



## Nationalism and Religion in the (Arab World)

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### **Introduction**

Nationalism is not essentially a European concept although modern European states may owe their existence to it.<sup>1</sup> It is wrong to assume that the modern world structure of nation-states is basically an internationalization of this supposedly European phenomenon.<sup>2</sup> It was not until very late that we looked at this concept as a common historical product that nations of the world have produced in course of their century's long journey.<sup>3</sup> However, until very recently there were not many studies to elaborate on the sociological development of this concept.<sup>4</sup>

Countries in the third world often identify themselves as nation-states in the western sense of the term, nevertheless, they lack some of the essential constituents that make a territory "nation". This necessitates a broader definition of the term, something that may not regard a country a mere institutional and "legal transplant."<sup>5</sup> It is however a welcome development that in our time social sciences, especially sociology and international relations, are coming close to develop an interdisciplinary approach to better appreciate the process of nation-building.<sup>6</sup> As for the growth of nationalism in the Muslim world, we need to understand the crises of Islam under the Ottomans, the history of Islam in general as well as the Arab factor that eventually led to the emergence of Arab nationalism and the redrawing the map of the Muslim land.

Arab nationalism too should not be seen in isolation. It is an amalgam of both the Arab pent-up feelings and frustrations as well as

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incorporation of many western nationalistic formulations. Islam is as much part of it as any western liberal and romantic ideals. An authentic understanding of the term nationalism therefore requires from us a redefinition of what is nationalism and what is a nation-state? It may also involve an enquiry into how this concept originated in the West, how it traveled to the Muslim East and finally how the entire process is seen and elaborated by western intellectuals. It is high time to take a second look at the colonial history when owing to their political dominance the western powers came to organize the Muslim land in essentially their own western organizational units.<sup>7</sup> The nation-state idea provided them a ready answer.

### **Constituents of Arab Nationalism**

Arab nationalism has all the merits and properties that appear in the numerous definitions of a nation. The Arabs by far have the many deep rooted and continuous links that bind its various groups to each other and make it a strong vibrant Arab nation.

It will not be improper to mention the constituent features of the Arab nation :

**(i) Language :** The Arabic language is the strongest foundation of Arab nationalism. It has drawn together the Arabs of the various countries and has been the means of communications between the Arabs living far and wide. The Arabic language is a record of Arab activity, a symbol of their unity and the expressions of their intellectual and technical achievements. The Arabic language has displayed a vitality in its structure and has been a strong vehicle for the transmission of the Arts and Sciences. The imperialists tried in vein to bifurcate the classical Arabic from the colloquial Arabic. However, they have not succeeded.<sup>8</sup>

**(ii) Common History :** From its earliest times, the Arab nation has lived through common historical experiences. The Arab world has faced the invasion of Alexander subjected to Roman injustices, Mongol barbarity, Crusades, Ottomanism and presently Zionism. The Arab world has , however, still grappling in withering the storms. A common history gives rise to common sentiments and aspirations. It does not evolve a mere outlook on the past but expands to the future and embraces a common destiny.<sup>9</sup>

**(iii) Religion :** Religion is a main factor in Arab national sentiments as the Arab world is the birth place of all the Semitic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Islam has a preponderant influence on the vast majority of the Arabs. Though in Europe religion has been separated from politics, Arab world in spite of imbibing the western idea is yet to witness the separation of politics from religion. The reason, Islam does not talk of the spiritual only but also talks of man and the mundane. It influences man's all spheres of life. So, the influence of Islam on the Arabs is in-separable.<sup>10</sup>

**(iv) Common Land :** The lands inhabited by the Arab nation is spread and wide in Asia and Africa. There has been artificial fragmentation of the Arab lands by the imperialists. However, the Arab sentiment is very strong. The Arab nations arose from the Arabian Peninsula and spread far and wide. The Arab nation is patently Arab in its descent, customs, way of life and language.<sup>11</sup>

**(v) Common Economy :** The wealth of the Arab land is great if the Arab nations were freely allowed to draw up a single economic policy, the economic self sufficiency would be un-parallel. Imperialism has prevented a unified Arab economic policy.<sup>12</sup>

**(vi) Common Race :** Although racial unity does not exist among the people of the world. Racial homogeneity exist to an extent among the Arabs. It is well known that the first Semitic race was the Arab race and these Arabs were located in Najd, al-Hejaz, al-Nufud and Yemen. The Arab conquest after the coming of Islam made them bonds more stronger.<sup>13</sup>

