Tormented births: passages to modernity in Europe and the Middle East

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Chapter 6

Roots of Change:
A Political Economy
of the Mashreq Revolutions

“Now, therefore, it is meet to sing of endings, of what was and may be no longer, of what was right in it, and wrong. A last sigh for a lost world, a tear for its passing.”

Salman Rushdie

6.1 Continuity and Change in Patterns of Migration

Recurrent internal migration waves from the countryside to the major Mashreq cities has been a theme that we dealt with in the preceding chapters. Until the early nineteenth century in Egypt and the mid-nineteenth century in Syria and Iraq, the administrative-bureaucratic and military elite of the region was mainly composed of indigenized “immigrants” or non-Arab subjects: Turks, Turkocized, Turkmen, Mamluks of Albanian and Caucasian origins, and Kurdish Janissaries. The much more numerous immigrants were those communities driven out of their land by nomadic attacks, local wars or drought. These were doomed to a marginal life on the fringes of urban social and economic activities. Survival and viability of urban life, including those of the small coterie of merchant and bureaucratic/religious families, heavily depended on reaching acceptable compromises with the forces that controlled the countryside and trade routes.

Even when the Ottomans had sufficient military capability to suppress a powerful tribe, relying on force alone could disrupt the economic life of whole urban communities. The increasing mutual dependence between urban merchants and semi-nomadic tribes made blows to the nomads a risky venture. When the government was planning an expedition against the powerful Shammar confederation in 1862, the British Consular Agent in Aleppo worried about its economic impact and sent the following memo to his government:

“An organized Expedition at this season will be the cause of serious loss and damage to the Merchants, both native and European, and to the petty traders who have been advancing money for the past four months to the Shammars for Sheeps wool. As Agent for a British Firm at Aleppo, I have also advanced to the Shammar and other tributary tribes the sum of Piastres 60,000 and I considered it prudent, in case this amount should be lost, to inform the local Authorities of the matter.”

Shields 1991: 28 (capital letters and mistakes in original memo)


2 In further away regions where the Ottoman administration was only nominally in control, such as the Persian Gulf, attempts to control trading posts led breakaway tribes to form their own trading posts, which eventually evolved into today’s emirates. The authoritative study of Fattah shows how, since the 1790s, “the Saudi state formalized a new approach to transit trade in the region by forcing merchants
This threat of nomadic tribes within the areas belonging to the Ottomans only began to recede between the second half of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth century. In Persia, nomadism and semi-feudal big landlordism persisted to coexist well into the mid-1920s (Bromley 1994: 82, 148-9).

The pre-1850s migrations to the major cities did not seriously alter the working of the Mashreq formations. The radical changes of the second half of the nineteenth century threw the relationship between urban activities -especially trade- and rural ones asunder. Before the enactment of land laws that transformed most of the Mashreq’s countryside into private hands, agricultural communities had little contact with urban traders, and these contacts were usually carried through the community chief not by individual peasants. Habib Chihá described the trading mechanism between urban traders and shaikhs in early twentieth-century Iraq in the following words:

“Ce marchand s sont pour la plupart des israélites parmi lesquels il y a même des orfévres.
En dehors de ces petits marchands, des négociants établis dans les villes envoient des agents qui s'assurent pour ainsi dire le monopole d'un ou plusieurs campement, moyennant certains cadeaux qu'ils apportent au cheikh... Grâce à ces présents, le cheikh interdit l'accès du campement aux autres concurrents.”

Chihá 1908: 326

With the new land settlements and the opening up of trading opportunities, merchants and landowners began competing for land ownership. Alliances were eventually forged between the two classes allowing for a two-way track where merchants invested in land and landowners invested in commerce. But the social status of practically each and every group – a status that had been preserved for centuries- was undergoing radical shifts.

The rerouting of trade within the Mashreq due to the opening of the Suez Canal and the introduction of steam boats brought untold fortunes to some regions-the Iraqi provinces in general- and much suffering to others – especially the Syrian trading centers. In 1879 the British Consul in Aleppo wrote that the Suez Canal had diverted Iraq’s exports from Aleppo, which were now transported by river to Basra and exported from there. Baghdad’s imports moved away too, but “the greater part of the imports of Kurdistan and northern Iraq still passes through Aleppo (Issawi 1988: 139).

“Before the opening of the Suez Canal, Mosul used to imports all the needs of the northern region either directly or via Aleppo. But after 1869, Mosuli merchants found that it was more profitable to import their relatively little needs and pilgrims to take the direct route to Dar’iyya [the Saudi capital city] and inducing Saudi-allied tribes to patrol the passageways from the Iraq, Syrian, and Kuwaiti deserts into central Arabia. The Saudi amirs tried to destroy the other free ports in the region or, at least, to bring them under control for the greater glory of the Saudi state.” (Fattah 1997: 51).

A nineteenth-century Baghdadi historian describes how Kuwaiti merchants took advantage of the heavy duties that Ottoman-controlled Basra had to impose on its merchants. Thanks to their duty-free ports, big Kuwaiti merchants became among the wealthiest ship-owners in the region (al Haydan 1872, Fattah 1997: 192).

Fattah concludes her study by asserting that “the incidence and regularity of the establishment of these market towns is supportive of the thesis that regional collaboration created new markets in the full face of the governmental opposition. ... [These free ports were often survival mechanisms, built to reinforce the tribal sector against the enveloping sweep of governmental centralization which, more often than not, was a city phenomenon.” (Ibid.: 194-7).

For a more a politics-oriented study on the formation of the Gulf emirates, see Anscombe1997.
via Baghdad in the first place, and Aleppo to a lesser extent. In the first decade of the 20th century the more prosperous and active merchants of Mosul would visit Baghdad (an 8 day trip back and forth) or Aleppo (15 day trip) once a year, or perhaps more than that.”

Hassan 1965: 262 fn. Quoting a 1907 Consular report

As for Damascus, whose trade was heavily dependent on its role as a center from which pilgrims to Mecca gathered, the decline began in the 1830s, when Anatolian and Balkan pilgrims began to use the sea route to Hijaz. From an average of 15 - 20 thousand per year, the number declined to 6000 in 1845 (2000 Persians, 2000 Turks and the rest Arabs). By 1863, only 250 pilgrims came back to Damascus from Hijaz. Persians too began to go by sea through the Gulf to Jedda. (Rafiq 1985: 250 - 2) The decline in Damascus trade led to a decline in the rural markets with which it traded, especially the villages of Hawran, which used to hire thousands of camels for the transport of pilgrims, their goods and the military troops that used to accompany them. The most important such market was that of Mzairib (2 days distance from Damascus), where pilgrims used to gather on their way.

The introduction of modern crafts like printing, photography, ironwork, mechanical work and so forth in the early twentieth century was a blessing to some marginal communities who were eager and capable of capitalizing on them, while the competition of western goods was a disaster to many traditional craftsmen in the entire Mashreq. And the cities were the loci of the conflicts and the reshaping of boundaries between and within the various declining and ascending communities.

Yet it should be obvious that unless one is dealing with numerically tiny communities, no one single community prospered or declined in its entirety. For one should remember that vertical solidarities never concealed the deep cleavages between rich and poor within each and every large community irrespective of confession or ethnicity, nor did they blur senses of solidarity across ethnic/confessional lines when common interests were at stake. Christian and Muslim notables sided with each other in discussing and adopting laws relating to their common interests, and Jewish, Muslim and Christian destitute went to the streets in numerous protests and rebellion.

These late nineteenth and early twentieth century changes brought the first radical shift in the relationship between city and countryside on the one hand and between different cities on the other. Although land ownership gained in importance and became the major source of individual wealth and power, peasant communities saw their conditions degrading to semi-serf positions. The cities were expanding thanks to the unprecedented growth in foreign trade. Thus it is not difficult to speculate on the fate of the early immigrants to urban centers- who were numerous as the figures cited above reveal. The rise of new ‘faubourgs’ on the outskirts of the cities to accommodate those communities engaged in crafts was one avenue of employment as we noted above. But trade and trade-related activities were the major source of assimilating the newcomers.

However, as table 6.1 shows, the most massive waves of internal migration were to occur some three-four decades later. From the 1930s on, these waves took place under radically different circumstances and had different outcomes. Unlike the early waves, the new ones were to become the gravediggers of the ancien regimes. The receptiveness of cities and their capability of preserving the division of labor among the various crafts, activities and communities were not functions of the personal attitudes or cultural traits of the urban population or of their notables. The property systems that were evolving throughout the second half of the nineteenth
century and the first decades of the twentieth had taken their firm shape. Big landowning and mercantile classes were now dominating social, economic and political life. The political structures that were decaying in the earlier case gave way to new state structures.

The Turkish republic was formed from the defunct center of the Ottoman empire. Egypt had regained its formal independence from the British and the Ottomans. The Asian part of the Ottoman Mashreq was now formed of ‘national’ states that either gained formal independence or were under French or British mandate. And Persia went through the Reza Pahlavi coup of 1925 that overthrew the two-century old rule of the Qajar dynasty.

### Table - 6.1 -
Estimates of the Population of Some Major Mashreq Cities*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>1930</th>
<th>1950’s</th>
<th>1975</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alexandria</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>2400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aleppo</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>460</td>
<td>770</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater Baghdad</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>784</td>
<td>3800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater Beirut</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>1500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cairo</td>
<td>1200</td>
<td>2500</td>
<td>6400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Damascus</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>455</td>
<td>1100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basra</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>680</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teheran</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Istanbul</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ankara</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1700</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* In thousands
Sources:
-1930 & 1975, Issawi (1988, Table 6 - 2)
-1950’s, H. Barakat (1984: 93)
-Basra figures for 1950’s, Calculated from Najim il Din (1970: 132)

Although still lacking legitimacy, the nascent and expanding modern state structures with their parliamentary facades and bureaucracies seemed to be facts of life. In sum, prospects for social mobility within the existing systems were blocked for new immigrants whom the existing agricultural relations were throwing away. Despite the consolidation and expansion of opulent mercantile and landowning classes, which we have depicted in chapters one and two, the economic conditions in the Mashreq until WWII were all but stagnant. From the beginning of the twentieth century until the mid-1950s for example, Egypt’s annual rise in per capita income did not exceed 0.1 percent (al Ayubi 1989: 95) Despite that, Middle East cities were growing in numbers. The reasons for this state of affairs have been discussed in the first two chapters of this study. As agriculture was increasingly commercialized and old loyalties disintegrating in the countryside, landowners were no longer in need of a large workforce of their tribesmen or kinsmen. In the meantime, urban dominant classes were mostly engaged in trade, banking and real estate activities, which have a low absorptive capacity for labor. The expansion of industrial activity was too slow to absorb even a fraction of the migrants or urban unemployed.

Where did the immigrants go? What was the social impact of these waves of internal migration?
It would not be unreasonable to suggest that the vast majority of immigrants were landless peasants, mostly illiterate and unqualified. These were the ones that occupied such ‘jobs’ as domestic servants in Cairo and Alexandria, Baghdad and Basra, Aleppo and Damascus, and Beirut and Tripoli. Although no detailed studies exist on the employment avenues of immigrants in the 1930s-1940s, one can make inferences from indirect evidence. Interestingly enough, Egypt’s national accounts statistics in the 1940s and early 1950s carried by the Central Bank reserved a separate category for the wages of domestic servants, which included personal chauffeurs and home cooks (Central Bank 1963: 464-5). In just three years, the total for this item rose from 25.5 to 28.8 million Egyptian pounds between 1950 and 1952. In relative terms this item rose from 2.8 and 3.4 per cent of Egypt’s national income for these years; i.e. faster than the rate of growth of the national income itself. Assuming that the monthly pay for a house servant in Cairo was 5 pounds, this means that there were some 480,000 such servants when the Egyptian revolution took place in 1952.

The first embryos of the working classes were formed from these migrants too. However, a stagnating industry could only absorb a tiny portion of these immigrants. Egypt, the most advanced of the Mashreq countries witnessed a decline of its non-agricultural workforce employed in industry and construction from 32 per cent in 1914 to 22 per cent in 1960 (Amin 1976: 160). We have noted that the main branches of manufacturing industry were of the type that required very few qualified workers: textile, food processing, shoes and leatherwork, etc. The slums on the outskirts of big cities, mud huts and shantytowns, shelters made of reed on the outskirts of big cities and even within them were (and still are) material witnesses on how the cities dehumanized their migrants. These slums that hosted hundreds of thousands were the main pools from which cities drew their labor force. Unemployment played a crucial role in depressing the rate of pay and cheapening the workforce for employers. Despite the spectacular rise in Iraq’s oil revenues since 1952, unemployment rates increased from 19.5 percent in 1947 to 23.8 percent in 1957 (Hassan 1965: 78-9).

