Pensée 2: Theorizing Arab Nationalism

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Arab nationalism has received the attention of a fairly large number of scholars since its inception at the turn of the 20th century. It did not receive its first full treatment, however, until 1938, when George Antonius published *The Arab Awakening*. This book set the tone for much that was to follow—as statements of confirmation, elaboration, or refutation.

Of greater importance, Antonius created a framework within which events, activities, and discourses were to be read and interpreted. Such a framework introduced the twin ideas of "Turkish oppression" and "betrayal" by influential Western powers of the Arabs' cause and their struggle for unity. Those who opposed such a view, with Elie Kedourie heading the list, turned the framework upside down by attempting to underline the artificial nature of Arab nationalism as well as the insincerity of its leaders. This trend could be said to have culminated in Martin Kramer's self-explanatory title, *Arab Nationalism: Mistaken Identity*. However, scholars such as Albert Hourani, C. Ernest Dawn, Zeine Zeine, Philip Khoury, and Rashid Khalidi built on, expanded, or refined Antonius's framework. Nevertheless, these studies were, by and large, confined to the origins of Arab nationalism or the social background of its pioneers. The opportunity to place its general trajectory within an overarching framework or paradigm did not arise.

This state of affairs persisted even during the heyday of Arab nationalism in the 1950s and 1960s. Although what was published in those two decades was in the main sympathetic to the idea or its movement, no major theoretical breakthrough made its appearance as a feasible explanation of its emergence, development, and vicissitudes. One could go further and state that the lack of clear theoretical guidelines did not allow the articulation of a coherent narrative of the movement in its maturity.

Be that as it may, implicit or explicit theoretical assumptions were not completely absent. Political scientists, historians, anthropologists, and other scholars alluded to or used certain aspects of theories of modernization, trying thereby to highlight the modern and liberating facets of nationalism as opposed to traditionalism or religious conservatism. In this sense, both admirers and critics of Arab nationalism delineated its triumph either as a prelude to a more prosperous and democratically based society or as the inevitable embodiment of an inherent Arab authoritarianism. In other words, Arab nationalism was seen in both versions as a transitional ideology that was destined to be transcended by more enduring institutions and discourses.

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In the wake of the 1967 military disaster, Nasser's death in 1970, and the ascendancy of Saudi Arabia as a new regional power, combined with the sudden assertiveness of Islamism as an alternative political discourse and social movement, rethinking or reappraising Arab nationalism began to occupy the agendas of a number of Middle Eastern and Western scholars. This new trend was primarily exemplified by a 1991 volume, *The Origins of Arab Nationalism*, edited by Rashid Khalidi, Lisa Anderson, Muhammad Muslih, and Reeva S. Simon. This collection of articles was crucial in underlining the importance and durability of local state-centered patriotism as opposed to Pan-Arabism. It also questioned the ubiquity of "Turkish oppression" as an originating factor and downplayed the perfidious nature of Western policies.

Another volume, *Rethinking Nationalism in The Arab Middle East* (1997), edited by James Jankowski and Israel Gershoni, offered wide-ranging discussions of the usefulness and relevance of postmodern and poststructuralist concepts and theories in dealing with the multiplicity of the Arabs' self-definition and the polycentric dimensions of their identity. Of greater importance, a number of its chapters demonstrated how hitherto excluded groups and social strata of the population—women, workers, peasants, and minorities—could be studied as independent agents of self-determination and the struggle for equal rights.

In this context I began formulating my own version of Arab nationalism. I soon confronted the need for a clear framework designed to explain certain political events and capable at the same time of allowing one to contextualize ideological statements as expressions of their historical conjuncture. In order to deal with the history of a social and political movement extending over a span of at least 150 years, introducing a scheme of historical periodization was an ideal solution to my theoretical dilemmas. Such a framework was, for example, essential in accounting for the prominence or dominant position of certain social groups or a cluster of ideas, be it democracy, struggle for independence, socialism, or minorities' political status. In *Arab Nationalism: State and Society in the Arab World* (2000), I divided this history into four autonomous but partially overlapping phases, with each phase having a particular characteristic as its dominant or determinant feature.

This framework made it possible to organize and select my data according to methodological criteria for a particular historical context. My phases, extending from approximately 1830 to 2000, are designated by reference to their chronological and structural elements: cultural, political, social, and pluralist or democratic. The cultural phase lasted until the eve of World War I; during this period the linguistic, historical, and ethnic attributes of the Arabs were excavated and made an index of their potential capabilities as a distinctive and distinguished community. In the political phase, covering the first half of the 20th century, the struggle for independence and some form of Arab unity occupied center stage. In the third, the social phase, Arab nationalism became a popular movement of mass mobilization. Its early successes were eclipsed after almost a quarter of a

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century by glaring failures or deficits in military, economic, and human-rights fields. The nascent fourth phase has yet to unfold in its full development and uncertain future.

For all the previous reasons and as a result of the contributions of scores of scholars, a new framework for studying Arab nationalism has finally emerged despite its preliminary contours.

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