

**Pre-Proof version.** For final version see *The Routledge Handbook to the Middle East and North African State and States System* (2019), pp. 270 – 284 (Editors: Raymond Hinnebusch and Jasmine K. Gani)

# **Arab nationalism in Anglophone**

## **Discourse:**

### **A conceptual and historical reassessment**

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#### **Abstract**

This chapter argues for a reassessment of the dominant position on Arab nationalism within the Anglophone academic literature, which posits that Arab nationalism carries little relevance in contemporary regional politics after capitulating in the 1967 war. I contest this narrative with the following arguments: first, English-language discourse on Middle East politics has depended on realist frameworks that diminish the significance of ideology—this trend should be interrogated with a more complex reading of ideology. Second, greater historicization of Arab nationalism, distinguishing between early and latter priorities, facilitates awareness of contending visions of Arab nationalism and prevents judging it as a homogenous entity. Third, Egyptocentric readings of Arab nationalism have contributed to assertions of its failure, whereas side-stepping to a Syrian lens offers an alternative account. And finally, rival and opposition ideologies in the region shed light on Arab nationalism’s continued relevance, contra its dismissal in influential Anglophone studies.

*Keywords: Arab nationalism, ideology, Syria, Egypt*

## Introduction

*“I do not know of any seriously creditable synthetic discussions of Arab nationalism in a western language...which engage this historical phenomenon beyond the perspective of the moment.”*

(Aziz Al-Azmeh 2000: 67-8)

Al-Azmeh’s claim nearly two decades ago still rings true. Though Arab nationalism was the major political force of the Middle East in the mid-twentieth century (Fawcett 2005: 5), dominating the intellectual landscape and adopted as the official state ideology by Egypt, Syria and Iraq, its perceived importance in Anglophone scholarship and political discourse has greatly diminished. Two main trends can be identified in this literature. First, there is a tendency to argue polemically against Arab nationalism as an ideology, particularly over the past two decades, without really considering its historical significance. Second, most analyses work within the constraints of Egyptocentrism when attempting to evaluate the function, successes and failures of Arab nationalism. Thus, much of the literature attaches the rise and fall of Arab nationalism to the charismatic leadership of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser (Ajami 1978; Darwisha 2003), by and large overlooking Syria’s part in the movement. This is despite the fact that the Syrian regime remains the only state to (officially) adhere to Arab nationalism as an institutionalized ideology, even throughout the recent conflict. While there is no doubt the ideology has been in decline since the Arabs’ defeat in the 1967 Arab–Israeli war, a number of scholars have gone further and argued that it was all but eliminated after Nasser’s death 3 years later and after Anwar Sadat’s truce with Israel. They have argued that historical events appear to corroborate this claim: peace treaties with (or *de facto* accommodation of) Israel, neglect of the Palestinians and persistent inter-Arab rivalry are all cited as “proof” of the death of Arab nationalism (Ajami 1978; Ayoob 2007; Darwisha 2003; Goodarzi 2006; Humphreys 1999; Tibi 1997; Chaitani 2007). This argument is dependent on several assumptions: 1) Nasser was the chief proponent of Arab nationalist ideology, without which it was unsustainable; 2) a territorial pan-Arab union was the *raison d’être* of Arab nationalism;

3) a regional Arab nationalism (*Qawmiyyah*) was replaced by political loyalty to the state (*Wataniyyah*); and 4) unlike European nationalisms, Arab nationalism was unable to unseat religion as the primary identity of societies in the Middle East.

Further underpinning these assumptions are two conceptual positions: the first is a realist one, still the predominant theoretical approach in International Relations of the Middle East, which has its merits no doubt, but often relegates the role of ideologies as a secondary or even irrelevant factor after security and power-political interests. The second conceptual position is one inspired by Marxism, portraying ideology as an artificial construct, an “invented tradition” (Hobsbawm 1983), to be instrumentalized for the personal ambitions of authoritarian regimes. Global events that appear to validate a post-ideological era (Haugnolle 2015; Browers, 2009), especially since the end of the Cold War, have also played a significant role in contemporary readings of Arab nationalism.

From a pedagogical perspective, the narrative of the failure of Arab nationalism has emerged as the definitive account in much of the literature, and is consistently taught as a historical watershed on Middle East courses with little contestation—the question usually asked is not if, but rather why and how the ideology has declined. This is partly due to the dearth of scholarly material in English that offers a counter-argument or seeks to complicate received understandings of Arab nationalism, justifying Al-Azmeh’s complaint. Here it should be noted that the work of Arab nationalist intelligentsia, whether historians, propagandists, ideologues or philosophers, as well as scholarly outputs in Arabic and French, help to mitigate against the criticisms of Arab nationalism by Anglophone scholars. Moreover, even in English, there are some notable exceptions, which chart the development and nuances of Arab nationalist movements, across and within states and different strata of society through historical sociological approaches (Gershoni and Jankowski 1997; Chourieri 2005; Jamali 2012). These works do challenge a monolithic reading of Arab nationalism, highlighting the varying contexts that shaped Arab nationalist ideology in multi-faceted ways. And yet the homogenization of Arab nationalism, and a preoccupation with its failures, remain predominant in the discourse.

