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978-1-107-00108-4 - The Politics of National Celebrations in the Arab Middle East

Elie Podeh

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Introduction

The renowned Russian writer Lyof Tolstoy unabashedly bemoaned what he deemed adverse expressions of patriotism and national celebrations when he wrote the following, in a turn-of-the-century treatise:

From infancy, by every possible means, – class-books, church-services, sermons, speeches, books, papers, songs, poetry, monuments, – the people is [*sic*] stupefied in one direction; and then either by force or by bribe, several thousands of the people are assembled, and when these, joined by the idlers always present at every slight, to the sound of cannon and music, and inflamed by the glitter and brilliance about them, will commence to shout out what others are shouting in front of them, we are told that this is the expression of the sentiment of the entire nation.¹

Rulers and elites clearly do not share Tolstoy's cynical view of national celebrations; rather, they tend to consider them a useful device in the quest for power, grandeur and legitimacy. Indeed, ever since the Greek and Roman Empires, public pageants have been a handmaid of politics. This was particularly true of the rise of the nation-state in Europe and elsewhere from the eighteenth century. These pageants gradually moved from the center of the polity to the periphery, inducing the masses to play an important role in the celebrations as participants and spectators.

By the end of the twentieth century, however, with the consolidation of the nation-state, the impact of globalization upon Western societies and the growing erosion of physical boundaries, the importance of state

¹ Lyof N. Tolstoy, "Patriotism and Christianity," in his *Patriotism, Slavery of Our Times, General Articles* (New York: Carlton House, 1928 [1899]), p. 38.

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celebrations, at least in Europe, appeared to have faded. But then the turn of a new century saw heraldry revived: the year 2005, for example, witnessed impressive celebrations, such as the sixtieth anniversary of the end of World War II and the liberation of Nazi concentration camps, the British bi-centennial of the Battle of Trafalgar and the Austrian Golden Jubilee, as well as the annual commemorations in a multitude of countries, Independence Days, Memorial Days and so on. Thus, if elites in established states continue to attach such importance to national celebrations, we may deduce that their role in new states is all the more significant.

The following example well illuminates the major role of state celebrations in the Arab world. In July 2003, an Interim Ruling Council was established in Iraq to fill the power vacuum created after the fall of the Saddam Husayn regime, following the U.S. occupation of Iraq. The council's first decision, made on 14 July, was to abolish all the holidays celebrated during the preceding regime and to fix 9 April, the day Saddam was deposed, as a national holiday.² The decision was made, probably not coincidentally, on the forty-fifth anniversary of the revolution that annihilated the Hashemite monarchy in 1958 – an occasion that had been lavishly celebrated by all Iraqi regimes thereafter. The fact that this was the council's first decision attests to the importance attached to this issue by the decision makers. Indeed, its significance derives mainly from its symbolic nature, as the holiday – associated as it was with the U.S. occupation – proved to be unpopular among Iraqis.

The Iraqi decision was by no means unique; history has shown – particularly since the French Revolution – that new regimes may invent a calendar of celebrations while erasing or significantly changing the previous one. Alternatively, a new regime may maintain the old calendar and add new holidays to it. In such situations the calendar reflects the state's evolving national narrative. Eviatar Zerubavel's survey of 191 countries demonstrates that every state defines itself, *inter alia*, through a national calendar, which includes a set of commemoration and celebration days.³ The task of this tool is to ground the individual more firmly to his or her territory ("homeland"), political community ("nation") and the incumbent regime. The invention of traditions and a shared historical past is

² *Al-Hayat*, 14 July 2003.

³ Eviatar Zerubavel, "Calendars and History: A Comparative Study of the Social Organization of National Memory," in Jeffrey K. Olick (ed.), *States of Memory: Continuities, Conflicts, and Transformation in National Retrospection* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 315–337.

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aimed at facilitating these goals.⁴ The national calendar, in a nutshell, tells the story of the nation, passed on from one generation to the next through holidays. In many ways, the calendar provides a reliable mirror of the core belief system of the nation. Its analysis, therefore, takes us into the very inner mechanics of nation building and state formation.

In his monumental study of French collective memory, Pierre Nora asserted that “we no longer celebrate the nation, but we study the nation’s celebrations.”⁵ The examples just given indicate that the first part of Nora’s assertion is misguided, and the second part is simply wrong: though the field of nationalism and ethnicity has grown impressively since the 1990s, academic scholarship does not attach due importance to the study of nations’ celebrations. As Gabriella Elgenius put it, this surge “has, on the whole, neglected the field of symbolism and rituals,” including the study of national celebrations. Moreover, she added, “the symbolic and ritual manifestations of Europe are little known, and no investigation into the symbolic patterns of nationhood has been undertaken.”⁶ This is particularly true with regard to the Arab world and the Third World in general.⁷

The aim of this book, then, is to explore the role of state celebrations in the Arab Middle East since the fall of the Ottoman Empire. The fact that most Arab states are modern creations means that their rulers have been continuously engaged in the twin processes of nation building and state formation. Initially, the emerging national calendar imitated the colonial model. Yet the established norms of celebrations, according to the ethno-symbolic theory of nationalism,⁸ may also rely on existing cultural artifacts – that is, rituals, ceremonies and symbols used in the pre-state period. In other words, though the organized observance of national days in the Arab Middle East is largely a new practice – as states did not exist in the pre-Ottoman period – its cultural components may be taken from each society’s own cultural repertoire (Islamic, Ottoman or

⁴ On this process, see Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 1, 4, 13.