Migrants themselves tended to cluster according to their places of origin, and more often than not, they tended to work in the same jobs. This pattern of clustering ensured mutual support for the newcomers. The southern quarters of Beirut were almost exclusively inhabited by Shi’ite migrants from the Bekaa Valley and Ba’albeck. Those migrants gradually displaced the original Christian Maronites who had occupied the district since the beginning of the twentieth century (Jalloul 1984: 327-33). The northern suburb of Barza in Damascus was the new home for immigrants from the Golan Heights. Further north of Barza was al Qaboun where destitute migrants from Hawran found shelter. The Druze, who migrated from al Suwaida’ resided in the southern quarter of al Hajar al Aswad.

Migrants to Cairo and Alexandria came mainly from the two most densely populated governorates of Egypt: Al Munoufiyya in the Nile delta, and Girga in the south (el Saaty 1980:89). These migrants tended to cluster in the sparsely inhabited outskirts of the cities of destination. El Saaty’s pioneering work on Alexandria shows the pattern of settlement in 1954, where most migrants packed the eastern, southeastern, and to a lesser extent southwestern outskirts of the city, while the

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2 The 5 Pound average is a high estimate based on interviews with old Egyptians who confirmed that a domestic servant was paid around 3 Pounds, while personal car drivers were paid around double that amount. Unfortunately, the present author is not aware of the existence of such estimates prior to 1950, which would have been useful to estimate the rise in domestic service.
‘original’ Alexandria was a semicircle lying on the Mediterranean and surrounded by these new quarters from all other sides.

In Cairo, immigrants occupied the extreme southern suburbs of el Giza and old Cairo, or the east – al Khailia, for example-, north –Shobra al Khamia- and the center – Boulag– (al Husseini 1980: 302-33). The image that viewers of Egyptian movies preserve of Nubians working as porters, house servants and house cooks in Cairo is not an isolated case. The Egyptian hammakeen, those who specialized in carrying heavy weights on their backs, descended from the village of Musha in Asiat. Their Iraqi and Syrian counterparts were Kurds or Jews. Drivers came from the village of Dair al Baqar in al Ghariyya. Similarly, many construction workers were brought by contractors from the village of Tirs in Jeeza (A Barakat 1977: 365).

Baghdad presents a stark, but by no means an exceptional case in point. According to the 1957 population census, 25.2 percent of the city’s population had not been born in it. The comparable figures for Basra and Kirkuk were 12.5 and 3 percent respectively (Hassan 1965: 75, B. Al Najjar 1976: 152). A survey in 1956 found that there were 16413 reed huts in Baghdad occupied by 92173 immigrants. These mainly clustered in nine quarters within the heart of the city or outside the municipal borders. In the first case high reed or mud ‘walls’ separated the immigrants’ huts from the residential areas. But since the bulk of the city lied on the left side of the Tigris river until the 1940s, many (but not all) migrants moved to the western side of the river. al Karkh and had their suburbs named after their tribal or provincial origins. Thus al Tikarta quarter was named after immigrants from Tikrit, al Douriyyeen after those from al Dor, al ‘Ikhalat after the tribe of Akeel, etc.

The segregation was not only between urbans and immigrants, but also among immigrants themselves. Because they competed for the same jobs, immigrants of similar social standing harbored deep feelings of suspicion towards those who came from other regions or belonged to other tribes, and clashes between suburbs were not infrequent. Thus reproducing the original social landscape and relations of the towns or tribes of origin in the receiving cities served as a catalyst for turning immigrants’ hostility against their oppressors into hostility towards urbans in general. Immigrants from the countryside tended to lay their hands on squatters of land in uninhabited areas east of Baghdad. Those belonging to a clan used to build their cluster of reed huts around the hut of their shaikh, and surround their ‘colony’ with a wall made of reed or mud. When al Sudan clan immigrated en masse to Baghdad in the late 1940s, they clustered in one of these areas to work collectively in the newly established Abboud tobacco factory.

Migration waves were inevitably leading to a radical change in the composition of Middle Eastern cities. The original city, the nucleus in which prosperous merchants, absentee landowners and bureaucrats thrived, was cracking down with time. The cities, which hosted a few hundred thousands until the 1930s, were organized in such a way that not only the rich, but also the poor who served them had their suburbs, social organizations, common habits and traditions, distinctive dialects, support mechanisms, and interpersonal ties. The old city was a locus of interaction among and within communities who realized that despite the envy and jealousy, the systems of exclusions and inclusions, they needed and depended on each other for their living. This explains why most of the established urbans: rich and poor, Muslims, Christians and Jews, Arabs and non-Arabs, faced the immigrants with the same apathetic attitudes. All of them needed these immigrants, but all of them despised them and treated them as inferior species, and tried to isolate them in pockets that would keep their effects on social and cultural life at a minimum.
But for the new migrants, the pluralism of urban life whereby members of ‘other’ ethnicities and/or confessions enjoyed enviable positions, were only explicable in terms of the latter’s playing the role of agents of a foreign enemy, or as the latter being foreigners themselves conspiring to deprive the true Arabs from having access to the wealth of their homelands. The source of these evils was seen as a result of the dominance of foreign and alien elements over urban life. The big city to which they had only recently migrated was seen as a locus of all the maladies: softy people alien to the true nature of ‘men’, commercial life which was seen as a departure from the moral codes of the family and tribe, non Arabs (many of whom had to live in the economically depressed cities not out of choice but because they could have no access to the traditional source of wealth: land) and/or non Muslims fulfilling vital functions in social, economic and cultural life. It was but natural that such complaints would be articulated within an ultra nationalist, and statist discourse.

But these perceptions by immigrants were not totally unfounded. From the end of WWI, when the new ‘national’ states began to emerge, until the rise of the revolutionary regimes a considerable section of political and administrative aristocracies of the Mashreq was a direct descendant of the old Ottoman apparatus that was brought up to despise the ‘local’ population. Many of these preserved, and even accentuated at times, their Turkish or Ottoman-inherited styles of life. The Egyptian royal family was the descendant of the Albanian Mamluks. Its Iraqi counterpart was brought by the British from Mecca after WWI to a country that they had never been before. Family names of Turks and/or non-Arabs whose ancestors served the Ottomans as Janissaries, such as Touson, Zayyour, Yakin, Buzo, Shamdin, Mardam Bey, etc. were still dominating economic and political life until the 1950s.

What the new migrants saw in the cities was the seemingly lavish life and the city dwellers who were insensitive to their sufferings and immune to integrating them within their fabric. Interestingly enough, Baghdadis, Damascenes and Cairoites reserved the ‘pejorative’ labels “‘Urbi, ‘Urban, A’rab’”(meaning Arab) to villagers and Bedouins. Would it be surprising then, that one of the greatest contemporary Arab poets, Badir Shakir al-Sayyab, himself an emigrant to Baghdad from a village near Basra, would write in one of his most celebrated poems: “Baghdad, a grand brothel”. Later, the Egyptian Salah ‘Abdul Sabour and Ahmad ’Abdul Mu’ti Hijazi would denounce Cairo in similar symbolism⁴.

By the 1960s, the ‘cosmopolitan’ Cairo and Alexandria in Egypt, Aleppo and Damascus in Syria, Baghdad and Basra in Iraq, as well as Teheran in Iran and Istanbul in Turkey were disintegrating to the benefit of recomposed capital cities. And it would take the prosperous Beirut another decade to suffer from a similar syndrome. Although the migratory waves caught additional momentum following the overthrow of the ancien regimes in the Mashreq, one should stress that this process was by no means the product of the new regimes. Its roots are to be found in the crises of the agricultural structures of the pre-nationalistic era and the relative prosperity of the capital cities.

A small pro-western class that dominated the political and economic life of the pre-revolutionary societies was keen on keeping its monopoly over the commanding heights in society while, in the meantime, benefiting from the services of those migrants who staffed the middle and lower echelons of the expanding state and military apparatuses. This class was not only pro-western in the political sense, but it adopted western life styles, norms and habits, to such an extent that its residential

⁴ The cultural manifestations of this social upheaval were treated in more detail by the author in al Khafaji 1997: 4-17.
areas looked more like suburbs imported from Paris or London and transplanted inside the slums of the respective Middle East cities.

### 6.2 Disruptive Migration, Shifting Balances:

Although the vast majority of immigrants were landless and destitute peasants, the most articulate immigrants, who will shape the future of the Mashreq, came from different origins. These were the sons of small landowners, craftsmen from provincial towns, or well-to-do peasants, who were sent to the big cities - mostly the capital city - in order to pursue higher education, or find better jobs there. It is impossible to quantify the number of this category of migrants. For one thing, the available figures on internal migration detect those moving from one governorate to another. But many of those migrants actually moved from the hinterlands or provincial towns to the central city of the same governorate, hence their movement does not show as migration. Another reason for the impossibility of depicting these migrants is that we do not have a breakdown of the figures of migrants according to their social, ethnic or confessional background, which would allow us to make approximations on who migrated from where, and for which reasons. Nevertheless we can make some generalizations from various indirect sources. The fact that these immigrants have radically shaped the socio-political landscape of the region mainly (but not exclusively) due to their enrolment in state jobs - especially the armed forces - provides a way of analyzing their impact.

The data relating to the expansion of state employees before the 1950s are scanty and confusing, but one thing is beyond doubt, namely the unprecedented rise in the size of state employees and the changing role of the state. Although these two latter factors may look identical, numerical expansion and changing roles should be treated separately. Without the introduction and expansion of public education, a system supervised, run and financed by the state and based on a unified curriculum for an entire country, the fate of these immigrants would not have been much different from that of the previous waves of migrations, or of their contemporary landless immigrants who ended up unemployed or performing inferior jobs.

Yet an expanding state apparatus could not breed by itself the seeds of changing the political system without the existence or rise of new trends that had the potential to change the role of the state and its autonomy from the dominant classes. We will deal first with the first aspect in some detail before analyzing the socio-economic roots of revolutions and the forms that these revolutions took.

Some indirect indicators on the expansion of the Mashreq's state apparatuses and armed forces are revealing in this respect. For example, the share of salaries in Egypt's state budget rose from 17 percent in 1913 to 42 percent in the 1930s, which means that the number of employees at least doubled in a matter of two decades (Al Disouk 1975: 141). The 'Guide to the Kingdom of Iraq' mentions that the number of people depending on the government salaries and pensions for their living in the mid-1930s was 37,158; i.e. 1.2 percent of Iraq's three-million population then, and approximately 5 percent of urban inhabitants (around 750,000) (Daleel 1936: 251). The number, it seems, includes the military and police forces. From 3,500 men in 1921, the Iraqi army grew to 12,000 in 1932 (Sluglett 1976: 260), around 50,000 in 1947 and 110,000 in 1957 (Hassan 1965: 78-9). Heydemann presents an estimate of the expansion of state employment in Syria that covers only the departments whose budgets were funded from the general budget and excludes large categories such as
those working on state-funded public works projects, the military, or special and auxiliary budgets. According to this estimate the number of employees depending on the general budget rose from 4,772 in 1939 to 10,144 in 1945 and 20,862 seven years later in 1952 (Heydemann 1990: 63). On the eve of the 1963 Ba‘thist takeover in Syria, the country had a standing army of 65,000 men (Batatu 1999: 158). By the years of the change of the ancien regimes, civil servants and state sector employees had reached 325 thousand in Egypt (1952), 34 thousand in Syria (1958) and 58 thousand in Iraq (1958) (Batatu 1983: 13, Hilan n.d.: 315, Mahdi 1977: 31).

Where did the recruited military come from? Many authors have noted the general overrepresentation of minorities or underprivileged communities in the armed and civil services of the third world countries. A favorite explanation for this phenomenon are the deliberate policies of the colonial powers to rely on these minorities who lack a broad social base of support and therefore tend to identify and defend the colonial masters. Reynolds noted that:

“[T]he colonial authorities often encouraged immigration to fill intermediate positions between the top jobs, held by Europeans, and unskilled labor, which alone was considered suitable for the ‘natives’. This produced a three-tier racial division of labor, as in British East Africa or Burma, where the rulers were British, the traders, clerks, and skilled workers were mainly Indian, while the indigenous population were farmers and laborers. Throughout Southeast Asia the Chinese filled this intermediate role, and natives of the country were largely walled off from occupational advancement.”

