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Humiliations: Middle Eastern middle class and the war in Ukraine

Introduction

The Middle East is not geographically far from Ukraine, thus the effects of Russia's military invasion were quickly felt in this region. The war became linked to some important issues for Middle Eastern countries such as energy and global peace. Several Middle Eastern governments have developed relationships with both Russia and the United States, making it challenging for them to take a stance on the Ukrainian war. Despite economic and political factors, public opinion significantly influenced the state decision-making towards involvement in the war in Ukraine.

The nations in the Middle East showed sympathy towards the Ukrainians who were forced to leave their homes and cities due to the destruction caused by Russian weapons. However, the middle class as a leading class did not approve the involvement in the war. Consequently, with the exception of Syria, the Middle Eastern states have generally condemned Russia's actions towards Ukraine and avoided involvement in the conflict. In addition, despite having

a close association with Russia and being hostile towards the US and the policies of NATO in the Middle East, Iran also declined to support the invasion.

The question arises how does the Middle Eastern middle class view involvement in the war? To answer the question, the research will focus on two important factors that influence the Middle Eastern middle class's attitudes towards war. The first factor is history and the humiliation of past wars. The Middle Eastern countries have a history of fighting for independence, which has resulted in numerous conflicts with the European colonial powers. The feeling of humiliation can be perpetuated from one generation to another through storytelling, historical narratives, and cultural expressions.¹ Therefore, history and memories matter. The second factor is the middle class fear of political-economic instability, which has been exacerbated by several recent wars in the Middle East. The Middle Eastern middle class prioritizes avoiding international or national conflicts, seeking a more peaceful environment.

Studying these two factors, this research aims to gain a comprehensive understanding of the Middle Eastern middle class's perspective on war. The assumption is that, as a leading class, the middle class does not approve of conflicts or wars due to its past experience of humiliation and current fear of political-economic instability.

Theoretical framework: Humiliation and the middle class

Although, humiliation is a personal emotion, it can be triggered by factors that target one's identity, which can also be shared among groups. Therefore, individuals who share an identity may have a higher likelihood of having similar emotional responses when their identities are activated. This may be a reason that war humiliation can cause a strong nationalist response. The humiliation experienced during war may lead to a desire for reassertion and the restoration of national pride, often influencing a country's foreign policy and military actions in the future.²

In the 19th century, during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1871, France had to give up the territories of Alsace and Lorraine. The French were determined to regain these provinces. Russia was also humiliated in the Franco-Prussian War. Therefore, they feared the rising power of Germany, which had

¹ T. Kisantal, "Beyond the Battlefields of Memory: Historical Traumas and Hungarian Literature", *Porównania*, vol. 2, no. 27, 2020, pp. 47–58.

² M. Masterson, "Humiliation and International Conflict Preferences", *The Journal of Politics*, vol. 84, no. 4, 2020, p. 5.

already formed alliances with Austria-Hungary and Italy. So the two nations decided to join forces for mutual protection as well. It was the start of what would become the Allied side, the Triple Entente, in World War I.

Adolf Hitler referred to the Treaty of Versailles as a tool for blackmail and a source of disgraceful humiliation. Fifteenth years later, during the signing of the 1940 Armistice with France, he intentionally evoked the memory of Germany's humiliation by sitting in the same chair where Ferdinand Foch had signed the Armistice marking Germany's defeat in 1918.³

In the 20th century, colonial humiliation resulted in wars between colonizers and colonized nations. These nations, having suffered under foreign powers, rejected external rule and demanded the right to govern themselves independently. These movements emerged in colonized nations seeking independence, using a range of tactics including armed struggle to challenge colonial rule. However, the colonial powers frequently responded with brutal force to suppress resistance movements, resulting in massacres, punitive expeditions, and repression of dissent. The nature of these movements was severe.⁴