⁵ Pierre Nora, “General Introduction: Between History and Memory,” in Pierre Nora and Lawrence D. Krizman (eds.), *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*. Vol. 1: *Conflicts and Divisions*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 7.

⁶ Gabriella Elgenius, *Expressions of Nationhood: National Symbols and Ceremonies in Contemporary Europe* (Ph.D. dissertation, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2005), pp. 21–22.

⁷ For a discussion of the literature on national holidays in the Arab world, see Chapter 1.

⁸ Anthony Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986).

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Persian). Thus, in many ways the national celebrations constitute another meeting, or contesting, ground between East and West, reflecting cultural differences and power relations.

This volume explores celebrations initiated and controlled by the state. Popular and non-state-controlled festivities, such as carnivals and public festivals, are not included unless they signify a challenge to the official calendar or are “nationalized” (e.g., Islamic holidays in certain Arab countries). Such celebrations are “national” in the sense that they represent a certain polity, even though the whole nation does not necessarily identify with or take part in them, particularly if they serve and advance a certain regime, minority group or ideology.

The study examines the ways in which Arab regimes and rulers invent, negotiate and perform their national holidays. This does not mean that the view from below – the holiday as seen by the ordinary citizen – has been completely neglected. Yet certain methodological shortcomings do not allow us to pinpoint the exact meaning of the celebration/ceremony/ritual/symbol for the individual and its impact upon him or her. In other words, it is difficult to assess how celebrations have been received, negotiated and consumed by ordinary people. In order to do that, it is necessary to rely on polls, statistics and fieldwork; but the first two are hardly available and the third is irrelevant with regard to historical inquiry. Christel Lane, following her extensive analysis of Soviet celebratory rituals, admitted that scholars usually prefer to neglect these questions because they pose a serious problem.⁹ Likewise, Eric Hobsbawm wrote that “the view from below, i.e., the nation as seen ... by the ordinary persons ... is exceedingly difficult to discover.”¹⁰ This shortcoming is exacerbated in the Arab world, where our access to the individual’s thinking is particularly difficult. Still, on the basis of existing material, an attempt has been made to learn about the individual’s impact on and attitude to the holiday.

This book explores the roles of national state celebrations in the Arab world during the colonial and post-colonial periods. It attempts to analyze the reasons rulers and elites invest great efforts in inventing holidays and manufacturing grandiose celebrations. More particularly, it addresses the following questions: First, in what way did the colonial

⁹ Christel Lane, *The Rites of Rulers: Ritual in Industrial Society – The Soviet Case* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 239–240.

¹⁰ E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, 2d ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 111.

power shape the local calendar? Second, in what way have regime changes (whether revolutionary or evolutionary) affected the national calendar? Third, what kind of events did the state choose to celebrate or commemorate – historical occasions (e.g., triumphs, disasters, golden age) or events associated with the ruler (birthdays, accession days)? Fourth, what kinds of ceremonies and symbolism did the state employ in these celebrations and what changes – if any – were introduced over the years? In this respect, a tripartite division has to be made between old and newly invented traditions; religious and secular symbolism; and external (i.e., Western or Eastern European) and homegrown symbolism. Evidently, this binary dichotomy may be artificial and blurred in reality, ending in a certain fusion. Finally, what differences exist between the center and the periphery, and which social groups take part in the celebration? In other words, is the event limited to the elite (in terms of participants) and to the capital (in terms of the public space) or is it a nationwide event for the masses? The two latter dimensions are highly important because they can shed light on the degree to which the elite truly extends its control beyond the center. An analysis of the various case studies based on these questions enables us to expose the differences among the various regimes in terms of their commemoration politics.

STRUCTURE, METHOD AND SOURCES

The Politics of National Celebrations in the Arab Middle East is written primarily from a historical perspective. In her illustrious research on French festivals in the post-revolution era, Mona Ozouf warned of the problems – or rather the dangers – facing the historian in his task of analyzing celebrations:

The annexation by historians of this new field of research does not proceed without difficulty. The festival resists historical inquiry in many respects. The activities of the festival do not endure beyond the time given to them; the expectations satisfied within it do not continue in the period that follows. There is no tomorrow: the evidence of an exuberant squandering of time, of energy and of goods reveals the festival's lack of concern with an afterward. Festive time, insularly delimited, opens the parenthesis of uncommon days; separated from daily rhythms, men relinquish the serious use of their time and their ties with ordinary moral and social values become undone.¹¹

¹¹ Mona Ozouf, "Space and Time in the Festivals of the French Revolution," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 5 (1975), p. 372.

