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Combination beyond ideational diffusion: origins and vectors of Bahrain's Arab nationalism through uneven and combined development

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Abstract *One cannot easily situate the Gulf Arab states homogeneously within the literature on Arab nationalism in the scholarship of the International Relations of the Middle East (IRME). Despite the recent historiography of 'other histories' of Arab nationalism in the Gulf, the extant research on the international relations of the Gulf has rarely theoretically interrogated how Arab nationalism derived from and evolved through the progression of rentier economy in the Gulf under British Colonialism as a peculiar historical process of late-capitalist social formation. To advance such a theoretical endeavour, this paper applies the concept of uneven and combined development (UCD) to the case of Bahrain under British colonialism. It argues that combined capitalist development in the Gulf under British colonialism fully activated Arab nationalism through the social mechanism of oil commodification. This historical process of combination created a vector for Bahrain's early capitalist development and generated changing class relations and internal contradictions associated with the origins of Bahrain's Arab nationalism. Most importantly, 'combination' transformed an early diffused national consciousness in the era of al-Nahda into a nationalist ideology in modern times, of which its agenda presents Bahrain's peculiar experience among other non-peculiar cases in the Middle East.*

Introduction

The values of 'other histories' in the Middle East has been recently reappraised and revived through more critical approaches such as Marxism, postcolonialism, and feminism. This trend has signalled a necessary yet open-ended 'paradigm shift'. It rectifies the Eurocentric view commonly imposed on Middle Eastern politics and resituates the region in a broader international context. If 'other histories' are to, in part, de-essentialise the region, they need to consider discussions of Arab nationalism in the Gulf. Yet, having seen both scepticism and optimism deriving from the Abraham Accords in September 2020 – the US Trump administration-led normalisation and peace

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agreement between Israel, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates – one cannot help recollecting how liberal scholars championed the end of Arab nationalism (Ajami 1978; Dawisha 1990), and how constructivism in the scholarship of International Relations of the Middle East (IRME), which views Arab nationalism as a declining regional norm vis-à-vis the universalised sovereignty norm, has gained traction.¹ In comparison with other oft cited and well-researched cases such as Palestine, Egypt, Syria and Iraq, one cannot easily situate the Gulf Arab states homogenously within the literature of Arab nationalism in IRME. The extant scholarship on the international relations of the Gulf has not theoretically interrogated how Arab nationalism derived from and evolved through the progression of the rentier economy in the Gulf under British Colonialism has a peculiar historical process of late-capitalist social formation. As such, this paper asks, to echo Fred Lawson's reflection on the scholarship of International Relations of the Gulf (Lawson 2009), what has prevented the Gulf from contributing its empirical richness to this broader critical international relations theoretical discussion? And what explains the provenance and evolution of Arab nationalism in the colonial-rentier Gulf?

This paper argues that constructivism in IRME has cast a shadow on the Gulf Arab states. It has generated the unintended consequence of conceptual ambiguity through what I term 'internalism concealed within "the international"'. The correspondence between Rentier State Theory (RST) and constructivism therefore fails to situate Arab nationalism in a broader international context.² To offer an alternative, the paper suggests applies the concept of Uneven and Combined Development (UCD), which is theorised in the discipline of international historical sociology, to the case of Bahrain to explain the development of Arab nationalism in the colonial-rentier Gulf under British colonialism in the early twentieth century. This case selection decision does not intend to uncover new historical data or solve a particular empirical puzzle within the literature on Bahrain. Instead, it is a decision to follow two recent threads that reflect on 'Gulf exceptionalism'. The paper seeks, first, to resituate the Gulf in a global context beyond the internal logic of RST and de-essentialise an image of Gulf politics defined by geo-sectarian identity conflict (Hanieh 2011, 2015, 2018; Khallili 2020), and, second, to shed an alternative light on the case of Bahrain through a nuanced theoretical discussion of the historiography of Bahrain. Informed by UCD, the paper further argues that combined capitalist formation transformed Bahrain's early Arab nationalist ideas from a diffused national consciousness into a fully activated modern nationalist ideology. This transformation took off at the critical historical juncture of oil commodification and modernisation under British colonial tutelage. The paper suggests that UCD accurately encapsulates this conjuncture of

¹ The term constructivism in this paper refers to a moderate, or conventional, version of constructivism in IR that distinguishes its theoretical, epistemological and methodological nuances from 'critical' constructivism, see Ted Hopf (1998).

² Rentier State Theory derived in the early 1970s as a political economy theory to explain the impacts of externally generated rents, such as exporting hydrocarbon in exchange of capital, on Gulf politics in modern times. It has been widely adopted by scholars investigating state-society relations within Gulf Arab states, especially how the regimes offer little political concessions to civil society while they keep their grip on rent distribution. For the genealogy and relevant debates on RST over time, see Matthew Gray (2011).

transformation, mainly through the analytical properties of *combination*:³ a concept that anatomises the ‘social’ mechanism fully activated through commodification to amalgamate different modes of projection (Allinson and Anievas 2009). In the case of Bahrain, the mechanism specifically refers to oil commodification. Not only did it result in changing and contradictory class relations, but it also entailed a civil society-led historical process of turning national consciousness into nationalist ideology, contesting British colonialism, and mobilising labour movements. As a result, the mechanism created vectors for Bahrain’s combined development since the 1920s and, correspondingly, for how Bahrain’s Arab nationalism evolved and set the stage for the revolutionary era in the 1950s and the 1960s, highlighting the ‘peculiarities of the non-peculiar’, in UCD terms, of Bahrain’s historical experience.

