# Nasserism and Ba'thism: Modern, Contingent, Confused, and Instrumental

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**"In the Middle East, as elsewhere, nationalisms have been modern, contingent, confused and instrumental ideologies, and the movements corresponding to them have reflected this" (Halliday 2000). Discuss with reference to ONE OR MORE cases.**

An assessment of the nature of nationalism in the Middle East is not complete without an exploration of nationalism itself as a concept and the paradigmatic debate surrounding the origins of nations. Nationalism is a multifaceted concept; the term itself has been associated with a wide variety of different meanings. Smith suggests that nationalism can mean the process of: the formation of nations, a national conscious/sentiment, a socio-political movement, a language and symbolism of the nation and an ideology of the nation (2001:5). Smith defines nationalism as "an ideological movement for the attainment and maintenance of autonomy, unity and identity on behalf of a population deemed by some of its members to constitute an actual or potential 'nation'" (2000:3). This definition is multifaceted, not only seeing nationalism as a movement seeking autonomy, but also one seeking to entrench a sense of unity and identity. Gellner, on the other hand, offers a predominantly political definition of nationalism suggesting that it is "primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and national unit should be congruent" (1983:1).

The essay will begin by exploring the paradigmatic debate surrounding the origins of nations, specifically highlighting the primordialist, perennialist, modernist, and ethno-symbolist schools of thought. An exploration of these paradigms is necessary to outline various different perspectives on the origins of nations and nationalism. It is also worthwhile to outline the paradigm that Halliday himself broadly subscribes to, as it serves to deepen an understanding of the quote itself. Moreover, the essay will then go into assessing the origins of nationalism in the Middle East, outlining significant factors that stimulated the emergence of Arab nationalism. The essay will then utilize Nasserism and Ba'thism as case studies to highlight the often modern, contingent, confused, and instrumental nature of nationalist movements in the region.

This essay will have an inherent focus on the phenomenon of Arab nationalism—"the nationalism of the Arabs as a whole," (Halliday 2000: 46) as opposed to state-based nationalism. The essay will agree with Halliday's statement to an extent as nationalism, in its guise as a social and political movement, certainly has been modern, contingent, confused, and instrumental in the Middle East. However, it will also show an awareness of the historical roots of nationalism in the region, specifically as a form of identity and national conscious. The question can be considered interesting in light of the unique relationship of coexistence between pan-Arab and state based nationalism, with apparent dominance alternating between both forms (Halliday 2000:50).

In order to guide its analysis of Arab nationalism and its corresponding movements, an analysis of the terminology used by Halliday in his quote is essential for the essay. This essay defines "modern" broadly along "modernist" lines to mean as emerging from the nineteenth century or later (Halliday 1997:2). Moreover, despite various uses and conceptions of the term "contingent," this analysis will definite it as man-made or constructed. Lawrence outlines the notion that nationalism was logically contingent, meaning that it was not a natural human condition (2005:141). This implies that nationalism, if not a natural condition, must have been, in fact, created or constructed. Additionally,

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Lawrence also outlines the idea of "historical contingency," which he suggests views nationalism not as a vague product of a range of factors but as a doctrine largely constructed from above (2005:129). Moreover, this analysis will suggest that "confused" refers to the inconsistent and often divided nature of nationalism and its corresponding movements. Furthermore, the essay will define "instrumentality" as "the use of…ideas by political leaderships in or out of power to serve their particular ends" (Halliday 2000:66). The essay will now explore the extent to which the leaders of nationalist movements, to attain specific goals, have used nationalist ideology as a tool.

Nationalism scholarship has offered competing conceptions of the origins of nations. Primordialism suggests that nations are primordial, acting as the foundation for other processes and developments (Smith 2001: 51). This approach suggests that "national identities are a 'natural' part of human beings" (Ozkirimli 2000:66). As well as being natural, the nation which a person belongs to is also considered to be predetermined (ibid). Moreover, Smith identifies the existence of a sociobiological version of primordialism which argues that the underlying reproductive drives of individuals can explain nations, ethnic groups, and races, as well as another variant that stresses the importance of cultural givens to nation and ethnic group formation (2001:52).

