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## Arab nationalism: Myth or reality

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### Abstract

Nationalism is an emotive issue for entire world community. Ever since the fall of Ottoman Empire Unity of Arabs has been important for Western community. This Article discusses the Journey of Arab Nationalism Journey Since the fall of Ottoman Empire and tried to discuss its various aspects. It has also dwelt upon Present meaning of Nationalism for Arabian Community as well as for Countries in the region. The consciousness of the Arabs for one nation began during the later years of Ottoman Empire -- especially during early 19<sup>th</sup> and late 20<sup>th</sup> century. This consciousness grew as soon as the imperialist West took control of West Asia and North Africa. The Arabs were assured that West had cheated them by supporting their revolt against Ottomans when the Ottomans Empire still drew vast admiration throughout the Arab World as an Islamic Empire. Arab nationalism exists through changing definitions. Throughout its history, Arab Nationalists defined Arab Nationalism according to the flow of tide. First it began as a revolt against Ottoman Empire. Then, a struggle for political unity, and simultaneously, independence from colonial occupation. Then, solidarity and cooperation among the different Arab States created by colonists. And finally after the humiliating defeat at the hands of Israel, Arab Nationalists reduced it to modernising

**Keywords:** Nationalism, Islamic Empire, Western community, fanaticism and confessionalism

### Introduction

Ever since the decline of the Ottomans, the unity of the Arabs was a primary concern for the Arabs, and how to contain this unity, for the West. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century there came different phases – pre-World War I, between World War I and II and Post World War II - of the Arab Nationalism depending on the world order at that time. And accordingly, the Arab Nationalism defined itself.

The consciousness of the Arabs for one nation began during the later years of Ottoman Empire -- especially during early 19<sup>th</sup> and late 20<sup>th</sup> century. This consciousness grew as soon as the imperialist West took control of West Asia and North Africa. The Arabs were assured that West had cheated them by supporting their revolt against Ottomans when the Ottomans Empire still drew vast admiration throughout the Arab World as an Islamic Empire. The decline of Ottomans and the rise of colonial West in the region offered a wide scope for ideological exploitation. It was here the Arab nationalists began their journey, offering theories that vaguely defined the region as an Arabic speaking nation with its great Islamic history and heritage apparently to unite it politically.

### Historical Background

Youssef M. Choueiri mentions about Qustantine Zurayq, a Damascus-born American-educated diplomat who played an important role in Arab Nationalist Movement: “Although a Christian himself, Zurayq offered an appreciation of the Prophet Mohammad and the central role of Islam in the history of Arabs. This appreciation is however meant not to rehabilitate Islam as a political system of the government, but to underline its culture significance as a set of values and symbols. In the scheme of things, religion turns out to be a moral force which strengthens nationalism when shorn of its fanaticism and confessionalism. He underlines the role of Prophet Mohammad as the builder of a solid state which for the first time united the tribes of Arabia”.

In the above statement, the lines contradict one another. Why Islam should be excluded from the political system of the Arab Nation when the Zurayq himself admits that it was the uniting force behind the quarrelling tribes of Arabia?.

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What “fanaticism and confessionalism” is he talking about? Prophet Mohammad built that “solid state” only by applying the fundamentals of Islam, with its entirety. Through selective application of religious teachings on one hand and the secularism on the other, one can only create confusion, not a consolidation, the goal of their nationalism. For, nationalism needs belief in a precise ideology.

These definitions were inclusive, founded on Arabic language and ethnicity that spread across the geography of the region, with a vague reference to Islamic moral influence on the society, and the principles of Western modernity and secularism for the development and administration. This, the Arab Nationalist theorists hoped, could unite the region’s majority Muslim population without excluding other minority sections like Christians and Jews politically <sup>[1]</sup>. These principles of Arab Nationalism seemed better suited for the foundation of unity for the region which is home to all the world’s three major rival religions — Islam, Christianity and Judaism.

However, seen the other way round, these definitions were designed by these elite Western educated Arab Nationalist in order to position themselves in the traditional and conservative societies, and at the same time not giving much reasons for the West for any open opposition to their movement. Soon in the mid-twentieth century it would be obvious that the idea of Arab Nationalism was drawing mobs of Arabs who were unable to comprehend goals of their revolution. These mobs gave immense power to the Nationalist rulers which made opposition impossible and suppression easy.

The doors were open on both the sides. On one side, the Arab nationalists invoked moral values Islam for their resistance against Jewish state of Israel – which was not only an encroachment on the Arab land but also on the birth place of the Islamic Prophets. On the other side, they preserved their secular credentials by suppressing any Islamist movements and invoking a secular political creed that draws upon certain Western concepts of modernity, progress, socialism and liberty as its frame of reference <sup>[2]</sup>.