This paper proceeds in four steps. First, I present the existing literature that portrays Arab nationalism’s origins and evolution as a response to internal and external dynamics. While most conceptual discussions draw on other cases of Arab states and the recent historiography of Arab nationalism in the Gulf, the conceptual discussion in IRME has not kept up with these scholarly endeavours. I explain the reason why and how the Gulf is otherwise understood through constructivism and the problem of ‘internalism concealed within ‘the international’’ in IRME. Second, I present the premises of UCD and elucidate the rationale of demystifying the ‘diffused culture’ of Arab nationalism through UCD. In turn, for the third step, I take up UCD as a distinctive method (Rosenberg 2016, 28–9) and expound its intrinsic theoretical properties of a ‘whip of external necessity’ and the ‘privilege of historic backwardness’ to analyse Bahrain’s historical experience of combined development, particularly the transition from a tributary relation to a combined capitalist one. I emphasise the historical moment of oil commodification and the resultant changing class relations and internal contradictions that are associated with the origins of Arab nationalism in Bahrain. In the final section, I discuss how, due to Bahrain’s combined development through British colonialism, the idea of opposing ethno-sectarian divides and labour activism signifies Bahrain’s ‘peculiarity among other non-peculiar’ case of Arab nationalism in the Middle East.

Arab nationalism and ‘internalism concealed within ‘the international’’

The scholarship has gone through various phases of exploring historical and conceptual questions about Arab nationalism. From a textualist presentation in the 1950s and 1960s to a sociologically informed historical investigation in the 1970s onwards, the historical narrative of Arab nationalism has transcended primordialist accounts of the prior existence of nationalism (Gershoni and Jankowski 1997). It narrates a general trend of Arab nationalism emerging as a diffused cultural renaissance, *the al-Nahda*, in the Arab world, as a response to the escalating European encroachment of colonial ideological, institutional, military and economic influence from the late nineteenth century onwards.

³ Throughout this paper, combination is italicised to refer to it as an analytical concept.

It is well-established that the early formation of Arab nationalism was associated with the *al-Nahda*. The subsequent evolution of Arab nationalism in the twentieth century corresponded with the dynamics of realpolitik within and beyond state boundaries and even more so to struggles between colonial powers, the state, and civil society. Arab nationalism, as Jasmine Gani (2020, 282) rightly points out, ‘in praxis... had the greatest salience as an anti-colonial, anti-hegemonic ideology juxtaposed against external forces... [its goals] were no longer defined by cultural renaissance of pan-Arab unity as assumed in numerous Anglophone academic works’. The socio-political historiography is enriched through individual case studies that explore Arab nationalism’s formation through the rise of a new middle class and working class in the urban areas in the heyday of pan-Arabist movements during ‘the Arab cold war’ (Kerr 1965; Beinín and Lockman 1988; Jankowski 2002; Lesch 2019; Gervasio 2020). In IRME, various theoretical lenses are also used to conceptualise Arab nationalism’s responses to both internal and external dynamics in a broader international context through, for example, an eclecticist approach to Arab nationalism as a supra-state identity (Hinnebusch 2003); constructivist informed historical sociology of the role of Arab nationalism in Syrian-US relations (Gani 2014); a Mannheimian-Gramscian analysis of Arab nationalism, intersecting with Egyptian intellectuals of diverse ideological currents, in Egypt’s foreign policy and the ‘Camp David Consensus’ (Stein 2011, 2012); a postcolonial interrogation of local actors’ agency and contestation of Egypt’s Arab nationalist commitments in foreign policy (Abou-El-Fadl 2019); and a Gramscian-Fanonian view of Nasserist anti-colonial nationalism as a hegemonic project in modern Egypt (Salem 2020). These scholarly attempts have addressed Gershoni’s earlier critiques of the scholarship of Arab nationalism as lacking a comprehensive and integrated picture of the history of nationalism in the modernist endeavour (Gershoni 1997, 25). They have also, by bridging sociological concepts and historical details, found a way out from an impasse in the open-ended debate on nationalism that ‘an array of *general* theories is offset against a mass of *individual* accounts with relatively little interaction between the two’ (Halliday 1997, 26–7). But why have these theoretical endeavours not sufficiently been applied to the Gulf, despite being undertaken in the relevant countries?

The most commonly seen understanding of Arab nationalism in the Gulf is that these newly formed Arab states in the 1970s have no nationalist history, not least ‘born out of a struggle for national self-determination’ (Partrick 2009). The recent historiography of Arab nationalism in Bahrain and the Gulf has nonetheless proven that such an understanding is inaccurate by bringing ‘other histories’ back in. Omar Al-Shehabi (2013, 2017a, 2019) historicises the *longue durée* of Arab nationalism’s origins and evolution, offering rich ethnographic research on the intellectual history of contested modern Bahrain. Abel Razzaq Takriti (2013, 2018, 2020) sheds light on the radical transformation of Arab nationalism during the Dhofar revolution, the emergence of Kuwait’s Arab nationalism through the case of Ahmad al-Khatib, and the transnational features of Arab nationalist-left struggle in the Gulf. Talal Al-Rashoud (2017) examines the role of modern education in producing Kuwait’s Arab nationalist identity. Most recently, Wafa Alsayed takes on a historically and sociologically informed constructivist approach, disentangling the complexity of pan-Arabist

identity in Kuwait's history and foreign policy (Alsayed 2022). However, the theoretical discussion of Arab nationalism in the Gulf has rarely progressed alike to reflect on these fruitful historical research findings.

