The Eclipse of Pan-Arab Nationalism

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This paper seeks to analyse the emergence and decline of Pan-Arab nationalism, the ideology that emerged in 19th century to restore and sustain the Arabic identity under the Ottoman Caliphate and developed until it became the hegemonic ideology in Arab world by the 1950s.

This article argues that Arab nationalism has been largely unsuccessful because of a variety of reasons. These reasons can be categorised into three sections: the 'inherent' reasons related to this ideology per se, the 'regional' reasons connected to Arab world and the political and social relationships within, and the 'exogenous' reasons that are associated with the non-Arab world.

In order to develop this paper's argument, two case studies will be introduced to critically access the record of Arab nationalism: the most influential Pan-Arab leader Gamal Abdel Nasser and the Arab League, the foremost Pan-Arab organization. For reasons of precision and clarity, this article uses the term *Arabism* when referring to the cultural and social similarities between Arabs. While *Arab nationalism*, the main idea of this essay, refers to Arabism 'with the added element of a strong desire (and preferably articulated demands) for political unity in a specified demarcated territory' (Dawisha, 2003: 13).

Emergence and Evolution of Arab Nationalism

During the nineteenth century, early Arabism emerged in the Ottoman Levant (*Bilad al-Sham*) in reaction to disillusionment with the status of Arabs under the Ottoman Empire. This movement, in its early days, was more a sentimental wave than a concrete political project with specific goals (Barnett, 1998). According to Salibi (1988: 38), 'Arabism was a romantic notion whose full implications had not been worked out'.

One of the tributaries of Arabism was the ideas of Mohammed 'Abdu, the Egyptian Islamic scholar, and his followers who were concerned with 'Islamic modernism and revivalism' (Dawn, 1991: 8). These attempts recalled the golden age of Islam, in which Arabs were able to establish a modern civilization, while Europe was mired in darkness. Glorifying Arab heritage and putting emphasis on Islamic and Arab identities were the prominent features of the early Arab nationalist movement.

Before World War I, recognising the fluidity of the concept of Arab nationalism at this time, 'there was a clear difference … between the majority of Arabists, whose … loyalty to the Ottoman Empire, and the … Arab nationalists who called for secession from the empire' (Khalidi et al., 1991: ix). According to Dawn (1988), the Arab nationalist movement remained a minority until the Ottoman collapse in 1918.

With the evanescence of the Ottoman caliphate,

'The political structure within which most Arabs had lived for four centuries had disintegrated … [This change] had a deep effect on the…politically conscious Arabs' (Hourani, 1991: 316). It posed questions about the way in which they should live together' (Ibid).

Most people in this region used to identify themselves according to religious, territorial, and tribal affiliations, so

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radical was the idea to be identified according to the common Arabic language (Barnett, 1998). With regard to the consideration of language, the stanchion of national/Arab identity was an imported idea from 19th century German nationalist thought. Modern European thought inspired many members of the Arab elite who studied at the American University in Beirut, in Constantinople, and in Europe (Ibid).

Among those Arab intellectuals who were influenced by European philosophers was Sati' al-Husri, the 'foremost theoretician of Arab nationalism' (Dawisha, 2013: 2). Al-Husri and the other prominent father of Arab nationalism, Michel Aflaq, the philosopher and the founder, with Salah al-Din al-Bitar, of the Ba'th party believed that Arab states are fabricated units that must fuse into a crucible of a unitary political entity. These units have arbitrary boundaries imposed by the imperialist powers to fragment the region and keep it under control (Ayoob, 1995: 33).

Al-Husri believed that the reason why Arab countries were defeated in the 1948 war was that they were not one state (Al-Husri, 1965: 149). To Aflaq, Arab unity was not merely a constitutive part of Arab nationalism but also a prerequisite for the resurrection of the Arab spirit and intellect (Aflaq, 1963: 181). Thus, the writings of Al-Husri and Aflaq stressed the importance of creating a united and sovereign Arab state as the ultimate goal of Arab nationalism.

Considering this stage of Arab nationalist thought, it could be argued that the very first reasons of the collapse of Arab nationalism were embedded in its foundations. The Arab nationalist theorists reiterated the importance of the unified sovereign Arab state, but 'Very few … asked seriously how [this unified Arab] state would be constituted, how the relationships among its many disparate regions were to be defined, and how different social groups would be represented within the political system' (Humphreys: 1999: 66-67). The quick breakdown of the unionist project of the United Arab Republic (UAR), the federation of Egypt and Syria that lasted from 1958 to 1961, serves as an example of the inner weakness of Arab nationalism and its disconnect from reality. The UAR, and therefore Arab nationalism as an ideology, was too incompetent to tackle the economic, social and political obstacles and troubles it encountered.