Reynolds 1983: 957

In the Mashreq, the British and French did practice a policy of organizing armies from members of indigenous minorities for a while, but this policy did not bear fruits and did not last long. The British formed the Levies troops from Iraqi Assyrians, and the French instituted the Troupes Spéciales from the Alawis in Syria. However, both these did not exceed a few thousands in number and were disbanded in 1955 in Iraq, while the strength of their Syrian counterpart reached only seven thousand at the time of Syria’s independence in 1946 and was further curtailed to 2,500 men in 1948. Given that these troops existed alongside the national armed forces, enrolled a limited number of low-ranking soldiers, and were eventually disbanded, it is difficult to explain the preponderance of non-majority communities in the armed forces as a continuation of the old French/British policies of the 1920s and 1930s.

Many scholars have noted that since the establishment of centrally organized armed forces in the nineteenth century Ottoman Empire and well into the mid-twentieth century these forces were held in low esteem by the wealthy and the general public.

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1 Batatu gives the number of civilian state and public sector employees in 1960 at 33,979 (Batatu 1999: 160). But by that year, Syria had already experienced two years of economic nationalism and étatisation after its short-lived merger with Egypt in 1958 and the formation of the United Arab Republic form both countries.

2 In 1935, the Levies became entirely composed of Assyrians after Kurds and Arabs were encouraged to join the newly established Iraqi army. These Assyrians were not part of the Iraqi Assyrian community that lived in Kurdistan for thousands of years. They were refugees who fled form Turkish Kurdistan during WWI, when the Ottoman empire declared a holy Jihad that increased the tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims. Some 25,000 Assyrians fled to Persia. A tragic history of famine in Persia, the outbreak of the Bolshevik revolution, which deprived the Assyrians of an ally, and the resistance of Kurdish Aghas to let them return to their homes forced them to find refuge with the British troops that had already been in Iraq in 1918. For details, see al Rasheed 1998: 45-9.
populace at large (P. Khoury 1983: 46, 92). Upper class families rarely ventured to send a son to serve in the military. During the Ottoman period and even after gaining independence, many Mashreq countries instituted the \textit{badal} (literally: substitute), the payment of a fixed amount of money in exchange for relieving a conscript from military service; a practice that consecrated the notion that military service was a burden rather than a privilege, and enabled the well-to-do to spare themselves the efforts, while laying it on the shoulders of the poor who could not afford to pay the \textit{badal}.

The armed forces of the Arab Mashreq have therefore been mostly recruited from lower classes. The officer corps was mainly composed of those sons of lower classes who could afford to finish a few years of high schools and enroll in military academies because their families could not afford waiting for them to pass four to six years in the more ‘respectable’ higher education institutes (Ba’eri 1969: 317-21). Ba’eri provided ample evidence on the lower-middle class background of the armed corps of Egypt and Iraq, which were ruled by landed oligarchies until the 1950s. Batatu explained how the Alawis of Syria, being among the most depressed sections of the country’s peasantry, were unable to pay the \textit{badal}, and hence their overrepresentation in the Syrian armed forces (Batatu 1999: 342).

Although this factor undoubtedly accounts for the preponderance of Alawis in the armed forces, I would suggest that it is not sufficient. The reason for this is that compulsory conscription did not lead to advancement in the military corps, because it was a temporary service, while the officer corps in the Middle East was (and still is) based on voluntarily joining a ‘higher’ military academy. Thus the \textit{badal} only spared people from the temporary compulsory service. This explains the preponderance of the underprivileged confessions/sects or regions in the lower ranks of the military, while they lacked a heavy representation in the officer corps. Contrary to a widespread impression, the Syrian Alawis in the officer corps were not as important numerically as the Sunnis prior to 1963 (Batatu 1999: 156). Yet they had a plurality among the common soldiers and a clear preponderance among the noncommissioned officers where they composed no fewer than 55 percent of that corps in 1955.

In Iraq, where discrimination was systematically practiced against enrolling Kurds and Shi’is in the officer corps, Shi’is from the southern poverty-stricken governorates of Nasiriyah and ‘Imara had a heavy presence in the noncommissioned officer corps and the police respectively. But even when poor families could collect the necessary financial amount to relieve their sons form service, they wouldn’t normally choose to do so, because serving in the civilian, military, or paramilitary state apparatuses was avoided only by those who had other means for social and economic upward mobility. For the poor sections of the Mashreq societies, especially during the period of stagnation during the 1930s and 1940s, these outlets provided excellent means for advancement for those who saw all other avenues blocked in their faces. Yet the evidence point out that it is not the ‘poor’ in general that have a tendency to staff the military and paramilitary apparatuses whenever they have the

\footnote{P. Khoury explains the Arabist attitude of the Damascene officers during the closing years of the Ottoman era by noting that these officers belonged mainly to the lower middle class and were mistrustful of the local, non-professional notables. Moreover the bureaucratic landowner class prevented its sons for several generations from entering the military service. Members of this class could use their influence with the state to exempt their sons from military conscription. The notables viewed military professions as more suitable to the lower classes. Khoury adds that the scanty available data on the biographies of the Arabist officers indicates that as a group they were of a socially lower status than the pre-Ottoman ones.}

\footnote{Further more, unlike other university students, cadets usually received a modest monthly payment.}
occasion to do so. The appeal of these services to marginal and marginalized communities seems much greater than their appeal, say to a Damascene or Baghdadi poor. Several authors have argued that military enlistment can shape the boundaries and saliency of a group’s identity. Al Rasheed points out that:

“Pariahs such as socially and geographically isolated groups seem to be receptive to military recruitment which gives them the opportunity to establish a new status and role for themselves. Examples of these cases include the Kurds, Berbers, Cossacks and of course the most famous case of the Gurkhas. Military enlistment provides such peripheral groups in remote areas with a vehicle for gaining respect and legitimacy.”

Al Rasheed 1998: 49

The validity of this argument is evident in the case of the Middle East. But one should add that the appeal of the military service to peripheral groups also stems from the fact that unlike previously established communities who enjoyed a degree of autonomy and had mechanisms for self-defense, Alawis in Syria, and Assyrians in Iraq, as well as Circassians in Jordan who showed a similar tendency to join the military, lacked these privileges. The absence of other avenues for upward mobility, the legal and/or material deprivation of land ownership explains why such communities were not only attracted to enlist in the military/paramilitary forces, but also to the new job opportunities, which members of other communities were not keen on practicing, or did not have the will to learn their skills. Therefore, it is not only the colonial policy, but more important the above factors that explain why the majority of early oil workers, mechanics, car drivers, etc. hailed from such peripheral regions/communities in the Mashreq.

Al Khattab provided ample evidence on how the British selected members of three Sunni Arab tribes residing north of Baghdad to form the nucleus of the officer corps of the newly formed Iraqi armed forces in 1921. Members of al Jubour, al Bayyat, and al ‘Azza tribes formed some 25 percent of the officer corps of the Iraqi army in the 1920s (al Khattab 1979: 123). Colonel al Zaidi published a comprehensive list of the Iraqi and Turkish officers who joined the Iraqi armed forces after the defeat of the Ottoman empire in WWI: the number of officers who came directly from Turkey was 304, those who came from Syria via sea routes were 108, and those who came via land route from Syria were 91 in number. None of the senior officers (colonel and above) belonged to the majority Shi’ite confession of Iraq (Al Zaidi 1990: 433-43).

This formula of excluding members of the majority confession, as well as non-Arab ethnicities including those adhering to the privileged confession (such as the Kurds who are Sunni Muslims but non-Arabs) has been pursued decades after the formation of nationalist rule. A survey of classes 44 and 45 of the Military Academy (academic years 1964 and 1965) showed that only 20 percent of the accepted students were Shi’ite (56 percent of the population), 45 percent were from Mosul (Arab Sunnis), 15 percent from Ramadi (Arab Sunnis), 10 percent from the Sunni quarters of Baghdad, and only 10 percent were Kurds, Christians, Yezidis and Turkomans. In the Military staff academies, non-Sunnis were simply not allowed (al Zaidi 1990: 158-9).

In all but two Syrian governorates, Sunni Muslims represented the majority of the population. In al Sauwaida’, the Druze formed the majority of the population and in Latakia the Alawites constituted the majority. In this regard, Van Dam notes that:

“[M]embers of religious minorities showed a disproportionately strong representation in the Syrian Army and occupied politically and strategically
important military functions, [but] the most prominent factions in power before the takeover by the Ba'th in 1963 were mostly led by Sunni officers.”

Van Dam 1981: 41

We will see the ramifications and consequences of this disproportionate representation later, but suffice it to note here that over, under, or simply ‘mis’ representation was not about sects, confessions or ethnicities. It was rather about people originating from a common background, experiencing the same hardships, sharing the same dreams regarding the prospects of migrating to the “cosmopolitan” cities, and facing the same shunning, dehumanization, and exclusion by the elite of the “cosmopolitan” city.

While it is true that the migrants who came to play prominent roles in the political and economic life of the Mashreq shared much with other migrants, their difference from the majority of the latter should also be stressed. Hence their political acts and choices, though in many ways responding indirectly to the expectations of the majority, were by no means representative of the choices and beliefs of the majority. On the ‘destructive’ side, i.e. on defining the political target for attack, there was a quasi-unanimity. One can safely assume that the monarchies and the dominant landed aristocracies in Egypt and Iraq were despised by the majority of the populace during their closing years.

The fragility of Syria’s post-independence regimes manifested itself in the success of three coups d’état in less than a decade. One can argue that a system based on the domination of a landed aristocracy and opulent merchants was quite alien to the aspirations/expectations of the majority of the population in the post-independence era. This alone, however, does not explain the incident of revolution. Social tension could take other avenues, as is well known. Lebanon’s opulent mercantile-landowning oligarchy alienated itself from wide sections of the population, yet no revolution followed. Rather, a civil war erupted in 1958. We are, therefore, required to make more precise approximations to the particular social settings.

Migrants and non-migrants alike were not keen on preserving the status quo in these countries. But while many aspired to overthrow (or radically transform) these regimes, not all had the ability to do so. Political change required much more than discontent, which manifested itself in several street outbursts in Cairo, Baghdad, and Teheran, among other places in the Mashreq. It required the existence of a core that had the capability to effect that change. And while those who succeeded in doing so did express the bitterness of migrants and the alienated urban towards the upper ruling classes, they had their distinctive worldviews, which distanced them from wide sections of other migrants.

The rifts and violent clashes that characterized the early revolutionary periods (a normal occurrence in practically all revolutionary changes) were clear indicators that while all parties agreed on overthrowing the existing regimes, there was little agreement on the social, economic, and cultural programs that should be implemented, and most important on the type of political regimes that should replace them. But before turning to the social and ideological formation of the new political elites, perhaps we have to present a tentative explanation of why revolutionary changes occurred in some Mashreq countries and not in others.

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9 Once again, it is novels that give us so much insight on people’s aspirations. Fawwaz Haddad quite succinctly shows how poor and low-income intelligentsia welcomed these coups without necessarily knowing the political agenda of the putchists. They simply hated the old regimes (Fawwaz Haddad (2000) al Dhaghian wal Hawa (Hate and Prejudice). Ibal Publishing House, Damascus, 2000).
6.3 Manufacturing Revolutions:

I have tried above to present the details that seem to provide a multi-causal explanation for the radical changes that swept the Mashreq in the 1950s and 1960s, and we should proceed now to link the various elements in a relatively coherent analytical body. But one remark seems very pertinent here regarding how one should characterize these changes.

A question that is often raised in the academic, or militant-polemic discussions is whether these changes, carried mainly through army officers in the form of coups d'état, deserve to be called revolutions, and if so, whether we should distinguish them from 'real' revolutions, the French or Russian for example, as 'revolutions from above'. My view is that whether one justifies or denounces these movements, the fact is that they have radically eradicated the previously existing property systems based on big land ownership and merchant capital, totally displaced the ruling political classes, and introduced novel social, cultural and economic policies, norms and practices.

