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NATIONALISM IN THE ARAB WORLD TODAY

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The Decline of pan-Arab Nationalism

Since the foundation of the Egyptian republic at the beginning of the 1950s, Arab or pan-Arab nationalism suffered a series of setbacks and gradually declined. At the same time, there was an increasing trend toward singularity among the various states which had emerged from the colonial or semi-colonial period. This transformation and decline of Arab nationalism may be attributed to three main factors: defeats in the struggle against Israel; internal dynamics of the Arab world; and the emergence of Islamism.

Defeats in the struggle against Israel. The repeated defeats of the Arabs in their struggle against Israel may be considered as the first main cause of the progressive erosion of Arab solidarity and nationalism.

While it is true that solidarity was manifested during the wars of 1948, 1967 and 1973, it was not very effective and the Arab states were frequently divided by divergent interests as well as other differences. Following the 1973 war, however, Arab solidarity began to deteriorate significantly. It was after this war that Sadat instituted a policy of openness toward the West which was to lead to peace with Israel and a definite break with the Arab world: Egypt became an outcast of the Arab community. Finally, many Arabs perceived the lack of an effective demonstration of Arab solidarity in the face of the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon as conclusive evidence of the decline of Arab nationalism: "Arab reactions to the devastating war once again demonstrated the obsolescence of pan-Arabism and of the belief in a common Arab destiny."¹

Clearly, Arab nationalism was weakened by its failure to end the Israeli occupation of Palestine and to re-establish Arab policy and values in that territory. But internal dynamics of the Arab world also contributed to this decline.

Internal dynamics of the Arab world. One important element of these dynamics was the competition for hegemony that is the conviction of one regime or another that it held the legitimate and authentic leadership for the unification of the Arab World. The first wave of attempts at pan-Arab unification – initially the United Arab Republic and later the Federation of Arab Republics – was characterized and ultimately defeated by the hegemonic claims of Egypt, the refusal of the other states to yield to such hegemony, and Gheddafi's demands that Egypt do as he thought fit. It is conceivable that the nationalist Arab regimes of the 1950s and 1960s were genuinely eager to surrender

¹ Farid el-Khasen, "The Middle East in Strategic Retreat", *Foreign Policy*, 64. Fall 1986, pp. 140-60. For a more general view, see Fouad Ajami in Tawfic E. Farrah (ed.), *Pan-Arabism and Arab Nationalism*, Boulder, Westview Press, 1987.

their power to the pan-Arab collectivity voluntarily. But it was the attempts at hegemony and other disagreements that quickly convinced the regimes to think of their own survival and to strengthen the legitimacy of their states.

It is important to note that in order to reinforce and legitimate themselves within their own states, the various regimes made considerable use of pan-Arab rhetoric. The divisions and differences among the Arab states were often justified and explained in the light of pan-Arab nationalism, that is, in support or in opposition to such nationalism. But although the Arab states continued to present their policies as being founded on pan-Arabism rhetoric, they increasingly acted according to their own interests, regardless of their ideological propensity to support the principles of pan-Arabism. In some states, such as Syria, pan-Arabism remained a more important ideological and political factor than it did in other Arab states, but even the former were caught up in the general trend toward singularity.

Arab states are also organized in forms of international solidarity, not unlike European or Western institutions, though the former are less well-structured and are not always as politically compact. Current potentially significant forms of collaboration and integration among the Arab states include the Arab Maghreb Union, the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Arab Cooperation Council. But these forms of collaboration, far from aiming toward union, are marked by an unmistakable intergovernmental quality. While their member regimes present them to the public as steps toward the realization of pan-Arab objectives, such steps are in fact impeded by the specific interest of the various member regimes and states, as has been the case in the Arab Cooperation Council and the Arab Maghreb Union.

The emergence of Islamism. The most profound crisis in pan-Arab nationalism was the result of the emergence of Islamism. As early as 1967, Islamism attributed the "setback" in Egypt and in other Arab states to nationalism, which it considered a modernist and Western concept. But it was particularly following the revolution in Iran and the victory of the Khomeini that nationalism was attacked and discredited by Islamism. Nationalism, even pan-Arab nationalism, is a secular concept that comes from the West. According to the Islamists, nationalism failed to liberate the Arabs from Western domination and from Israel, and it frequently led to alliances with the West. In their view Arab nationalism has led to the establishment of states which imitate the Western model, while Islamism renews political unity among Arabs on the basis of cultural and political values which are in opposition to those of the West. According to Islamism, nationalism is not capable of affirming the identity of the Arab peoples and is often an enemy to be defeated.