To clarify, this is not a defence of a primordialist essentialism espoused by nationalist ideologues—that nationalisms are imagined or constructed, “rooted in

modernity” or history, is a path well-trodden and exhausted by critiques (Anderson 1991; Gellner 1983; Hobsbawm 1990; Hutchinson 1987; Smith 1981, Breuilly 1993). But even so, it is also necessary to acknowledge from a historical perspective that Arab nationalism did play a crucial role in the politics of the Middle East (and of the Cold War) during the twentieth century, and arguably still persists as an influential idea beyond its failures to institutionalize. For that, and for historiographical purposes, Arab nationalism warrants a renewed assessment. This chapter offers a primarily conceptual re-evaluation of Arab nationalism that challenges redundant comparisons with European trajectories of nationalism, and interrogates an Egyptocentric account. The chapter’s critique focuses on the influential works of Bassam Tibi, Adeed Dawisha and Fouad Ajami, three sceptics of Arab nationalism who have argued persuasively that it is no longer relevant. The chapter then draws upon Syria (rather than Egypt) as a case-study to argue that Arab nationalist forces produced some important successes with a lasting influence on the region. It also seeks to restore the distinction between pre- and post-Mandate developments in Arab nationalism, a transitional phase that is often unaccounted for.

Before reappraising Arab nationalism, it is worth defining what an ideology is in the first place. How do we distinguish between ideologies and mere identity on the one hand, or political philosophy on the other (Freedman 2003: 62–3). Moreover, which ideas are prioritized, and which are of secondary importance in an ideology? Ideologies are not monoliths, but are comprised of both core and peripheral principles: core principles are less likely to change, being the *raison d’être* of the ideology, while peripheral principles are more susceptible to alteration and can even be discarded if considered to be less salient in changing circumstances. (Gani 2016: 8). Applying this methodological approach to ideology, allowing for adaptation that is contingent on environmental and historical contexts, acts as a caution against absolutist claims that ideologies have entirely failed in their objectives due to a misreading of their core and peripheral principles. This is particularly relevant when evaluating the arguments of Tibi and Dawisha who collapse the distinction between the two; thus the failure to achieve cultural goals or a pan-Arab territorial union are perceived as the wholesale failure of the ideology when, in fact, these may have been peripheral goals and thus were of lesser importance, depending on the historical period one analyses.

Given Tibi's concentration on the Eurocentric roots of Arab nationalism as one of the justifications for his "failure" thesis, the following sections will explore Arab nationalism's links with European paradigms of nationalism, identifying Western and secular strains in the ideology. The chapter will go on to highlight the divergence in core goals between Arab nationalism and its European counterparts once the former metamorphosed into an anti-colonial movement in the post-Mandate period. The final part of the chapter turns its attention to Arab nationalism in the contemporary era, to consider if it retains any relevance to regional and global politics despite the predominant belief that Arab nationalism is "dead."

## **European Nationalism between culture and politics**

Tibi portrays Arab nationalism as an unsuccessful iteration of European nationalist ideology (1997). As such, the failure to install republicanism (and even liberalism) and secularism by those states that adopted Arab nationalism are taken to be a failure of the ideology itself. To some extent this is due to the continued reliance on George Antonius's seminal book *The Arab Awakening* (1939), the first account of "Arabism" to be printed in the English language, and which promulgates a highly Eurocentric conceptualization of Arab nationalism (Dawn 2000: 41).

This reliance implies that we could, therefore, simply look to the core goals of nationalism as they emerged in Europe to chart the goals, success or failure of Arab nationalism. However, drawing on Freedman's distinction (1996), I argue that to rely on intellectual accounts alone would assume Arab nationalism is merely a political philosophy, rather than an ideology; to treat Arab nationalism as an ideology, one would need to measure intellectual claims against the practice of its adherents. An ideology is defined by its social expression as much as its theoretical principles (Gani, 2016). Thus, even though Arab nationalism incorporates the name, to what extent has the ideology ever constituted a form of *nationalism* at all?

As "one of the most powerful forces in the modern world" (Hutchinson and Smith 1994: 3), nationalist ideology produced a new global norm that transferred popular and political loyalty from religion or empire to the nation (Greenfeld 1992:3). Nationalism's secular foundation made it the perfect political expression of concurrent Enlightenment

ideals. For Rousseau and J.S. Mill, nationalism was above all an expression of loyalty to political institutions and laws holding a community together, rather than birthplace, while national symbols, history and culture were only useful insofar as they fostered loyalty to the aforementioned institutions. In turn, this paved the way for political unity and the development of civic institutions (Barnard 1988; Festenstein and Kenny 2005: 271–4).

In contrast to liberal interpretations of nationalism, Herder, Fichte and Arndt argued that common political identity rested not on polity (a human construction) but shared culture and common language, deemed to reflect one's natural, primordial state. The German historian Heinrich Von Treitschke similarly opposed the liberal-nationalist concept that a sense of belonging must include freedom of association, arguing instead for the primacy of territory in defining one's nationality (Festenstein and Kenny 2005: 274–6). Mirroring the schisms highlighted above, we can delineate two camps within twentieth-century debates on the matter, comprising of an "idealist" and culturalist approach on the one hand (Renan 1882; Toynbee 1915; Kohn 1944; Deutsch 1953), and a political, instrumentalist approach on the other (Gershoni and Jankowski 1997: ix–x; Kedourie 1961; Gellner 1983; Breuilly 1993).

However, despite differing over the weight given to culture or politics, liberals, primordialists and instrumentalists all saw the cultural and the political eventually coming together in some form of republicanism that reflected popular representation, as well as political autonomy from empires and religious institutions. Ultimately, we can parse through the variations to extract the core principles of nationalism being: a common political identity, shared culture, republicanism, and loyalty to the nation that overrides other communities.