To emphasize the novelty of the new system does not imply at all that the buds of this system were not evolving and maturing under the previous regimes. On the contrary, these changes came to consecrate these rising trends and install the rising strata in power. Therefore, if by revolution we mean a radical change in the social system, then these changes qualify for the terminology *par excellence*. As for the form that these revolutions have taken, we should keep in mind that they always came following a period of rising social tensions and, in Iraq and Egypt, mass movements 'from below', so to speak. The 'Free Officers' movement in Egypt followed bloody mass demonstrations in 1946, clashes between the British forces and the Egyptian army in 1950-1951, the beginning of anti-British guerilla operations in the Suez Canal, and the riots of 1951 which instigated the famous 'Cairo fire' (Al Shafi'i 1957, Hamroush n.d.). The overthrow of the Iraqi monarchy in 1958 followed two mass uprisings in 1948 and 1952 and numerous local peasant revolts (Marr 1985: 106-13, Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett 1987: 38-47). In this regard Fred Halliday and Maxine Molyneux note:

"Revolution from above is not so much an alternative to revolution from below as an extension or fulfillment of a mass movement from below, where the latter is, for a variety of reasons, unable to go beyond the stage of creating an atmosphere of national dissidence and to overthrow the established regime."

Quoted in Bromley 1994: 162

If we judge a revolution by the magnitude and intensity of the changes that it introduces to the cultural, social, political and economic spheres, then a comparison between the military-led coups and the Iranian revolution seems very pertinent here. Undoubtedly, the latter qualifies to be among the most spectacular popular revolutions in modern history, given the level and duration of the mass activities that were involved in the overthrow of the Shah's regime in 1979. For the world outside Iran, the latter's revolution might seem quite specific and incomparable to any other because of the Islamic ideology under which it was carried and the religious mantle of the regime.

However, the outcome of the revolution is strikingly similar to the outcome of the revolutionary changes that had taken place elsewhere in the Mashreq: a monolithic political system, an anti-imperialist and anti-western foreign policy and ideology, extending the role of the state in the cultural and economic life, and the pursuance of an
policy of economic nationalism. Mass popular involvement in carrying a revolution introduces specific elements and imposes additional demands on the new leadership (the French case, for example), but its differences from changes 'from above' should not be exaggerated.

With this in mind, we can proceed now with an attempt to 'explain' revolutions in the Mashreq. In order to do this, it may be helpful to see why did revolutions occur in some countries and not others. Revolutionary change did not take place in the entire Mashreq region or the Arab world. It began in Egypt, when a military coup overthrew the monarchy in 1952, and was followed by a similar Iraqi coup in 1958. Syria plunged into a series of conservative, Latin American-type military coups between 1949 and 1954, followed by a parliamentary republican regime, a three-year unity period with revolutionary Egypt, a coup that reinstated a conservative parliamentary republic for two years before entering the radical revolutionary period that brought the Ba'th Party to power since 1963. Yemen underwent a military coup in 1961 that overthrew the centuries-old medieval system under the rule of an Imam. Algeria installed its one-party rule after gaining independence from 130 years of French colonialism. Libya overthrew the Sinussi monarchial dynasty and installed a revolutionary regime in 1969. Sudan vacillated between periods of parliamentary democracy and military rule between its independence in 1956 and the prolonged military rule that came to power in 1989. Iran had its particular brand of a popular revolution that installed an Islamic revolution and overthrew the Pahlavi monarchy in 1979.

The three decades of revolutionary changes, however, have left several parts of the region immune to coups, despite the fact that these changes have left their strong imprints on the 'conservative' systems forcing them to adapt their functioning and discourse to the changing realities around them. Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the five Persian Gulf Emirates, and most notably Turkey and Morocco escaped this fate. Lebanon presents a special case. The country has been ruled by a parliamentary republican democracy since its independence, but I will argue below that its two civil wars of 1958, and most importantly of 1975-1990, partially fulfilled the same functions as the ones achieved by the Mashreq coups d'état. And finally, Turkey went through two successful coups in 1960 and 1980. But both these coups did not (and were not intended to) introduce radical changes in the country's political system or to the composition of the leading elites. Rather, they reformulated the rules of the parliamentary game in accordance with the military's demands before handing power back to civilian politicians.

A combination of developments, it seems, can account for the similarities and divergences of the patterns of the Mashreq's paths. First, in all the Mashreq's societies that underwent revolutionary changes a powerful class of big landowners had been in place for a long period, as was noted in the preceding chapters. This class extracted its wealth from the misery of a large mass of wretched peasants, many living in semi-serf conditions. This situation engendered extensive waves of peasant migration to the city centers where their lives were not much better off. This was the case of Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon.

By contrast, Jordan, the Arabian Peninsula and Turkey did not experience the domination of such a class, in the first cases because of the arid ecological conditions

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The cases of Morocco, Tunisia, Libya and Algeria evidently fall outside the scope of our study because they are part of what is conventionally known as the Maghreb. Enumerating these cases is only intended to give an idea on the scope and magnitude of the changes that swept the region on the one hand, and the cases that resisted that change on the other.
of the region, and in Turkey because the republican regime in 1923 inherited a land system based mainly on small and medium-sized land ownership and proceeded with a ‘modernization’ project that was heavily biased to the urban sectors. However, one can argue that in the case of Turkey, the nationalist, anti-western revolutionary change did actually take place some three decades before the other Mashreq countries. Kemal Ataturk’s coup in 1923 initiated a series of reforms including the nationalization of foreign owned companies, the adoption of five-year economic plans and state control of the major industries and financial institutions (Hershlag 1968: 90-2, Berberoglu 1980: 97-100).

Although the structure of land ownership may partially serve as a departing point for explaining the occurrence of revolutionary changes in the Mashreq, it leaves several questions unanswered. Why was the revolutionary change in Iran, which had an extremely exploitative landowning class, around two decades late compared to its other eastern neighbors? Why didn’t a revolutionary coup d’état take place in Lebanon, despite the fact that its land ownership system was similar to that of Iraq, Syria, and Egypt?

The pressures for reform in Iran began earlier than anywhere else in the Mashreq. In 1906, a popular revolt against the absolute monarch of the Qajar dynasty forced a short-lived reform on the Shah who reluctantly introduced a form of constitutional monarchy. In 1952, popular vote brought the legendary prime minister Dr. Mosaddegheh to power. His constitutionally elected government took the unprecedented decision of nationalizing the multinational oil industry. The price he paid was a bloody CIA-engineered coup d’état in 1953. So, the yearning for reform was there in Iran. But the Shah, aware of these trends in his society, and alarmed by the radical change around his country in the late 1950s, initiated a program of mild land reform in 1961 and 1963 that was intended to forestall radical changes. In retrospect, one can see that this program only delayed revolution. As these reforms were unable to engage the emancipated labor force into any rewarding activities, major Iranian cities, especially Teheran, underwent the same ruralization process where sprawling shantytowns encroached upon the established urban orders, eventually suffocating them (Abrahamian 1991: 118).

Lebanon’s land system was no less oppressive than elsewhere in the Mashreq. Social tensions between peasants and landowners showed in several revolts and acts of protest. The absence of powerful group dedicated and able to change the system has to do with the other two factors that I propose to explain change in the Mashreq. One is the potential for the state to gain some relative autonomy vis-à-vis the major actors in society, and the other is the existence of an economically rising group who sees its ability to further development, and the translation of its economic rise on the social and political levels blocked by the existing elite. This rising group must, moreover, be capable of casting its aspirations in ideological terms that could appeal to the majority of the population and not only to its members. Obviously, the ability to cast particular interests as national ones is not only a matter of ideological manipulation by the rising group. In order to be viable, a socio-political change must produce benefits to social groups other than the would-be dominant one.

The Mashreq states that underwent revolutionary change had already begun intervening in the economy since at least WWII, with various degrees of success. The spectacular rise in the shares of governments’ oil revenues in Iran and Iraq since 1952 allowed the state in both countries to develop that autonomy after decades of dependence on external aid and/or taxing the land and commercial activities. The fees from the Suez Canal gave the state in Egypt a modest independent source of finance.
The Syrian state had less chances of autonomous development. However, when the country gained its independence from the French in 1946, the latter agreed to hand back the relatively large amounts of Syrian gold reserves, partly in cash, and partly by abandoning the French enterprises to the Syrian government as a form of payment.

The Lebanese state, by contrast, was an exception in this regard. Following an ultra-liberal economic policy, the state left a flourishing mercantile/banking activity intact and became ever more dependent on the revenues accruing from taxes on these and the agricultural activities. With Lebanon turning into the Switzerland of the Arab world, any revolutionary change via capturing the state would have produced negative effects even for those strata that may aspire to enrich themselves via capturing state power. The multi-confessional structure of Lebanese society made it impossible for any single group, including the armed forces, to impose radical changes on society and expect to be met with acquiescence.

To this anomaly one should add the second factor that hampered change in Lebanon in the way that the other Mashreq countries experienced. The Lebanese economy, just like the majority of other Mashreq countries, was expanding during the first post WWII decade. This implied the rise of new strata whose further development was blocked by the dominant oligarchy, and the persistence of poverty among wide sections of the population. This should have presented a golden opportunity for revolt, because it is the widely perceived boom, accompanied by stagnant living standards of a significant mass that ferments rebellion and not a general atmosphere of poverty or stagnation. Here too Lebanon differed from most of the Mashreq countries in at least two aspects. One is that the standards of living of the population in general were above those of the rest of the region. And despite the gross inequality in income distribution, the poor saw their living standards on the rise during the 1950s and 1960s, and unemployment rates were much lower than elsewhere in the region. The second is that Lebanon’s post independent constitutional compromises consecrated and perpetuated the Ottoman mechanisms of indirect rule and thus obstructed the rise of a civil society where the individual is connected to the state without any mediators.

Despite the modern façade of a parliamentary rule, a multi-party system, and a free press, unwritten rules dictated that the president must be a Maronite Christian, the prime minister a Sunni Muslim and the speaker of the parliament a Shi’ite Muslim. Hence, whereas the post-war social mobility in the Mashreq was gradually paving the road for the rise of individuality and citizenship, Lebanon preserved the formula by which members of the different sects would be represented in the state structures via ‘their’ notables. This formula was a recipe for peaceful coexistence among the various communities that compose the Lebanese society, but it also proved that in order to translate the changing balances among these communities, civil war was the means.

6.4 New leaders in Search of Constituencies:

Radical changes took place in countries that had been characterized by: 1) the domination of big landed aristocracies and mercantile classes; 2) an increasingly autonomous role of their states, and 3) the rise of social strata whose further advancement was blocked by the dominant landed and mercantile classes, and who

11 A few months after the eruption of the 1975 civil war in Lebanon, the leader of the feeble Lebanese army, General Azz al Ahbab, carried a coup d’état in the hope of putting an end to the war. His coup, however, failed and the Lebanese army split along confessional lines.
could present their revolutionary cause in a way that appealed to wide masses of the oppressed.

Understanding the backgrounds of the immigrants who came to play the leading roles in the Mashreq is essential to understanding the ideological framework, the political practices and the socio-economic programs that they introduced to their respective societies and to explain how they imposed acquiescence on the majority of the population. It may be ironical that the changes, which were the direct product of the crises of systems dominated by the big landed aristocracy, were not carried by its direct victims.

Despite some differences in the backgrounds of the leaders of the nationalist regimes in Egypt, Syria and Iraq, two striking lines of similarity among them must be pointed out. The first is that none of them came from any of the major two or three cities in their respective countries. And the second is that virtually none of the new leaders, or their parents, had experienced direct subjugation to the oppressive machinery of big landed aristocracy. They either hailed from regions whose topography did not allow the rise of big estates, or belonged to the lesser notability of small landowners that did not suffer directly from semi-feudal exploitation and degradation. 

Of the nineteen members that composed the military committee that was to play the leading role in Syria since 1966, none descended from sharecroppers or landless families. Ten of these members and four out of the five inner core of the committee descended from lower or middle class peasants (Batatu 1999: 145). Others were the sons of petty clerks or employees who experienced, in one way or another, the humiliating dominance of the French and British on their country’s affairs. Egypt’s leader Gamal Abdul Nasser was the son of a postal clerk. His deputy Abdul Hakim ‘Amir came from a wealthy peasant family. The father of his successor and companion Anwar al Sadat was a clerk with the army. Zakariyya Muhiyildin, a long time strong man in Nasser’s regime, came from a middle class family of landowners (Hamrous h n d : 70-98). The composition of Iraq’s Revolution’s Command Council, which is the body that governs the country since 1968, reflected the same pattern. Out of the fifteen members that sat in this body during its first decade in power, eight came from a rural background (peasants, petty agricultural entrepreneurs and petty landowners), and the fathers of four members were policemen, vendors, and petty tradesmen (Batatu 1978: 1090-91).