However, this approach of pleasing everyone rendered Arab nationalism vulnerable to attacks on both sides also. For the West, such a political unity of the Arab world would be a huge blow to their imperial ambitions. By aligning with Sharif Husayn of Mecca in 1916, Britain did not want to strengthen the Arab nationalism, but to weaken the influence of the Ottoman Empire in the region. After their success, Britain and France, as the Arab Nationalists discovered, soon resorted to their mission of dividing the region among themselves under a clandestine Sykes-Picot Agreement. Besides, Britain publicly supported Jewish state under Balfour Declaration. This demarcation of the Arab land by Britain and France among themselves would divide the nation for ever, never to be united again, not even after their independence.

Throughout 1920s and 1930s, the nationalist intellectuals were debating independence and the lines on which *political* unity of the Arabs was possible. These debates were going on against the backdrop of the division of Arab land and creation of new Sheikdoms after World War I. However,

the formation of Arab League on March 22, 1945 was a formal expression and acceptance of the waning influence of the idea of Arab Nationalism. The member states, Egypt, Iraq, Transjordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and Yemen, agreed to strengthen relations and numerous ties which bind the Arab states. They agreed to “cementing and reinforcing bonds on the basis of respect for the independence and sovereignty of theme states”.

Hence, the formation of the League by the Arab States was a first blow idea of Arab nationalism, which considered the Arab land as a single political identity, by the Arab states itself by officially recognising the many states within the land of Arabia. By now each state possessed its own ruling elite, bureaucracy, flag, and anthem. Their proposals and counterproposals, for “Fertile Crescent unity,” “Greater Syria,” and “Arab federation,” were schemes for self aggrandizement. In the end, independence did not alter the map drawn by imperialism. “The member states of the Arab League promised to assist one another, but none would sacrifice their prerogatives of sovereignty, which the Arab League charter meticulously upheld” <sup>[3]</sup>.

Also, the colonial division and creation of the new states in the region gradually helped local rulers of different states to consolidate power in their respective countries by drawing mobs on streets. This had both long term and short term consequences for the region: rulers could only suppress the opposition within their territory; however, their state was too weak to deal with any conflicts outside. This was visible in the defeat of Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon and Syria, who fought together against Israel, in 1948. This war ended with Israel in possession of even more territory than had been allotted to her by the United Nations, and the Arab states became reluctant hosts to seven hundred thousand Arab refugees.

However, one other factor majorly contributed to Arab States’ defeat. Writes Martin Kramer, “the Arab States claimed to be fighting in concert, to uphold their brotherly commitment to the Arabs of Palestine, in fact they did just the opposite: each waged its own war to defend its own interests, each sought a separate *modus vivendi* with Israel.” The independence from colonial rule in 1940s and 1950s gave false hopes to the people of the Arab region for a revolution. The rulers became highly authoritative and could easily, without any opposition, misuse or manipulate this power for their personal political motives. In the long run, the rulers built a political system in their respective countries where toppling authoritative regimes became difficult – this legacy persists even today.

Although, given the support base for the heroes of Arab nationalism, they could nationalise their oil and, especially the Suez Canal which led to the invasion of Egypt by Britain France and Israel in 1956. Widespread opposition from within the Arab world and outside, more importantly USA, brought Gamal Abdul Nasser into international focus. He emerged as an undisputed leader of the Arab Nationalisms. However, this Arabs’ rallying behind Nasser was more out of hate for the West, who were “behind every evil” in the region, than out of love for the Arab Nationalism. This rallying culminated in United Arab Republic, a Syria-Egypt union, in 1958. But this union was not to last too long as the rivalries between Nasserites in Egypt and Ba’thists in Syria grew stronger and in 1961 a Syrian coup ousted Nasser’s

<sup>1</sup> Youssef M. Choueiri mentions the theories of Sati al Husri, Qustantine Zuryaq and Shaykh ‘Abdullah al-‘Alayili in his book *The Arab Nationalism*.

<sup>2</sup> Criticism of the Idea of Arab Nationalism

<sup>3</sup> Arab Nationalism: Mistaken Identity by Martin Kramer, p183

viceroy from Damascus and union was declared finished <sup>[4]</sup>.

### Changing Definitions of Arab Nationalism

“The men and women of the nationalist generation who had sought the political unity of the Arab people”, Adeed Dawisha writes in the first chapter of Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century, “must have cast weary eyes at one another when they heard their acknowledged leader call a truce with those they considered to be anti-unionists; they must have dropped their heads and thrown their hands in the air when he announced the onset of a new era where ‘solidarity’ among Arab states would replace the quest for a comprehensive political unity”. Gamal ‘Abd al-Nasir in 1963 declared that it was Arab solidarity “which would make the Arab states stronger through their cooperation in the economic, military and cultural fields, and in the sphere of foreign policy”.