Moreover, the position of the individual human being within the Arab nationalist project was ambiguous. All the terms of freedom and dignity were more associated to the projected Arab state than the Arab individual. This marginality of human rights and liberty was an echo of 19th century German cultural nationalism's tenets that considered the notions of liberty or freedom as distractions that should be suppressed if they contradicted the national will. To German nationalists, unifying the nation was the ultimate goal, which necessitated subsuming the individual will into the national will (Kedourie, 1960: 47). In 1871, when Germany annexed the German-speaking population of Alsace, whose wish was to stay with France, the German historian Heinrich von Trietschke commented, 'We desire, even against their will, to restore them to themselves' (Kohn, 1944: 582). These intolerant connotations reverberated in al-Husri's own words: 'patriotism and nationalism before and above all … even above and before freedom' (Al-Husri, 1984: 42), also are reiterated in Aflaq's statement: 'Nationalism Is Love before Everything Else' (Aflaq, 1959: 20-30).

In addition, the absence of democracy and institutionalism, the contempt of the individual freedoms and adoption of the one-man rule were amongst the serious flaws of Arab nationalism that undermined its ability to survive political setbacks. For instance, the fall of the authoritarian nationalist leader would consequently result in the fall of the values and the ideology of the regime as they are not rooted and protected constitutionally by the state's institutions. In the autocracy, the source of legitimacy is not the constitution or the state bodies but the despot himself. That was the case in post-Nasser Egypt, when President Anwar Sadat managed to develop an Egypt-centric identity, which enabled him to roll back Nasser's Arab nationalist foreign policy (Coldwell, 2003).

Arab League: Failure of Design or Designed to Fail?

In this section, the paper argues that the Arab League is a valid case study of the failure of the Arab system. This 'bleak' experience of regional cooperation (Lindholm Schulz and Schulz, 2005: 187) is an embodiment of some diseases that sickened the Arab nationalism body, such as the 'contradictory logics of *wataniyya* [state interests] and *qawmiyya* [Arab national interests]' (Barnett, 1998: 77).

Because of the subjugation of the Arab world by the League of Nations' mandate system by the 1920s, the Arab

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elites initiated a series of meetings to discuss the future of the region in order to address the social and political challenges and to coordinate or unify their policies. These negotiations of Arab officials resulted in the crystallization of two unequivocal paradigms that would become defining features of the Arab politics, as well as powerful destructive factors of the Arab nationalist dream (Barnett, 1998).

The first paradigm is the dispute of self (statism) and collective (nationalism) interests. Barnett and Solingen (2007: 181) stated that 'The politics of Arab nationalism and a shared identity led Arab states to embrace the rhetoric of Arab unity in order to legitimize their regimes, and to fear Arab unity in practice because it would impose greater restrictions on their sovereignty'. This *wataniyya*/*qawmiyya* division is one of the main pitfalls of Arab nationalism as the Arab leaders proved to be more devoted to their personal and territorial interests than to collective Arab interests. Worse still, those leaders 'looked upon each other as a potential threat to their sovereignty, autonomy, and survival' (Barnett, 1998: 78).

The second paradigm is the ongoing debate about the meaning of the Arab unification. Not surprisingly, drawing on the first paradigm, the Arab rulers feared that the Arab unity would risk their own interests and might leave them vulnerable to their rivals in the region. 'We do not want the Arab League to become a State above the [member] States or a federation' declared the Lebanese foreign minister (Porath, 1986: 285). What the Lebanese Foreign Minister said clearly reflects how the Arab regimes deliberately worked against the Arab nationalism project by creating a powerless Pan-Arab organization. This behavior concurs with the argument that the Arab League's dysfunction is not a consequence of 'failure of design', but rather the League was deliberately 'designed to fail' (Pinfari, 2009).

The Arab League's aim to enhance the cooperation between the Arab countries was thus stillborn with 'no means of collective action or enforcement' of its resolutions (Hinnebusch, 2009: 165). The narrow or domestic interests of the Arab leaders agitated to cripple the League, which was not to benefit from healthy and functioning decision-making or decision-implementation mechanisms. The substantial obstacle in the way of the league was its pact per se.

For instance, the seventh article limits the binding of the League's resolutions to the member state(s) who vote(s) for them (Ireland, 1945). In other words, this flawed article allows the member states to react inconsistently, perhaps contrarily, to the same event. According to Masters (2012), this article 'places a premium on national sovereignty and undercuts the League's ability to take collective action'.