Nationalism since the Israeli-Palestinian Agreement

The agreement between Palestinians and Israelis in September 1993 within the framework of the Arab-Israeli negotiations begun in Madrid is of particular importance with respect to the evolution and future of pan-Arab nationalism. This agreement, reached by the Palestinians independently of its other Arab partners has several significant implications. First, it involves the singularization of the Palestinian issue – an issue which until then had been at the heart of the struggle of Arab nationalism. From the pan-Arab point of view, the "Palestinianization" of the foreign policy of the PLO is even more significant and disruptive than the "Egyptianization" of the Egyptian foreign policy that was the subject of debate during the Egypt-Israel peace process.

If the Palestinians have decided to work alone, a large segment of the foreign policy of the Arab States and of pan-Arab rhetoric is destined to fade. This development has immediate consequences for the "frontline" states, i.e. Syria, Jordan and Lebanon, but also for all the others. Of course, this does not preclude the possibility of Arab solidarity – if that is what the Arabs want; rather, it means that with the singularization of Palestinian policy (which had already begun a few years ago under the influence of *Intifada*), the foundations and objectives of Arab solidarity will be those of the international, intergovernmental grouping referred to earlier, and not those of nationalist, pan-Arab solidarity.

A second implication of the singularization of Palestinian policy is analogous to the meaning of the fall of the Berlin Wall for Europe and the West, Pan-Arab nationalism has lost its most immediate and direct enemy. The Israeli threat to the Arab world has become less defined. Of course, there are perceived threats from other fronts: Iran, the West, radical Islamists. Furthermore, the process of normalization of relations with Israel has just begun and could well fail. But since the peace agreement between Egypt and Israel and the turning point brought about by the Israeli-Palestinian agreement, it seems that progress in the normalization of relations between Israel and the Arab states is now irreversible. Consequently, it is conceivable that the core of the threat to the Arab world, at least as it was perceived since the birth of the "Zionist entity" in Palestine in 1948. Thus, it would seem that the more concrete prospects for peace that are emerging in the Middle East could have the same effect in that region as the end of the Cold War had in Europe and the West. The fading image of the enemy should result in weakening of Arab nationalism further, and particularly in making it a less effective means of legitimation of Arab regimes, thereby leading to their decline.

Nationalism and Islamism

It is possible that the Israeli threat will be shifted to the West: the new threat (or risk) could be construed as no longer coming from Israel but from the West as a whole. This view constitutes the rationale for an alliance between nationalism and Islamism. The creation of this type of link was attempted both by Saddam Hussein during the 1990-91 Gulf war, and by several markedly secular and nationalistic actors such as Government of Syria and the radical Palestinian Fronts since the 1980s. The alliance between nationalism and Islamism is therefore not new, but the political evolution under way may reinforce it.

There is a widely held theory that Islamism is nothing more than present-day nationalism. That is to say, it is – to use Lenin's well-known notion – the "supreme stage" of nationalism. Several points must be made to clarify the meaning of this interpretation. It seems to make a valid assertion that Islamism tends to supercede and absorb nationalism; it is a formidable rival of nationalism. In fact, Islamism presents itself to the people as the movement capable of pursuing the objectives that nationalism failed to achieve. Thus, while Lenin presented imperialism as an outgrowth of capitalism, Islamism tends to subsume nationalism. This interpretation must not obfuscate the fact that Islamism and nationalism are two profoundly different political and ideological movements.

The Arab-Islamic appeal by Saddam Hussein sparked public opinion throughout the Arab world, playing on a widespread frustration. But it did not create a unified or lasting movement. In the 1980s – as we have seen – there were numerous cases in which there were links between Islamism and nationalism, but not even these led to a significant form of unity. Islamism and nationalism may be fellow travellers, but the underlying trend is toward divergence and even conflict.

The relationship between Islamism and nationalism is characterized by the risk of subordination of the latter to the former. Whether we refer to the forces in opposition to nationalist regimes, or to any alliance between Islamism and pan-Arab nationalist opposition, the historic failure of nationalism to achieve the objectives of affirming the position of Arabs in the world and in the region hands that task over to the Islamists, and awards them hegemony in the movement and among the masses. In this context, Islamism has not failed to exert its hegemonic claims and aggression against its the nationalists.