Where then does Arab nationalism sit within this debate? What are the areas of overlap and divergence? Can the successes and failures of Arab nationalism be measured through the prism of the core principles outlined above? Both the cultural and republican projects can be found within the intellectual history of Arab nationalism, where a deliberate, secular and cultural project akin to and indeed borrowed from nationalist accounts in Europe is promoted. Sati Al-Husri is frequently identified as a preeminent figure in the development of Arab nationalism as a *cultural* phenomenon. Notably, he is the focus of works by Bassam Tibi and Adeed Dawisha (Tibi 1997: 117–

22; Dawisha 2003: 49–75) who use Al-Husri’s vision as a yardstick for the fortunes of Arab nationalism, and a measurement of its nearness to the European model.

Al-Husri leaned heavily on the form of nationalism developed by the likes of Herder, Fichte and Arndt, focusing especially on the commonality of language as the cohesive element in an Arab cultural community that would in time emerge into a united political community (Tibi 1997: xii). He argued “people who spoke a unitary language ... have one heart and a common soul. As such, they constituted one nation, and so have to have a unified state.” Thus, he argues, pan-Arabism emerged from the culturalist impulse (the language) of the Arab people (Al-Husri, 1974; Khadduri 1970: 201).

As with European culturalist theories of nationalism, this viewpoint carried strong teleological connotations. Arab nationalist intellectuals sought to cultivate a distinct identity when they called for a secular “Arab awakening” advocating a new source of political and cultural loyalty other than religion, instigated by increased contact with Western science and secularism (Dawn 1991: 3–5; Haim 1974: 27). Other Arab nationalist intellectuals such as Rifa’ah Rafi’ al-Tahtawi, Abd Al-Rahman Al Kawakibi and Nejib Azouri eulogized the West as an inspiration for Arab nationalism (Azoury 1905, in Haim 1974: 81), and indeed the Arab intellectual George Antonius entitled his Arab nationalist thesis “The Arab awakening” to celebrate the spread of European Enlightenment values to the Arab Middle East (Antonius 1939). On this basis, Tibi and Dawisha’s assessment of Arab nationalism against European nationalist models is justified. On this point they are joined by Rashid Khalidi, to take one example, who sees the political goals of Arab nationalism as contingent on culture, summarizing Arab nationalism as:

[T]he idea that the Arabs are a people linked by special bonds of language and history (and many would add, religion), and that their political organization should in some way reflect this reality.

(Khalidi 1991: vii)

These definitions certainly resonate with earlier conceptualizations of Arab nationalism particularly as it emerged during the Ottoman Empire (Dawn 2000: 44); but such ideas largely existed in the realm of theory and philosophy, ideas held by intellectual elites whose relevance increasingly diminished after the imposition of colonial mandates in

the region. In practice, the intellectual cultural movement had limited success in mobilizing popular opinion, while the republican and liberal associations, such as civil rights and representative government, were side-lined by the internal politics of Arab nationalist states and pressures of colonialism. The aforementioned scholars thus assert that Arab nationalism has been a failure on the domestic front, since they measure the successes of Arab nationalism by its capacity to pursue the European model of republicanism and civic institutions. But just how representative were those intellectuals of the Arab nationalist movement in practice?

## **Whither the cultural and republican project of Arab nationalism?**

It is true the cultural emphasis of early Arab nationalist intellectuals did and still does have appeal. However, this appeal, built on secular sensibilities, is often limited to Arab elites, many of whom have been educated in the West or within Western institutions in the Middle East (Simon 1997: 87–105). The early intellectuals' hopes for a de-Islamization of culture, did not have universal traction. Similarly, attempts to translate common cultural identity into political projects have largely been fruitless. The collapse of the UAR between Syria and Egypt between 1958–61, and the ineffectual Arab League that still operates but barely registers on individual foreign policies and has little international leverage as a collective policy unit, are two examples of unfulfilled political idealism based on a united cultural (language-based) identity.

Part of the difficulty for Arab nationalists in using existing culture for political goals is that it encroaches on other loyalties that have ample cultural and political substance to foster socially cohesive identities at local levels. Two such loyalties will be briefly highlighted here (although they could be broken down even further to include tribal, ethnic and sectarian loyalties), these being statist nationalism and Islam.

The first concept, statist nationalism (*Wataniyyah*), has taken root as a by-product of practical realities. As Humphreys states:

[State] boundaries that were purely colonial fictions created out of thin air in 1920 by Britain and France for their own convenience—had become sacred and immutable in 1950.

(1999: 60–82)

State patriotism, as an obstacle or challenger to Arab nationalism's regionalism, is evident in all the Arab states, and most influentially in Egypt and Iraq. Humphreys argues that an Egyptian (as opposed to Arab) nationalism was crystallized by British occupation in 1882, articulating a strong sense of historical and cultural identity that had long existed within its stable geopolitical boundaries; thus, in this sense, Nasser's Arab nationalism marked a temporary interlude before Egypt returned to statism under Sadat. Donald Reid argues that Pharaonic symbolism has provided Egyptians with a strong counter-culture (Reid 1997: 127–50), predating Arabism and connecting them to an overlapping African identity as well.