### **Historical Background**

Abdel Aziz al-Duri, an eminent professor of Islamic History at Baghdad University has traced the origin of Arab Nationalism to its pre-Islamic roots, "in the move toward formulating a unified literary language" and has tried to find a continuity in Arab Nationalism even after the emergence of Islam. If one examines the beginnings of Arab consciousness, the first vague stirrings occurred prior to the rise of Islam. On account of the twin advances of Sassanians in the East and Byzantine in the West, the Arabian Peninsula was threatened. In this chaos, Arab consciousness first appeared. Arab consciousness with the move towards replacing the many dialects with unified literary language. A language that appeared first in poetry and crystallized in the Quran. Historically, therefore, the Arabic

language was the first common denominator. The emergence of Islam, monotheism and emergence of Ka'ba were another unifying factors among the Arabs. With the appearance of Islam, the Arab spirit burst forth. Arab consciousness was furnished by Islam in a clear content and a well defined direction.<sup>14</sup>

The Quran was revealed in Arabic. It struck a blow to all other dialects and provided the Arabs with one language. It gave the Arabs the linguistic unity and added as the greatest common denominator. Hence the Arabs could be distinguished from the non-Arabs. According to al-Duri, the Arabs emerged united on the stage of history and seething with Arab consciousness.

The attacks (of Shu'biyya) against the Arab heritage led the Arabs all the more strongly to embrace the heritage of wisdom in prose and poetry. The Arabs took care to preserve this heritage and to base the Arabic culture upon it. Given were the days when Arab history into Islamic and pre-Islamic history to ignore all pre-Islamic culture, and to regard Islam as the starting point with dark ages at its back.<sup>15</sup>

Arab consciousness and the Arab renaissance acquired added significance through one nation, one language, a historic message and a common destiny. Al-Duri emphasizes that the Arabs emerged united on the stage of history out of chaos, fragmentation and the conflict between the Sassanians East and Byzantines West. For the first time, the idea of the cultural unity of Arabs before and after Islam made itself clearly felt in the life of the Arabs. To trace the historical roots of nationalism we must distinguish between Arabism and Islam. Islam appeared as an Arab revolt and although the Islamic and Arab movements were identical in the heyday of Islam. The two movements bifurcated when Islam began to expand and it was used as a weapon to attack the Arabs and when the Arabs were led in the name of religion to accept a foreign domination.

The Arab nationalism is essentially cultural. It is not based on a racial concept since the conception of the Arab nation was drawn from the language, the process of Arabization, the cultural heritage and the historic role of the Arabs. The Arab intellectuals have stoutly defended Arab consciousness when it came under attack during the Abbasid period. In the modern times, it has again become popular and comprehensive.

**The Arab Experience**

The Arab consciousness was universally humanistic in character since it carried its message of religion and civilization when it replaced in the guise of nationalist consciousness, it stood up against tyranny and foreign domination. It sought to liberate the Arabs and create a new Arab society. This movement is essentially constructive in its aim.<sup>16</sup>

The Role of nationalism and the concept of nation–state has been essential in the Islamic world inclusive of the Arab world which is the birth place of three universal religions though pre-dominantly Islamic. In the modern history of the Arab Islamic world, territorial states are accepted in accordance with the world of nation system. Nevertheless, the Muslim states do not offer preference to other Muslim states in terms of trade investment and / or importing of labour, for example, Saudi Arabia has some times given priority to aiding Muslim states. However, the main bulk of Saudi and Arab aid is extended to Arabs rather than Muslim countries.<sup>17</sup>

Supranational Islamic networks (the Muslim Brotherhood, the Muslim World League), have never been able to create an international policy that transcends the conflicts of interest in perspective of regional states or ethnic groups. The links between Islamists and Secular nationalists are extremely difficult to unravel. They have often drunk at the same spring. Joel Gordan's acute analysis of the relationship between the Egyptian Brotherhood and Free Officers provide insight into the often tangled nature of Islamist-secular nationalist interaction.<sup>18</sup>

The employment of religious terms even by the most secular of nationalism in the Arab world does not mean that these terms reflect a content i.e., necessarily religious. The Iranian revolution, for example, appeared to reject nationalism as a secular, alien and limiting ideology and yet if one considers the programme of Khomeini movement before and after it seized power, will find much in common with many nationalisms. In the Arab world or otherwise, the invocation of religious terminology finds its counterpart in the nationalism of the Christian West. The French spoke of Revolutionary France as the “Vatican Reason”, the Russian of their country during the nineteenth century as the “Third Rome”.<sup>19</sup>

**The Iranian Experience :**

Marked differences certainly exist between token invocation of

religion by essentially secular rulers, such as, Nasser. One should note that Ayatollah Khomeini was capable of speaking in totally non-Religious terms as he invoked the *mihan* or "motherland". The *millat-e-aziz* or dear nation while fighting war with Iraq, he was giving importance to the state and society over the obligation of religious law and rituals.<sup>20</sup>

A conscious scrutiny of the vast literature pertaining to Arab nationalism and its relation with religions predominantly Islam has been difficult. The occupation of modern Arabic thought and its relationship with both religion and nationalism has been of long standing and it dates back to the second half of the nineteenth century.