However, in the 21th century seems with the rise of middle class in the developed countries and even developing countries, the response to humiliation has changed. This is because the middle class generally values stability and security in their lives. Armed conflicts and wars can disrupt economies, threaten personal safety, and create uncertainty, which can negatively impact their financial well-being and overall quality of life. In addition, the middle class with higher levels of education have a better understanding of the complexities and consequences of armed conflicts. Educated individuals may be more receptive to diplomatic and peaceful approaches to resolving disputes. Therefore, economic development leads to rise of middle class and according to research, higher income countries tend to be the most peaceful.⁵

It should be noted that the most recent populist movements, in developed countries, often appeal to the frustrations and grievances of certain segments of society. In populist humiliation discourse, the country of the present is described as a fundamentally weakened nation. Members of the target audience are constructed as an idealized community of shared origin and destiny, the 'pure people' who have been betrayed and humiliated because what is represented as

³ J. Barnhart, *The Consequences of Humiliation; Anger and Status in World Politics*, Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, p. 1.

⁴ See M. Kebede, "The Rehabilitation of Violence and the Violence of Rehabilitation: Fanon and Colonialism", *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 31, no. 5, May 2001, pp. 539–562.

⁵ Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP), "Positive Peace Report 2019", *Vision of Humanity*, 2019, <http://visionofhumanity.org/reports> [accessed: 15.07.2023].

their way of life and righteous place in the world has been lost.⁶ It seems the rise of the middle class is closely connected to a stable economy. Thus, the middle class actively seeks peace and stability to sustain its upward mobility and growth.

The experience of humiliation in Ukraine and the Middle East

Ukraine's history is complex and defined by a prolonged quest for independence and self-determination, intertwined with periods of foreign domination and occupation. It was during the 20th century, following the collapse of the Russian Empire and subsequent events like the Russian Revolution and the Soviet era, that Ukraine eventually gained its independence as a sovereign nation. Ukraine remained part of the Soviet Union from 1922 until its dissolution in 1991. During this time, it was known as the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (Ukrainian SSR).

It is not doubtable that a special relationship exist between Ukraine and Russia. Their relationships are deeply entangled, and goes beyond that of many other nations. This connection is rooted in shared elements such as the common religion of Orthodoxy, a partially common East-Slavic culture, long periods of shared history, and parts of a common memory. However, the Ukrainian nationalists believe that Russian and Soviet rule separated Ukraine from the common European world.⁷ Contrary to what Russian nationalists claim, when the Soviet government came to an end in 1991, about 92% of Ukrainians voted in a national referendum for independence from the collapsing Soviet Union.⁸

Independent Ukraine has been trying to re-establish its traditional ties with Central Europe. This is while, Russian national ideologues looking at the Ukrainians as uncivilized Russian peasants or anarchic Cossacks who have to be ruled and civilized by Russia which brings European culture to Ukraine.⁹ In addition, according to Vladimir Putin, Ukraine doesn't exist.¹⁰ Russian has

⁶ A. Homolar, G. Löflmann, "Populism and the Affective Politics of Humiliation Narratives", *Global Studies Quarterly*, vol. 1, issue 1, March 2021, pp. 4–5.

⁷ A. Kappeler, "Ukraine and Russia: Legacies of the imperial past and competing memories", *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, no. 5, 2014, p. 115.

⁸ J. Mankoff, *Russia's War in Ukraine. Identity, History and Conflict*, Washington, DC: Centre for Strategic and International Studies, April 2022, p. 2.

⁹ A. Kappeler, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

¹⁰ O. Khromeychuk, "Putin Says Ukraine Doesn't Exist. That's Why He's Trying to Destroy It", *The New York Times*, 1.11.2022, www.nytimes.com/2022/11/01/opinion/ukraine-war-national-identity.html [accessed: 15.07.2023].

always ignored Ukraine independency and try to keep Ukraine in its own sphere of influence, its view towards Ukraine can be described as a combination of past humiliations and current threats.