Meanwhile in Iraq, though Arab nationalism was deployed to foster greater cohesion among its ethnicities and sects, ideological sentiments were to a large degree subverted under Saddam Hussein's rule. Iraq's adoption of Ba'thism in 1966 and Saddam Hussein's vocal instrumentalization of pan-Arabism in his foreign policy can create confusion on this front. But as Wieland (2006: 22), Humphreys and Tripp (2002: 167–93) argue, the regime's self-interest and "Stalinist" repression, and the alienation of the Kurdish and Shi'a populations, prevented a greater level of ideological loyalty in the country. Moreover, Iraq was just as likely to hail its Mesopotamian history as its Arab one. Indeed, notwithstanding the personal, power-political rivalry between the leaders of Syria and Iraq, Syrian perceptions of Iraq as corruptors of Ba'thist ideology (Gani, 2014: 158-159; Kienle, 1988) contributed to their mutual antipathy. Such counter-cultures were effectively channelled into political projects of state-building, which rivalled and hindered the intellectuals' calls for unity based on shared Arab culture.

The second challenge, Islam, has provided important cultural symbols, historical narratives and idioms, which are often used by Arab nationalists to encourage the very sentiments that its own secular, cultural discourse fails to invoke. Islam in some ways has been the more problematic of the two competing loyalties highlighted here, at least conceptually. While Arab nationalism can at least purport to be a separate political phenomenon from state nationalisms (which are at times denigrated as products of

Western colonialism), its cultural symbols often collide with similar unifying concepts in Islam, such as the notion of *Ummah* as a community that transcends state boundaries; historical “heroes” such as Salah al-Din Ayyubi who is seen to have liberated the Arabs from the Crusaders; and even Arabic as a revered language (albeit for differing rationales). To understand the difficulty in disentangling the two, one ought to consult the lengthy and convoluted attempts made by Kawakibi (1931), Al-Husri (1944), and Al-Bazzaz (1952). For years the Syrian regime, as one example, regularly employed the above religious reference-points to simultaneously serve its ideological goals and tap into the population’s religious loyalties. It should be noted here that Islam does not necessarily provide a uniform identity that automatically fills the “cultural void” of nationalism as is argued by Islamists; indeed, it accommodates localized cultural pluralism; nor is there such a high degree of religiosity in Arab society that only an Islamic culture appeals; but it *is* the case that tapping into religion is often used to raise Arab nationalism’s authenticity, while paradoxically also serving to highlight its cultural limitations.

In view of these obstacles, the cultural project at the heart of nationalist thought (Toynbee 1915; Kohn 1944; Greenfeld 1992), Arab nationalist intellectual thought (for example Al-Husri, Kawakibi and Azouri), and emphasized by Tibi, Dawisha and Ajami, failed to successfully convert to a political project. On the one hand, state-based nationalism obstructs the collectivization of an Arab nationalist culture, while on the other hand Arab nationalism’s symbols and emotional appeal are often affiliated to the history of Islam, reserving little for the banks of an entirely secular transnational loyalty.

Where, then, does this leave the *republican* programme that was such a prominent component of successful nationalist movements in Europe, and which was ideologically adopted by a number of early Arab nationalist doctrines. In practice, the two nationalisms from Europe and the Arab world have diverged the most on this front. patchy in reality, European nationalists were drawn to the concept of citizenship, and through that sought economic, political and social transformation; it often represented the emerging middle class whose social upward mobility was previously prevented by the dominance of elites seeking to preserve their influence and stake within the state (Bull 1977: 42).

As Tibi notes, however, Arab nationalist states failed to bring about their intellectual and constitutional goals for domestic freedoms and representation. To take Syria as an example, the democratic process was stifled, and civilian freedoms sacrificed to safeguard the interests and authority of the regime (George 2006: 11).

This divergence in the outcomes of the European and Arab nationalist movements can partly be understood by recognizing that the contexts of repression and domination that the nationalist movements sought to challenge were different in Europe and the Middle East. In Europe, the struggle for equality, representation and recognition of “the masses” was contested mostly within states through civil wars and internal revolutions; in the Middle East, and indeed throughout the “Third World,” nationalist movements were essentially anti-colonial with the struggle for equality and freedom transferred to a global level, contested between the local populations and their external colonizers. This is not to say that conflicts did not exist internally within the old colonial states. Certainly, in Syria, as elsewhere, there was an internal struggle between various social strata even during the mandate system, and a latent resentment towards the dominance of ruling Syrian elites, many of whom were formed through colonial rule (Khoury 1997: 287). This has since been manifested on a catastrophic scale with the Syrian conflict that began (after initially peaceful protests) in 2011. But as Halliday and Alavi argue:

While the ideologies of power and opposition found in these societies are, in the first instance, concerned with internal, domestic, conflict, the issue of external relations and the role of external forces is always central and forms a vivid part of the world view that sustains such movements.

(1988: 3)

Such external involvement became a central feature of the Syria conflict, despite the fact it was at first seen as a domestic affair, and reflects a continuity of outside meddling in Syria’s history (Hinnebusch and Ehteshami 2014: 231).

In such circumstances, external relations and the role of foreign forces that were already central to the regime’s ideological narrative, have gained heightened importance among both the forces in power and those in opposition. Emergency Law, curtailment of individual freedoms, suppression of political dissent—all the antitheses of civic development associated with the intellectual Arab nationalist movement—are

easier to justify while conflict and resistance take priority in the nationalist narrative. In practice, then, Arab nationalism has rarely reflected the Eurocentric republican ideals affiliated to its early intellectuals, stymied in large part by the very same European nations eulogised by early Arab nationalists.

