Are Arab Nationalism and Islamism Two Sides of the Same Coin?

It is with the support of the Muslim Brotherhood that, in 1952, the Free Officers' coup brings to power Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt, future hero of Arab nationalism. By 1954, Nasser had abolished the Brotherhood and driven the Islamist movement underground. This episode epitomizes both the brutality and the ambivalence of the relations between Arab nationalism and Islamism. Yet, this ambivalence is, at first, quite puzzling. Indeed, a quick historical and conceptual overview seems to point towards a clear incompatibility and opposition between these two great political ideologies of the 20th century.

After all, Arab nationalism (here defined as the belief that all Arabic speakers form a nation and should be united and independent (Shulze, 2004)) and Islamism (here understood as a synonym of political Islam, i.e. the political ideology which seeks the establishment of an Islamic state based on Islamic law (Ibid.)) share a history of violent confrontations forces throughout the whole century. Moreover, this confrontation seems to logically derive from a fundamental ideological antagonism. According to Anderson's *Imagined Communities* definition, nationalist ideology supersedes religion and is inherently secular or at least represents a challenge and competing focus of loyalty vis-à-vis religious identity or authority (Anderson, 1982). Furthermore, such an ideology, which equates sovereignty and nation, conflicts with the conservative Islamic principle *al hukm l'il-allah*, which defines sovereignty as the exclusive possession of God (Mandaville, 2012).

Therefore, everything should oppose them, leaving no room for ambivalence. But how if they are really two separate, "impermeable" ideologies, can one explain their intriguingly common pattern of emergence –both having their intellectual roots in the late 19th century and their first significant political manifestations in the interwar period? How can the numerous contacts between both ideologues (and ideologies) be explained? Taking this point further, and going against the adversarial view, the claim that Arab nationalism and Islamism were in fact 'two sides of the same coin' has been made. In this perspective, the two movements would be merely two different "expressions" of one thing. This thing being identified as the rejection of Western influences (i.e. successively the European colonial powers first and the US hegemony).

In assessing these claims and adjudicating between them, this essay will try to avoid two methodological pitfalls. On the one hand, refusing to reify ideologies, that is to see them as fixed and unvarying sets of ideas, this essay will acknowledge the importance of historical, political and social dynamics in shaping them. As Dale Eickelman puts it: "These forms do not exist as objects that can be torn from social and cultural contexts …" (Eickelman, 1998). This element will be of a particular relevance to the question of identity, defined here as a social construct built implying the presence of an 'Other', in the sense ascribed to it by the anthropologist Fredrik Barth, (who wrote "No identification without differentiation", Barth, 1969). On the other hand, this essay will endeavour not to lose sight of the fact that these ideologies, although changing over time and being shaped by non-ideational factors, are not vacuous things: they carry content, a more or less elaborated vision of the world, and are ultimately about values and goals, that one cannot discard as irrelevant.

In this framework, the following question will be addressed: are Islamism and Pan-Arabism two separate and opposed ideologies, or the same phenomenon taking two different forms? First, this essay will nullify the "adversarial" view, showing instead that both movements are closely intertwined and interacting in a variety of ways.

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Second, it will demonstrate that both can, indeed, be validly identified as identity-driven reactions to the West. But it will then argue that viewing them as no more than variants of this rejection would overlook the very ideological content of both and would amount, in Descartes's terms, to a confusion between *origin* and *foundation*. This essay will hence hold the view that political Islam and Arab nationalism are intimately linked movements which are united and differentiated at the same time by their relation to the West: both emerge in opposition to it, but what their respective fight rest on fundamentally different ideological underpinnings.

A Complex Pattern of Interactions

An investigation of the intellectual and political history of Islamism and Arab nationalism draws the picture of a wide diversity of modes of interactions and definitely refutes a simplistic opposition model. Much more nuanced, it evidences two intimately linked trajectories shaping each other, through a variety of relationships, ranging from symbiosis to mutual instrumentalisation.
First, as a preliminary remark, one can point out that the two original doctrines are far from being totally alien to each other and that the respective early founders did not design them in a spirit of confrontation or incompatibility.