Perennialism, on the other hand, offers a competing vision. As an approach, it was popular before the Second World War, with many scholars agreeing with its claims that "nations had existed in every period in history, and that many nations existed from time immemorial" (Smith 2001: 49). This paradigm envisages nations as "historic entities which have developed over the centuries, with their intrinsic characteristics largely unchanged" (Ozkirimli 2000:68). However, this approach can be distinguished from that of primordialism, as it does not claim that ethnic ties are natural (ibid), merely that they are historic. Perrenialism argues that "modern nations are the lineal descendants of their medieval counterparts" (Smith 1995:53 cited in Ozkirimli 2000:69).

Unlike primordialism and perrenialism, modernism stresses the contemporary nature of nationalism. Smith suggests that modernism is characterised by a belief that nationalist ideologies and the state system are modern; that nations and national identities are also recent and novel; and that nations and nationalism are also the products of modernity and modernization (2000:28). Modernism argues that nations and nationalism are products of processes such as "capitalism, industrialism, the emergence of the bureaucratic state, urbanization and secularism" (Ozkirimli 2000:85). Ernest Gellner, a modernist, seeks to discredit the ideas of the other paradigms. He argues that "nations as a natural, God given way of classifying men, as an inherent though long delayed political destiny, are a myth" (1983: 47) Similarly, for John Breiully, nationalism is also a modern and avidly political project, which seeks to utilize state power and justify its use in nationalism's name (1993:2). Fred Halliday subscribes to the modernist viewpoint arguing that "cultures, peoples, languages have existed throughout history…but this does not mean they were nations in the modern sense" (2000:39).

Ethno-symbolism, unlike the other paradigms, focuses on "the subjective elements in the persistence of ethnies, the formation of nations and the impact of nationalism" (Smith 2001:57). Ethno-symbolists like John Armstrong and Anthony Smith propose a compromise, a third way between the opposing paradigms of primordialism/perennialism and modernism (Ozkirimli 2000:168). Conversi suggests that it rejects the notion that nations may be invented, instead arguing that they rely on a pre-existing foundation of myths, memories, values, and symbols (1995: 74). Instead of simply seeing nations as a product of modernity or as "natural" given identities, the ethno-symbolist approach recognizes the importance of existing subjective factors like memory and sentiment. The essay will now go onto considering some of the key formative factors contributing to the emergence of nationalism in the Middle East.

The emergence of Middle Eastern nationalism has been attributed variously to the demise of the Ottoman Empire, the domination of the region by the colonial powers, or as a result of a nineteenth century Arab literary/cultural revival. The disposition that stresses the role of the Ottoman Empire, envisages the emergence of nationalism as a response to apparent Ottoman domination. Gershoni suggests that Arab nationalism emerged "in the latter part of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth… as an opposition movement…for the most part seeking cultural autonomy within the framework of the Ottoman state" (1997:1). This perspective envisions nationalism as a "reactive" phenomenon, as outlined by Gershoni & Jankowski (1997:4). Similarly, Choueiri argues that the pan-Arab movement "is to be understood as largely a movement of Ottoman Arabs struggling against policies of Turkification" (2005:305). This approach stresses the pivotal role of Arab opposition to the political reforms carried out by the

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Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), an umbrella political organisation within the Ottoman Empire, following the 1908 Young Turk revolution (Choueiri 2005:304). The reforms pursued in light of Ottoman decline involved a policy of power centralisation, along with an emphasis on the Turkish language as a means of communication and as the language of government (Choueiri 2000:88). These "Turkification" policies were obviously very divisive, and a number of Arab organisations subsequently came into being, seeking a redefinition of Ottomanism (ibid).

Moreover, the origins of Arab nationalism in the Middle East have also been accredited to anticolonial opposition. Tibi underscores it anticolonial origins suggesting that Arab nationalism was "directed at liberating the Arab world from Western dominance" (1997:202). Arab nationalism has been portrayed as an anti-colonial movement, which increased in popularity following the Arab revolt of 1916 against the Ottoman Empire. However, the Arab revolt subsequently "left Arab Asia severely and artificially divided into several states under direct or indirect European control" (Choueiri 2005:297). This acted as a catalyst for the spread of Arab nationalist ideas, leading to their dissemination from their origins in Iraq and Syria to the wider Arab world (ibid).