Such stagnated theoretical endeavour, I argue, is mainly because of a moderate version of constructivism, exemplified by Michael Barnett's work (1998) (corresponding to Ajami's liberal thesis (1978) of 'the end of Arab nationalism') uncritically applied to the Gulf. It brings about an unintended consequence of conceptual ambiguity in understanding Arab nationalism in a wider international context and generates a problem of what I call 'internalism concealed within "the international"', which is created by the correspondence between RST and constructivism. For Barnett, Arab nationalism is conceptualised as the analytically interchangeable and socially constructed term 'Arabism', representing a political and ideological aspiration to confront modernity; as a 'cultural storehouse', Arabism's ideational incompatibility with modern sovereignty norms sets out different world views and rules for Arab states in the international arena, either dictating Arab state leaders' 'dialogues' or leading to their divergent behaviours (Barnett 1998). Since the 'storehouse' is inherently ambiguous, it has 'a decided virtue that allows for multiple meanings and therefore conflicting interests' (Barnett 1998, 55). This ambiguity remains untheorised in Barnett's 'dialogues model' and underlies his approach to Arab nationalism in the international relations of the Gulf. He takes 'the international' as a separate domain dictating state actors and leaves what Arab nationalism might entail to a regime's arbitrary will. Such ambiguity, wittingly or not, is derived from a conceptually tangled view of the provenance and evolution of Arab nationalism in the Gulf. On the one hand, this tangled view conceives Arab nationalism as an idea primarily representing regimes' political will, resonating with the assumption of rentier-generated regime ultimate autonomy in RST. On the other hand, it sees Arab nationalism as a parochial norm diffusing across the Arab world, overlooking the international characteristics of Arab nationalism. This conceptual ambiguity has generated a general claim that Arab nationalism is *merely* a parochial identity being part and parcel of a diffused normative cultural structure. It has also produced a resultant epistemic fallacy of conceiving Arab nationalism as a 'momentarily fixed identity' (Stein 2011, 739), a 'timeless and continuous culture' (Halliday 2005, 198), and a variable in political science terms and an item on the 'menu of choice' at state leaders' disposal (Telhami and Barnett 2002, 14–6). In other words, an internal logic of overweighing regime autonomy in explaining ideas is 'concealed' within a framework that conceptualises Arab nationalism as a set of ideas diffused through ambiguous, endogenous, and enclosed cultural contexts. Arab nationalism's response to wider socio-political dynamics remains a conundrum in the discussion of Arab nationalism in the Gulf within IRME that leaves no room for 'other histories'. Under the shadow of constructivism in IRME, the problem of 'internalism concealed within "the international"' prevents the theoretical discussion of Arab nationalism in the Gulf from offering an alternatively viable framework to capture historical particularities and internationalities of 'other histories' of Arab nationalism in the Gulf.

The solution to the problem, suggests the paper, lies in conceptually re-grounding Arab nationalism in a historical sociological framework, which enables us to recapture the historical particularities of Arab nationalism in the

Gulf in an international context. More importantly, beyond the moderate constructivist informed thesis of ideational diffusion, this framework would allow us to explain the social mechanism within society that corresponds to international dynamics. This theoretical solution is international historical sociology of UCD.

Re-theorising Arab nationalism in UCD: combination beyond diffusion

In the past decade, UCD has repositioned IR and interrogated the division of labour in modern disciplines that fractures the social totality of human development in ‘the lost history of international relations’ (Rosenberg 1996). Taking a point of departure from his critiques of internalism of classical social theory, Justin Rosenberg’s seminal article, entitled ‘Why Is There No International Historical Sociology?’ (2006), substantiates and theorises his ‘international imagination’ (1994) by theorising what Leon Trotsky called ‘the universal law of uneven’ and its deriving law of combined development (Trotsky 2000[1930], 3). Rosenberg’s theorisation of ‘the international’ is ‘to grasp *the rise, the components, the shape* of the specifically modern international system as a definite, historically developing set of relations between people’ (1994, 98 emphasis in original). A set of interdependent relations, ‘not just of events but also of the structure of social, material and cultural life’ (Rosenberg 2006, 324), reveals its intrinsic nature of social multiplicity and deriving effects of multi-linear socio-historical change through a dialectical inter-societal logic (Rosenberg 2021). The inter-societal logic is contained within a set of three interrelated key concepts found in Trotsky’s original thoughts: *uneven*, *combined* and *development*. These concepts capture historical facts: different levels and stages of human development across social sites (unevenness), various social sites’ coexistence and interaction with each other in one way or another through multiple social instances—for example, ideas, capitals, and migration (combination)—and therefore co-constitute pivotal driving forces of open-ended historical change at any given time (development). Even though a series of comradely debates on the trans-historicity of UCD is unsettling (Rosenberg 2013, 2021; Davidson 2009; Ashman 2009; Allinson and Anievas 2009, 2010; Anievas and Nişancıoğlu 2015; Allinson 2016), UCD scholars hardly disagree that, in the capitalist epoch, the notion of unevenness moves beyond its primitive geographical and ecological variations by acquiring ‘a sharpness owing to the universalis[ing] logics of capital expressed through competitive pressures, leading to an inter-societal process of comparison’ (Evans 2016, 1063). The law of uneven development does not replace nor abolish the law of world economy but, as Trotsky reminds us, crystallises *peculiarities* of a national social type; in other words, ‘*national peculiarity is nothing else but the most general product of the unevenness of historical development*’ (Trotsky 1970[1930], 148 emphasis in original).

