Reading Excerpt “From Beirut to Jerusalem” (Thomas Friedman)

\*Winner of the Pulitzer Prize

There is a third tradition at work, a tradition imposed from abroad in the early twentieth century by the last group of imperial invaders of the region, the British, French, and Italians: the modern nation-state. This was a very new concept for the Middle East, where there was a long standing tradition authoritarian dynasties stretching from one end of the region to the other. In these sweeping dynasties, whether it was the Ottoman or Abbasid or any other, men did not identify themselves with, or hold patriotic loyalty to, their specific empire or country of residence. “Countries and nations existed; they had names, and evoked sentiments of a kind…but they were not seen as defining political identities or directing political allegiances’ in the modern Western European sense. The empire and its dynastic ruler in the Middle East were distant, often alien, entities. Political identities tended to be drawn instead either from one’s religious affiliation or one’s local kin group – be it the tribe, clan, village, neighborhood, sect, region, or professional association.

In the wake of World War I, however, the British and French took out their imperial pens and carved up what remained of the Ottoman dynastic empire, and created an assortment of nation-states in the Middle East modeled along their own. The borders of these new states consisted of neat polygons – with right angles that were always in sharp contrast to the chaotic reality on the ground. In the Middle East, modern Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Palestine, Jordan and the various Persian Gulf oil states all traced their shapes and origins back to this process; even most of their names were imposed by outsiders. In other words, many of the states in the Middle East today – Egypt being the most notable exception – were not willed into existence by their own people or developed organically out of a common historical memory or ethnic or linguistic bond; they also did not emerge out of a social contract between rulers and ruled. Rather, their shapes and structure were imposed from above by the imperial powers. These shapes had little or no precedent in either the medieval or the ancient world. Rather, boundaries were drawn almost entirely on the basis of the foreign policy, communications, and oil needs of the Western colonial powers that were to dominate these new countries – with scant attention paid to ethnic, tribal, linguistic, or religious continuities on the ground. As a result, these states were like lifeboats into which various ethnic and religious communities, each with their own memories and their own rules of the game, were thrown together and in effect told to row in unison, told to become a nation, told to root for the same soccer team and salute the same flag. Instead of the state growing out of the nation, the nation was expected to grow out of the state. (pp. 81)