### **The search for political autonomy: roots in anti-colonialism**

If one eliminates culture and republicanism as contenders, the remaining connections between Arab nationalism and broader nationalist ideology are political autonomy and secularization of politics. With the cultural project lagging behind as a predominantly elitist agenda, and the republican ideals of domestic politics having never taken off, the mobilization of Arab nationalism was overwhelmingly dependent on its political, anti-colonial credentials—it is in that form that Arab nationalism enjoyed its greatest success. Rather than positing this as a deficiency in comparison to European nationalism, as Tibi and Daweesha do, one might as well acknowledge that Arab nationalism’s main potency as an ideology was its resistance to external intervention in line with other non-aligned movements during the Cold War (Ginat 2005; Gani 2014; Sajed, 2019). Indeed, the mass legitimacy of Arab nationalism in its early phase was due to its appeal to both secular and religious movements in the region.

Thus while Tibi describes Husri as “the spiritual father of Arab nationalism,” while Dawisha depicts Arab unity as its foremost priority, and while it may well have been the case that the intellectual basis of Arab nationalism was originally an offshoot of a Eurocentric framework, such features receded when it came to political and popular mobilization. For all the romanticism and cultural references in Arab nationalist literature, the ideology’s principles, practical resonance and political realization has been manifested since its mobilization in the twentieth century as a struggle for political and economic autonomy from external (usually Western) domination. This was the case in the Arab revolt in 1920, the Syrian Uprising against the French in 1945, the 1956 Suez crisis, the failed wars of 1948 and 1967, and—with renewed purpose, albeit in corrupted form—in the current Syrian conflict.

While protests against colonial rule were widespread in Egypt during the interwar period, there is less evidence to suggest these reflected Arab nationalist grievances rather than a form of *Wataniyya* or statist patriotism. The oldest and most powerful

nationalist party in Egypt, the Wafd, concerned itself primarily with political wranglings within Egypt between themselves, the monarchy and the British forces (Gani, 2019).

It is in Syria that we find both popular and intellectual claims for autonomy and independence transcended national borders and were more closely aligned to *Qawmiyya*, a regional Arab identity as opposed to statism. Syrians' greater attachment to a transnational movement in comparison to interwar Egypt was affected in no small part by the colonial dismemberment of a historical union between (what became) Syria, Palestine, Lebanon and Jordan — the European mandates had had a deeper impact on Levantine political and territorial integrity, whereas Egypt's borders had remained largely intact. The deep aspiration for political autonomy was evident among diverse segments of Syrian society from an early stage, mobilizing the educated and urban classes (Gelvin 1997: 237; Gershoni and Jankowski 1997: 16), the ulema (Thomas, 2002), later the agricultural labourers (Seale 1988: 120), and eventually even the political and landed elite who provided patronage to anti-colonial agitation in the rural areas. A more diverse grassroots movement, who interpreted and actualized Arab nationalism in a way that was relevant to them in turn had an impact on the principles of the ideology. Intellectuals and ideologues who experienced their political awakening amidst the intense anti-colonial fervour of the 1930s and 1940s could hardly echo the lofty culturalist principles of their predecessors who eulogized the West and unwittingly justified European imperialism by lambasting their own people's backwardness. They could not afford to alienate the peasant classes who refused to supply the colonizers. Nor could they denigrate the religious classes in the same way when some of the most vociferous opposition to colonial rule came from the ulema and the mosques (Hariri, 2015). A coalition between these disparate forces was made possible through a prioritization of anti-colonialism and solidarity with fellow Arabs opposing colonial rule.

It was in such a context that Michel Aflaq and Salahaddin Bitar, two Syrian intellectuals, one a Christian and the other a Muslim, joined forces to form the Ba'th party in 1947, and after joining forces with Akram Hawrani's socialist party became the second-largest party in the Syrian Parliament in 1954. They argued that anti-colonialism was not merely an instrumental principle en route to Arab solidarity and

eventual unification; in fact in Syria, it came to be the reverse, that Arab solidarity was sought in order to close the door on external interference, and was most prized at times of opposition against an external power such as France, the US or Israel. Thus, the core principle, indeed the *raison d'être* of Arab nationalism, as it developed in Syria and as it was understood by the masses, was an opposition to Western hegemony and interference.

Aflaq and Bitar were not the only ones to pursue anti-hegemonism in Syria's nascent party politics; other groups emerged with affiliated goals, among whom was the aforementioned Arab Socialist Party. The socialist movement had been making inroads on the political scene throughout the 1930s, culminating in a formal party formed in 1945 by Akram Hawrani, a keen political activist from Hama (Hopwood 1988: 82–3). His agenda was opposed to “feudalist” Syrian landowners, and on several occasions was able to mobilize violent uprisings and mass demonstrations by the peasantry—an important factor in the politicization of Syria's grassroots rural communities, which also made Hawrani and the socialists valuable allies for the Arab nationalist movement (Seale 1988: 120). With Bitar and 'Aflaq's Ba'th party growing in popularity, and the gradual consolidation of their Arab nationalist ideas into a more concrete ideology, they joined forces with Hawrani in December 1952—a turning-point for Ba'thism and Syrian politics in general. With this coalition between what Seale described as, “perhaps the most astute and the most principled men in Syrian public life” (Seale 1988: 127), domestic grievances against the corrupt French-sponsored elites were seamlessly tethered to the Arab nationalist goals of resisting foreign domination. Thus, challenging inequality at home was seen as a means of resisting imperialists abroad.