With the changing international and regional order, increasing personal and political ambitions of the nationalist leaders and exhaustion of general masses, new definitions began to pour in. From a broad political unity of Arabs, the idea of Arab Nationalism was reduced to mere “solidarity” among neighbouring states who struggled to stand united amid local rivalries. And such a definition by the “hero” of Arab Nationalism diminished all the fantasies for any political unity of the Arab world.

But, such a definition seemed more pragmatic, given the magnitude of divisions within the region. People had already come to recognise themselves as Egyptians, Syrians, Lebanese, Iraqis. Now any practical unity depended on the unity of different Arab States based on, as asserted by Nasser, economic, military and cultural fields. Redefining of Arab nationalism was however a mere effort out of desperation to get some common ground for the neighbouring states – just any other neighbouring states, sharing common history, would do.

All the revolutionary goals diminished. Arab states wanted to accommodate themselves just like any other normal countries.

Throughout the struggle for Arab unity, Israel had been a rallying point for the leaders in Arab world. It was seen as a colonial project. This issue never died to draw masses because it encroaches both the Arabs’ territory and religion —Islam. The United Nation granted Israel a separate state in 1948 carved out of Palestine, where majority of the population was Arab. As a Jewish nation, Israel evoked history of their religion to prove legitimacy over the Palestinian land that they occupied. In 1967, even amid the waning belief in Arab Unity, this issue still had power to draw support for an attack against Israel, though that resulted in the defeat of Syria and Egypt in six days and cause of death for the hero of unity three years later -- Nasser.

But Islam, despite being the driving force behind unity throughout the history among Arabs still remained as an assisting element in the changing definitions of Arab Nationalism. Arab nationalists made sure that their failure did not translate into rise of Islam. Arab Nationalism became about setting “the house in order”. It became about modernising Arab states’ military and economy. This defeat in a way worked positively on Arab nationalist. They started to shifting focus from pan-Arabism to their individual

military and economic issues that had deteriorated under the burden of Palestine. “Even mighty Egypt could no longer assume the sole custodianship of the Arab cause (an Egypt which sent tens of thousands of troops to defend the Arab cause as far away as Yemen, yet had difficulty feeding its own people at home). If these states were ever to set their own priorities, they would have to justify openly their separate existence, and demand the primary loyalties of their citizens and subjects,” writes Martin Kramer.

### Future of Arab Nationalism

Arab nationalism exists through changing definitions. Throughout its history, Arab Nationalists defined Arab Nationalism according to the flow of tide. First it began as a revolt against Ottoman Empire. Then, a struggle for political unity, and simultaneously, independence from colonial occupation. Then, solidarity and cooperation among the different Arab States created by colonists. And finally after the humiliating defeat at the hands of Israel, Arab Nationalists reduced it to modernising.

“Arab Nationalism is needed more than ever,” wrote Hilal Khashan in 2000. Obviously he referred to the divisions within the Arab world. He refers to solidarity, cooperation, freedom, initiative, and inculcation of positive values as the founding principles of modern Arab national consciousness <sup>[5]</sup>. But in 21<sup>st</sup> century Arab Nationalism has to be redefined as a struggle to rid the region of its tyrants – a legacy of Arab Nationalism’s previous definitions, which drew millions of Arabs for support -- who rose to power during the past few decades. They worked their way through by suppressing all opposition groups, most prominent of them Muslim Brotherhood, a pan-Arab Islamist group that hails global Muslim unity rather than the unity of Arabs. Modern Arab Nationalism means what has already been exhibited in past three years, the consciousness of Arab commoners against their oppressive rulers. For the past three decades these corrupt rulers collaborated with the West and Israel, compromised on Palestine -- much against the will of the masses. Riding on their oil wealth, they imported weapons and surveillance technology to consolidate their grip on the throne. West and Israel ceased to be enemy: the rulers were strengthening against each other and their subject population.

For the past three years, Arabs have already paid high prices in lives and material, just as they have paid in past. The fight still continues. But given the degree of Western influence and interference in the region and the power of Israel in international arena today, Arabs will again find themselves be fooled by their own hopes. Civil war in Syria has cost more than one lakh lives. A democratically elected government was overthrown in Egypt. Sectarian war has intensified more than ever in Lebanon and Iraq – seeds of which were sown during America’s invasion of Iraq in 2003. As Arabs lose sight of their future, goals of Arab Nationalism are getting bleak.

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