On the pan-Arab side, founding ideologue of the Ba'ath party, Michel Aflaq said "the power of Islam… has revived to appear in our days under a new form, that of Arab Nationalism." (Aflaq, as cited in Kramer, 1996) and advised the Arab Christians to know Islam, and love this new religion as it is, in his words "the most valuable element" of the nationalism (Anjum, 2015). Similarly, on the Islamist side, Rashid Rida himself, who regarded the Caliphate as a necessity, argued that Muslims could realize the moral system of Islam within the confine of the nation state[1] (Rida, 1923 as cited in Mandaville, 2012). In fact, during the inter-war years, only minority radical movement, such as Hisb-ut-Tahrir, were actually seeking to gather the ummah under a Caliphate (Kramer 1986, Mandaville 2012). These remarks do not aim to negate the ideological differences of these two movements, simply underline the inaccuracy of a too strong "adversarial" approach that would retrospectively reify them in their most radical – and arguably more recent– version.

Secondly, the political history of the two movements is by no mean more exclusively confrontational than their intellectual origins. Indeed, embedded in power struggles, permeated with politics, political Islam and Arab nationalism relations have sometimes been a mutually constitutive one. Many have highlighted the crucial role Islam and Islamists have played in the nationalist movements and their state-building endeavours, from the interwar era to the early aftermath of World War II, as a conscious basis for mobilization (Sidel, 2015) or an active force in the making of state power (Reza Nasr, 2001). In reverse, these state-building processes have also impacted and reshaped practices and perception of Shari'a, as for example in Malaysia (Roff, 1967) or Arabia (Messick, 1993). These almost symbiotic interactions have also taken the form of instrumentalization or, at least, to political dynamics where each side has been able to use the other as a tool towards the fulfillment of its own goals.

Thus, beyond Arab nationalists' use of Islam (e.g. regime employing religion as a tool for mobilizing domestic and regional support for his Arab socialist agenda, notably through Al-Azhar university, used as a vehicle to legitimate Arab socialism; or Saddam Hussein repeatedly invoking religion to rally Arabs during the 1991 Gulf war, Anjum, 2015) Islamism *per se* has been utilised as an instrument by the nation-state, and so in the very moment of political Islam's re-emergence after the 1970's. In Pakistan and South-East Asia for example, not only did Islamisation not arise as a challenge to the state (Shulze, 2015) but it actually strengthened the postcolonial states (in particular the Pakistani and Malay ones) by providing them with an ideological tool, which was lacking before (Reza Nasr, 2001). The strong statist approach adopted by the Islamists in the Middle East exemplifies the reverse dynamic.

What stems from this analysis is that the confrontational approach appears to be a fallacy. Political Islam and Arab nationalism are not to two fully homogenous antagonistic ideologies that would have no relation with each other but clash. Such a view obscures the complex intertwined histories of these two highly evolving movements, which can be seen as being, in many aspects, mutually constitutive. However, nullifying this view does necessarily imply that the opposite one is true. In other words, saying that the adversarial model is mostly inaccurate is one thing, claiming that Islamism and Arabism are two forms of a single thing ("two sides of the same coin") is, of course, another. The question that one should address now is whether it is possible to go beyond this variety of interactions described

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above and identify a unifying element that would justify such a claim.

A Common Rejection of the West

It will first be found that both Islamism and Arabism emerge as a reaction to the Western penetration of the region and have similar societal functions in that respect. To some extent, both movements can therefore validly be viewed as two forms of this rejection. The first hint of the existence of a strong common element consists in the following observation: Pan-Arabism and political Islam seem to be linked by an inverse correlation. When one rises, the other declines, when one dominates the other is marginal. This relationship can arguably be traced back to the early 20th century. Before the first World War indeed, according to Dawisha (2000), the Islamic identity was much stronger among the Arabs than the still new and marginal concept of Arab nation.

It is only after the second World War –and particularly in the beginning of the 1950's– that the relationship is reversed: Arab nationalism, then perceived as much more concretely moored in local territory, language, history, and experience than the abstract and diffuse *ummah* (Anderson, 1991), triumphs over Islamism. The latter almost "disappears" from the international relations stage (Sidel, 2015) while the former rises and reaches its climax in the 1960's under Nasser's leadership and the United Arab Republic projects. Arabism's decline after 1967 witnesses the resurgence of political Islam and the reverse equilibrium begins to take shape. To account for this striking and seemingly mechanic relationship, one needs to understand what links Arab nationalism and Islamism, and, therefore, pay attention to their common origin. This origin is to be found in the rejection of the European colonial power, which is at the very heart of the emergence and spread of both movements.