Some of these immigrants did not descend from peasant families. Their rural towns were the centers of crafts or services that were eclipsed by the introduction of new transport technologies and/or competition form cheaper and better products from the west or from other regional centers. In the nineteenth century ‘Ana, a rural town on the upper western bank of the Euphrates in Iraq, was a center for the production of women gowns (‘Aba) that was eclipsed by competition from French and Syrian products with the improvement in transport technologies. Tikrit, on the other hand, specialized in the production of kalaks, rafts that were used to transport goods from Mosul to Baghdad via the Tigris River. Once in Baghdad, the kalaks were dismantled.

12 In a very telling interview with an American author who published a semi-official apology for the policies of the Iraqi regime. Saddam Hussein reminisced about his youth in Tikrit: “Though life was difficult. I never felt that a narrow class interest inhibited our personality from evolving. Feudal lords had no authority in our region... The feudal lord belonged to our tribe.” (Interview with Christine Moss Helms, al Thowra [Baghdad daily] 28.12.1985)
and their precious wood was used as fuel because it was very difficult to navigate upstream in the Tigris. With the introduction of steam power, Tikrit began its decline. But using the kalaks continued until the 1940s, when new railroads linked Mosul to Baghdad and paved roads facilitated transport by cars. The depressed situation of Tikrit can be gauged from the fact that its population showed no increase in two decades from ‘around 5000’ in 1929 to 5770 in 1947 (Daleel 1936: 846 ff., al Aqeeli 1995:60).

This background, common to most of the leaders of the nationalist revolutions of Egypt, Syria and Iraq, has been, along with other factors, instrumental in shaping the outlooks and social programs of the ‘radical’ leadership of the Mashreq region. But portraying the new Mashreq leadership in this way may give the impression that this analysis is an additional evidence to the widely held notion that political leadership in this part of the world has a free hand in molding passive societies, and that whoever manages to capture the state machinery can steer the course of events according to his wishes. An analysis of the courses of these revolutions will show that this is an unfounded opinion and that the final shape that the revolutionary regimes have taken was due, to a large degree, to the forceful pressures that these regimes had faced from social actors, who despite being unorganized and lacking the means of transmitting their demands, could make their aspirations and disappointment felt by the rulers.

6.5 Interregnum: Prelude to Rupture

In all the countries that underwent radical changes, a strikingly similar pattern has characterized the revolutionary processes and the composition and rifts within the new ruling groups- an aspect which has drawn very little attention by analysts despite its huge significance. The first leaderships of the revolutionary regimes were either predominantly urban, or had symbolic urban figures heading them. And in all these cases, there were figures who had played prominent roles in society and in the ‘establishment’ politics, or had occupied relatively prominent positions under the defunct regimes. Finally, in all these cases, the new leaders tried to give the impression that they were preserving some semblance of continuity with the constitutional norms of the ancien regimes, that were based on the formal separation of the executive, legislative and judiciary bodies.

Egypt’s first leader was Brigadier General Muhammed Neguib, a prominent officer born to an officer father. The revolutionary regime overthrew the monarch, but not the monarchy. The officers worked under the formal leadership of a regent to the throne and a civilian government (which incorporated several ‘free officers’) headed by one of the monarchy’s politicians. Only two years after the revolution was the monarchy declared dead, the republic instituted, and Neguib was put under house arrest.

Iraq’s revolution immediately overthrew the monarchy and declared a republic. However, the leaders of the first republican regime (1958-1963) emphasized the ‘interim’ nature of their regime, whose role was to reform the political system before handing it back to civilian politicians who were supposed to compete for seats in a reformed, multi-party parliamentary system. A symbolic and powerless ‘sovereignty council’ was formed of prominent figures to fill the jobs of a head of state. And actual power resided with the cabinet and its premier General Qassim. Qassim himself was one of only sixteen individuals who held that rank at the time of the revolution – an indicator of his incorporation into the elite bureaucracy- and the
urban structure of his cabinets was very pronounced: 64 percent of the ministers were born in Baghdad, Basra, or Mosul. The comparable figures for the period 1963-1968 were 37 percent, and 25 percent for the first decade of the Ba’thist regime (1968-1977) (Tikriti 1976: 276, al Khafaji 2000: 262-5).

Syria presents an interesting case where the same party has been in power since 1963. One would therefore expect that no significant change has occurred in the structure of its leadership over the years. Yet, this is far from true. Two ‘internal’ coups (in 1966 and 1970) and numerous shuffles and splits fulfilled the ‘ruralization’ function. Although the Syrian Ba’th acquired a pronounced rural and provincial coloring since the 1950s, the party leaders were keen on preserving the traditions of appointing Sunnis from the major cities to the posts of president and prime minister until 1970. Batatu’s analysis of the Ba’th leadership concentrates on a period that begins six months after the assumption of power by that party.

However, Van Dam shows clearly that in the period between March 1963, when the Ba’th assumed power in that country, and 1966, when the ‘left wing’ ousted its rivals, 2 percent of the commands of the party were Sunni Damascenes, 8 percent were Sunnis from Aleppo, 10 percent Sunnis from Homs, and 10 percent Sunnis from Latakia (Van Dam 1981: Appendices, table 3). Thus members from al Bitar Damascene family, the notable Hamah family of al Attasi, or the Aleppo, or the Aleppo born Amin al Hafidh occupied these jobs during the first years of the Ba’thist revolution. By September 1963 descendents from the major five Syrian cities represented only 17.3 percent of the total individuals (and 24.5 percent of the total members) of the party’s leadership. These percentages dwindled further by February 1966 to 8.4 and 12.4 respectively in the four following years (see table).

Even the radical Islamic revolution in Iran did not depart from this pattern. The first president was a non-cleric, as well as the first prime minister who came from a political organization that adhered to the secular line of the 1952 deposed prime minister, Muhammed Musaddegh.

Several conclusions can be drawn from the above analysis. The first regards the impulse for changing the ancien regimes. It is clear that not only rural and descendents from rural towns were against these regimes, but a wide section of the urban population including some well-placed people. Without support from the latter, it would have been very difficult to achieve success in carrying political change, since urban could (and did) neutralize many influential and vacillating strata, and had access to the reigns of power.

Table – 6.2 -
Syrian Ba’th Regional Commands 1963-1970
by Place of Birth

|----------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|

13 The urban/provincial/rural origins as major sources of tensions between various factions were consciously felt by the officers themselves before the Ba’th’s coming to power in 1963. Reminiscing on the shuffling of the officer corps in 1962, ex-chief of staff of the Syrian Army explicitly states that its essence was to fill the main jobs “by officers who harbored nothing but hatred and aversion to Damascus and its inhabitants.” (Zahr al-Din 1965: 22)
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<td>34.0</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>37.9</td>
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<td>58.4</td>
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<td>Lesser Towns</td>
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<td>18</td>
<td>27.7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latakia</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main Cities*</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>26.0</td>
<td>29.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Damascus</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aleppo</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>10.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hims</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hamah</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Information</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Cities with populations of more than 50,000 in 1960 or more than 100,000 in 1970.

Source: Batatu 1999: 164

A second conclusion regards the pace of change and the popular pressures that made further radicalization possible. It should not be surprising that promulgating and implementing the laws on land reform, a major step with which the radical regimes have been associated, took place during this ‘first stage’ in all the Mashreq’s revolutions. Ironically, these reforms unleashed pressures that were to undermine the political base of those who enacted them. The first-stage leaders did not intend to go much beyond curtailing the power of big landowners and punishing the old politicians. Radicalized masses of unemployed immigrants who had never been to the ballots or understood party politics, and peasants for whom the liberty of the press meant very little -if anything- could not understand the hesitation of their leaders to abolish all these practices. Many of them never heard of the names of those personalitities that the leaders were hesitant to throw in prisons or even execute. Many of the new leaders either hailed from modestly propertied classes or had at least some personal encounters with the merchants and industrialists whom the newcomers to the cities saw as major opponents. In sum, whereas the urban leaders viewed revolution as processes aimed at redressing a course and returning things to ‘normal’, others saw them as the beginning of paths towards an unexplored heaven, or as an insightful analyst of the French revolution aptly put it:

“Most revolutionary histories present themselves as linear: a passage in time from oldness to newness. But they can hardly avoid circularity. In its early usage, revolution was a metaphor drawn from astronomy, signifying the periodic turning of the sphere. It implied predictability, not unpredictability. ‘The World Turned Upside Down’, as the popular anthem of the American Revolution was called, paradoxically implied an adjustment to its becoming right side up. Correspondingly, the men of 1776 (and still more the framers of the Constitution) were more concerned with preserving order than with perpetuating change. Some of the same nervousness was apparent in France in
the way the men of 1789 used the word. But in their case, its transformative rhetoric overwhelmed any apprehensive second thoughts. Curiously, those who hoped for limited change in 1789 were the most given to the hyperbole of the irreversible. And from that time on revolution would be a word of inauguration, not repetition.”

Schama 1989: 6-7

Clearly then, social tensions in the Mashreq societies left tremendous effects on the shape and content of political power. The first revolutionary regimes were rendered transitional by the large disenchanted masses that saw them as reformist and mild. The cleavages, it must be stressed were not between poor and rich as such. Generally speaking, the trade unions and urban workers tended to side with the ‘reformist’ regimes rather than with the more radical populism of the nationalist movements. And it is this dilemma that contributed to eclipse some of the rising political organizations and the rise of others.

The complex configuration of —active or passive— social actors during the revolutionary periods can be portrayed as a matrix of four blocks: the landowning and merchant classes, the middling and poor urbans, the destitute migrants, and the better-off migrants. As in any other schema, this matrix tends to simplify a more complicated reality as many nuances, subdivisions, conflicts within each block and sub-block interactions are not portrayed in it. The first block, landowners and merchants, was targeted by the three other as the source of the perceived societal and political maladies. Despite the overall animosity towards that first block, the urban poor and middling strata shared social norms, values and collective memories with the urban merchants in particular. The two migrant blocks shared values but no common interests, apart from doing away with the ancien regimes. Perhaps, it was this complex social configuration that allowed the rising migrants to assume the role of a bridge where the three blocks could find their common meeting points, through bloody conflicts and clashes to be sure.

In an atmosphere of severe competition, the radical political parties in the region adapted with varying degrees of success to the changing realities in the Mashreq countries. In the meantime, non-radical opposition parties that had been vocal during the pre-revolutionary era ceased to exist altogether. The Egyptian al Wafd, the Iraqi National Democratic Party and Independence Party, the Syrian National Party and the People’s Party, and the Iranian Partisans of Freedom Party welcomed the revolutionary changes, but they were not viewed favorably by those who would play the leading roles during the ‘second stage’ of the revolutions. The reasons are not hard to discern. These parties were mostly urban-based. Their leaderships were almost exclusively urban. Their political practices revolved around parliamentary politics and a façade of pluralism. As the revolutions introduced new social actors to the political arena, these parties were seen at best as relics of the past that had played a positive role but have no reasons to exist since the demands put on their political programs have been fulfilled, and even surpassed by the revolutions.

However, it would be preposterous to assume that the relative success or failure of particular trends and organizations to adapt to the changing realities and to express the aspirations of the majority of the oppressed can be accounted for by the talents, skills or strategies adopted by their leaders. Social changes tended to reflect themselves in the composition, outlook and strategies of the radical organizations more or less in an inadvertent way. Given the clandestine or semi-clandestine nature of these organizations, the changes occurred though splits, expulsions and heated struggles within organizations. The particular problems facing each of the Mashreq’s
countries, and the ideological mantle under which each of these organizations operated imposed their constraints on the degree that each trend could adapt to changing needs and realities and determined to a large extent the trend that was more accommodated to express them more effectively.

