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RIFTS IN THE ARAB WORLD

Michael Bornstein

Introduction

As a result of the ongoing war between Iraq and Iran, as well as other potential or protracted conflicts elsewhere in the Gulf and North Africa, many Western governments are reassessing their long-held view of the Arab-Israel conflict as the central or even the most dangerous of the Middle East crises. Some are beginning to recognize that the majority of inter-Arab controversies are totally unrelated to the conflict between the Arabs and Israelis. It is worthy of note that every Arab state is today technically or actively at war with at least one of its Arab or non-Arab Islamic neighbors, and this belligerency is mirrored internally by instability and internecine strife.

This observation, that inter-Arab conflict is endemic to the Middle East, contrasts with the pan-Arabist claim of Arab unity: one people, a common culture and language, and for the most part religion - an identity transcending that of particularist nationalism or ideology. The contrast stems from the mythic nature of this claim. The reality is that two-thirds of the Arab world is composed of Arabo-negroid or Arabo-Hamitic peoples, i.e., racially non-Arab.¹ Even during Muhammad's lifetime, half of the Arabian peninsula was inhabited by non-Arab Yemenites, with the Arabs themselves divided among Hamites, Yoqtanites and others.² The pan-Arabist claim merely underscores the degree and depth of rifts in the Arab world by failing to recognize the region's vastly heterogenous character; an intricate mosaic of diverse nationalities, ethnic groups and religious communities interacting within the context of conflicting allegiances and ideologies.

Arab leaders have often sought to reify the Arab unity myth through the initiation of bi- or tripartite political unions. Such attempts were common around the turn of the century, even before the inception of Arab nationalism. Over the past twenty-five years, beginning with the United Arab Republic (1958: Egypt - Syria) which failed within three years and most recently with the mergers of Syria and Iraq (1979) and Libya and Syria (1980), the Arabs launched repeated efforts to give the myth form through abortive merger. Invariably, each union resulted in failure, and in most cases, open hostility between previously "united" parties.³

Ironically, much of this inability to conciliate is in fact due to certain common cultural traits among the Arabs. The all-powerful role of religious and tribal affiliations, the tendency toward extremism and intolerance, as well as the recurrent themes of

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jihād and *gūm* (holy war and vendetta) all operate to ensure that wounds, once opened, remain so. These are the underlying causes of the Lebanese crisis, which began in 1975 when Christian Falangists machine-gunned a busload of Palestinians in reprisal for a previous attack on their leader, Pierre Jumayyil; the "debts" subsequently and arithmetically increased.

In exploring the notion and nature of "rift" in the Arab world, a geological metaphor seems appropriate. The Arab world may be represented by a mountain which, when viewed from a distance, appears stable, composed of a unified rock-type, smooth surfaced. Yet, upon closer inspection, the mountain is then seen stratified and fissured, scored by rifts and faults which, when exposed to tectonic pressures, expand into crevices and canyons. It is the purpose of this article, then, to identify both the faults and the pressures, and to cite examples from the many ensuant rifts.

Major Divisions: "Clefts"

Even a medium-range glimpse of our metaphor mountain will reveal several major clefts in its terrain. These appear first in the Arab League, the principal embodiment - albeit mostly symbolic - of the Arab unity myth. * The League is deeply divided into opposing blocs: the Steadfastness Front and the Center Camp.

The states comprising the Steadfastness Front, Libya, Algeria, Syria and Democratic Yemen, are the most radical and most pro-Soviet in the region, and to the extent that Islam and the USSR both advocate Arab unity, also the most pan-Arabist. However, the Steadfastness Front remains deeply divided within itself, as its member states fail to agree on a collective strategy against Israel, grapple to fill the supremacy vacuum left by Egypt's ouster from the League, and seek to gain unilateral control over the Front's only non-state member, the PLO.

The pro-West Center Camp is also internally split, with its Gulf state members, Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia currently at loggerheads with those members maintaining relations with Egypt, viz., Oman, Somalia and Sudan. Iraq, whose policies on Israel and pro-Soviet leanings would normally place it within the Steadfastness sphere, has been forced by inter-Arab rifts into the Center Camp. In its war with Iran, for example, the Center Camp supports Iraq; Steadfastness is pro-Iranian.