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Indeed, the anthropologist's instincts and expertise may be better applied to capturing the peculiarities of the onetime celebration. Yet the historian feels more comfortable with the investigation of historical developments. In the journey to the foreign territory of the past, therefore, the historian is the more qualified visitor.¹²

Historical investigation – according to a classification made by Peter Burke – may be divided into two camps. The first focuses on the particular, the unique and the unrepeatable, with historical narrative as the preferred mode of writing (“history of events,” in his terminology). The second focuses on long historical processes (*la longue durée*) and structural changes, with comparative thematic analyses as the preferred mode of writing.¹³ The latter mode was criticized by Gertrude Himmelfarb for its laxity with regard to “the canon of evidence.”¹⁴ Based on Burke's advice and allowing Himmelfarb's criticism, this book attempts to offer a synthesis of these historical approaches – on the one hand, relying on hard evidence and focusing on the unique and particular and, on the other, comparing five case studies over a century, investigating the repeatable and changing, thus unraveling the patterns and structures of behavior. In addition, the description of the events (i.e., celebrations and commemorations) is as “thick” as possible given the limitations posed by the number of case studies and comprehensiveness of the subject matter.¹⁵

In many ways, the book is interdisciplinary: guided by the historical method, it also relies on insights from political science, anthropology and sociology. The first chapter offers a theoretical framework, placed within the nationalism debate, and defines terms such as “celebration,” “ceremony,” “symbol” and “ritual,” which admittedly suffer from certain

¹² This sentence draws its inspiration from David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). Ironically, however, even the historian cannot visit his country: the past. See in this connection H. Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1950), p. 66.

¹³ Peter Burke, “History of Events and Revival of Narrative,” in Peter Burke (ed.), *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), pp. 233–248. It is somewhat amusing – or ironic – that the two trends can be juxtaposed in two books with the same title: Michael Oakeshott, *On History and Other Essays* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983); Fernand Braudel, *On History*, trans. by Sarah Matthews (Chicago: University Press of Chicago, 1980).

¹⁴ Gertrude Himmelfarb, “Postmodernist History,” in her *On Looking into the Abyss: Untimely Thoughts on Culture and Society* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), p. 156.

¹⁵ Burke, “History of Events,” p. 240. The term “thick description” is taken from Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 412–454.

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theoretical ambiguity.¹⁶ The second chapter sketches the role of Islamic celebrations. As most of the Arab lands were under Ottoman control for more than four hundred years and under Islamic rule for more than a millennium, it is necessary to review Islamic celebrations. Evidently, different patterns emerged under Islam, yet this chapter explores whether the Islamic or Ottoman heritage left any legacy with regard to rites and symbols used by the modern state in the twentieth century.

The lion's share of the book deals with five case studies. As studying all twenty-two Arab states is an impossible task, five typical examples were chosen. Employing Roger Owen's classification, the basic division is between republics and monarchies.¹⁷ This division, however, is somewhat simplistic, since some republics (Egypt and Iraq) were previously under monarchic rule (until 1952 and 1958, respectively) and since there are differences in behavior among states of the same type. The first category, then, comprises the republics of Egypt and Iraq – two major Arab states that constitute disparate examples. Egypt is a relatively stable regime that enjoys a large measure of legitimacy and boasts a shared national history and memory. On the other hand, Iraq is a newly formed state, dominated by a minority elite, which suffers from major problems of legitimacy but displays diversity and change. Another republican case featured here is Lebanon: a multi-denominational and multi-ethnic state that historically operated according to an accepted political pact. It will be instructive to see how domestic upheavals affected its politics of commemoration.

The second category includes the monarchies of Jordan and Saudi Arabia. These states have enjoyed relatively stable regimes, though both are modern creations with little historical memory to draw upon. In both countries the tribal and religious elements are highly influential within the ruling elite. Yet while Jordan underwent a process of relative secularization and Palestinian immigration changed the makeup of the society, Saudi Arabia remained a state governed by Islamic law, the *Shari'a*, and ruled by the tribal Saudi dynasty. Nor was Saudi Arabia, in contrast to Jordan and many other Arab states, affected by the colonial experience. It is worth exploring how the religious identity and the lack of colonial experience have affected the politics of commemoration in Saudi Arabia.

¹⁶ Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967), pp. 7–8; Turner (ed.), *Celebration: Studies in Festivity and Ritual* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1982), pp. 11–16.