Between 1920 and 1930, the mixed success of rebellion efforts directed against the European colonial powers accentuated the need for solidarity among the Arabs (Choueiri 2000:83). Choueiri suggests that "although patriotism, confined to a particular Arab country remained a powerful force, it began to be increasingly supplanted, and often submerged, by the drive for wider Arab unity" (ibid). As a formative force for nationalism in the Middle East, European colonialism can be considered to have aided the rise of both state-based and Arab nationalism. Both of these dispositions support Halliday's claims that nationalisms in the region are modern, contingent, and instrumental. Having emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as a response to domination by external forces, Arab nationalism, as envisaged by both conceptions, is considered to be modern. Furthermore, it also envisages the instrumental nature of the development of Arab nationalism, as it was created for a specific purpose—to act as an instrument of emancipation.

Additionally, the origins of Arab nationalism have also been accredited to a cultural and literary revival that took place in the nineteenth century, as exemplified by the thought of George Antonius in his text *The Arab Awakening* (1938). Antonius viewed the cultural revival as part of a wider, Arab cultural awakening during the nineteenth century (Cleveland 1997:5). This conception is termed the "history of idea"' approach by Tibi (1997:202). It suggests that the cultural revival occurred as a result of processes of socialisation, as "awareness of the European concept of 'nation' led to the claim of an Arab Kulturnation" (ibid).

This framing of Arab nationalism as a consequence of a European concept offers a diffusionist account of its emergence (Gershoni & Jankowski 1997:4). This form of cultural Arabism took a mainly literary and ethnic dimension that sought to reintroduce themes of national regeneration (Choueiri 2005:299). Diverse sectors of society including religious scholars, the Christian intelligentsia, and urban notables sought to highlight the achievements of the Arabs and reinterpret their contributions to areas of science and government (Choueiri 2005:301). For instance, Al-Tahtawi was a notable figure, who played a key role in the cultural revival; he was a translator and a religious scholar, who sought to stress the cultural virtues of the Arabs such as their generosity, magnanimity, and readiness to help those in distress (Choueri 2005:302). The highlighting of various Arab achievements sought to demonstrate the entrenched nature of Arab national credentials (Choueiri 2005:301). The essay will now go onto utilise Nasserism as a case study to argue in support of Halliday's stance on Middle East nationalism.

Personally, Nasserism certainly was modern, contingent, and instrumental. The term Nasserism refers to the ideology associated with Gamel Abdel Nasser, who led the Free Officers revolt in Egypt in 1952. Podeh and Winckler suggest that various clusters of Nasserism interpretation can be identified, which offer competing visions of Nasserism. It can be interpreted variously as: an ideological movement; a modernisation movement; a protest movement against western imperialism/colonialism; and a type of populist movement (2004:1-4). Broadly speaking as an ideological movement, it can be characterised as a system of ideas encompassing some or all aspects of anti-imperialism, pan-Arabism, and Arab socialism (Podeh & Winckler 2004:1).

The contingent or constructed nature of Nasserism is very prominent due to the political climate of the time, which had a strong influence on its formation. For example, the pan-Arab nature of Nasserism was not evident immediately

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from its emergence, suggesting that this dimension was added later on. When they took power, the Free Officers appeared to have no clear programme as such, "apart from a desire to free Egypt from British influence and remove the King" (Choueiri 2000:180). Likewise, Gordon argues that they had no clear program, and indeed, only limited ambitions (1992:194). Choueiri reaffirms this position arguing that in its early incarnation, Nasserism was "primarily an Egyptian affair with no particular pan-Arabist dimension" (2000:179). Moreover, despite the fact that Nasser himself came to embody and lead the pan-Arab movement, his first and arguably strongest affinity laid with the Egyptian nation, not the Arab one. Jankowski suggests that his affinity with the pan-Arab nation and the cause of Arab nationalism itself developed later than his loyalty to Egypt and was not as strong (1997:2). He underscores this argument by suggesting his affinity with the Arab nation "was also more of an intellectual phenomenon lacking much of the emotional resonance that he expressed towards Egypt" (ibid).