Center of Conflict: "Faults"

As noted, the mountain is laced with "faults," i.e., traditional areas of weakness in and around which stronger factors contend. The weakest, and thus most explosive, is Lebanon. The Gulf states, because of their immense oil wealth, sparse population and small ruling families, constitute another serious fault. In North Africa, conflicts center around Tunisia, Sudan, and the Western Sahara. The internal instability of the governments in both North and South (Democratic) Yemen make that region fault-prone as well.

A prime source of regional instability exists in Arab countries where governments maintain power in minority - rule situations. Jordan's Hashemite King Hussein rules over a Palestinian majority with Bedouin support. The Syrian government and military are both controlled by a minority Alawi tribe of Shi'ites (12% of the total population); Hafez Assad is an Alawi. And in Iraq, a Sunni Moslem regime governs over a Shi'ite majority of 75% of the population as well as an 18% Kurdish minority, over half of which is Shi'ite. 4

Factors for Subversion: "Seismic Pressures"

These pressure-factors exploit or operate directly against the Arab world's faults. The most active and aggressive is Libya's Qaddafi, who in the past two years has invaded Chad, attacked Tunisia, threatened Sudan and renewed tension with Algeria and Egypt. The rival Ba'ath parties of Iraq and Syria exert enormous pressure, especially in the Lebanese fault.

* The League cannot enforce majority decisions of its members.

South Yemen exploits the Gulf fault with overt attacks against North Yemen, and threats to Oman and Saudi Arabia.

Within the context of "pressures," three general observations can be drawn: (1) the pressure states comprise the most radical bloc in the Arab world, one heavily dependent on Pan-Arabist declarations to justify its activities in fault areas (e.g., Libya's invasion of Chad in the interest of Pan-Arabism); (2) their internal situations are chronically unstable (see index); and lastly, (3) all are allied with the Soviet Union. Accordingly, the more radical the state, the more rifts it generates, and in the Arab world, the Soviet Union is the prime sponsor of rift-making.

The Palestinians: Pressure and Fault

The Palestinians play a unique role in the melee of Middle East rifts in that they act as both pressure and fault simultaneously. As faults, the governments of Syria, Iraq and Libya manipulate their constituent organizations within the PLO-As-Saiqa, the Arab Liberation Front and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, respectively, to gain control over the Palestinians. Syria, in particular, has a vested interest in keeping the PLO under its authority, for gaining leverage in the Lebanese crisis as well as in the conflict with Israel. Often, because of their international ubiquity and prowess as terrorists, the Palestinians are used by these pressure-states in carrying out inter-Arab vendettas, as was the case in the rash of Arab political assassinations that swept Europe in 1978-79. Further weakening the fault aspect is the structure of PLO itself -- an umbrella organization covering numerous groups, representing a wide spectrum of diverse and often clashing ideologies. This structural instability leaves the PLO susceptible to external manipulation.

Divided and exploited, the Palestinians nevertheless remain a powerful force in the Arab world. Sophisticated both academically and militarily, they have risen to occupy key government and army positions in most of the Arab host countries. It is for this reason that the hosts' leaders fear the Palestinians, particularly in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution to which so many Palestinians gravitated ideologically. No Arab state, with the exception of Jordan, offers citizenship to the Palestinians, and some, most notably Kuwait, have resorted to official discrimination and even expulsion in order to contain Palestinian power. ⁵

The Elusive Character of the Rifts

An inherent difficulty exists in the study of rifts in the Arab world, viz., that most rifts are multi-dimensional, and what at first might appear a primary rift may indeed be only a symptom or result of a deeper rift. Thus, the study of inter-Arab rifts must, of necessity, be also a search for the primary causes of known rifts in the region.

Ethnic/Religious Rifts

Ethnic and/or religious rivalry provides the most deeply-rooted and most abundant sources of inter-Arab rifts. There appears to be no general rule for understanding such rifts, only contradictions; an Iraqi Sunni will hate a Kurd -- same faith, different ethnicities -- just as a Lebanese Sunni will hate a Maronite Christian -- same ethnicity, different faith.