In demystifying the ‘diffused culture’ of Arab nationalism through UCD, the concept of *combination* is the foremost one, enabling a historically specific explanation of combination as a social mechanism setting out such coexistence and amalgamated modes of production in motion through ‘the international’. For oil-producing Gulf Arab states, none of the productive forces across all classes deriving from combination could ever crush each other as Nazih Ayubi

once reminds us (1995). As this paper proceeds with a historical investigation of Bahrain, combination was realised in oil commodification, meddled with by the British colonial intervention, and generated a distinctive configuration and dynamic equilibrium of state-society and class relations. 'Owing to the lack of class hegemony', as Ayubi further argues, 'politics in such a society [of oil-producing Gulf states] is not characterised by an orderly process of aggregating demands but by *acts of capturing the state and acts of resisting the state*' (1995, 25). As a result, no single class ever forged Arab nationalism, but a national collective will alongside political struggles on the periphery: struggles, in Gramsci's terms, between hegemony and counter-hegemony. And this historical episode of Arab nationalist struggles against the regime's political will has never been under the radar of IRME. A few concepts associated with the premises of UCD such as the whip of external necessity and the privilege of historical backwardness that provide analytical toolkits will be discussed when the paper shows how the embodiment of 'the international' in Bahrain is captured through both capitalist and geopolitical dynamics.

The abstract idea certainly needs more historical evidence to support it and to give rise to the concrete (Marx and Miers 2015, 34). And historical specificity shot through UCD 'requires the empirical identification not only of a particular social formation itself but also of the shifting configurations formed at any moment by its coexistence with others' (Rosenberg 2016, 29). As an example of a 'necessary encounter' between Marxism and IR (Halliday 1994, 47–73), Fred Halliday's early work, *Arabia without Sultans* (2002[1974]), once identified the nature of uneven and combined development in modern Gulf politics. The Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf Region, for Halliday, came into being as the scene of intense development, acquiring enormous strategic importance for world capitalism and witnessing a complex set of socio-political dynamics as a sharp example of 'the Marxist law of combined and uneven development: capitalism unifies the world into a single market and into a system of political dominations; yet, the different sub-sections of this world system remain *distinct*' (2002[1974], 31–2).

Distinctiveness, or peculiarity, is a result of intensified global capitalism through combination as shown in the case of Bahrain's combined development that follows.

Bahrain's combined development: the 'whip', changing class relations and contradictions

I argue *combination* helps re-interrogate the social origins and evolution of Bahrain's Arab nationalism that remain conceptually ambiguous in IRME constructivism. Combination plays a vector role in Bahrain's social transformation, including leading to changing class relations and redefining state-society relations, and thereby revealing profound internal contradictions in the historical process as conditions for the rise of Arab nationalism. As such, *combination* helps us better conceptually unpack the social mechanisms that activated Bahrain's Arab nationalism and transformed national consciousness into a modern political ideology beyond identity, norms, or diffused culture. In turn, *combination* leads us to a discussion on the resulting contradictions, intrinsic to combined capitalist social formation and corresponding to the evolution of

Arab nationalism, that underlie nationalist ideologies and demonstrate themselves in physical and violent ways, especially when geopolitics experienced a 'cataclysm' on the international scale, for example, in the first three decades of the twentieth century (Anievas 2015a). As will be discussed later, Bahrain was dragged into an imperial competition during the British colonial phase and mobilised to extract resources needed for British colonialist geopolitical and capitalist interests. Bahrain's 'national' context within the matrix of colonialist competition and under British colonialist tutelage became a 'point of arrival within the international conditioning of capitalist expansion' (Morton 2007, 615). British colonial rule played a crucial role in linking Bahraini social formation to 'the international' and kicking off a process of uneven and combined development that generated antagonism around the origins and evolution of Arab nationalism.

From unevenness to combination under the 'whip' of colonial competition

From the sixteenth century to the nineteenth century, the tributary mode of production, as the predominant social relation, revealed the unevenness between itself and capitalism in Europe. Through the trading network between the Indian Ocean and Europe, the tributary mode of production was practised through a concrete form of speculative trade (*mudarabah*), upon which the ties of tribal regimes and merchants, or traders, were built through protection fees (*Khuwa*): the regimes offered military protection to the merchants and other inhabitants of coastal towns as well as subjugating them to their absolute authority (Al-Naqeeb 1990, 6–15). Such a social relation/mode of production, as Khaldoun Hasan Al-Naqeeb argues, lasted for at least two centuries until the British grand imperial design in the nineteenth century was employed in the Gulf area. Imperial supremacy was realised by subjugating speculative trade 'to the complete control of commercial agencies, and the ruling [tribal] families to protectorate treaties'. Imperial subjugation eliminated 'the seasonal impact of [speculative trade]' and 'in the end destroy[ed] local, long-distance mercantile fleets' (1990, 27). At this point, British imperial interests were mainly driven by strategic motives rather than economic ones. The empire's primary concern was how 'to establish a *cordon sanitaire* around British India', and thus most places in the Gulf area, except the ports of Aden and Muscat, could preserve their social relations to a certain extent (Onley 2005, 42–3). Though the General Treaty of Peach with the Al-Khalifa in Bahrain, among others, was signed in 1820 (Commins 2012, 78), British colonial intervention into Bahrain's internal affairs was quite late, not until 1900. The forward policy of the British Viceroy of India was employed in Bahrain amidst Britain's competition with other European powers in the Gulf and Indian ocean (Al-Shehabi 2017b, 2–3). As the Government of India granted British political agents in Bahrain more powers, the forward policy was followed by advanced British penetration into Bahraini affairs, after the First World War, through modernisation starting in the 1920s (Al-Naqeeb 1990, 27). At the turn of the twentieth century, Bahrain was gradually integrated 'into the sphere of informal empire as an overseas imperial territory and laid the foundations for the establishment of the new administration', which then supported the British Mandate in Iraq. After 1919, this was through 'instructions to seek the amelioration of local