Following this alliance, the Ba'th party was able to dominate Syrian politics and crucially, the Syrian military, which drew heavily from the lower economic classes (Hinnebusch and Zintl 2015: 24). On account of this consolidation, the Ba'th party announced its three core principles: 1) “Freedom from occupation; 2) Arab independence and unity; 3) socialism at home.” While independence, freedom from occupation and socialism at home have been accounted for so far, it is worth reflecting here on the role of Arab unity in the Ba'th manifesto. This principle of Arab unity has heavily influenced Aaded Dawisha's critique of Arab nationalism for failing to achieve its pan-Arab goals. However, while not unimportant, Arab unity was expressed more

as a political vision rather than a territorial one. Moreover, with the embedded reality of statism in the Middle East, pan-Arabism shifted from a core principle to a peripheral principle of Arab nationalism. This de-prioritization of territorial unity and cultural commonality behind anti-colonialism can be gleaned from the statement of Bitar and Aflaq, who, despite including unity in their fundamental principles, explained:

[W]e saw nationalism simply as a struggle between the nation and the colonizer ... In the country those who helped the foreigner were called traitors and those who opposed them nationalists.

The founders did later attach the notion of a cultural and intellectual “awakening” to their doctrine, but it was nevertheless instrumental to the struggle for autonomy and not insisted upon for its own sake, in contrast to the writings of their intellectual predecessors:

To be effective, the struggle against the colonizer had to involve a change of mind and of thought, a deepening of national consciousness and of moral standards.

(Aflaq, quote in Seale 1986: 149)

This is supported by the fact that even after brief pan-Arab unity failed with the break-up of the United Arab Republic between Syria and Egypt in 1961, the anti-imperialist character of the Syrian Ba’th party became even more strident. Syrian Arab nationalism did not decline due to the failure of Arab unity, but instead ushered in an even more radical Arab nationalist government in 1966. Moreover, the importance of a common Arab culture for the political agenda of the ideology remained ambiguous, reflected by the Ba’thist regime’s willingness to welcome non-Arab forces to its ideological cause.

As the early social movements had demonstrated in their actions, and as Aflaq and Bitar had emphasized in their writings, the primary cause of Arab nationalism in Syria was to target the European powers. Given the practical urgency of their agenda in the face of European colonization, it decidedly overtook the original target of the early intelligentsia who had focused their animosity on the Ottoman Turks. That initial political programme never succeeded as a widespread social movement before or after the disintegration of the Empire; even if one takes the example of the Arab revolt in 1916 prior to the establishment of an anti-colonial Arab nationalism, it is worth noting

that this was headed by Arab elites and only made possible by Britain's sponsorship motivated by its own vested, imperial interests.

## **After decolonization and Israel**

*"Arab nationalism is meaningless without its ultimate goal of Arab unity."* (Dawisha 2003: 12).

As the quotation above indicates, Dawisha does not sufficiently account for the potency of anti-colonialism in Arab nationalist ideology, focusing rather on its failure to deliver pan-Arab unity. Arab nationalism is thus judged as deficient for not matching up to criteria that in practice had shifted from a core to a peripheral principle in the Arab nationalist project for much of the last century. Meanwhile, Tibi recognizes the anti-hegemonic character of Arab nationalism, and yet places greatest focus on the influence of the intellectual writings of European nationalists and their Arab "cousins"; considering the heavy cultural emphasis of the latter, and the republican associations of the European nationalists, it is no wonder that Tibi asserts the "death" and obsolescence of Arab nationalism in the contemporary Middle East. If it is not considered obsolete, then at best it has been viewed as a distinct "eastern" brand of nationalism, manifesting illiberal and reactionary traits due to "backwardness" before eventually arriving at its goal of emulating the West (Plamenatz 1976: 23–6, cited in Choueiri 2000: 10).

Dawn challenges the above accounts by pointing out, "there probably is no nationalism that fits the common model." (2000: 58). This is an apt observation; he prefers to expand the perimeters of nationalism altogether than to suggest Arab nationalism does not fit or has failed. I offer an alternative counter-argument. Having distilled the main objectives of Arab nationalism in praxis, it is more logical to group it with non-Western decolonizing, Third World movements, whose intellectual basis lies in the works of Marcus Garvey, Frantz Fanon and other postcolonial scholars, who propose anti-colonialism and indeed revolution as core ideological goals (Fanon 1961, 166–99; Said 2000). Viewing Arab nationalism in the twentieth century from this perspective unshackles it from comparisons with Western national histories, varied though they may be; as such, it is more useful to define the ideology as Arab anti-imperialism than Arab nationalism. Furthermore, by paying greater attention to Arab nationalism's core principle of freedom from the influence of external hegemonic

forces, it is possible to argue that the ideology continued to be relevant and influential in the regional context far longer than it has been given credit for (Seale 1988; Ginat 2005; Gani 2014).

Arab nationalist movements in different states, from a multitude of classes and religious backgrounds, arguably succeeded in the single most important goal around which the ideology was publicly mobilized in the first place: ousting European occupying forces from Arab territory. Syria achieved independence in 1946, Lebanon in 1943, Egypt in 1952 (after nominal but not effectual independence in 1922). Of course, these victories were not only due to Arab nationalist contention. But archival evidence of British, French and American exasperation with the daily, relentless, emboldened and increasingly aggressive protests and attacks against Western forces, demonstrate the direct negative impact such activities were having on Western appetite to remain in Arab lands.