Nasser's utilisation of pan-Arab rhetoric and beliefs appeared to emerge in the mid-1950s (Jankowski 1997:3). Jankowski suggests that Nasser's rationale for this turn to Arab nationalism can be attributed to the "common problems of Egyptians and Arabs and the practical utility of solidarity for both" (1997:4). The fluid and contingent nature of Nasserism are stressed by this shift to Arab nationalism, the motivation for which appeared to be merely pragmatic. Nasser shaped and changed the movement at his whim, demonstrating its contingent nature. Indeed, Kramer goes as far to suggest that it "evolved from day to day while Nasser held power" (1993:185).

Moreover, the instrumental nature of Nasserism can also be demonstrated. Nasser utilised a pan-Arab orientation, specifically with regards to foreign policy, because of the "utility of Arab solidarity for the achievement and maintenance of Egyptian independence" (Jankowski 1997:9). It served as an instrument and a political tool to aid anti-imperial efforts. In a speech in 1957, Nasser said, "Arab nationalism is a weapon for every Arab state" to be "employed against aggression," (cited in Jankowski 1997:4) demonstrating its instrumental nature. Additionally, it also acted as an instrument to allow Egypt to emerge as a dominant force in the Arab world (Podeh & Winckler 2004:25). Pan-Arabism, as a part of his populism, along with his charismatic style, allowed Nasser to shrewdly attain regional hegemony under the guise of Arab unity (Podeh & Winckler 2004:26).

The instrumental and constructed nature of Nasserism suggests that Nasser's pan-Arab position was not based on a personal or ideological attachment as such, but was instead, based on pragmatic concerns. For example, Sela argues that "Nasser's adherence to Arab unity was a matter of pragmatism rather than ideological commitment" (2004:190). Sela reinforces this argument suggesting that he was, in fact, actually ambivalent at most about the practical realisation of Arab unity, (ibid) despite the unification attempt with Syria in 1958. This ambivalence can be seen in the rebuffing of earlier Syrian unification efforts in 1955-56 (Jankowski 1997:10). Although, with the creation of the United Arab Republic, unity did eventually occur in 1958 (Hoopwood 1993: 60). Personally, Nasserism appears to be contingent and instrumental; however, it does not appear to be confused, as its defining traits such as its commitment to pan-Arabism were a consequence of pragmatic decisions made by Nasser himself.

Along with Nasserism, another pan-Arab ideology featured prominently in Middle Eastern politics during the twentieth century is Ba'thism. The essay will now go onto outlining Ba'thism as an ideology and argue that as a movement, it was essentially instrumental, confused, contingent, and modern. Ba'thism is the ideology of the Arab Ba'th party, which was founded by Michael 'Aflaq and Salah al-Din al-Baytar, two school teachers from Damascus, in 1947 (Choueiri 2000:197). The party was renamed the Arab Socialist Ba'th party in 1952, in light of its merger with Akfram al-Hawrani's Arab Socialist Party (ibid). The Ba'th party was organised along hierarchical lines with various "cells, sections, divisions, branches and regions" (Choueiri 2000:197). Devlin suggests that the party began as a movement characterised by commitments to "Arab nationalism, freedom from foreign rule, and the establishment of a single Arab state" (1991:1396).

Likewise, Choueiri suggests that the ideology was based on the ideas of Arab unity, freedom, and socialism (2005:309). Moreover, Tibi suggests that Ba'thism subscribed to the thought of Sati al-Husri, a leading Arab nationalist thinker who successfully "transposed the German idea of the nation…to the circumstances of the Arab world" (1997:120). The movement's ideology was based on the aim of creating "a pan-Arab state under the Ba'th leadership for reviving the 'glorious' Arab past" (Tibi 1997:207). However, the Ba'th party's conception of socialism had little to do with Marx and the emancipation of the working class (Tibi 1997:208). Instead, its conception involved

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delivering social justice for the poor and the underprivileged (Devlin (1991:1398). Its brand of socialism took a particularly mild form (Devlin 1976:33).

Parallels can be drawn between Ba'thist and Nasserist ideology, as both espoused Arab nationalist sentiment, as well as anti-imperialist and broad socialist claims. Still, differences between them are evident; for example, Nasserism did not have a pan-Arab organisation, whereas the Ba'th party had regional offices in several Arab countries (Tibi 1997:209). Additionally, Ba'thism was not tied to a specific leader, as Nasserism obviously was. Although Ba'thism was strongly associated with 'Aflaq, the Ba'th party "did not depend on his personality to carry on" (Torrey 1969:459).