government and to turn public opinion in favour of British rule' (Fuccaro 2009, 116). The colonial enforcement by British political agents, as historian Nelida Fuccaro argues, was driven by their aim for a 'civilising mission of empire as a process of regeneration of state and society'. Despite the process being opposed by some tribal leaders in Bahrain who saw it as 'the imposition of a colonial regime' and raising uncertainty within the colonial government for its rule, it was ready to wheel through reforms under the British tutelage once the historic moment arrived (2009, 117–9). Around the corner was the historical conjuncture at which social and political instances of existing tributary relations in Bahrain were about to be reconstituted. From this point onwards, Bahrain began its combined social formation with an increasingly dominant capitalist mode of production 'whipped' by British colonialism. The 'whip of external necessity' then effected an internal change in Bahrain.

In light of UCD, this is a historical conjuncture of combination at which a pre-capitalist relation was then dominated, but not destroyed, by capitalism and to which 'the international' gave incentives to 'different constellations of social forces [that] gave rise to different forms of social transformation' (Shilliam 2004, 63). As 'the external necessity' of geopolitical competition inevitably whipped Bahrain's capitalist development, the sense of 'backwardness' then entailed Bahrain's objective of catching up. As a late-developing capitalist society, Bahrain was given the "privilege" of adopting cutting-edge ideas, practices, and technologies from 'advanced' British colonialism (Anievas 2015b, 846), shaping the philosophy of progress. As such, in Tom Nairn's analysis of peripheral elites' self-determination and nationalist projects, Bahraini elites were given what Trotsky calls the 'privilege of historic backwardness' that permitted, or compelled, 'the adoption of whatever is ready in advance of any specific date, skipping a whole series of intermediate stages (Trotsky 2000[1930], 2). As a capitalistic periphery, Bahrain's capitalist development then led 'necessarily to a peculiar combination of different stages in the historical process' and acquired 'a planless, complex, combined character' (Trotsky 2000[1930], 2–3). From the late nineteenth century onward, while capitalism 'spread remorselessly over the world to unify human society into one more or less connected story for the first time', it also brought about the inevitable result of not just uneven development but also combined development of capitalist formations in peripheral areas like Bahrain: 'a perilous and convulsive new fragmentation of that society' (Nairn 1975, 12). This fragmentation is not abstract but concrete, while also being seen along with the emergence of reassembled social forces in new amalgamated social relations, corresponding to changes in the mode of production. More often antagonistic than not, as seen in the case of Bahrain, these forces derived Arab nationalism on the soil already economically exploited and politically dominated by colonial powers. As a result, Arab nationalism in Bahrain was also 'the so[c]io-historical cost of this rapid implantation of capitalism' (Nairn 1975, 12). While shaping an 'awareness of the European danger', it nonetheless attempted to imitate British progressivism but resist British colonialism (Amin 1976, 300). At this conjuncture, 'the political' and 'the social' instances in Bahrain were reconstituted along with *combination*, setting the historical conditions and compelling the process of social transformation under 'the whip of external necessity' and through 'the privilege of historical backwardness'.

Following the collapse of the pearling industry in 1929, oil commodification gave substantive content to Bahraini capitalist social formation. The material resources of the Al-Khalifa rule no longer relied solely on tributes. Oil commodification at the hands of foreign oil companies offered Al-Khalifa an alternative source of income. This critical conjuncture in Bahraini social formation marked how capitalist sociality was realised through oil commodification: the characteristics of uneven and combined development were ‘fully activated under the specific socio-historical conditions of generalised commodity production’ (Allinson and Anievas 2009, 49). This combining process brought about two significant political consequences to Bahrain. First, the political authority of Al-Khalifa was preserved along with modernisation supported by oil commodification and directed by British political agents. It qualitatively changed the trajectory of Bahraini development and its linkage to the global capitalist system. While Al-Khalifa’s political authority counted on oil revenue from the global capitalist market, how political and social instances were reconstituted were tied and subject to socio-political dynamics on both regional and international scales ever since. Second, more importantly, the process tilted the state-society equilibrium and witnessed changing class relations that gave birth to new social forces of Arab nationalism.