As for political Islam, one of its early ideologues, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani identified European imperialism as an experience common to Muslims and sought to mobilize anti-colonial sentiment around a renewed sense of *ummah* consciousness (Landau 1990, as cited in Mandaville 2012). Likewise, Hasan al-Bana who founded the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928 was concerned with cultural Westernization of the Muslim world and the loss of Islamic traditions. According to Adib-Moghaddam (2012) "It is not too far-fetched" to generalise that for the modernist Islamists from Abduh to Khomeini, Qutb to Mawdudi, al-Banna to Iqbal, Islam was the answer to the social, political, economic and cultural decline of the *ummah* in comparison to the West. For Shulze (2015) even the notion of an Islamic state is a reaction to the Western nation-state, and for many authors Islamism is also a response to the emergence of Zionism, regarded as a Western project.

The exact same analysis can be made on Arab nationalism, which also sees itself as mean to roll back Western dominance in the region (Hinnesbuch, 2012). A telling illustration of it is probably pan-Arabism's "foundational"event: Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956 –an act directly targeted at European ex-colonial powers and followed by massive anti-Western Arab demonstrations following it in Libya, Morocco, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, and Aden. It is thus clear that same both movements emerge out of the same anti-Western identity matrix. To put it differently, not only are they both identity-driven movements, but they both have constructed this identity against the same "Other", the West. They hence necessarily share core characteristics: they have same goal –being seen as the legitimate source of definition of collective identities–, which in turn implies fighting for a single thing –authenticity or, as Dawisha puts it "the place in the heart of the Arabs (2000)" – and a single public. They are both responses to the same societal preoccupation –the anxiety of the decline and the need to retrieve a positive self-image–; attempt to provide answers to the same questions – the challenge of a modernity dominated by the West. Their successes or failures are therefore subordinate to the same criteria since they can but make the same promises. It seems that this framework only can account for and explain the inverse correlation outlined above. For example, one could posit some of the most decisive promises, in terms of their influence on the fate of the two ideologies, are the liberation of Palestine and the achievement of a better economic equality.

Political Islam re-emerged out of Arab nationalism's failure to liberate Palestine in 1967, after the lost June war against Israel (Shulze 2015). At this moment, Islamism wins the ideological battle on the same issue on which it lost after World War II: the ability to represent a credible anti-Western force. Critiquing Arab nationalism for being a mere imitation of European institutions, it was then able, to position itself as the only authentic way to get rid of Western influence. A similar argument could be made in the field of political economy. When in the 1970's Arab nationalist

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powers, facing the economic crisis, proved unable to fulfill their socialist promise of economic equality, Islamism rose in prominence as an alternative, proposing a new Islamic model of socio-economic justice (Shulze, 2015).

It would be tempting to infer from this seeming system of "connected vessels" that Pan-Arabism and political Islam are in fact two aspects of the same phenomenon (or "two sides of the same coin"), this phenomenon being the rejection of Western hegemony. Although both movements *are* indeed two different expressions of an anti-West sentiment, reducing them entirely to this framework would be unsatisfactory. Such a model would totally overlook the actual content and internal ideational drivers of the two ideologies –which elements do matter a lot, both in terms of their relations to each other and in terms of their effects on regional and global international relations.

Divergent Ideological Apparatuses

In other terms, both are a reaction to the West, but these reactions are themselves *fundamentally* different. In fact, they do not reject the same elements in Western hegemony; they do not fight the West at the same level, and in a sense that they are not opposing the same West. While Arab nationalism fights a military and political power, political Islam fights an ideological influence. The 1967's transition moment is enlightening in that respect. When Islamists criticized Arab nationalist states' failure to defeat Israel, it is not their inefficiency or even the irrelevance of the pan-Arabist project that is at the heart of the attack. It is rather what is described as the "moral bankruptcy" of secular nation-states built on the Western model (Shulze 2015). Discarding this criticism as a purely opportunistic stance dictated by power struggles would be fallacious. Indeed this Islamist view appears to be rooted in the very original doctrine of the movement, which, although it did not call for a confrontation at the moment of its formation and was radicalized over time (notably as a result of its conflicts with Arab nationalism and the sometimes brutal repression it implied; Mellon, 2002), already about countering the spread of European ideas. Hasan al-Bana's project, for instance, is not dissociable from the objective to roll back the Westernization of Muslim *minds.*