Ethnic/religious rivalries are among the few one-dimensional rifts in the Arab world, i.e., pure hatred between disparate peoples or adherents. Such is the case of the Assyrian Christians of Iraq. Massacred by the Turks in World War I, 100,000 remain in Iraq today where they are branded "American-Zionist agents" and forbidden to emigrate. ⁶

Another example on a much larger scale is that of Egypt's Copts. Comprising ten per cent of the population, the Copts in recent years have become the target of the radical Moslem Brotherhood. In March 1979 two churches in Asyut were destroyed by Moslem rioters, and in January 1980 the Brotherhood claimed responsibility for the bombing of two more churches in Alexandria. The Egyptian government also demonstrated a degree of discrimination

when the Coptic clergy protested a May 1980 bill making Shari'a (Islamic) law the basis for civil law, Sadat accused them of plotting to set up a separate state in Asyut. 7

Undoubtedly the most explosive ethnic rift in the region is that between Iraqis and Kurds. Engaged in a continuous struggle for independence since the abrogation of the 1958 constitution recognizing their national rights, the Kurds were the victim of a U.S. - Iranian doublecross in 1975 that broke their military strength. Since then, internal squabbles as well as a leadership gap left by the death of Mulla Mustapha Barzani have prevented the Kurds from mounting another major offensive. Nevertheless, with some new impetus gained from the disintegration of the Iranian army and the current Gulf war, the fighting continues, evoking fierce Iraqi reprisal. In April, 1979, the Iraqis signed an agreement with Turkey to eliminate Kurdish guerillas operating from Turkish soil.

For the most part, ethnic rifts, including those not dealt with here (Arabs vs. Armenians, Jews, Berbers), tend to be limited geographically, localized. Far more expansive is the scope claimed by inter-religious rifts, one of the smallest of which is that rupturing Lebanon. The Lebanese civil war, though in general a multi-dimensional conflict, is at base an inter-religious rift between various Christian groups, Sunni and Shi'ite Moslems, and Druze, with ideological difference causing most of the in-fighting among co-religionists.

The most widespread inter-religious rift, reflected in the Lebanese situation but equally volatile elsewhere, is that between Sunni and Shi'ite Moslems. The Sunni-Shi'ite rift is perhaps the most bitter of inter-Arab/inter-Islamic rivalries, serving as a casus belli in the war between Sunni-led Iraq and Shi'ite Iran, and throughout it a multitude of related inter-Arab rifts. Syria, a Sunni country ruled by the Alawi Shi'ites, has allied itself with Iran. Conversely, the Sunni states of Jordan and Saudi Arabia are supporting Iraq. Internally, the Sunni-Shi'ite rift ensures constant instability, particularly in the inverse minority rule situations in Syria and Iraq: Shi'ite minority over Sunni majority and Sunni minority over Shi'ite majority, respectively. In November 1979 a group of insurgents occupied the Grand Mosque in Mecca, and in the ensuing battle to dislodge them 102 insurgents were killed and 63 were later beheaded. According to Saudi Arabia, the insurgents were members of its Shi'ite minority. 9

A subheading under the rubric of ethnic/religious rifts is the rift between Moslem extremists and conservatives. Conservative, in the Middle East context, is a relative term, especially in a region where *jihad* is considered a viable policy alternative. However an examination of this rift must focus on the extremist element, most significantly the Moslem Brotherhood.

Like the Palestinians, the Moslem Brotherhood often plays the role of both fault and pressure, except that the sect tends to operate in the pressure-states themselves. The Brotherhood's insurrection in Syria which took hundreds of lives in Aleppo, Hama and Hama was financed with funds from Jordan and Saudi Arabia - an extension of their rifts with Damascus. 10 Egypt also fears the pressure of the Brotherhood, especially an alliance of convenience between the Islamic extremists and radical leftists of the sort that toppled the Shah. At the end of 1979, the Egyptian government clamped down hard on both the extremists and the radicals (see index), although for its own reasons, Cairo relaxed its condemnation of the Brotherhood's attacks against the Copts. 11

Rifts Over Hegemony

Many inter-Arab rifts waged in the name of religious or ideological affiliations are basically and simply attempts to achieve hegemony in a certain country or area. Syria's intervention in Lebanon, ostensibly for Pan-Arabist ends, constituted the first step toward the realization of Syria's traditional vision of Greater Syria, a mini-empire that embraces Lebanon, Jordan and Israel within the Syrian sphere of sovereignty.