Thus, Arab nationalism, as a coalition of anti-colonial social movements, succeeded in their goal of official political autonomy, an achievement given short shrift by many scholars of Arab nationalism. But even so, the question remains: if anti-colonialism was, in practice, the *raison d'être* of Arab nationalism, could it retain any relevance after formal decolonization? Even prior to the current Syrian conflict, there are two notable factors explaining why it could and did remain relevant.

The first factor is Israel. Zionism as an ideology, and later Israel as a direct neighbour, joined the ranks of Arab nationalism's opponents in the early twentieth century. Regardless of Zionism's internal nuances (Shanin 1988: 222–55), Arab nationalists viewed Zionism as a wholesale extension of European colonialism. Jerusalem, with its religious significance and once again seen as the prize to be wrestled from the control of modern-day "crusaders," injected even greater urgency and justification for the Arab nationalist cause. The historical comparisons produced an enduring hostility, expressed initially towards Israel's very existence, later towards its policies and interests.

The later opposition towards the US and its Middle East policies is a less straightforward anti-colonial stance: the US had always castigated the European powers for their colonial exploits in the region, and until the 2003 Iraq war, the US had never

directly occupied Arab land. However, US support for Israel and persistent interference in Middle East politics, not least the two Iraq wars, rendered the US as “neo-colonialists.” Ba’thism’s affiliation with socialism, in particular, provided it with yet a further rationale for Syria to oppose the US and its strategic-economic policies even after formal decolonization, and particularly during the Cold War.

Scholars have used persistent and dramatic Arab failures when confronting Israel, most notably in 1948 and 1967, to argue for the failure of Arab nationalism as a whole. Moreover, they have argued that such unequivocal defeats irrevocably undermined the credibility and potency of Arab nationalism, such that it never really recovered. If proof was needed, the actions of Egypt, the so-called leader of the Arab nationalist movement, seemed to provide it. Nasser’s much-lauded leadership qualities were rendered futile in the face of Israeli military power and prowess, his promises to defend the Arabs laid bare as empty rhetoric. If this realization was not traumatic enough for the Arab nationalist movement, his successor Anwar Sadat defected from the cause, signing a peace treaty with Israel in 1979, leaving them supposedly leaderless and without purpose. Jordan, always lukewarm in its commitment to “resistance,” took this opportunity to gradually soften relations with Israel, while the Gulf States ebbed and flowed based on their economic and diplomatic interests. Egypt’s about-turn after 1973, argued Ajami, marked the death-knell of Arab nationalism (Ajami 1978).

There is no doubt that these events were a major blow to the Arab nationalist movement, but very often such analyses overlook the trajectory of Syria, and its continued adherence to the ideology. The Syrian regime’s disillusionment in 1979 was matched by its fury with its Egyptian (now former) partners. These “failures,” rather than dilute Syria’s ideological commitment, appeared to spur them on with greater defiance. The loss of one regional ally from the Arab nationalist cause meant a search for new allies; in that same year, with the revolution in Iran, Syria found one.

## **Syria, Islamist allies and relevance today**

To understand why Syria, a secular Arab nationalist state, was able to forge such a close relationship with Iran, a non-Arab, Islamist state, one cannot look to unifying cultural facets, which in this case are very different. Geopolitical pragmatism provides some of the explanation (Goodarzi, 2006), but we also cannot overlook their shared and

overlapping ideological principles. Both regimes claimed to have built their foreign policies upon the principle of anti-imperialism, shaped by their experiences of direct or neo-colonialism by the French or British, and external interference by the United States. Both cited Israel and the US as their enemies, and targeted “reactionary” conservative Arab monarchies for criticism. Despite the Ba’thist regime’s avowal of secularism, and the religious character of the Iranian regime, this divergence did not obstruct the alliance, and still does not. This suggests the importance of secularism to Syria’s operationalization of Arab nationalism is contingent and at times peripheral.

Thus, at home, Islamists were not tolerated by the Syrian regime and instead were viewed as treacherous fifth columnists with whom they vied for power (Slackman 2006). But on the regional level, we see quite a different picture emerging. Syrian support, and indeed its ideological position, has historically helped to sustain the activities of regional Islamists. The points of correlation that do not suffice at home (such as anti-hegemonism and a transnational regional loyalty) form a unified and representative front in the international context. As is the case with Iran, Hizbollah and Hamas in their conflict with Israel correspond entirely with the political mandate of Ba’thist ideology. For the Palestinian militant group Hamas, this was demonstrated clearly in the conflict between Hamas and Israel in the Gaza strip, between 26 December 2008– 20 January 2009. Syria was singularly outspoken among the Arab states in its unequivocal denunciation of Israel as the aggressor in the conflict. Bashar al-Asad used his meetings with the then French President, Nicholas Sarkozy, UK Foreign Secretary David Milliband and UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon as a platform to highlight Israeli culpability in the affair, differing markedly from the neutral overtures of his Arab counterparts. Khalid Meshaal, Hamas’ political leader in exile, spoke openly and unequivocally of their “defiance” of Israel from his base in Damascus. Such an association between Syria and Hamas was made deliberately obvious; in turn, the then US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, pointedly did not visit Damascus on her diplomatic mission to the region during the conflict, despite Syria’s key involvement in regional affairs. By the next Gaza war in 2014, Syria was embroiled in its own devastating war and played little role in the political theatre of the Israel–Hamas dispute. But after a brief estrangement, and despite the intense vilification of Islamists at home, Syria and Hamas tentatively renewed ties in late 2017 under the common goal of maintaining an “axis of resistance” in the region. The

alliance between Hamas and Syria is particularly interesting because it cuts across the sectarian lines that dominate Middle East alliances and enmities. A more prominent and uncomplicated example of Syria's support for anti-Israeli Islamists would be its strong and consistent alliance with Hizbollah, the Lebanese militia-turned political party, closely affiliated with Iran.