¹⁷ Roger Owen, *State, Power and Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 21.

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The empirical study is based primarily on Arab sources such as journals, newspapers, magazines, radio broadcasts, TV programs and the Internet. Since state celebrations are at the heart of this study, Arab media – controlled by the state in most cases – constitute the most important source. The authoritarian nature of the regimes (Lebanon aside) proved here to be an asset, as rulers and regimes used their control of the media to publicize their activities. In addition, I have used archival material in Britain, the United States and France, which includes reports on the national events as documented by diplomats at the time of their occurrence. It should be emphasized, however, that the search for material in the archives was extremely daunting. Looking for relevant reports was truly like searching for a needle in a haystack; it seems that diplomats did not consider national celebrations a possible vehicle for learning more about their regimes and rulers. Thankfully, however, a few seasoned diplomats did provide “thick” descriptions of national events, and these proved to be highly useful for this research.

This is the first systematic study of the ways in which Arab states celebrate and commemorate their national holidays. As such, the research offers a contribution to the largely underdeveloped field of cultural history of the Arab world. The analysis of state celebrations offers a unique prism through which important insights can be obtained regarding the state, its rulers and mechanisms of rule, as well as state–society relations. In addition, by comparing several Arab case studies, it will be possible to offer a typology of celebrations in the Arab world and add new insights to the more general theoretical debate on nationalism and ceremonialism.

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Celebrating Nation and State

A Theoretical Framework

STATE, NATIONAL IDENTITY AND COMMEMORATIONS

The historical and sociological evolution of territorial states and nations is a question ardently debated among scholars dealing with the phenomenon of nationalism. Anthony Smith, a leading scholar in this debate, listed four paradigms within this discourse: primordialism, perennialism, modernism and ethno-symbolism.¹ Unfortunately, the debate to date has centered on the Western – particularly European – models of states and nations, while largely neglecting the colonial experiences in Asia and Africa. Therefore, applying the theoretical literature on the vast subject of nationalism to the Middle East region is a mission to be accomplished by historians and social scientists.²

Historically, many of the political entities found in the Arab Middle East are modern. Their boundaries were carved out by both Britain and France in the aftermath of World War I, leading to the formation of new states often comprising disparate ethnic and religious communities. Here too it was, as we know, the European model of the nation-state that was imported, imitated and imposed on the local inhabitants; this had

¹ For a useful summary of the debate, held between Anthony Smith, John Armstrong, John Breuilly, Walker Connor, Elie Kedourie, Ernest Gellner, Liah Greenfeld, Steven Grosby, Eric Hobsbawm, John Hutchinson and others, see Anthony D. Smith, *The Nation in History: Historiographical Debates about Ethnicity and Nationalism* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2000).

² For an initial attempt to analyze this phenomenon, see James Jankowski and Israel Gershoni (eds.), *Rethinking Nationalism in the Arab Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

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far-reaching consequences for the twin processes of nation building and state formation in the Arab Middle East.

Smith claims that two models of territorial nations emerged outside Europe in the age of colonialism. In the “dominant *ethnie*” model, the culture of the core ethnic community became the main pillar of the new national identity. This was particularly relevant when that culture had historical roots. In the Arab Middle East, Egypt is a classic example of this model. In such a state, Smith continues, the process of forming the nation is less one of “invention” than of “reconstructing” the ethnic core and integrating its culture with the demands of a modern state and with the aspirations of minority communities.³ In his second model, several ethnic communities compete for a supra-ethnic political culture, as no acknowledged dominant group exists. Often enough, a struggle ensues among the various groups, leading to the imposition of a certain ethnic identity and culture on the whole community. In contrast to the first model, the formation of nations in these states is associated with the invention of a shared collective identity. Smith uses Syria as an example, but in fact many Arab states belong to this category.⁴

The process of identity formation is associated with the adoption of nationalism by the ruling elites.⁵ The implementation of this ideology in socially fragmented states (the so-called colonial) is particularly problematic. Burton Benedict noted in this connection:

Many of the new nations are amalgams of diverse peoples with various languages, customs and religions. The consolidation of national power has been a major difficulty for these countries and all have sought appropriate symbols to project an image of unity for their own people and to present to the world at large. Like many older nations, they have invented traditions and reconstituted history. They have delved into the events of their pasts to find appropriate symbols and to construct narratives which will justify their national identities.⁶

In such societies, therefore, the nation has to be “imagined,” to borrow Benedict Anderson’s oft-used dictum.⁷ Stuart Hall listed several

³ Anthony Smith, *National Identity* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1991), pp. 110–111.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

⁵ For a definition of nationalism, see *ibid.*, p. 73.

⁶ Burton Benedict, “International Exhibitions and National Identity,” *Anthropology Today*, Vol. 7 (1991), p. 5; Anthony Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 167.

⁷ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991). See also Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation*, p. 166.