Libya is a central character in many of the region's hegemony-grabbing plots. Having tried and failed to annex Egyptian border lands, tried and failed in an invasion of the

Tunisian town of Gafsa (January 1980), Libya has now occupied most of northern Chad - what Qaddafi terms "Southern Libya" - allegedly to rescue the north's "Moslems from the southern Christians." *

Pan-Arabism also clashes with particularist nationalism in the rift between Algeria and Morocco over Western Sahara. Pan-Arabist Algeria supports the Polisario guerillas fighting for the independence of mineral-rich Sahara from Morocco. Morocco, which claims Sahara as a traditional Moroccan possession, has now engaged in a rift with Mauritania, which signed a separate peace with Polisario in 1979. Morocco has accused the Mauritians of aiding the guerillas and of plotting against King Hassan.

Internal struggles for hegemony, coups, are waged almost exclusively in the name of an ideology, never merely to oust an ineffective ruler. In the case of the Kurds or the various warring factions in Lebanon, ethnicity and religion become the basis for the battle for regional independence or national sovereignty.

The Pro-Soviet vs. Pro-West Rift

Despite the all-pervasive nature of this rift throughout the Arab world, its dimensions are not always well-defined. Basically, the rift boils down to the Steadfastness Front versus the Center Camp, with Iraq floating somewhere between the two. Steadfastness' support of Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan have caused Iraq to question its alliance with Moscow, and this ambivalence has found expression in Iraq's ruthless crackdown on indigenous communists. Interestingly, that ambivalence created a rift between Iraq and South Yemen beginning in June 1979, when an Iraqi communist was assassinated in Aden, leading to a mutual severance of diplomatic ties. 12

Although the Middle East remains very much an arena of superpower rivalry, both powers have lost much in terms of prestige and influence. The Central Camp is disillusioned over the Camp David peace process, and what it views as America's bungling of the Iranian revolution and hostage crisis. Soviet supporters are uncomfortable over Afghanistan. Perhaps the most explicit display of superpower competition in the region today is in the Yemens, where the South continues to host thousands of Soviet, Cuban and East German advisors. 13 Despite a ceasefire between North and South Yemen in March 1979, even a proposed merger, the two states systematically break the truce and accuse one another of subversion. As noted earlier, Marxist South Yemen also periodically threatens Oman and Saudi Arabia.

A spinoff of superpower rivalry is the rift between radical leftists and conservatives. Here, a particular phenomenon occurs, a contradiction: most Arab countries, with the notable exception of South Yemen, pro-Soviet or pro-West, have outlawed indigenous communist parties (see index). Apparently, the Arabs' fear of communism overrides the multitude of ideological, political and social rifts, and has become a rare commonality.

Rich vs. Poor

The Arab Middle East includes some of the wealthiest and some of the poorest countries in the world, and this disparity itself presents an enormous rift. Many of the wealthy states, particularly in the Gulf, are militarily weak and ruled by feudal family dynasties lacking a power base, making them prime targets for impoverished but often well-armed neighbors (e.g. South Yemen).

Compounding the great imbalance of wealth, is the tendency of the oil-rich nations not to be overly-generous with their petro-dollars. So far, for example, Iraq is the only Arab oil power to come close to fulfilling its pledges to Jordan, Syria and the PLO made

* Libya and Tunisia have been entangled in a diplomatic dispute since 1977 over rights to their mutual continental shelf. Diplomatic relations, however, were severed after the Gafsa incident. Egypt is currently building up its troop concentrations along with Libya in response to Qaddafi's building of a 180 mile defense system there.

at the 1978 Baghdad Summit. However, in 1979, Sudan severed diplomatic relations with Iraq for the non-delivery of pre-paid oil supplies. ¹⁴

The rich versus poor rift is further complicated by discrepancies in population between the Arab states. Tension evolves from situations where poor, densely-populated countries confront rich, sparsely-populated neighbors, such as the rift between Egypt and Libya. The same rift is in evidence among the wealthy states themselves, with densely-populated countries in need of development funds unwilling to limit oil production to the degree desired by the sparsely-populated states. This is the essence of a rift between Algeria and Libya; at an April 1980 meeting of OPEC, Algeria opposed a Libyan proposal to renew the oil embargo against the West.