Scrutinizing the amendments the Arab officials introduced to the Alexandria Protocol reveals their real intentions and that they were determined, since the very beginning, to limit the authority and utility of the league. By doing so, they could claim to satisfy their societies' aspirations, which means scoring political points and getting more popular, and at the same time protect their own interests and their state sovereignty (Gomaa, 1977: 160-61; Barnett, 1998: 80).

An instance of these amendments is the item concerned with the urging of the Arab League to enforce solutions for regional conflicts. In the initial version of Alexandria Protocol, it stated that 'the Council will intervene in every dispute which may lead to war' (Pinfari, 2009). However, the modified version states that 'the Council shall mediate in all differences which threaten to lead to war' (Ibid). The interpretation of this amendment, in harmony with this paper's argument, unveils the Arab elites' reluctance to assign any real power to such a supranational institution (Ibid).

Since the founders of the League abandoned any ideas related to collective security or military cooperation (Gomaa, 1977: 240), a few years later 'the league failed its first test'; the coordination of Arab states to defend Palestine (Hinnebusch, 2009: 165). However Hourani (1947: 134) regards the League as a victory for 'moderate Arab nationalism', this ailing organization represents, to many Arabs, nothing more than a 'do-nothing talking shop for tyrants' (The Economist, 2012), that 'has historically supported regimes at the expense of civilian populations' (Küçükkeleş, 2012).

Nasser: Rise and Fall or Arab Unification

This section of the paper will discuss Arab nationalism through the discourse of the Nasserite reign. In 1952, King

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Farouk of Egypt was ousted by a military coup instrumented by a group of junior army officers. The leader of this group was Gamal Abdel Nasser, who 'within two years of the coup … had broken the existing centers of civilian power, purged the military of potential rivals, and maneuvered himself into position as the dominant political force within Egypt' (Cleveland and Bunton, 2009: 307).

Nasser was not merely a politician; he was also an Arab nationalist ideologue who was keen to reiterate the tenet shared by Arab nationalists which was without the endeavor to achieve the political unity, Arab nationalism would be a purposeless belief (Dawisha, 2013). Beginning his reign as the custodian of Arab nationalism, Nasser decisively opposed joining the Baghdad Pact, which was 'an attempt to extend the [US] policy of containment to the Arab states through the use of British influence' (Cleveland and Bunton, 2009: 309). The next step in Nasser's triumphant march was the nationalization of Suez Canal, in 1956, in order to secure funds to finance development projects in Egypt. The imperial powers' response to this bold move was tripartite aggression by Britain, France with Israel on Egypt. In the aftermath of this crisis, Nasser emerged as a popular Arab hero who defied and challenged the western powers. The Arab world applauded Nasser and his brave leadership; even his rivals were forced to acknowledge his achievement (Satloff, 1994: 151).

'For about a decade (1956-67), Egypt's Nasser deployed Pan-Arabism to roll back Western dominance in the region' (Hinnebusch, 2009: 165). In pursuit of Egyptian hegemony and Arab nationalist objectives, he tried to reshape the entire region by interfering in other countries' political affairs. In 1958, the United Arab Republic was established out of a complete merger between Egypt and Syria. Although he was, to some extent, skeptical that this step would lead to nowhere good, Nasser was caught between the conventional interests of Egypt and the 'raison de la nation' (Korany, 1987) on which his Pan-Arab leadership is contingent

However, in September 1961, the UAR broke down after a rebellion amongst Syrian military units against their Egyptian commanders. Nasser did not abandon his role as Pan-Arab leader. In Yemen's civil war (Kerr, 1970), Nasser decided to back the republicans militarily after the rebels asked for his support against the royalists. Barnett (1998: 139) argues that 'Nasser intervened in Yemen to recover his prestige … after the failure of UAR', and that his move in essence was symbolic politics. Saudi Arabia's fear that Nasser's real intention was to overthrow the Saudi monarchy instigated the regime to heavily back the royalists militarily and financially. As a result, the Egyptian troops, bogged down in an unwinnable war and suffering severe losses in equipment and personnel, were finally withdrawn in 1968 (Dawisha, 2003: 309; Cleveland and Bunton, 2009: 315).

These successive relapses damaged Nasser's image as a pan-Arab leader; however, the 1967 Arab-Israeli War was the fatal blow to his leadership and his project. The defeat (*al-Naksa*) of June 1967, which 'marked the Waterloo of Pan-Arabism' (Ajami, 1978: 357), 'had underlined the vulnerability of the Arab system, the bankruptcy of the Arab order and its guardians' (Ibid). This defeat was the climax of Arab nationalism's fall.