The instrumental nature of Ba'thism is apparent in the goals and aims that it held, such as the realisation of a secular pan-Arab state. The Ba'th party served as a tool to facilitate the realisation of this imagined state. This aim is enshrined in its constitution which says that the "party decides in favour of…the struggle to gather all the Arabs in a single independent state" (cited in Devlin 1976:347). Kalanyi suggests that with regards to Ba'thism, "every action based on principle was to be geared…towards the unification of the Arab world—the paramount objective of the Ba'th" (1972:6). Moreover, Ba'thism also acted as a tool to achieve the revival of the Arab nation. Ba'thist doctrine proposes that "the Arab nation possess special characteristics which although long suppressed, are capable of being resurrected" (Torrey 1969:447). The realisation of Ba'thist rule would presumably facilitate the resurrection of these characteristics.

Moreover, as well as being instrumental, Ba'thism was arguably confused, as demonstrated by Devlin. He suggests that, in the Ba'th party, "there were sharp differences of opinion and belief on the part of members and of leaders as well, in addition to substantial discrepancies between doctrine and practice" (1976:23). Devlin cites the example of the division over the interpretation of the concept of "*Inqilad" (revolution)*, defined by 'Aflaq to mean the transformation of people, which was not accepted by all party members (1976:27).

Additionally, it can also be argued that Ba'thism was a contingent i.e. constructed ideology as it was "invented" by 'Aflaq and al-Baytar, although it can be argued that every ideology is "invented" in a way. However, crucially the specific blend of Arab nationalism and socialism that Ba'thism espoused was shaped by 'Aflaq and al-Baytar themselves. Moreover, because one of its core concepts—Arab nationalism—was arguably a product of contemporary political factors, such as the need to counter Ottoman and Western dominance in the early twentieth century, discussed earlier in the essay, it can also be argued that the movement was modern.

Although this essay has argued in support of Halliday's claim, an awareness of the apparent historical roots of nationalism in the region is also worth noting. Gerber, for example, attempts to highlight the historical roots of contemporary Middle Eastern identities in both pan-Arab and country-based form (2004:252). He seeks to offer an account of nationalism somewhere between that of primordialist and that of modernist accounts (ibid). Gerber cites evidence highlighting the proto-national usage of the term "Arab" as a part of a normal discourse by intellectuals during the Mamluk period (1250–1517) (2004:259). This suggests that a sense of Arab identity and self-awareness predates the nineteenth century, emphasising the historical roots of Arab identity. He argues that the idea of Arabism was "not invented even in 1910," (2004:254) suggesting that as an identity or as a feeling, the origins of Arab nationalism are perhaps less modern than Halliday suggests.

In conclusion, nationalisms in the Middle East, specifically Arab nationalism and its related movements, have been modern, contingent, confused, and instrumental. After carrying out an analysis of two key variants of Arab nationalism, Nasserism and Ba'thism, Halliday's assessment appears to be fairly accurate. Both Nasserism and Ba'thism appeared to be instrumental, as both served as political instruments for the attainment of specific goals: Nasserism served as a vehicle for Nasser to try and achieve regional hegemony and to ascertain Egyptian independence, while on the other hand, Ba'thism had a firmer ideological grounding and served to help achieve the realisation of a single pan-Arab state.

Having been constructed by Nasser and his associates and 'Aflaq and al-Baytar respectively, both movements appeared to be contingent. The fluid character of Nasserism specifically demonstrates its contingent nature; it was "a

pragmatic ideology responding to political and economic developments as they unfolded" (Choueiri 2000:179). However, despite generally conforming to Halliday's claims, personally Nasserism was not confused; it was just fluid and ever-changing at Nasser's will. Ba'thism, on the other hand, was arguably confused due to differences of opinion within the Ba'th party and as a result of discrepancies in practice. Furthermore, both nationalisms can be thought of as modern, as both were products of modernity. Although simply labelling them as modern is perhaps too simplistic, as it ignores the apparent historical roots of nations, overall the nature of nationalism is far from as clear-cut as Halliday's quote suggests.

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