Very few doubted the corruption of the old sociopolitical systems of their respective countries, but the way each section of the underprivileged classes viewed this corruption was different from others. Shared grounds could be found of course, provided that some other manifestations of the corrupt system were relegated to a secondary position. For example, the overrepresentation of Jews and Christians in the higher grades of the chambers of commerce and in the banking and real estate activities could be attributed to class divisions and the infiltration of agents of imperialism among Moslems and non Moslems alike, as the Marxists did. But any reference to these minorities as being non-authentic citizens would jeopardize the basis upon which these organizations were founded, namely that national liberation is a matter of class struggle rather than ethnic cleansing. Moreover, the communists of Iran, Syria and Iraq, among the most popular parties in the 1940s and 1950s in their respective countries, had a significant membership of underprivileged minorities for whom an ideology stressing equality among citizens irrespective of their sects, confessions or ethnicity was very appealing. The bulk of the membership of the Lebanese communist party was composed of Orthodox Christians and Shi’is, in addition to Armenians and a few Maronite Christians or Sunnis.

On the other hand, nationalist feelings, which ran high among all of the underprivileged (and even many privileged) strata, could easily be incorporated within chauvinistic semi-Nazi ideologies, which tended to play on the instincts of the poor by portraying the privileged merchants as alien conspirators plundering their countries hand in hand with the British and the French, not because of the social position that the former occupied, but because they belonged to sects/ethnicities whose loyalty to the nation was questionable. Until its merger with the Arab Socialist Party in 1952, a party that had much support among the Syrian peasantry because of its emphasis on the corruption of the landowners and the need for land reform, the Ba’th party showed very little, if any, sensitivity towards the oppressed social classes. All the members of the Ba’th Executive Bureau from its founding in 1945 to the party’s merger had their roots in Syria’s main cities and towns. Hence the absence of any reference to landlords or exploitation in the numerous writings of the founding father of the party (Bata‘tu 1999: 136). In the 48 articles Ba’thist Constitution adopted in 1947 and composes the party’s general principles, the character of Arab socialism’s economic policy is described in a purely nationalistic discourse. Article 26 states that “The Arab Ba’ath Party is socialist, believing that the economic wealth of the homeland belongs to the nation (Gottheil 1981: 247).

But how could the originally urban Ba’ath succeed in mobilizing, or at least gaining the acquiescence of the migrants and declassed, while the communist failed? It seems that the ideological framework of ‘pure’ nationalism can only provide a partial answer. The success of nationalist agitation naturally varied according to the concrete situation of each of the Mashreq societies. The dominance of western

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14 Naturally, I am describing the communist positions of the late 1940s and 1950s. These movements, composed of modestly educated but dedicated militants, relied mostly on French and British communist pamphlets very loyal to the Stalinist versions of Marxism. Later on, the theoretical ‘sophistication’ of the communist parties would deteriorate even more with the advent of Soviet publications and the expansion of cadre training courses for communists in the various institutions of the USSR and its allied countries.
interests was palpable in the entire Mashreq, naturally. Ownership of the Suez Canal, the oil industry in Iran, Iraq and the Gulf and Saudi Arabia, the humiliating occupation of Egypt by British troops in 1882 and their continues presence there and in Iraq, and the 1953 CIA intervention to overthrow the democratically elected government of Iran, were daily reminders of that presence to the ordinary people.\footnote{It is noteworthy that the 1952 revolution of Egypt skillfully adopted the slogan: "Raise your head my brother, you are your own master!", because since the end of the Pharaoh’s era Egypt was never ruled by an Egyptian. The pre-revolutionary monarchs descended from Muhammed Ali, who was an Albanian Mamluk.}

Long before the Ba’thists, the communists championed the causes of national liberation and were among the first to denounce the domination of foreign capital on national resources. But nationalism -or more accurately revolutionary nationalism- is not only a function of the domination of foreigners, otherwise we would have witnessed such nationalist explosions in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf emirates. It is an ideology that is best couched on the existence of oppression and misery on the one hand, and the rise of articulate groups who feel that their interests, which they may view as the interest of the whole nation, can be furthered by doing away with foreign domination. And these conditions were fully there in the countries that underwent revolutionary changes in the Mashreq.

Paradoxically, Syria, was the country in which foreign domination was least palpable. It had gained its full independence in 1946, and the French debts to the country were used to buy the foreign owned public utilities (electricity, trams, etc.) and turn them into Syrian state property. Trade activity was (and still is) in the hands of the powerful local Sunni merchants of Aleppo and Damascus. Nevertheless, foreign capital still held powerful positions in the economy, as the following table suggests. Yet, it seems that the success of Ba’thists in Syria had less to do with nationalism than with its socially refurbished image and policies after the merger with the Arab Socialist Party, as the above cited figures on the high percentage of rural in its leadership, even in the early 1960s indicate. It seems, in fact, that unlike the Iraqi Ba’th, which preserved its insensitivity to social problems until the end of the 1960s, the Syrian Ba’th’s “socialist” tone appealed more to the masses than its purely nationalistic one.\footnote{The ‘purely’ nationalist feelings in Syria should not be minimized however. The Syrians may be the most pan-Arabists of any other nation in the region and the Palestinian tragedy weighed, perhaps, heavier on their conscience than on any other society in the region, because historically Palestine was the southwestern strip of ‘Greater Syria’. Yet it is the urban Damascene who upheld the pan-Arabist idea, and it is the absence of those in the leading bodies of the pan-Arabist Ba’th that deserve our attention here. The Syrian Ba’th gradually alienated itself from its founding father, himself a Damascene nationalist for whom social struggles occupied a subordinate position in comparison to those hampering the ‘Nation’s strength’ vis-a-vis the others. In 1966, the party officially split into two factions, a ‘left-wing’, which ruled Syria and ousted the founder, and a ‘right-wing’, which came to rule Iraq since 1968. Significantly, the right-wing party had already committed bloody massacres against the communists in Iraq, whereas the Syrian Ba’th, more oriented to social thinking, adopted a strategy of ‘depopulizing’ the communists by providing more achievements than the latter’s promises. For details, see (Kienle 1990).}

By contrast, a predominantly Shi’i Iranian population could easily target the opulence of the tiny Jewish and heterodox Baha’i communities as signs of animosity of whole communities (or faiths) to the national interests. The same could be said about Egypt, where Christian Egyptian merchants held a disproportionately high percentage of the trading activity (see table).
Table – 6.3 -
Foreign Companies in Syria in 1952

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Capital</th>
<th>Currency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lebanese</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>48,393,345</td>
<td>Lebanese Lira</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>54,020,600</td>
<td>Sterling Pound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>4,739,960,50</td>
<td>French Francs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palestinian</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2,269,000</td>
<td>Palestinian Pounds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palestinian</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>300,000</td>
<td>Lebanese Lira</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egyptian</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>815,550</td>
<td>Egyptian Pound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>631,599,530</td>
<td>$ Dollar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swiss</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>77,000,000</td>
<td>Swiss Franc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordanian</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>145,000</td>
<td>Jordanian Dinar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraqi</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1,010,100</td>
<td>Iraqi Dinar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgian</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>653,333,300</td>
<td>Belgian Franc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>105,000</td>
<td>Sterling Pound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5,062,825,50</td>
<td>Italian Lira</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dutch</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1,000,000</td>
<td>Dutch Guilder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panamanian</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>90,500</td>
<td>US $</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danish</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saudi</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Al Sibai’i (no date: 361)

The paradox, however, lied in Iraq, where the majority of the population is Arab Shi’ite (around 55 percent) while political power has always resided with Arab Sunnis (around 20 percent of the population). Because of the traditional dominance of Sunnis on the state, urban Shi’is, who had the means to pursue higher education, or had access to some resources directed their activities to trade and liberal professions. Until the mass exodus of the Jews following the creation of Israel, the latter dominated the trade and banking sectors, while the Shi’ite merchants came second. The preponderance of Shi’ite merchants became very evident after 1948, when the latter had a virtual monopoly on banking and commercial activities. Yet the most wretched peasants and migrants to the cities were also Shi’ites from the southern governorates of Iraq, as well as the Kurds.

Table – 6.4 -
Muslim, Christian and Foreign Merchants in Cairo
1891/1917

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Muslims</th>
<th>Christians</th>
<th>Foreigners</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Note: Muslim merchants’ figures includes some non-Egyptians (e.g. Moroccans). Christian Egyptians include Egyptian Copts, in addition to some Christians of Syrian origins. Foreigners include Western Europeans plus some Greeks, Jews, Italians, Armenians, etc. The compradors include those merchants registered under the category “commissioners”, which is of Turkish origin denoting trade agents.

Source: Davis 1983:90.

Whereas Syrian minorities: Ismariliis and Alawis for example, harbored feelings of mistrust towards the predominantly Sunni elite, who besides dominating mercantile activity in the cities was their direct exploiter as peasants, such a rift was not so clear cut in Iraq. Shi’ite as well as Sunni landlords exploited Shi’ite peasants. Kurdish aghas were the masters of Kurdish peasants. The impoverished masses of migrant peasants, as well as the established urban workers, tended to view their misery more in terms of explicit class oppression than in sectarian or ethnic terms. This may partly explain the amazing success of the Iraqi communist party in gaining mass support until around the mid-1960s, whereas Ba’thism was hardly a popular current in that country.

To put it differently, in all the countries that underwent revolutionary changes in the Mashreq, the most successful political trends were those that could create a sense of national unity in the face of western colonial powers and their local allies. Syria’s social divisions were mainly of religious/sectarian nature, and therefore an Arabist ideology appealing to the actual or perceived Arabness of the vast majority of the population irrespective of their confessions could fulfill that role. By contrast, Iraq’s divisions were mainly ethnic ones. An Arabist ideology alienated large sections of the population, while the communists managed to transcend the nationalist cleavages by emphasizing class unity, which had the potential to appeal to Shi’is and Sunnis alike.

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### Table 6.5

**Composition of the Baghdad Chamber of Commerce for the Financial Year 1938/1939**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Total*</th>
<th>Western</th>
<th>Non-Iraqi Arabs</th>
<th>Iraqi</th>
<th>Others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Jewish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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195
The receptiveness to each variant of the radical ideologies largely depended on the specific situation and common experience that a particular group of migrants faced, and the specific situation of each of the Mashreq societies. Syria and Lebanon were no less diverse societies than Iraq as we have seen above. But their diversity was confessional and not ethnic in the first place. True, Syria and Lebanon had their non-Arab citizens: Kurds, Armenians, Syriacs, and Assyrians. But these composed tiny percentages of the population and Arabic was becoming the dominant, if not the sole, spoken language, in both countries.

Kurds in northeast Syria and Armenians in Damascus and Aleppo kept using their languages. But the Damascene Kurds, many of whom occupied high positions during the Ottoman era, melted in their Arab milieu and ceased using that language for generations. Armenians kept teaching their children their mother language and had their own schools, but their minority situation and living in Arabic-speaking cities and not in exclusive enclaves of their own, made it impossible for them to demand recognition as a culturally ethnic identity.

This was not the situation in Iraq, where despite the Sunni-Shi‘i cleavage, a larger majority of the population belonged to non-heterodox Islam. There were several other non-Muslim groups to be sure: Christians, Jews, Yazidis, Sabean, as well as heterodox Muslim sects. But the biggest source of diversity was ethnic, the more so after the mass exodus of Jews. Although the Kurds are mostly Sunni Muslims, they could not identify with Sunni Arabs because, in addition to being persecuted by Sunni-dominated Arab regimes, the cementing element of the post-Ottoman Mashreq was nationality defined as synonymous with ethnicity. Another difference between Syria and Iraq lied in the fact that in the former there was a clear-cut majority for a single ethnic-religious group; Arab Sunnis constituted some 72 percent of the population. In Iraq, most of the Arabs were Shi‘is, but Arabs only constituted some 70 percent of the population. Sunni Muslims constituted more than 50 percent of the population, but only if we lump Arabs with Kurds together. The Kurds had their own distinct identity that kept them apart from Arabs, Shi‘is and Sunnis alike. Therefore, while Ba‘thism and pan-Arabist ideology in general appealed to non-Muslims in Syria because it upheld the concept of equality of all irrespective of their religion and sect, it was a time bomb for the Iraqi Kurds, Turkmans,

* Membership included companies and individual merchants and tradesmen. The grading of classes reflected wide differences. First class membership was for those with 'a financial consideration limit' of 75,000 dinars (one dinar = one pound sterling), while the sixth for a 'financial consideration of a mere 100 dinars.