Nationalism cannot expect to be invigorated and reinforced by Islamism. It remains culturally different; it has Western roots, while Islamism sees the West as an often

ineluctable antagonist. Islamism is not only a declared enemy of the nationalist regimes in power, but it also threatens to splinter the pan-Arab nationalists which join it in opposition to the regimes.

In sum, nationalism appears to be in sharp decline. It has already lost ground to Islamism, which tends to subordinate and overpower it. Already weakened by its historical downward spiral, nationalism is further weakened by the political evolution which has prevailed since the Cold War, that is by the predictable disappearance of the enemy of Israel. Without the threat of Israel, the regimes risk losing the rhetoric of legitimation which has kept them in place thus far. Since the agreement between Israel and the Palestinians, the regimes, the nationalist intellectuals and the Arab League have made every effort to underline the need to prevent the peace agreement from giving rise to forms of integration with Israel in the region; they make impassioned calls for the reinforcement of Arab unity, security, economy, etc.²

But the main problem of nationalism does not lie in its relationship with Islamism or with Israel; it is to be found elsewhere. Is there anything that can turn nationalism into an effective and constructive political force and make it strong and autonomous with respect to Islamism?

Nationalism and democracy

The process of singularization of the Arab states at the expense of traditional Arab nationalism has developed without offering anything to the people: the regimes have been legitimated by promising Arab unity, but they achieved neither this unity nor prosperity, nor did they allow the participation in government that citizens have the right to expect. The critical issue in the current debate is political participation and democracy. This is the main concern of Arab intellectuals today. There are two

² Arab reactions to the eventuality of an arrangement with Israel within the framework of a US-dominated "new world order" are very much concerned with Arab unity. By the beginning of September 1993, the Arab League had issued a report on the prospects of "Arab national security", pointing out "Western attempts to drive a wedge between the Arab parties and interference in their internal religious and ethnic affairs", according to reports of the *Al-Ahram Weekly* ("Arab League's Rallying Call", August 19-25, 1993. Ambassador Adnan Omran, Assistant Secretary-General for political affairs of the Arab League, made the following comment on the prospects for multilateral economic cooperation in the region: "Calls for a Middle East market now are the second stage of foreign attempts to undermine Arab nationalism" (Boycott of Israel Seen as Arabs' Last Bargaining Chip", *Egyptian Mail*, November 6, 1993). Along the same lines, Dr. Ramzi Zaki, Director of the Egyptian National Planning Institute, stated in a public meeting that "The revival of the call for a Middle East market and for a regional arrangement including Egypt and the Arab Gulf states is mainly aimed at rearranging the geo-political map of the Arab World on a non-national basis..." ("Pan-Arabism: Still the Only Way", *Al-Ahram weekly*, July, 8-14, 1988).

principal schools of thought on this issue, and though they are based on different premises and considerations, they reach the same conclusion.

Among the secular intellectuals, differing opinions find agreement on the fact that the Arab state is based on alienation of the governed from the governors, that is, on the absence of political participation and democracy. Some maintain that the creation of a democratic polity would bring to light the consensus of Arab public opinion with respect to the ideals of solidarity and pan-Arab unity. Thus, greater democracy would force Arab governments to implement more genuine and effective pan-Arab policies.

Others maintain that "political participation and palpable improvement in the quality of life... was sacrificed on the high altar of Arab nationalism".³ Given that the regimes have neither achieved the objectives of nationalism nor delivered an improvement in the quality of life, they have lost legitimacy and should restore the political freedom that their citizens have sacrificed in vain.

These two schools of thought are based on two opposing views of Arab nationalism: the first emphasizes the continued validity of Arab nationalism; the second seems to accept the "singularity" of the Arab states and is primarily concerned with the relationship between the government and the people. Both call for the institution of democratic regimes, either in individual Arab states or in the wider circle of the Arab nation as a whole.

It may be said that the debate on nationalism is currently centred around two main aspects: its scope, i.e. whether a true pan-Arab nationalism should prevail or whether nationalisms of individual states should emerge; and its political substance, i.e. the democratic substance of nationalism, however it is manifested.