In these ways, the anti-colonialism of Arab nationalism that played such a central role in mobilizing vast swathes of Arab populations in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s is still remnant, both in an official capacity with the foreign policies of the Syrian regime, and via popular sentiment. Of course, one may well question the Syrian government's opposition to Western intervention, while simultaneously inviting Russian and Iranian presence in the country, which seems to make a mockery of the regime's fierce protection of sovereignty. But even so, it is worth remembering that it is Western intervention, not Russian activity, that helped form Syrian Arab nationalist identity and has historically been a subversive force against the interests and policies of the Syrian government.

Before closing, it is worth making a distinction between Arab nationalism and Arabism; whereas the former is an ideology, the latter is not, but rather it relates to the promotion of all the cultural facets shared and expressed within Arab identity without political aims. Thus, Arabism is widespread—Arabic and Arab film, music and literature, for example, are all very popular and are shared across the region (Phillips 2012). However, if they are then harnessed for a specific political agenda, it is more often than not because they connect to anti-colonial sentiments parallel to a political, and not a culturalist, ideological vision. In fact, Arab nationalist rhetoric and activities over decades in the political realm can be attributed with reinforcing a strong Arabist identity across the region, thus—returning to our earlier discussion—the politics has shaped culture rather than the other way around. Due to its powers of mobilization, this Arabism has been co-opted by Islamists such as the Muslim Brotherhood (Gani, 2019) and Hamas, despite their claims to oppose *'Asabiyya* and nationalism. Thus while such groups argue that their transnational goals are motivated by a sense of community with the Muslim Ummah, in reality their vision, contentions, activism and networks are by and large limited to the Arab Muslim world, with relatively little sustained interest in the non-Arab Muslim world that constitutes the majority of the so-called Ummah. If

anything, this is even more apparent among the Arab-Islamist diaspora outside of the Middle East region, thus demonstrating that their nationalist outlook is not simply defined by geographical proximity and practicalities but reflects a deeper, constitutive ideological influence. In these less tangible ways, one can see the continued pervasive influence of Arab nationalism, even if some of the flagship goals such as pan-Arab unity have not been achieved. This warrants a more nuanced reading of the principles of Arab nationalism and measurements of its success, and a recognition of the continued role that states such as Syria and its allies play in maintaining the ideology's influence in regional and world politics long after the death of Nasser and the “defection” of Egypt.

## **Conclusion**

I have argued in this chapter that Arab nationalism has, in praxis, since the break-up of the Ottoman Empire, had the greatest salience as an anti-colonial, anti-hegemonic ideology juxtaposed against external forces. While the early philosophy of Arab nationalism fit within a rubric of European nationalism, defining and evaluating the ideology by the goals of the early intellectual movement fails to take account of the shift in core and peripheral principles once the ideology was operationalized by a much broader social base. Those core principles emerged as political autonomy from global hegemonic and external influence, and freedom from occupation or imperialism—be it military, economic or political. The core goals were no longer defined by cultural renaissance or pan-Arab unity as assumed in numerous Anglophone academic works.

This is borne out by the observation that, historically, if a non-Arab or non-nationalist actor supported these core principles, Arab nationalists willingly lent support and forged a strong alliance with that actor, often stronger than alliances with their Arab counterparts; this has been the case with Iran, Hamas and Hizbollah. In the same vein, if an Arab (and indeed Arab nationalist) state contravened these principles, Arab nationalist actors, such as Ba’thist Syria, were not shy to express their opposition to those states—as seen from Syria’s animosity with Egypt after its truce with Israel in 1979, its resentment of the Arab League, and disputes with Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. Since the core goals of Arab nationalism were not based on cultural identity, this was not a contradiction of ideology.

Arab nationalists' claims to salience have historically been carried along two paths: one cultural, the other political. The early intellectual movement gave substance and weight to the cultural project; but an inextricable connection between Arab and Islamic culture due to the region's political history, and the obvious secularism—and indeed Westernized outlook—of the intellectual movement, meant that Arab nationalist attempts to gain legitimacy on such grounds historically proved less than fruitful except among sections of the elite. The political route, on the other hand, focusing not on domestic civil liberties but on freedom from occupation, fared much better as an inclusive umbrella movement; on a practical level, this allowed the movement to avoid drawing attention to its secular foundations, and opened the door for significant levels of co-operation between it and Islamist groups on international and regional issues.

That relationship between Arab nationalism and Islamism in the Middle East is more complex than is superficially assumed (Gerges, 2018). Syria's Ba'athist movement has flitted between co-operation, coexistence or animosity vis a vis its Islamist rivals, a pattern of behaviour that can be explained through their mutual search for popular legitimacy at home, and a convergence in anti-imperialist "resistance" abroad.

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