Source: Batatu 1978: 245

| Second | 22 | 3 | 3 | 11 | 1 | 2 | - | 2 | - | - |
| Third  | 84 | 7 | 4 | 44 | 8 | 11 | 2 | 6 | - | 2 |
| Fourth | 130| 4 | 2 | 73 | 15| 17 | - | 12| - | 7 |
| Fifth  | 162| 4 | 5 | 58 | 39| 33 | - | 18| 4 | 1 |
| Sixth  | 75 | - | 1 | 19| 17| 24 | 4 | 5 | 5 | - |
| Total  | 498| 35| 15| 212| 81| 87 | 6 | 43| 9 | 10 |

17 Mainstream Islam falls within the following five sects: Hanafi, Malik, Shafi‘i, Hanbali and Shi‘ite. These share the basic tenets of Islam and the interpretation of the Koran. Heterodox Muslims, whom many even do not consider as Muslims, compose such sects as Alawites, Druzes, Isma‘ili and Baha‘is. On the differences and development of these heterodox sects, see among many others, Hishi 1985.
Chaldeans, Armenians and Assyrians, who formed distinct ethnic groups that preserved their cultural traits and languages.

These factors combined might explain the differences and the commonality in the trajectories of the Mashreq countries. Whereas the radical changes that swept the region since the 1950s can be attributed to the bursting off of the sclerotic social systems that had been in place since the end of WWI, notably their incapacity to cope with the waves of migration and urbanization and the crises of the agricultural structures, the forms that the radical changes took were not quite uniform. Improving economic conditions following WWII exposed and magnified social cleavages. Those strata that saw their fortunes on the rise due to WWII and its aftermath either could not enhance their positions any further, or had to acquiesce to playing subordinate social and political roles in a system where roles had been already defined and monopolized by a tiny aristocracy.

6.6 Transitional Revolutionaries:

The revolutionary developments since the end of the 1950s swept the old ruling classes away from the political scene. The ‘transitional’ revolutionaries followed suit after a few years as the huge pressures for radicalizing the course of revolutionary changes made it possible for rural and provincial town immigrants to take full control of the state apparatuses of the Mashreq. Theoretically, this should lead one to expect the establishment of more representative and therefore more democratic political systems since these immigrants formed the majority of the new urban spaces and had so much to share with the aspirations of the peasants. However, in all these cases the evidence shows that tyrannical leviathans under the rule of tiny cliques were the outcomes of these changes. And it is of utmost importance to attempt to understand this paradox.

The interaction of two sets of conditions may account for the outcome of the revolutionary changes in the Mashreq, one is the social configuration at the time of the revolutions and the other is the changing relationship between states and societies since the early 1950s. The mass migrations coupled with the virtual absence of expansion in the formal, organized urban sectors—the same phenomena that instigated change—had their necessary corollary; namely that the new regimes stood above atomized societies. The vast majority of the population was neither organized economically, nor politically. Their aspirations, pressures and disenchantment could be felt and transmitted in indirect ways, but they had no way of putting collective demands systematically. What little organized action could be carried out via radical parties and trade unions, repression and hostility towards collective acts by the pre-revolutionary, as well as revolutionary, regimes were able to isolate.

Obviously, suppression could not achieve these results were it not that organized action and organized sectors were turning more and more into isolated acts due to the atomization of the population. Whereas in the 1930s and 1940s a strike would have had a destabilizing effect on the ruling elites, and thereby on the political structures that were heavily linked to these elites, such acts no longer weighed as

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18 It is of particular significance here to mention that three months after the Egyptian revolution and immediately after the adoption of an agrarian reform act, two trade union leaders, al Khamisi and al Baqari were hanged because they led a strike in the factories of Kafr al Dawwar. A few months after the seizure of power by the Ba’th party in Iraq in 1968, bloody attacks against a left-wing student public gathering in a park in Baghdad and a workers’ strike of the vegetable oil industry sent the same message.
heavily in the 1950s and especially after the revolutions. Not only the changing social configuration and the changing relationship between the new regimes and the dominant elites were the reasons behind that, but also the changing relationship between states, dominant classes and societies.

Until around the mid-1940s, Mashreq state leaders harbored ambivalent political attitudes towards their social base: the big landowners and merchants. These attitudes, very similar to those of European absolutisms, can be described as the desire to see the monarch and his/her retinue stronger than any single local power holder on the one hand, and the desire to keep local power holders in control of their subjects on the other hand. The first tendency is not difficult to understand obviously. It was the recipe for putting an end to separatist attempts at state building and thereby to enforce the acceptance of the fact that modern structures were there to stay. The new invention of air force, which the unfortunate European absolutisms lacked, proved to be a formidable means to suppress local revolts and demands for more autonomy for the local power holders and their subjects.

On the other hand, the desire to keep local power holders in control of their subjects stemmed from the fact that the legitimacy of rulers and their state structures rested upon the allegiance of the functional chiefs of various communities to their authority. Chiefs of tribes, village notables, religious leaders, and merchants who played the role of notability in their respective suburbs or city quarters, were the means through which the population could be controlled and appeased. Parliamentary rule—a fraudulent one to be sure—served as a means to enforce indirect rule, rather than building modern centralized states. A glance at the above-cited tables on the distribution of parliamentary seats of the Mashreq should be sufficient to make the point that the ‘modern’ institutions were adapted to ‘premodern’ social conditions, and local chiefs were the intermediary layers between central state bureaucracy and the subjects.

But the figures on the social backgrounds of the members of parliaments and cabinets in the last years of the ancien régime also give a partial indicator of the changing relationship between dominant classes and their constituencies. For despite the concerted efforts to rig the election and preserve the status quo, the rising number of independent professionals and personalities close to the progressive parties who could enter the parliaments of the Mashreq is a clear indicator of the detachment of growing numbers from their ‘traditional’ local leaders. The numerous street riots in the cities and peasant revolts and exodus from the countryside also testify to the fact that the drive towards direct rule was imminent and that the traditional chiefs lost their legitimacy in the eyes of their own subjects.

The system of indirect rule based on subjects whose interests and control were in the hands of their local notables was cracking down. The inability of those notables to efficiently challenge secular politics was a clear indicator. In sum, revolutions were

19 A proud Winston Churchill would reminisce on the use of the RAF of chemical weapons to suppress the Sulaimniyya Kurds’ revolt for independence in 1921. But the nascent ‘national’ Iraqi air force was first used to suppress the revolts of the Dwanîyya peasants and lessor landlords who demanded more rights for the cultivators against big landlords (Sassoon 1987: 123).

20 A hasty reading of European history may take the above as evidence for the variance between the Mashreq and the former cases. But let us remember that the parliament was an institution that developed in the struggle between the nobility and the monarchs even in Europe. Commenting on the adoption of the Magna Carta in 1688, Wood notes that: “Constitutionalism has, in fact, historically often been aristocratic, even feudal, in its motivations; and while this does not disqualify it as an important contribution to the development of ‘limited’ and ‘responsible’ government, a certain caution should attend any effort to identify it with democracy” (Wood 1990: 83 fn.).
made possible by the fact that the dominant classes lost their ideological-political functions and the political institutions lost their pillars of societal control. Therefore, what is generally viewed as military coups ‘diverting’ the ‘normal’ functioning of societies, should be seen the other way around. Where the old dominant classes preserved their social functions and therefore ideological legitimation, a military coup would either antagonize these classes and thus face tribal riots and urban unrest that would eventually force an end to the coup, or would have to act in accordance with interests of those dominant classes, thus ending up with the reproduction of the ancien régime.

Lacking moral/ideological legitimation and a social function to fulfill, dominant classes would normally turn to the other aspect of control—physical coercion via the armed forces. Yet the expansion of the armed forces under the pre-revolutionary regimes, whose intention was obviously the strengthening of these regimes, led to the opposite effects. The relationship between defendants and defended, so to speak, was peculiar however. Where an institution of a standing armed force existed in pre-revolutionary Europe, these were mostly recruited from the lesser nobility and privileged classes. This was not the case in the Mashreq, as we have seen above. The defendants of public order and the political system had simply no stake in doing so. With the exception of handfuls of superior commanders who hailed from upper class families and/or were incorporated within the ruling elites, the majority of officers, let alone the noncommissioned officers and soldiers, were alienated from the top elite by virtue of their regional descent, social status, and/or living patterns.

The European case that most resembles the Mashreq in this respect was France where the expansion of the standing army under the monarchy was carried through the massive incorporation of the plebeians within its ranks. The classical and insightful study of Alexis de Tocqueville emphasized this factor as a major source that undermined the position of the dominant aristocracy (de Tocqueville 1865: part 2, chap. 1).²²

On a societal level, state authorities, deprived of their independent means of ideological legitimation, were facing atomized populations even before the revolutions took place. In fact, this atomization was a symptom of the crisis that the revolutions were supposed to address. This situation provided the preconditions for asserting the supremacy of the state as a regulator of social activity without the mediation of local leaders. The backgrounds of the new revolutionary leaders, almost all owing their rise to occupying jobs in the state apparatus and particularly the armed force, was an additional reason for fetishizing the state and its capabilities to ‘produce’ progress. But this fetishism only evolved gradually as the state leaders discovered the lack of organized and effective resistance by the atomized population to their acts.

²¹ The quick decline in the ability of the ‘old classes’ to control and legitimate, in contrast to their social power during the previous decades, may account for the failure of coups, or their inability to establish military regimes before. Reza Pahlavi’s coup in 1925 put an end to the rule of the Qajar dynasty, but he was proclaimed shah and his main pillar of power were the still influential big landlords. Thus he ended up with a monarchy that was similar to the ones in Egypt and Iraq. The 1936 military coup in Iraq, the first ever to occur in an Arab country, ended up months later without achieving any change. The series of coups in the late 1940s and early 1950s in Syria ended up with the return of parliamentary rule and the old merchant-land owning notables.

²² Goran Therborn comments that this was not because the mobs entered the state apparatus in the first place, but because their entry increased the isolation of the ruling aristocracy from its local base; thus turning into parasitic court nobility (Therborn 1978: 51).
With the exception of land reforms, the transitional revolutionaries had no plans to enact serious changes in the socio-economic spheres. Land reforms had an objective of putting a ceiling on the size of land owned by a single individual or family, and distributing the confiscated land to landless peasants. Their enthusiastic calls for industrialization and the encouragement of national industry were translated into enacting legislation that gave more exemptions and bonuses to local private industrialists and taxing imported goods. Hence, no statist was preconceived by the urban and transitional revolutionaries who undoubtedly shared the illusion that a class of national industrialists could be dissociated from the merchant and landed classes in order to launch the modernization programs. But the political changes and land reforms were more than sufficient to send an alarming message to the many members of the dominant classes who moved, or moved their liquid assets to the west, Lebanon and other neighboring countries.

The social consequences of these developments were obviously favorable to the rise of new juntas who were not constrained in their actions by organized lower classes, or powerful dominant classes. But these consequences would not have been sufficient to ensure stability if the state had not acquired the potential for a relative financial autonomy from the dominant classes. Whereas the social and political influence of the old dominant classes had been eroded, their economic influence could not have been curtailed and the revolutionary regimes would have succumbed into chaos without this financial autonomy. The Mashreq states were able to achieve this thanks to two developments. One was a new arrangement between the international oil consortium that controlled its oil production and the host governments to raise their shares of the oil revenues to fifty percent, thus causing spectacular hikes in the governments’ incomes. And the second was post-WWII international economic boom and the cold war competition between the superpowers to gain influence in the Middle East and their generosity to hand grants, aid, and easy loans to their prospective allies. To this should be added the rise of the national liberation tide which made the nationalization of western interests in the region one of the possibilities for governments under pressure to find sources of revenues.

Due to all these combined forces, oil revenues in Iran rose from 11 percent of the central government’s total revenues in 1954 to 42 percent in 1960 (see table). In Egypt, the public sector’s contribution to the GDP rose from 94.8 million Egyptian pounds in 1950 to 257.4 millions in 1958 thanks mainly to the nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956\(^2\). Iraq’s oil revenues jumped from 6.7 million sterling pounds in 1950 to 51.3 in 1953 (Owen and Pamuk 1999: 260). Although the Syrian state lacked the natural resources or utilities that could bring her significant revenues, certain indicators show that its resources were expanding in the decade leading to revolutionary changes. The state’s share in gross capital formation rose from an annual average of 43 million Syrian pounds in the period 1952-1954 to 109 millions during the period 1955-1958 and 171 millions during 1961-1964. In proportional terms the share of public investment rose from 18 percent in 1950-1955 to 41.3 percent in 1965 (Hilan n.d.: 155). The strategic location of Syria during the height of the cold war era allowed it to reap benefits from the superpowers and later from the regional wealthy neighbors\(^24\).