Moreover, Russian leaders have repeatedly invoked national humiliation at the hands of the West when discussing their motivation for recent acts of aggression within the former Soviet sphere. In 2014, President Vladimir Putin cited Western failure to consult with Russia over the admission of Ukraine to the European Union as one in a long line of humiliations at the hands of the West.¹¹ It seems that one significant reason behind invasion of Ukraine was Putin's humiliation.

Some Middle Eastern nations have been humiliated by Russia in the past and present as well. In several wars between Persia and Russia 1651 and 1828, Persia surrendered much of its Transcaucasian territory to the Russian Empire. In 2015, Russia became involved in the Syrian civil war through military intervention, to safeguarding its strategic interests in Syria. However, the majority of Middle Eastern people have experienced humiliation during the colonial era under European powers.

Prior to 1900, the Ottoman Islamic Empire had control over the Arab Muslims. The Arab speakers were invisible in the Ottoman Empire and identified as distinct national groups. The Ottoman Empire had always been a multi-ethnic state based on loyalty to the ruling dynasty, not on a shared national identity. Thus, it was not strange if these groups, over the hundred years prior to 1900, had begun to identify themselves as distinct national groups rather than as subjects of the Ottoman Empire.¹²

During WWI, Arab Muslims sought liberation from their Muslim oppressors, but did not defend against the European forces who claimed to support justice, freedom, and liberation. In November 1914, the Ottoman Empire declared a holy war against France, Russia, and Great Britain. Despite this, Arab Muslims were allied with the British and France. They hoped that their efforts in helping the Allies fight the Turks would result in them being allowed to govern their own lands.

Although the Sykes-Picot Agreement of May 1916 and British support of the Arab Revolt occurred, the agreement between Great Britain and France aimed to divide rather than unite the Arab people. This resulted in the Middle

¹¹ J. Barnhart, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

¹² J. Mchugo, "The legacy of Arab nationalism and the end of the Ottoman Empire", *The National*, www.thenational.ae/arts-lifestyle/the-review/the-legacy-of-arab-nationalism-and-the-end-of-the-ottoman-empire [accessed: 15.05.2015 (inactive)].

East and North Africa (MENA) being split into multiple small states with artificial borders that disregarded their varying cultures and geographies. The Arab Muslims were now humiliated by the non-Muslims and their lives became increasingly miserable as their local orders were dismantled, traditional economies destroyed, cultures demonized, resources plundered and politics corrupted. The Muslims were now for the first time in their history ‘subjects’ of the domineering European powers.¹³

If WWI ended the Ottoman-dominated geopolitics and led to the utter humiliation of the Arabs and Muslims, WWII led to the collapse of European colonial dominance. However, before giving ‘independence’ to their Muslim colonies, the European powers fought bloody wars against local ‘liberation movements’.¹⁴ The European powers then created artificial and conflicting ‘nation states’ from the former colonies to be ruled by local dictators whom the Europeans had nurtured. Thus, after the Second World War these countries became independent; Iraq, Kuwait, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt and Israel.¹⁵

Contributing to the humiliation, Orientalism was promoted in Western policy circles, academia, and media, exaggerating and distorting the differences between Arab peoples and cultures and those of the West. Arabs and Muslims were viewed as exotic, backward, uncivilized, and at times dangerous. Worse, Arabs and Muslims were also humiliated by their own corrupt, inept, or ignorant rulers dictators and populists alike. Anti-Arabism led to Western domination of Arab oil resources. France between 1954 and 1962 took over a million Arab lives in Algeria. In the late 1970s, as dictatorships started to lose power, it was the Islamists who managed to take control quickly in countries such as Iran, and the Arab World.¹⁶

Arab Spring, wave of pro-democracy protests and uprisings took place in the Middle East in 2011, however failure of the movement again led to rise of radical Islamists ISIS, ISIL, or Daesh, in 2014, which caused the loss of countless lives. However, there has also been the emergence of a middle class in the region, which is dedicated to promoting peace and stability.