Changing class relations and the rise of Arab nationalist intellectuals

In the Gulf area, class analysis can sometimes be tricky, as social stratification also corresponds to different categorisations. In the case of Bahrain, although its population has a diverse ethnic and sectarian background, we can still have an idea of pre-capitalist social relations, by and large, by examining how Bahraini people acquired the means of production for a living. On the one hand, even though Bahraini Sunni was mainly composed of two traditions of origin – *Hawala* and *Najdi*, the former referring to families originating from coastal areas of the Gulf, and the latter to tribes from the Najd area in Arabia – they had primarily resided in urban areas, making a living on pearls and dates, and trading and controlling primary economic resources (Khuri 1980, 2–4). On the other hand, when Bahraini Shia had arguably consisted mainly of some original Arab inhabitants (before Al-Khalifa came) and other Persian immigrants—the former referred to as *Baharna* and the latter *Ajam* (Al-Rumaihi 1973, 46; Al-Shehabi 2017a, 336)—most of them had resided in villages and lived as peasants (Khuri 1980, 4). The categories here are certainly not absolute when one considers some exceptions; for example, some urban Shia worked in trade and commerce, and some *Ajams* were Sunnis. Yet, such a categorisation helps us set a departure point for class analysis, seeing class as a social relation for Bahraini transformation from a pre-capitalist relation to a capitalist one.

By highlighting the contours of Bahraini pre-capitalist social relations along urban areas and villages, the significance of knowing such relations lies in understanding how the contours gradually changed over time, corresponding to the later formation of different classes and social forces under international pressures. In other words, it is necessary to locate class formation in the Gulf in a picture wherein ‘Gulf capitalism arose as an integral part of the making of the global political economy’ (Hanieh 2015, 7). For Bahrain in the pre-capitalist epoch, in addition to the symbiosis between merchants and Al-Khalifa tied

together by *Khuwa*, the Al-Khalifa regime also allied itself with the other tribal chiefs by granting them conquered lands. As a land-owning class, they had accumulated capital and later invested it in the pearl industry, becoming merchants in urban areas and the subaltern class of Al-Khalifa's rule, whereas other tribes that had not been granted lands became peasants, pearl divers and fishermen, gradually forming another class along with the original inhabitants of villages in subordinate strata (Al-Rumaihi 1973, 254). Through such changing relations, the social ties between these two classes had bonded with the coercive power of the ruling class so that 'production' was due to political compulsion, for example enslaved pearl fishermen, rather than purely economic incentives (Miers 2003, 266; Allinson 2016, 44). The Al-Khalifa regime and its allied merchants and landowners had dominated various political roles. In contrast, the other majority had been what Mohammed Ghanim Al-Rumaihi called 'the politically unconscious masses' (1973, 255).

Starting in the 1920s and 1930s, class relations in Bahrain changed following capitalist primitive accumulation—'the potential wage labourer free from both means of production and from the (direct) coercion to produce' (Allinson 2016, 30)—and oil industrialisation. These changes brought political effects to Bahrain under the international pressure in two ways. First, the collapse of the pearl industry in Bahrain in the 1930s led to a power reshuffle within the ruling class. Having survived the collapse of pearling production, some landowners became the new upper class aligning with Al-Khalifa as 'oil revenues began to be paid and land values rose with the needs of the oil company' (Al-Rumaihi 1973, 256). However, other merchants, who no longer relied on pearling production, retreated from the circle of the ruling class, and they formed another middle class by working in trading businesses affiliated with the oil industry (Al-Rumaihi 1973, 256–7). Second, while oil production replaced pearling production as Bahrain's primary industry, 'slaves' who had been direct producers of pearls under political coercion were 'freed' from such relations and became waged labourers working in new industries. Their ties to the dominant mode of production were now not bound by their political subservience, but more by yielding to surplus-labour. In the sense of what Jamie Allinson calls 'dual freedom' (2016, 30), 'the politically unconscious masses' were freed from the status of slavery in pearling in tributary relations and, in turn, sold their labour freely to the capitalist market, acquiring a new means of production for living.

This historical moment of combination reveals the analytical significance of such changing class relations, underlying the origins of Arab nationalism in Bahrain. First, the Al-Khalifa regime became a ruling capitalist class. Conceptualising the Al-Khalifa regime as a ruling capitalist class does not entirely reject a neo-patriarchal reading, such as Hisham Sharabi's (1988), of Al-Khalifa as a tribal regime. Instead, it highlights an amalgamated sociological characteristic of the Al-Khalifa regime. The regime's social status as a capitalist class was formed by a circulatory rentier economy and was operated through a patronage system of tribal conventions. Such a combined social relation enabled the regime's accumulated capital from the process of oil commodification and export. With colonialists' backing, capital transformed into the regime's political leverage among different, newly formed, classes. The rationale behind how the Al-Khalifa regime intervenes in politics goes beyond

a patrimonial understanding of tribal regime survival. It is about its survival as an emerging ruling capitalist class whose dominant political and economic influence in Bahraini society increased along with Bahrain's late-developing capitalist state formation from the 1930s onwards.

