2 Interstate Ideological Cleavages

There are two basic interstate ideological breaches in the Middle East. One is the division between ‘pan-Islamists’ and ‘pan-Arabists’ that overlaps but does not neatly coincide with the second cleavage between ‘conservatives’ and ‘radicals’. These two fractures have been highly penetrated by external influences, attracted by the geostrategic location of the region, its straits and waterways, its petroleum resources and the richness of its history and civilisation.

PAN-ISLAMISM VERSUS PAN-ARABISM

Middle Eastern charismatic leaders have had the ability emotionally to appeal to the people of other states in the region over the heads of their leaders on two grounds: the grounds of Islam, Islamic unity and orthodoxy, and the grounds of Arabism, Arab nationalism and brotherhood, like the ones used by regional demagogues such as Nasser of Egypt and Hussein of Iraq.

Pan-Islamism consists of a general call for all Muslims regardless of ethnic, linguistic, or national affiliation to participate in the revival of Islamic political power. Pan-Islamism reached its height during the medieval Islamic empires of the Umayyad and Abbasid. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, Gamal Al Din Al Afghani called for a spiritual rebirth of the Muslim peoples in order to remove the yoke of European domination. Al Afghani’s aim was to ensure a more independent spiritual, intellectual, economic as well as political Islamic world by emphasising Muslim values.

In the late 1970s another call for pan-Islamism was shaped by Ayatollah Khomeini, leader of the Islamic republic in Iran which even before the Islamic revolution, under the rule of the Shah, had been adopting an aggressive policy of regional hegemony. After more than seventeen years of revolution, war and political infighting Iran, is now again a power to be reckoned within the Middle East. Tehran’s conviction that it is rightfully the dominant power in the region has been a continuing underpinning for its policy, especially with the temporary removal of Iraq as a barrier to its ambitions in the area.
The clerical nature of the Iranian regime and its pan-Islamic aspirations determine Tehran’s responses to a variety of external developments. Iran has developed a system of alliances mainly with Syria and Sudan, and has been assisting Islamic political movements throughout the region, even at the sacrifice of long-standing governmental ties. This is especially true in Lebanon and in the Palestinian territories where the radical Hizbollah and Hamas movements benefit from the open and full support of Tehran.

All this raises the critical question of how far Iran will go toward achieving hegemony over the Middle East and spreading Islamic revolution throughout the region. Tehran might well conclude that the best way will be a combination of religious righteousness and military might. Even if it does not intend to go beyond intimidation to aggression, the conflicting interests between Iran and other Middle Eastern countries could lead to a volatile situation.

Many already believe that pan-Islamism has failed, and for numerous reasons. The size and diversity of the Islamic world make common recognition almost impossible. What may be considered as essential in one region may not be judged so in another. In fact, there is virtually no harmony of outlook in the Islamic world, given its vast differences in cultural and historical make-up; national frontiers also tend to filter out the more emotional appeals of pan-Islamists. Past efforts to sustain pan-Islamism seem to have been unsuccessful, and in the contemporary era, the concept itself has been considered more as a rallying cry than a valid objective.

Pan-Islamism in the Middle East has been confronted by pan-Arabism which departs from the one-ness of the Arab nation and the belief that existing political boundaries are artificial importations, and political fragmentation is a colonial legacy, channelling sentiments of political allegiance from the state to a larger human and social body. Two major factors have stimulated and reinforced the ideology of pan-Arabism in the contemporary world. One is the common experience of colonialism, under first Ottoman and then French and British rule; the other is the creation and existence of Israel in the midst of the Arab world. Both of these factors emphasise common enemies – colonialism (and later neo-colonialism) and Zionism. Thus, one can say that ‘negative’ factors (what they universally oppose rather than ‘positive’ and ‘integrative’ elements unite Arabs.

Symbolic of the cry for Arab unity and for an Arab reawakening is the Baath movement that emerged in Syria in 1953, and is now the official doctrine of the regimes in Damascus and Baghdad, with party branches in Lebanon and Jordan (see Box 2.1). Baath means ‘rebirth and renaissance’,