Conclusion: A Cause for Cohesion

More ironic and binding than the common hatred of communism is the Arab world's conflict with Israel. Though Arab leaders differ as to the proper way to conduct that conflict, the enmity itself serves as a powerful welding-factor toward the fusion of inter-Arab rifts. The Arab-Israel conflict is, moreover, one of the few truly one-dimensional rifts in the region; an ethno-religious struggle between two different faiths which lay claim to the same stretch of land. As such, the conflict holds many benefits for Arab leaders: it bolsters the image of their governments and invites large-scale superpower intervention while diverting public attention from problems at home. And, parenthetically, it provides a convenient excuse for inter-Arab rifts; few are the rifts where antagonists do not accuse one another of being Zionists.

The picture of the Arab mountain is, then, an unfortunate one. In a region possessed of the world's most precious resources - oil, minerals and manpower - few can be tapped and combined to achieve their maximum potential because of the extent and depth of inter-Arab rifts.

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Index: Recent Internal Rifts in Arab Countries

- Algeria March 1980: 200 civilians killed in government suppression of Berber revolt in the province of Kabylie. Government forces also closed down Tizi Ouzou University after students rioted.
- Chad Moslem Arab forces continue to battle southern Christian blacks following Libya's invasion in June 1979.
- Egypt July-August 1979: 20 found guilty of spying for Libya; members of the outlawed Communist Party also arrested. April 1980: 20 members of the Communist Party sentenced to prison terms.
- Libya March 1979: 20 officers executed after failed coup attempt. August 1980: 300 killed in unsuccessful army revolt in Tobruk. 2,000 people were reported arrested for political opposition by mid-1980.
- Iraq January 1979: 600 Christians arrested for allegedly teaching the Gospel. July 1979: Government claimed to have uncovered a Syrian plot; 22 executed, 33 sentenced to prison - all Shi'ite Moslems. Shi'ite leader Ayatollah Mohamad Bakr arrested, executed April 1980. In 1980, search went on for Communist Party members (in 1978, 21 party members were executed).
- Mauritania January 1980: President Muhammad Ould Ahmed Louly deposed by the military. Following the failure of an Algerian-sponsored coup in July, Col. Mustapha Ould Muhammad Salek came to power.
- Morocco January 1980: Trial of members of trade unions and student bodies protesting political detention begins. In August, Le Monde reported 150 members of outlawed Communist Party still in prison after three years.
- Saudi Arabia January 1980: 63 persons beheaded following occupation of Grand Mosque.
- Sudan August 1980: 100,000 Egyptian soldiers reportedly enter country to silence anti-government activity.
- Syria June 1979: Moslem Brothers kill 63 army cadets in Aleppo; 20 later caught and executed. July-August 1980: Brotherhood uprisings in Aleppo, Hams, and Hamma take hundreds of lives; 12 Soviet advisors also assassinated.

*All information taken from Keessing's Contemporary Archives (see notes)

Tunisia June 1979: 28 sentenced to prison as members of illegal Communist Party. February 1979: Government clamps down on Khwanja fundamentalist group; closes its press.

North Yemen Since February 1979, the National Democratic Front, a South Yemen-based group of North Yemeni dissidents, has carried on a civil war in the North.

South Yemen In 1979, 20,000 refugees fled to North Yemen to escape fighting between followers of late President Ali against the forces of Socialist Party Secretary Abdel Fattah Ismail.

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Notes

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2. Middle East Review, Vol. IX, No. 1, Fall 1976. Introduction by Anne Sinai and Chaim I. Waxman, pg. 5.
3. A History of Arab Political and Military Unification, publication of the Information Centre of the Israel Foreign Ministry.
4. Encyclopedia Britannica: William Benton (Chicago) article on Iraq, pg. 529.
5. "Al-Anbaa", Kuwait newspaper, November 26, 1979; article entitled "The Palestinian Revolution."
6. Middle East Review, article by Stephen Oren, "The Assyrians of the Middle East." pp. 36-40.
7. Keesing's Contemporary Archives, Volume XXVI (1980) and Vol. XXV (1979). ed. by Robert Fraser (London) 30587.
8. ibid., 29923.
9. ibid., 30427.
10. ibid., 30613.
11. ibid., 29434. 30587.
12. ibid., 30197.
13. National Geographic Magazine, Vol. 158, No.3; September, 1980, pg. 335A. Map, "Mideast in Turmoil".
14. Keesing's 29883.