\(^2\) Throughout the late 1940s and the 1950s, the region was drawn into the race to form pro-western, anti-Soviet pacts. Turkey, Syria’s powerful neighbor to the north joined the NATO. In 1955, the Baghdad Pact was established. This alliance (later known as the CENTO after the Iraqi revolution and
Lebanon presents a case where big landed and merchants aristocracy dominated the social, economic and political scene just like in the other Mashreq countries. The same symptoms of discontent, migrations and inability to absorb the unemployed into remunerating activities led to several social outbursts. However, the state could never evolve into an autonomous body, and the system of indirect rule was nowhere more pronounced than here. Parliamentary seats were (and still are) assigned to sects, whose deputies are expected to play the role of mediators between their constituencies and the state apparatus.

Table 6.6 -
Iran: Sources of Central Government Revenues (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1954</th>
<th>1960</th>
<th>1964</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oil Revenues</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duties and Customs</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct taxes</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Domestic Revenues</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign Donations</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Mahadavy 1970: 455

Table 6.7 -
Iraq: Sources of State Revenue (Selected years, thousands of dinars)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Land &amp; Animal Tax</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Oil Revenue</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Customs' Excise</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1927</td>
<td>4432</td>
<td>1256</td>
<td>28.3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>2063</td>
<td>46.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1932</td>
<td>4215</td>
<td>607*</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>524</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>1931</td>
<td>45.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1939</td>
<td>9208</td>
<td>842</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>21.8</td>
<td>3388</td>
<td>36.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>45001</td>
<td>4569</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>13295</td>
<td>29.5</td>
<td>15642</td>
<td>34.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>79542</td>
<td>3856</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>37405</td>
<td>47.0</td>
<td>15504</td>
<td>19.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1953</td>
<td>91474</td>
<td>3491</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>58343</td>
<td>63.8</td>
<td>18784</td>
<td>20.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1958</td>
<td>129393</td>
<td>2445</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>79888</td>
<td>61.7</td>
<td>27695</td>
<td>21.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The land and animal taxes were until 1931 directly levied, and after that date became indirect consumption imposts.

Iraq's withdrawal) was formed of the UK, Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Pakistan. The US had an observer membership in the pact. The Iraqi monarchy was heavily involved in coup attempts in Syria in order to draw the country to the pact. And a sandwiched Syria looked for revolutionary Egypt and the Soviet camp for aid, eventually entering into a short-lived unity with the former to form the United Arab Republic under the leadership of Nasser. For more details, see Seale 1965.
Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, a process of rise among descendents from the hitherto marginalized provinces was under way. The Shi'is, the most numerous of sects, improved their socio-economic conditions, benefited from transfers from relatives and family members who engaged in lucrative trade activities in west Africa. Sunnis from the southern city of Saida (Sidon), and Maronites from the northern regions of Zgharta and ldhn were also on the rise, thanks to similar transfers from the oil-rich Arab countries for the Sunnis and from Africa for the second. Although the rifts took the form of whole sects demanding fairer say in the politics of their country, there was another, no less volatile one: that between the rising strata of each sect and its "assigned" representatives. The starkest example is the budding of new Shi'i political organizations since the mid- 1970s: Amal first, followed by Hezbollah.

The civil war was to partially fulfill the 'tasks' of the Mashreq's coups d'état: forcing new leaders for the various sects into the body politics and opening the way for social mobility for the newcomers. Thus the monopoly of the role of the speaker of parliament by the two big Shi'i landowning families, the Hamadas and al As'ads, was abruptly ended and Amal's leaders occupied that role, while Hezbollah's deputies made their regular presence in the parliament. As for the Sunni leadership, the traditional families that occupied the post of prime minister hailed from the traditional aristocracy of Beirut or Tripoli, or had established themselves so long in Beirut, that they lost touch with towns of origin and were considered Beirutis, like the Sulh family that originally came from Sidon. The outcome of the civil war was the eclipse of these families to the advantage of the nouveaux-riches from Sidon, like the post-civil war prime minister Rafiq al Hariri.

The fact that the Lebanese economy and society had been geared to banking, trade and transit activities meant that the state could never develop a huge executive body or an extensive armed force that would deplete the resources of the main sectors. While a military coup was almost impossible in Lebanon's case, a popular social revolution was equally difficult given the non-rise of a trans-sectarian hegemonic class that could pose its demands as those of the whole nation. Whenever these demands were raised and social tensions rose high, the country could easily slide into a civil conflict.

Lebanon's specific situation is very instructive as a contrast to the developments in the rest of the Mashreq. Despite the violent fifteen-year long civil war between 1975 and 1990, the country had to keep a façade of a parliamentary rule and a multi-party system, a separation of authorities, free press, a fixed term for the president, and the system of indirect rule. The change, as we have seen, was confined to the rise of new communal leaders from modest, and mainly provincial, backgrounds to partially or totally replace the old aristocratic leaders. A façade of a representative system, which assumes that citizens are identified in sectarian terms, has perpetuated the institution of indirect rule.

Commentators on Lebanon and the Middle East have mostly viewed these Shi'ite movements through the prism of their anti-Israeli operations. However, Amal (literally meaning hope in Arabic) was established in the mid-1970s under the name of Harakat al Mahroumin: the Movement of the Deprived. At that time, the radical Lebanese Shi'ites were mainly under the influence of the Lebanese Communist Party.
By contrast, a more autonomous state could do away with the whole concept of representation to the advantage of direct rule in the rest of the Mashreq. But in order that such a unique center for political activity and decision-making could survive, several conditions needed to be met. We already mentioned the rise in the financial capacity of the state, the collapse of the legitimacy of the old classes and the atomization of the population as three essential conditions. The armed forces, despite their distorted ethnic and sectarian composition, could present or imagine themselves as the only national institution that can act on behalf of the ‘nation’. By cutting the roots of upper landed aristocracy, the revolutionary leaders could claim that they removed the most formidable obstacle to achieving social and economic equality.

Yet the ‘transitional’ revolutionaries, those of predominantly urban composition, could not go very far in their claims and perceptions, because they themselves were associated, in one way or another, with the affluent or well-to-do urban merchants, bankers, real estate agents and industrialists and were thus seen by the radicalized population as half-hearted reformists. What prompted their imminent demise was not only the narrowing of their social base as they achieved their preliminary programs, but also the fact that they were desperately divided among themselves. Shared common goals could not conceal the differences in outlook of people hailing from different cities and therefore different backgrounds, interests and ambitions.

Paradoxical as it may seem, the first revolutionaries were victims of their own success. As the peasants were liberated from their age-old dependence on the landlords, agricultural classes lost what little influence they had on policymaking because of the further atomization of small peasants and the rise in the economic weight of urban activities. Although peasants lost their influence, their descendants and relatives in the cities gained weight thanks to their numerical preponderance and their ability to formulate common political perceptions that revolved around the creation of strong states that have the capability of coercing opponents. This was not the case with urban revolutionaries. Their common urban backgrounds could not conceal the fact that they descended from different class positions that definitely shaped their views and outlooks.

### Table 6.8
The Transformation of Egypt’s Agrarian Structure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Size of holding</th>
<th>Before the 1952 Land Reform Law</th>
<th>1961</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number Holdings</td>
<td>Total Area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No. (1000s)</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small: Less than 5 feddans</td>
<td>2642</td>
<td>94.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium: 5- less than 10 feddans</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10- less than 20 feddans</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 6.9 – The Transformation of Syria’s Agrarian Structure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Size of Holding (Hectares)</th>
<th>Pre-Reform</th>
<th>Post-Reform</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% Population</td>
<td>% Owned Land Surface</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large (100+)</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>50.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium (10-100)</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>37.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small (-10)</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>13.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Landless</td>
<td>60.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Hinnebusch 1989: 110

### Table 6.10 – The Transformation of Iraq’s Agrarian Structure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Size of Holding (Donums)</th>
<th>Prior to Land Reform law</th>
<th>1972</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Landholders</td>
<td>Area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 10</td>
<td>1135</td>
<td>44.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 – less than 100</td>
<td>1009</td>
<td>39.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100 – less than 500</td>
<td>3150</td>
<td>12.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>500 – less than 1000</td>
<td>2916</td>
<td>1.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1000 – less than 2000</td>
<td>1832</td>
<td>0.72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Abdul Fadhil 1988: 87
6.7 Conclusion:

Up till now, much of the writings on the revolutionary changes in the 1950s-1970s Mashreq tends to portray them as 'accidental' events that could or could not have happened depending on the whims and aspirations of some military officers who moved their troops and captured the reigns of power in their respective countries. Before these changes, the typical narrative goes, society was running on its due course, a 'bourgeoisie, which was nothing but the precapitalist mercantile bloc as I argued in the first two chapters, was in control of the state and the working classes, which were no more than tiny urban islands, were acting according to the (vulgar) textbook formulae of class struggle.

On the other hand, of course, there is the official ‘explanation’ presented by the ideologues of the revolutionary regimes, according to which history had been stagnant and waiting for the revolutions to usher in a new dawn. Without falling into the trap of determinism, I have tried to show above that coups d’état do not explain change. They themselves need to be explained in terms of social contradictions and configurations, otherwise we wouldn’t be able to understand how and why similar coups ended up as palace events, when the legitimacy of the socio-political system has not been seriously undermined in the eyes of its subjects, while others were able to initiate radical socio-economic and political changes.

In order to explain this irony of revolutions coming to rid the people of non-democratic regimes and ending up in establishing tightly controlled tyrannies, one needs to go beyond the essentialist stereotypes on despotic vs. democratic cultures, or the subjective wills/inclinations of leaders whose preferences are assumed to be capable of reorienting societal choices. The question that should be asked is not whether these rulers had dictatorial attitudes or not, for in any revolutionary change such leaders must be among the main players. Rather one should ask about the circumstances that made these would-be dictators take the lead and a majority of the

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26 If one may draw an analogy with the working of a capitalist economy, then revolutions may be resembled to economic crises: a posteriori signals that indicate the existence of serious, non-remediable disturbances in the system. And just as economic crises entail the destruction of some society’s assets in order to redress disturbances, revolutions carry the same destructive ‘tasks’.

---

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2000 +</th>
<th>2480</th>
<th>0.98</th>
<th>1773051</th>
<th>55.3</th>
<th>453</th>
<th>0.08</th>
<th>2283</th>
<th>442</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2532</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>3215481</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>5391</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>2292</td>
<td>9921</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

population acquiesces to dictatorships. And it is here that apathy towards city life comes to the forefront. While urban revolutionaries saw their ‘destructive’ mission accomplished by cutting the roots of big landed aristocracies, with whom they shared no common interests or sympathies, the more articulate and active sections of the Mashreq population were looking for bettering off their conditions in the cities. The scenes of inequality, lavishness and affluence lied side by side with those of misery.

I have tried to show above that the revolutionary leaders’ backgrounds, hailing from oppressed sects or regions, was instrumental in shaping their ways of perceiving class divisions in their own societies, and their ‘solutions’ to harmonize their societies and bring social justice. Those rulers may not have, and did not in many cases, harbor a priori religious prejudices, but were driven to view the dominant and wealthy merchants, bankers and affluent strata as hostile people belonging to privileged sects or regions. Attempts at ‘redressing’ inequality inevitably turned into suspicion against established urbans, especially those sharing confession with the dominant strata.

As the revolutions achieved the goals that were welcomed by the majority of the population, fissures within the revolutionary camp surfaced as the eternal question of the outcome of the revolutions would reveal the narrowing of the common denominator between people hailing from different social structures and having different concerns. Revolutions ended up being monopolized by leaders who could not trust but their kinsmen or personal friends to the top jobs, as ideological ties proved to be insufficient for the formulation of concerted, concrete and detailed practical policies.

What made this outcome possible was not the power struggle in the top, but the atomization of the Mashreq societies, the increasing capacity of the state to play a dominant role in the economy, and a host of other factors that made nationalism, statism and development look like identical/ non-competitive objectives. And to this topic we should turn now.