As'ad AbuKhalil, an Arab intellectual who has recently been studying the issue, supports the assertion that there is a relationship between democracy and pan-Arabism, pointing out that today the objective of a return to Arab nationalism is freedom, as opposed to the glory and greatness prescribed by Arab nationalism in the past: "Unlike the nostalgic Arab nationalism harking back to the Baghdad of Haroun al-Rashid, Arab nationalism today does not aspire to achieve glory and greatness... Many Arabs simply look for greater ease of population movement within the Arab world without worrying about the watchful cruel eyes of the *mukhabarats*".⁴

³ Saad Eddin Ibrahim, "Crises, Elites and Democratization in the Arab World", *The Middle East Journal*, 2, 47, Spring 1993, pp. 292-305.

⁴ "A New Arab Ideology? The Rejuvenation of Arab Nationalism", *The Middle East Journal*, 1, 46, Winter 1992, pp. 22-36.

Another Arab intellectual, El-Sayed Yassin, Director of the Al-Ahram Center for Strategic and Political Studies in Cairo, maintains that "the Iraqi invasion to Kuwait... was also an act interrupting the process of changing Arab World view which was going on steadily before the invasion. In this process, a trend was emerging to shift Arab politics from Authoritarianism to political pluralism and democracy, and from rigid planned economic policies to more liberal policies, and lastly from adopting an utopian view of Arab unity to a more functional approach, stressing mainly economic cooperation. This last development has been represented by the establishment of three Arab Councils: The Gulf Cooperation Council, the Arab Cooperation Council... and the Maghrebi Union. The Iraqi invasion led actually to a break in the Arab Regional System." ⁵

Thus, it seems clear that there is the convergence within a system of regional Arab solidarity that is characterized by objectives of democracy, cooperation and development— objectives which represent new constituents with respect to the ideals of the historic Arab nationalism that emerged in the 1950s.

What is most important is this convergence on democracy. Whether it is achieved within a more or less institutionalized pan-Arab solidarity, or whether it is achieved by states among which there are relations of international cooperation and integration, democracy is what can give nationalism a purpose again. In this context, particular mention should be made of the importance of the Palestinian elections and the process that they should usher in to strengthen the Palestinian state; similarly note must be taken of the importance of the elections in Jordan on 8 November 1993.

Concluding remarks

In which direction are the Arabs moving? Toward a national or supranational pan-Arab state? Toward individual, national, Arab states, linked perhaps by a strong international solidarity? Or toward unity dominated by a type of Islamic nationalism?

It is difficult to define Arab nationalism in the current situation, in which a common foundation gives rise to contradictory trends. *Public opinion* in the various Arab countries regards pan-Arab nationalism as an important and compelling objective; *nationalist regimes*, on the other hand, tend to emphasize the singularity of the individual states. The nationalist regimes claim to be pan-Arab in order to gain the consensus of public opinion, but their main objective is actually that of keeping

⁵ *The Mediterranean and Middle East Security*, unpublished paper presented at the Joint Seminar held in Cairo on November 6-7, 1993 by the Istituto Affari Internazionali and the Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies.

themselves and the states they govern alive. In other words, the pan-Arabism of the regimes is merely rhetoric aimed at keeping them in power.

The result is that a national or supranational pan-Arab state does not exist; nor are there individual, national Arab states. The absence of democracy prevents the evolution of the modern -- day Arab state toward a more specific identity. In fact, it prevents pan-Arab public opinion from forming governments which are truly committed to this goal. Furthermore, it prevents the regimes from evolving in the direction of the democratic national state which has prevailed in the West.

Within this contradictory framework, two trends may be identified: on the one hand there is pressure from the bottom up – from the society at large and from the intellectual – calling for democratization, and aimed at the rise of a nationalism which is intertwined with democracy within individual national states, or within a national or supranational pan-Arab state; on the other hand, there is pressure to ensure stability and confidence in the notion of a pan-Arab nation – a notion that has been jeopardized by the agreement between Israel and the Palestinians, as well as by the dynamics of the peace process and regional integration set in Madrid. This pressure comes from the regimes, but their slogan of nationalism serves only to mask their anxiety about their survival.

Thus, the debate on democracy is crucial to the future vitality of Arab nationalism. If Arab nationalism is not linked with democracy, that is, if it is not adapted to the needs and aspirations of the Arab people, it will be devoured by Islamism.