Second, various groups of merchants and intellectuals emerged as middle classes. They arose between the upper ruling class and the lower subordinate class as the 'intermediate classes', occupying a broader economic and political spectrum in peripheral societies and having much more political influence both upwards and downwards. As such, they 'play a key role in the construction of political reaction as well as in the process of radicalisation and even revolution' (Ahmad 1985, 44). In Bahrain, and more broadly in the Gulf, their larger size and diverse composition were subject to the regime's policy of circulation and distribution of lands and oil wealth. But we can still clearly identify them as a newly formed middle class, distinct from the landed aristocracy and traditional merchants (Ayubi 1995, 175–6). As a result of the modernisation of education in Bahrain, the intermediate classes, composed of doctors, journalists, lawyers, engineers, and others, harboured more liberal ideas (Al-Rumaihi 1973, 258). Unlike traditional intellectuals, such as clerics whose political role in society had been represented in issues of ethics and religion, these newly formed classes of professionals embraced modernistic tendencies. They also highlighted their political role instead in labour problems, social reform, nationalist issues, and so on (Khuri 1980, 241), gradually shaping a role that was able to link ideologically both upwards to the ruling class and downwards to the subordinate ones in the process of capitalist state formation in Bahrain.

Activating Arab nationalism beyond 'diffuse ideas': Bahrain's 'peculiarities of the non-peculiar'

Most literature on Bahrain and the Gulf has explained how authoritarian regimes have evolved with the support of the rentier economy. Informed by Weberian insights, much analysis of the Bahraini state revolves around its institutional dimensions, in particular, Bahrain's bureaucratic development and the regime's increasing authoritarian power with British colonialism's backing and rentier economic development (Khuri 1980; Al-Tajir 1987; Lawson 1989). Such existing explanations consider colonialism and the rentier economy as offering a basic understanding of the political development of Bahraini social formation. Yet, how it relates to the provenance of Arab nationalism remains mostly under-explored. As shown earlier, UCD captures Bahrain's combination experience—under British colonial support, an amalgamation of modes of oil production and the tribal regimes changed the nature of class structures within Bahraini society. But, as a late-developing capitalist formation, how far is Bahrain's experience 'not in a simple repetition of the West European historical process' but 'the creation of profound peculiarities' (Trotsky 2000[1930], 330)? More specifically, how far is Bahrain peculiar among other non-peculiar cases of Arab nationalism in the Middle East?

Like other Arab states, the origins of Bahrain's Arab national consciousness can be traced back to the *al-Nahda* movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century through private schools and social clubs. Amidst the cultural renaissance in the Arab world, concepts like 'nations, classes, knowledge, and

society ... marked a new discourse and mode of thought emerging in Bahrain' (Al-Shehabi 2019, 101). Despite being only circulated among a limited circle of Bahraini elites, the movement offered a discourse of anti-colonialism and ecumenical Islamic reform as an alternative to the British colonial sectarian lens (Al-Shehabi 2019, 130). As shown earlier, nationalism on the periphery revealed contradictions as a product of uneven and combined capitalist development and inscribed itself into the process of international social transformation. In Bahrain, this process was realised through oil commodification under British colonialism and, I argue, transformed Arab nationalist ideas from national consciousness in the cradle of a diffused cultural renaissance *al-Nahda* into nationalism as a modern political ideology.

From a perspective of international historical sociology, this process associated with the international dimension of social transformation and involved ideological aspects to it, 'importing' a foreign political subject to valorise the reform (Shilliam 2009, 18). It was then imposed on the colonised society of Bahrain, representing the political side of Bahraini capitalist relations and reflecting British colonial consciousness. It set an arbitrary and rationalistic purpose of organising and mobilising individuals under specific socio-political orders. Its validity and concreteness were substantiated through what Omar Al-Shehabi calls the British 'colonial ethno-sectarian gaze' and then appropriated in 'contested divided rule' (Al-Shehabi 2017a). The ruling-class bloc's 'colonial lens' contrasted with Arab nationalism in the Bahraini context and distinguished Bahrain from other cases in the Middle East. In the cases of Egypt, Syria and Iraq after their revolutions in the 1950s and 1960s, a repertoire of anti-imperialism, anti-Zionism and socialism informed Arab nationalism that was upheld by those revolutionary military figures, by which they linked organically to social and political movements within civil society (Stein 2017, 677) and sought consent from its subordinate classes and political support from the people to build up its hegemonic status. In a Gramscian sense, Arab nationalism was organised by a populist regime as a 'national-popular collective will' (Gramsci 1971, 130–3), which was then reflected in foreign policies with a more revolutionary orientation. Yet, in Bahrain, Arab nationalism was rarely considered similarly. When Bahraini capitalist formation was fully activated through oil commodification and export, the social mechanism for Bahrain's combination through foreign oil companies was tied to colonial interests. It was a British colonialist-monitored conduit through which Al-Khalifa obtained foreign capital as the principal material basis of its rule. This experience contradicted the oft-seen rationale of Arab nationalism in the Middle East—that is, that the idea of civil society-led self-determination and liberation from colonialism was tied to the populist regimes' political will. In other words, Arab nationalism did not project the ruling class's political will but was mainly associated with the middle-class intelligentsia in the Bahraini civil society. This ideological disconnect was not due to antagonistic false consciousness between the people and the regime. Instead, it derived from a historical process of combination and its resultant internal contradictions. Therefore, when the social structure corresponded to a colonial superstructure/lens, Arab nationalism was meant to overcome ethno-sectarian divides designed by British colonialism.