As Esposito explains it "For Qutb, as for al-Banna and Mawdudi, the West is the historic and pervasive enemy of Islam and Muslim societies, both a political and a religiocultural threat … Its clear danger comes from … its hold on Muslim elites who govern and guide by alien standards" (Esposito, 1995 as cited in Mellon, 2002). As a consequence, political Islam's critique did not simply relate to the grievances felt against the Arab nationalist regimes but more fundamentally offers a moral indictment of post-Enlightenment political theories (Euben, 1999 as cited in Mellon, 2002). And indeed, this perception of Arab nationalism being a product of Western ideologies is well-founded. Pan Arab founder Sati al-Husri borrowed from the writings of the German nationalist school of the Romantic era (Dawisha, 2000) and the birth of Arab nationalist sentiment is framed in Woodrow Wilson's terms, as a struggle for "self-determination"(Mandaville, 2012).

A significant manifestation of this ideology gap can be found in nationalist's education policies. In post-independence new nation-states, secular education is vigorously promoted, as seen in Egypt where school population expands by 800,000 in the years surrounding the 1952 (Sidel, 2015). A fundamental ideological cleavage seems to take shape here. It implies that, even though it is exact that Islamists and Arab nationalists are both combating the West, both are not leading the same battle.

On the one hand, as Hedley Bull puts it "[pan-Arabism was] at pains to accommodate Western norms and values while using them to combat the West as a political and military power, but not as a civilization. In this sense, Arab nationalism embraces Western ideas" (Bull, 1984). Arab nationalist's adoption of the national emancipatory discourse, commitment to socialism, furthering of the European forms of the state perfectly illustrates Bull's point. On the other hand, political Islam presents itself as a rejection of Western ideas ("this individualism which lacks sense of solidarity … that animal freedom which is called permissiveness" said Qutb, as cited in Dawisha, 2000) and calls for the construction of an alternative political system based on Islamic values. In many senses, Islamism is the ideological weapon of "Islamic modernism" directed against the West (Tibi, 1981). Arab nationalism had none and did not seek to have one.

Consequently, the view which, irrespectively from their ideological content, defines Arab nationalism and political Islam as *essentially* two manifestations of the same counter-hegemonic dynamic, is incorrect. Such a definition would

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amount to an overly social-functionalist approach, which would, in a way, tear ideas from ideologies. Conceptually, this would commit the fallacy against which Descartes warns, in his *Discourse on the Method*: confusing the *origin* (in this case, a reaction to western penetration of the Middle East) and the *foundation* (what this reaction consists in).

In addressing the question whether *"Arab nationalism and Islamism are two sides of the same coin"* , this essay started with an assessment of the opposed stance –namely the one according to which these ideologies are two entirely different things, only linked to each other by confrontation. A wide variety of interactions being found, the claim was nullified. A seemingly unifying pattern and a common origin were then evidenced but found to be insufficient to proceed to agree with the discussed assertion. In other words, this essay reached the conclusion that Arab nationalism and political Islam, closely intertwined from their origins, both grow out of the same anti-Western identity matrix, but that the contents, means, and meanings of this rejection are fundamentally different.

Overall, the answer to this essay question ultimately revolves around the issue of these movements' relation to the West, which both links and distinguishes them. In this sense, the metaphor of the coin, may, after all, not be such an inaccurate one. If rather than two mere "faces" of one single thing, it describes two different things forged out of the same material and oriented toward radically different directions, it might in fact constitute a quite fair depiction of Islamism- Arabism relations.

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[1] Such a view is surprisingly close to the non-islamist muslim scholar Abd al-Raziq's one, who saw Islam and the modern nation state as perfectly compatible, arguing that, in relation to governance, Islam did not prescribe any particular institutional arrangement (Abd al-Raziq, 1925)

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Date written: November 2015