As an identity, Arab nationalism was in a continuous search for an 'other' to define itself against (Hinnebusch, 2009: 148). By the 1960s, Imperialism, which was the first relevant other, had become less relevant, and so, Nasser, the Arab nationalism champion, had to find a new target to fill the void. Therefore, Nasser's nationalist fury became directed to what he deemed as the 'reactionary' Arab countries (Dawisha, 2003: 285). This new strategy against some Arab countries and his interference in other countries' affairs were detrimental to the Pan-Arab movement as it ripped the Arab world into two camps (Cleveland and Bunton, 2009).

However, in Malcolm Kerr's opinion, Nasser 'symbolized a range of attitudes and actions reaching far beyond Egypt and beyond the particular things he himself said and did' (Ibid). This paper argues that Nasser, like the Arab League, was an incarnation of some of Arab nationalism's flaws. The first flaw was the understanding of freedom as merely the freedom from western domination, as in Nasser promising the Arabs freedom, which is an echo of al-Husri's conceptualization of that norm (Dawisha, 2003:302). Second, the disdain of democratic values, Nasser banned political parties, viewed separation of powers as 'nothing but a big deception' and enforced repressive policies against any opposition, such as the communists and Islamists (Ibid), for example. Third, Nasser's unionist decisions were more to do with sentimental and symbolic politics than rational politics (Gerges, 1994: 150; Barnett, 1998: 121).

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Fourth, Nasser exploited Arab nationalism as a way to enforce hegemonic policies and intervene in other countries. Finally, As the Arab nationalist orientation of Egypt was terminated with the death of Nasser, Arab nationalism as the hegemonic ideology in the Arab world irreversibly started to decline with Egypt's 1967 defeat. 'The fate of Arab nationalism … was inexorably linked to Egypt and its charismatic president' (Dawisha, 2003: 282).

The Egyptian defeat opened the door to rival identities to expand on the expense of the wounded Arab nationalism, like Pan-Islamism as a supra-state ideology and *Watanniya* (statism) at the state level. In addition, the role of Western powers in preventing the expansion of Arab nationalism cannot be overlooked. American and British troops, who deployed respectively in Lebanon and Jordan to secure the incumbent regimes in July 1958, were an unequivocal message that a hegemonic entity like Prussia, a Piedmont, or an Ile de France will not be allowed to exist in the Arab world (Barnett, 1998: 134; Dawisha, 2003: 311; Gerges, 1994: 116).

The death of Arab nationalism has been announced and debated more than once (Hinnebusch, 2009). However, in the wake of the Arab spring of 2011, there might be hope for a new Arab nationalism.

Conclusion

As seen in this paper, Arab nationalism emerged as a restoring-identity movement evolved and refined by educated Arab elites throughout its march from a minority movement under the Ottoman Empire to the dominating ideology of the Arab world by 1950s.

Through shedding light on the Arab League, the Pan-Arab association and Gamal Abdel Nasser, the most prominent Pan-Arab leader, this paper has presented reasons and examples to support its argument that Arab nationalism has been largely unsuccessful. As was previously stated, Arab nationalism encountered various drawbacks that can be thematically classified into three main sections.

First are the 'inherent' reasons that represent the pitfalls of Arab nationalism at the theory-level, such as the disdain for democracy and freedom, its authoritarian traits and the lack of approaches to tackle the real challenges of how to establish and sustain the unified Arab state politically, economically and militarily.

Second are the 'regional' reasons that related to the Arab world. For instance, the clash between*wataniyya* and *qawmeyya,* state sovereignty and Arab nationalism. In addition, self-interested Arab leaders, who worked against Arab unity, also encouraged, intentionally or not, the emergence of alternative rival identities, such as the sub-regional identity 'Gulfi identity' or vatious state nationalisms. Furthermore, the up-bottom direction and being inspired by charismatic leaders or despotic regimes were a serious weakness of this ideology. Third are the 'exogenous' reasons that refer to the Western powers who tried to prevent any hegemonic power or unionist project to come into fruition.

As a final point, *Arabism* had been moribund for decades; however, the outbreak of the Arab Spring led, to some extent, to its resurgence. A prospective change in their states' regimes, rethinking state sovereignty and building on this Arabist sentiment could serve as a right step in the direction towards a new bottom-up *Arab nationalism* movement that corrects past mistakes in both theory and practice.

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