Bahrain's Arab nationalism began to get a foothold and evolved alongside labour activism represented by the nationalist movements, further substantiating the *al-Nahda* movement's legacy. From the late 1920s, labour activism rose through Arab migrants and those Bahraini students who had studied abroad in Mashreq (Chalcraft 2011, 29). The discovery of oil by the Bahraini Petroleum Company (BAPCO) in 1932 helped Bahrain to weather the Great Depression and relocated Bahrain in the world economy, moving from reliance on the pearling industry to counting on oil. But its subsequent development generated momentum for labour movements throughout the 1930s and 1940s. In 1938, accumulated grievances over poor working conditions resulted in a strike and a petition to improve labour rights in Bahrain. The strike forced BAPCO to look for other sources of labour, from India and Iran, that might accept lower wages than local workers and would pose less of a political challenge to the authorities. In turn, the 1938 petition and another general strike in 1943 saw cross-sectarian cooperation in Bahrain that was believed to be a series of actions signalling to the authorities that they must pursue reforms of the educational and judicial systems, employ more Bahrainis, rely less on foreign workers, and allow for the establishment of trade unions (Al-Mdairse 2002, 23). Following the 1953 sectarian conflict, which fortified the Anglo-Bahraini ruling bloc's divide and rule tactics (Al-Mdairse 2002, 24–5), the idea of national cohesiveness and labour activism was later enshrined in the opposition National Union Committee in the 1950s.

From its early stages, the social origin of Arab nationalism was never a mystery. It emerged as a national consciousness in the era of *al-Nahda* but transformed into a nationalist ideology through the historical process of combined capitalist development. For Bahrain, this process was fully activated in oil commodification, which offered a vector for the subsequent socio-political development associated with the ideological evolution of Arab nationalism. This was the case even before the heyday of Arab nationalism, which swept across the Arab world in the 1950s and radicalised through the New Arab Left in the 1960s, set in a broader international context of decolonisation and the anti-imperialist movement in the Third World.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have suggested that our understanding of Arab nationalism should transcend 'diffused ideas' *within* Arab culture that is incompatible with 'the international'. Instead, Arab nationalism's origins can be better captured through political economy analysis, particularly international sociology of UCD, by re-conceptualising national specificities in broader international geopolitical and capitalist dynamics. These macro-historical changes, as widely understood in IRME, usually refer to the cataclysm of the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 and the later collapse of the Ottoman Empire. They demarcated Arabia and Mashreq into different areas of an imperial mandate, anchoring a general imperial policy of dividing the Arab world and setting a historical benchmark for the rise of Arab nationalist movements in the region (Al-Naqeeb 1990, 68). More importantly, the changes paved the way for a new scheme for constructing international relations in the Arab world by creating a contemporary state system around the ideas of Westphalian sovereignty

(Lawson 2006). However, Arab nationalism emerged from the cataclysm of more than just ‘an articulation related to the real setting of the modern international system ... [and] the nation-state as an organisation unit of this international system [of sovereignty]’ (Tibi 1997, 11). The changing social structure underlying the early formation of Arab nationalism also registered simultaneous capitalist competition and social formation in peripheral areas. As this paper has shown, Arab nationalist aspirations were associated with a social transformation that brought about newly emerging social groupings of labours, students and civil servants. Social relations changed qualitatively and quantitatively in new forms of social networks beyond established and localised religious and tribal bonds among the people. These changes then created a variety of social bases, upon which social mobilisation relies and through which Arab nationalism transformed itself from a national consciousness to a modern nationalist ideology. In Bahrain, the driving forces behind the genesis of new types of social relations lie in the secret of oil commodification that activated Bahrain’s uneven and combined development in modern times.

Through a historical sociological inquiry of the Bahraini case, this paper has also offered a solution to the problem of ‘internalism concealed within “the international”’ in the existing constructivist accounts of Arab nationalism. Instead of conceptualising Arab nationalism through endogenous, parochial, and enclosed cultural contexts within a definite and universal ‘international’ defined by sovereign states, it contributes to IRME by re-theorising the social origins of Arab nationalism through the premises of UCD, especially *combination*. Having argued that combination is a determining vector for the origins of Arab nationalism, it by no means falsely argues for a deterministic analytical function of combination—that is, the ‘world economy is simply a sum of national parts of one and the same type’ (Trotsky 1970[1930], 161). The peculiarities of Bahrain’s Arab nationalism surely reflect the rentier nature of the Gulf Arab states as a consequence of combined development. But we should be cautious not to fall into the trap of economic determinism or reductionism, as many rentier state theorists are criticised, when it comes to the discussion of ‘the political’ of rentier states. As Anievas and Nişancıoğlu (2015, 50–1) remind us of the indeterminate socio-political and economic effects of uneven and combined development, an analysis of human agency is needed to understand how ‘the developmental pressure of intersocietal relations will impact on any given society’.

This paper has illustrated that our understanding of the origins and development of Arab nationalism does need to rely on a historical sensibility to comprehend the agential features of Bahrain’s combined development. Whether examining the early history of how *al-Nahda* had travelled to Bahrain through elite groupings, the post-oil era of how labour activism and anti-imperialism fed into Arab nationalism in Bahrain, or the era of the ‘monsoon revolution’ in the Gulf and New Arab Left in the 1960s and 1970s (Takriti 2013; Haugbolle 2017; Haugbolle and Sing 2016; Al-Kubaisi 1971; Ismael 1976; Bardawil 2020), these historical episodes all revealed Bahrain’s peculiar experience of Arab nationalism in comparison with other Middle East states. This ‘peculiarity (Bahrain) of the non-peculiar (other Arab states in the Middle East)’ is by no means ambiguous, nor is it merely associated with the idea of a diffused culture, as found in constructivism.

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