¹³ H. Amirahmadi, “Dark New Geopolitics of the Middle East”, *Cairo Review*, no. 18, 2015, p. 93.

¹⁴ V.R. Nasr, “European Colonialism and the Emergence of Modern Muslim States”, [in:] *The Oxford History of Islam*, ed. J.L. Esposito, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 550.

¹⁵ See S. Heydemann, *War, Institutions, and Social Change in the Middle East*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.

¹⁶ H. Amirahmadi, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

The middle class stand for peace

During the 1960s and 1970s, the increases in oil revenues led to urbanisation, improvements in infrastructure, higher employment rates, and a rapid growth of per capita income. The economic growth have also resulted in notable improvements in increasing literacy rates and higher levels of education.¹⁷ In 2021, the adult literacy rate for Egypt was 73.1% and Saudi Arabia about 99.38%. In Iran the literacy rate of women above the age of 15 years reached 85% in comparison to the men's rate of 80%.¹⁸ These changes led to rise of a new middle class. Currently, the Middle East region is home to over 500 million people with an average life expectancy of 78 years and a current median age of 31 against a global average of 30.¹⁹

However, the middle class faces some economic and political obstacles due to disadvantages of the rentier or semi-rentier states in the most oil exporter countries of the region. This is due to the fact that, the emergence and development of the middle class in the Middle East are quite different from the middle classes in developed countries. The raising oil revenues have resulted in the formation of rentier states in the region. The oil revenues has given rise to state control over the economy. As a result, the middle class has become increasingly reliant on the state due to its dominance over the economy.

This middle class has had little input in terms of the competitiveness of the economy, given that the state is so powerful and integral at all levels of the economy, with distribution of rents the main function of the rentier state, undermining even nascent linkages between the people and the state. In other words, with the reliance on rents, the rentier state becomes autonomous from society and can play an active and decisive role in the nation's social, economic and political life due to its structural autonomy.²⁰

Despite the middle class vulnerability, there have been several attempts to bring about political change in which the middle class has played an important role. However, the middle class has compromised over democracy with

¹⁷ M. Alexeev, R. Conrad, "The Natural Resource Curse and Economic Transition", *CAEPR Working Paper*, no. 018, 2009.

¹⁸ UNESCO Institute for Statistics, "Literacy rate, youth total (% of people ages 15–24)", *World Bank*, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ADT.1524.LT.ZS?location-s=ZQ>, 2021 [accessed: 20.10.2022].

¹⁹ "Middle East: 9 countries make up the middle east region", *World Economics*, 2022, www.worldeconomics.com/Regions/Middle-East [accessed: 10.07.2023].

²⁰ M. Zahirinejad, "The Economic Effects of Sanctions and the Iranian Middle Class", [in:] *Iran in the International System: Between great Powers and Great Ideas*, eds. H. Gärtner, M. Shahmoradi, London: Routledge, 2019, p. 109.

the state in these countries due to its fear of socio-political instability. In another word it seems, the priorities of the middle class are based on interest and stability, not necessarily democratic goals.

Influenced by the new world politics and economy, several Middle Eastern states have become more globalised and are seemingly spending their rentier wealth more intelligently to develop their economies and societies, diversifying away from their strong reliance on oil, building new international images and roles for their cities and states, and even changing the state's relationship with society.²¹

In the recent years, the COVID-19 outbreak had a significant impact on the economies of the Middle East and North Africa, leading to declines in oil production, tourism, and remittances. This is while populations keep growing, and many countries are shaken by conflicts and deal with a growing number of refugees. Due to declining oil prices, it is no longer possible for governments to redistribute wealth by integrating their citizens into the public workforce or providing large subsidies. This has led to an increase in inequality and with it, a questioning of the social contract in many countries in the region.²²

Now, the Middle East is the most unequal region worldwide: 56% of national income accrues to the top 10%, and only 12% goes to the bottom 50%. Extreme concentration at the top of the distribution: the top 1% income earners own 23% of total income in 2019, almost twice as high as the share earned by the bottom 50%.²³ This has affected the life of the large middle class in the region. The new middle class plans to see their youthful populations educated in the science, technology and innovation sectors, with a view to preparing them for the jobs of tomorrow.

