2007 CCOT Prompt:

Analyze major changes and continuities in the formation of national identities in ONE of the regions listed below from 1914 to the present. Be sure to include evidence from specific countries in the region selected.

Middle East
Southeast Asia
Sub-Saharan Africa

ESSAY 1

Sub-Saharan Africa faced possibly the greatest difficulties in developing national identities of any of the colonized areas. Between 1914 and the present, after two world wars, European powers began to hand over power to Africans themselves through the process of decolonization. However many of the leaders that gave African peoples hope for freedom and independence ended as cruel military dictators. Throughout the era, Africans formed national identities that centered on a desire to remove Western influence. However, the political divisions created by European interference remain a problem, and the economies through much of Africa still exist in a sort of slavery to the West.

World War I and II diminished the strength of European powers that had been active around the world, thereby encouraging African peoples to push for and win their independence. 1914 was the beginning of the First World War and of a time when colonial peoples in Africa and other parts of the world saw the white, European powers from a new perspective. Africans were conscripted by European powers to serve in the military, not always as soldiers but often for labor. Africans exposed to the conflict in Europe returned with a new impression about the lack of European solidarity and strength. Post-war Africans approached the possibility of independence with great hope and intensified mass nationalist movements, because they saw whites as more vulnerable. Ironically, much of the development of nationalist (and therefore anti-colonial) ideology in Africa and other colonial areas came from the diffusion of western thought. U.S. President Woodrow Wilson inspired the pursuit of national independence all over the world with ideas of self-determination. Much of the time the leaders of nationalist movements like those of the Pan-African and negritude movements were non-western but were westernized elites, people educated by those they sought to overthrow.

World War I and II weakened the European powers, forcing countries such as Britain and France to gradually give up colonial territory and permitting Africans to form their own nations. Some independence came relatively peacefully like in Ghana where Kwame Nkrumah negotiated with the British in regards to their hand-over of power. In Kenya, the Mau Mau War finally broke Britain’s resolve to maintain colonial control there through the Kenyans’ intense guerilla warfare. Belgium literally abandoned its African possessions, withdrawing politically from the Congo, for example, in 1960. This created a power vacuum and created violence and civil war in the area. Ultimately, military dictators like Mobutu of the Congo arose and brutalized their own people for the sake of personal power. The colonial era had a lasting impact on the organization of African states. The Africans, more so than other colonized peoples, struggled with establishing national identities. One of the major reasons for this was that the Europeans had carved up parts of Africa to benefit their own economic pursuits, leaving Africa arbitrarily fragmented.

In some areas, the presence of white dominating peoples did not vanish with the colonial era. In South Africa, a white minority (Afrikaners) controlled an oppressed black majority, instituting a practice of apartheid, which segregated and discriminated against black people. South African nationalism developed more powerfully as a response to oppression and injustice. Thanks to outside pressures and the leadership of Nelson Mandela and his allies,
South Africa was able to end apartheid by the 1990s and establish a new, democratic government and a successful national identity.

ESSAY 2

Before 1914, much of the Middle East was united under the Ottoman Empire. However, as various regions, especially those in the Balkans, began to break away to form their own nations, nationalist sentiments in the Middle East grew. After World War I, the Ottoman Empire dissolved and the Middle East was mostly placed under European control under the mandate system. This outraged Arabs who had fought in the war in hopes of gaining independence from the Ottomans and, in combination with the spread of ideas about self-determination, caused nationalist sentiment to skyrocket. After the establishment of Israel, many Middle East nations felt united by the common bond of Islam and national identity took on a more religious character. Today, nationalism in the Middle East continues to be defined by opposition to foreign domination and a focus on religious unity.

In 1914, the Middle East was mostly controlled by the Ottoman Empire. One of the reasons that the Arab tribes were willing to cooperate with the British and rebel against the Ottomans, was their desire to be free from Ottoman rule. This reflected nationalist aspirations, but was not the clear, unified nationalism that would later develop.

After WWI, the Ottoman Empire collapsed and, at the Paris Peace Conference, the victorious Allied Powers, including France, Britain, and the USA, divided up the Middle East into mandates – regions that they controlled and helped government. This was essentially another form of colonial imperialism by Western powers. This enraged Middle Easterners who had hoped for independence. At the same time, Woodrow Wilson was promoting his Fourteen Points, which included the principle of self-determination, of the right of a distinct group of people to govern themselves as a nation. The people of the Middle East became more explicit in their desire to form their own nations free from foreign domination. This is particularly evident in the case of Turkey, where Mustafa Kemal, also known as “Ataturk” or the father of modern Turkey, rejected foreign interference and established the independent Republic of Turkey. Later on, after WWII, nationalism in the Middle East took on a different flavor after the establishment of Israel. The encroachment of foreigners, especially non-Muslims, upon the Middle East created a pan-Arab nationalism, based on opposition to not only British interference in the region by establishing the state, but also to the Jewish settlers who began flocking to the region. Opposition to British domination also was evident in Egypt, when Gamal Abdel Nasser overthrew the British –supported government and pursued independent policies opposing foreign interference, as with the Suez Canal crisis, from which he emerged as a nationalistic leader in the Middle East. Nationalism also took on a more religious character as in the Iranian Revolution, when Ayatollah Khomenei overthrew the secular government and replaced with a fundamentalist Islamic one. Since that time, many Muslim countries in the Middle East have emphasized the religious aspect of their identity and embraced the Islamist movement, rejecting secular Western influences.

Today, this religious identity continues to be important in countries like Iran and Saudi Arabia, where nationalism focuses much on the religious, Islamic nature of the country as opposed to foreign, secular influences. Foreign involvement also continues to fuel nationalist sentiments, as in Iraq and Afghanistan where many of the local populations oppose US involvement.