### ***Arubah's Islamic Ethoes***

The problematics of this relationship can be seen in many of the Arab writers belonging to that particular period of time. The writings of Abdur Rahman al-Kawakibi (1849-1903) who visualizes of an Arab nation based on idea of separating religion from political domination. Al-Kawakibi, however, wrote in a tradition of religion through which including Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838-1898), Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905), Rashid Rida (1865-1935), a tradition that had developed in the wake of two very important religious revivalist movements –the Wahhabi in the Arabian Peninsula and the Sanusi in North Africa.<sup>21</sup>

The call for an Islamic unification against the Western encroachment is the very basis of this Arubah-based Islamic unity. Yet, because the call was often couched a political rather than purely religious term, Al-Afghani and his disciple made contradictory assertion regarding the question of nationalism or patriotism versus religion. According to these writers the religious tie among Muslims in the one single bond made the Muslims shy away from the consideration of nationality and refuses any kind of solidarity (*asabiyah*) except Islamic solidarity. In the same vein Rashid Rida though he opposed the Ottoman rule, rejected any tendency towards establishing separate Arab state based on non-Islamic solidarity in the Islamic world.<sup>22</sup>

This line of thinking was opposed in Egypt. The leader of Egypt's nationalist party Mustafa Kamil was called upon for the support for Ottoman state in its struggle against the Western power. Similar audient support was voiced by other prominent leaders and journalists. With the defeat of Ottoman Empire and occupation of many countries by Britain

and France, new definitions of Arab nationalism were advanced by nationalist writers most of these began clearly to take ideological turn. Yet the relation of Arab nationalism to Islam remained at the very centre of all this discussions. Islam was now given a new identity. It became an Arab religion and thus a new formula was found to show that there was basically no contradiction between Islam and nationalism.<sup>23</sup>

In the modern context, there is hardly any attention given to the question of *Imamate* and *Caliphate*, rather the debate on the question of state and citizenship rights. This is because there is a general acceptance in the Muslim world of the idea of the 'nation state' throughout the Muslim world. Associated debates in the contemporary period include those of the democracy and human rights.

The Ottoman caliphate was abolished in 1924 and there emerged a secular nation state of Turkey. The caliphate disappeared which was nothing but a symbol of fictitious Muslim unity. In the Arab world, also after the First World War, collapse of the Ottoman political system, introduction of mandatory rule by Britain and France in West Asia and re-drawing of the West Asian map so as to suit the colonial masters as also establishment of the puppet regimes, eventually gave rise to restive Arab national sentiments. Non-fulfillment of Western promises to the so-called representatives of the Arab cause added a sentiment of resentment among the Arab intelligentsia. The Western educated intellectuals stationed in capital cities of the Arab world Cairo, Damascus, Baghdad and Beirut gave vent to their nationalist aspiration in their numerous writings. This helped establishing a proto nationalist Arab movement which was urbanized and secular in nature.<sup>24</sup>

Michael Aflaq and Abdul Rahman al-Bazzaz were many such thinkers. However, the Arab world lacked the ingredients of the causes of the French Revolution. There never occurred any protest movement against established religions on the pattern of Europe in the Arab world. The pre-ponderant of religion in the region could not be challenged. Hence, nationalist sentiments, however secular they could be, have failed to ignore the overwhelming religiosity of the Arab society.<sup>25</sup>

The Second World War brought forth certain changes which were democratic for the Arab world. Creation of Israel gave impetus to the rise

of Arab nationalist sentiments. On account of this, the regimes were changed over night in Iraq, Syria and Egypt. Nasserism in Egypt, Ba' thism in Syria and Iraq were the current ideologies which were by far secular in nature. The rise of Ikhwan was scuttled in these nation states and attempts were made to forge unity in the Arab world on the basis of Arab nationalist sentiments.<sup>26</sup>

### **Evaluating the Nationalism**

Though Arab nationalism is firmly rooted in the recent years, it has suffered a set back on account of the consecutive defeats at the hands of Israel, collapse of Soviet Union which was bullwork for the Arab nationalists. Rise of Islamic Revolution in Iran and the support of Western powers to the Israel and oil rich regimes of the Gulf, and resultant frustration has led to the dwindling power of the nationalists in the Arab world and growth of Islamic militancy in the region. In Palestine, al-Fatah, a secular Palestinian movement has receded in the background and we can see Hamas emerging as an alternative. Rise of Hizbollah in Lebanon, sectarian strife in occupied Iraq are reasons for the weakening of Arab secular nationalists movements in the area.<sup>27</sup>