On the other hands, the Middle East still is involved with the ongoing civil wars in Syria and Yemen, persistent threats posed by Salafi-Jihadi extremism, large-scale displacement and humanitarian emergencies and sectarianism. These have rendered the region susceptible to political, religious, and social instability. To avoid rise of radicalisms, according to research the middle class in particular young generation is demanding reform to religious institutions.

²¹ See M. Gray, *Towards a Theory of 'Late Rentierism' in the Arab States of The Gulf*, Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies, The Australian National University Canberra, 2011.

²² L. Assouad, "Inequality and Its Discontents in the Middle East", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 12.03.2020, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2020/03/12/inequality-and-its-discontents-in-middle-east-pub-81266> [accessed: 15.07.2023].

²³ R. Moshrif, "Income Inequality in the Middle East", *World Bank*, 10.10.2020, <https://wid.world/news-article/income-inequality-in-the-middle-east> [accessed: 16.07.2023].

More than two-thirds of youth want their religious institutions to modernise while people increasingly believe that religious leaders should not interfere in politics.²⁴

Therefore, peace is an essential element for the Middle East's middle class as it serves as the base for economic development, social stability, and better quality of life. Currently the Middle East's economy is recovering after the COVID-19 outbreak. Therefore, the middle class struggles to keep pace in generating meaningful employment for the young and educated. It is obvious that involvement in another war which may cause economic crisis is another humiliation that they can't afford.

Conclusion

The dominant view towards the Middle East is that the region is stuck in the past and plagued by conflict. Consequently, due to the poor domestic circumstances in some Middle Eastern countries, such as bad economic conditions or political unrest, it is anticipated that the states in the region may initiate or become involved in conflicts. Such conflicts serve as a means for state leaders to divert public attention away from internal challenges by directing it towards an external conflict.

However, the Middle East has undergone many economic changes and improvements in education over the past century. This has resulted in the emergence of a large educated middle class in the region with a focus on enhancing socio-economic conditions. Although the middle class's efforts have not yet led to a complete transformation of authoritarian governments into democratic ones, the middle class demand for the state accountability is increasing. The region has witnessed rising protests, prompting governments to take notice.

Simultaneously, the prolonged civil wars over the past decade have had a profound impact on the middle class's perspective on politics. As a result, it appears challenging to mobilize a larger middle class towards supporting a new conflict. The middle class's priorities have shifted towards stability and progress rather than engaging in further wars and being stuck to past humiliation.

²⁴ Shelley J. et al., "Think Again: Inside the Modernisation of the New Middle East", *Tony Blair Institute for Global Change*, 14.07.2022, www.institute.global/insights/geopolitics-and-security/think-again-inside-modernisation-new-middle-east [accessed: 20.07.2023].

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Abstract

The dominant view towards the Middle East is that the region is stuck in the past and plagued by conflict. Therefore, it was anticipated that Middle Eastern states would take a side in the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Despite expressing sympathy for Ukrainians due to their own experiences of humiliation caused by several wars, the Middle Eastern people and states remained cautious and chose to avoid getting involved in the conflict. It seems that the view of the Middle Eastern middle class had an influence on state decision-making regarding involvement in the war in Ukraine. Considering the rise of an educated middle class in the region, it can be hypothesized that the middle class's priority is political-economic instability rather than engaging in further wars. The objective of this research is to comprehensively understand the Middle Eastern middle class's viewpoint on war.

Key words: Middle East, middle class, humiliation, war, Ukraine