In defining its relationship with Islam, Arab nationalism thus often ends where it started with purification of Arabism as a commanding value in Islam. Most theoreticians of Arab nationalism seemed to be in agreement whether they are Muslims or non-Muslims, religionists or secularists. A few of them recognized Islam as a religion for the whole of humanity and not just for one particular branch of it. Their works impart impression that the Prophet Muhammad almost acted as the first hero of Arab nationalism by uniting all the Arab speaking inhabitants of the Peninsula under his banner. Arab nationalists praise the Umayyad era as one of the glory of the Arab nationalism.<sup>28</sup>

The difference between the Islamic and classical western concepts of equality is reflected partly in the political terminology of the two cultures i.e., the Quran recognizes man (*insan*) irrespective of his believe and political standing but has no word for citizen.

The re-assertion of religious values for political ends in West Asia suggests a need for reconsideration of the process of social change. Social scientists in the post war period have frequently used the concept of political development or modernization as devices to explain change and the differing character of political and social systems. Ethnic and religious have not diminished in West Asia. The decline of nationalist's forces in the area of neo-colonialism has led in the rise of religious loyalty for both leaders and masses and this remains a powerful evolution, perhaps stronger than the claims of nationality or the attraction of ideology. The strength of indigenous values has remained great and the search for an identity of their own has caused these countries to be worried of Western influence in social relation and cultural behavior.<sup>29</sup>

Religion and politics have been intertwined in the Muslim countries of the West Asia from the very beginning of their history. Religious values have been central to Arab societies now confronted with the Western domination. These societies are responding with a fervent religious terms. This revival may be seen not so much as a reinstatement of values and concepts.

### Notes and References

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3. See in this regard, Gale Stokes, "The Underdeveloped Theory of Nationalism", in *World Politics*, Vol.31, No.1 (1978), pp.150-160.
4. There has been growing emphasis on cooperative studies and sociological explanations to study the phenomenon of nationalism, for details see, Anthony D. Smith, "Nationalism and Classical Social Theory", in *The British Journal of Sociology*, vol.34, No.1 (1983), pp.19-38.
5. The term "legal transplant" is borrowed from Adam Watson, See A. Watson, *Legal Transplants* (Edinburgh, (U.K.): 1974).
6. For details see, Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (New York: 1977), pp.33-45.

7. See Theda Skocpol (ed.), *Vision and Method in Historical Sociology*, Fourth Edn. (Cambridge: 1987), Also see Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolution*, (12<sup>th</sup> Edn. Cambridge: 1987).
8. Al-Jundi, Darwish, "The Foundations and Objectives of Arab Nationalism", in Karpat, Kemal H. (ed.), *Political and Social Thought in the Contemporary Middle East* (Paeger Publisher, New York, 1982), pp.34-5. For more detail, see al-Alayili, "What is Arab Nationalism", in Haim, Sylvia G. (ed.) *Arab Nationalism* (London, 1975), pp.120-7.
9. Ibid., al-Jundi, pp.35-6.
10. Ibid., p. 34.
11. Ibid., pp.32-3.
12. Ibid., p.33.
13. Ibid., p.33-4.
14. Al-Duri, Abd al-Aziz, "Historical Roots of Arab Nationalism", in Karpat, Kemal H. (ed.), *Political and Social Thought in the Contemporary Middle East* ( Paeger Publisher, New York, 1982), p.22.
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16. Ibid., p.25.
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19. Ibid., pp.131-2.
20. Ibid., p.132.
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22. Ibid.
23. Ibid., p.45.
24. Smith, Charles D., "Historiography of World War I and the Emergence of the Contemporary Middle East", in Gershoni, Israel 9ed.), *Middle East Historiographies (Narrating the Twentieth Century)* (University of Washington Press, 2006), pp.39-58, **also see** Saeed, Abdullah, *Islamic*

*Thought*, (Routledge, 2006), pp.123-4 and Tibi, Bassam, *Islam between Culture and Politics* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp.13-5.

25. Curtis, Michael (ed.), *Religion and Politics in the Middle East*, pp.48-51 and Enayat, Hamid, *Modern Islamic Political Thought* (I.B. Tauris, London, 2005), p.112. For detail, see al-Bazzaz, Abd al-Rahman, "Islam and Arab Nationalism" and Aflaq, Michel, "Nationalism and Revolution" in Haim, Sylvia G. (ed.), *Arab Nationalism*, (London, 1976), pp.172-188 and pp.243-9.
26. Choueiri, Youssef M., *Islamic Fundamentalism* (London, 1990), p.58.
27. Enayat, Hamid, *Modern Islamic Political Thought* (I.B. Tauris, London, 2005), p.112-3.
28. *Ibid.*, pp.114-5.
29. *Ibid.*