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NATIONALISM AND THE ARABS[1]

Aziz Al-Azmeh

IT IS MY PRIVILEGE, AND MY PLEASURE, to address the question of Arab nationalism, not least because I shall be drawing on some matters raised by Albert Hourani, who addressed aspects of the same theme in his Antonius Lecture of 1977. I shall thereby make a modest contribution to honoring Mr. Hourani's memory, and to signify an intellectual debt owed to him, not only as my teacher, but as the *shaykh* that he increasingly became to me afterwards. I shall aim for clarity and for the long view, and I will take up my reflections in three successive and distinct keys. The first concerns the way in which Arab nationalism is misconstrued for immediate political purposes. I will then move on to comment on a crucial moment in the history and scholarship of Arab nationalism — the Hijazi mutiny of 1917 — and, finally, I shall try briefly to identify themes of contemporary relevance that emerge from these.

Nationalism is a political animal. Like all political animals, it lives to the full a life of trading both with reality and with fantasy: It trades with the reality of those who claim it and those who deny it, and it lives the fantasy of its advocates as well as of its enemies and detractors. The manner in which it is perceived is often as much of an historical force of material consequence as its material thrust through social, political, economic, and other currents. This is why it is imperative that we try to disengage ourselves from the snares that history lays before those who engage it. It should be made clear at the very outset that I do not believe that the Arabs have a specially privileged call on the snares of history or its fantasies, and declare that, above all else, my aim in what follows is very radically to contest the prevalent thesis of Arab exceptionalism — or for that matter, of Muslim exceptionalism under which, in grave error, matters Arab are being increasingly subsumed.

It should be asserted first, therefore, that the Arabs are not impeccably Arab: They do not usually live up to the stereotypes after which they are cast, into which molds it is thought desirable for them to be set, although, like other human objects of study, some of us Arabs do play to the gallery, although visiting anthropologists, journalists, and political scientists do not seem to notice. Arabs, like everyone else, are subject to change, to very profound change; they live in societies that are stratified and differentiated internally (and

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I do not only mean ethnically and religiously). They are ruled by states which, though presently suffering in general from a deficit of political and economic capital, are of very considerable solidity and stability in view of the shocks they have sustained and absorbed in the past few decades: Shocks emanating from war, internal stresses of an economic, social and political nature, and much else. We Arabs, moreover, are given as much to valor as to cowardice, to romance as to realism, to industry and to idleness; we are given to the most abject parochialism no less than to the loftiest sense of public duty. It would just not do to over-Arabize the Arabs in the imagination, just as it is patently absurd to succumb to the very common temptation to over-Islamize Muslims. To reduce Arabs to representative types and to literary *topoi* would do us no justice, nor would this do justice to understanding, most particularly to an historical understanding. To treat the Arabs thus is to retreat to the undisturbed pastures of Orientalism: I have often been told that some colleagues are tired of this matter being forever repeated and discussed, but I too am wearied and bemused by the persistence of Orientalist tropes, most particularly among those who really ought to know very much better. Most disturbing is indeed the appropriation of these tropes and stereotypes by Arabs writing in English as well as in Arabic, not all of them necessarily high on an anti-Arab mania they take for an arriviste's enlightenment. Some of those have now taken to reinventing personal histories by writing mendacious autobiographies in which they effect the recollection of sectarian and ethnic affiliations they had never been aware of before. Others simply insert terms like "ethnic" and "sectarian" in between other words or on the titles of books and articles, sometimes wholly inappropriately, terms which are very much à la mode, and desirable to publishers.

Yet others proceed differently: One prominent Palestinian academic suggested at a conference, a couple of years ago, that a history of specifically Palestinian nationhood existed, even a Palestinian quest for *Lebensraum* (at Damascene expense) under the regime of Zahir al-Umar of Safad in the Eighteenth Century. Clearly modelled on Fakhr al-Din, construed in Lebanese schoolbooks as the founder of modern Lebanon, this imaginary history came alas at a time when the myth of Fakhr al-Din had been exploded by recent Lebanese historical scholarship (by Ahmad Baydoun, Fawwaz Traboulsi, and Kamal Salibi). It is also curious that the author of this idea should have chosen a person who combined brutality with the most retrograde folklore, even self-parodic folklore, as the example of a national founder and, presumably, paradigmatic deliverer. In present-day conditions, the analogy may not be too far-fetched.

So whence do we speak today of Arab nationalism? In the present conjuncture the Arabs' relation to nationalism is spoken of in terms of the triumphalist craze of recent years, namely a carnavalesque sense of living beyond history in general, and beyond particular histories: Thus the themes that predominate in discussions of Arab nationalism are derivative notions from

perceptions of post-modernity, post-nationality, post-historicity. Italian Neo-Fascists are seemingly able to neutralize their fascism by the simple use of the name Post-Fascist, for the mere conjuration of the prefix "post" seems to hypnotize willing audiences into a somnolent amnesia. What ought to be emphasized is that: All these terms are *legerdemain* variations on the theme of post-Communism, accompanying the dismantling of the Socialist Bloc, and the prefix "post" merely inscribes a collective amnesia in the public mind to all or virtually all that occurred in the history of the world since the Second World War: the devastation of Vietnam, the devastation of South Lebanon, Palestinian refugees, to mention but three matters. Mopping up — or rather appearing to mop up — the remains of historical contestations to Western hegemonism, with the war against Iraq, was construed as a war against some subterranean demon, an irrational form of hyper-nationalism. Of course, this was a false construal, for the invasion of Kuwait — like the total response to it — was a quest for oil that had nothing to do with Arab nationalism, for all its jingoism.

Let me return to perceptions of Arab nationalism: Like all wars, the Gulf war was cheered on by rather a long bandwagon train. The rubbishing of the Arabs' sense of Arab nationality was a fundamental refrain in the jingles struck on this bandwagon, and one of these bandwagon jingles achieved quite some notoriety under the title of *Cruelty and Silence*. The refrain is an old one: that Arab nationalism is an irrational and unnatural force, suggested by demagogues and tyrants to a credulous and primitive *demos*, which habitually explodes with a primordial energy and is invariably rebuffed by reality — the reality of inter-Arab conflicts, and the reality of policies and red lines set up, first by Britain and France, later by the United States and Israel. The more natural order for Arab societies, according to this conception, is a form of democratism appropriate for the conditions of Arab backwardness: not democratic order based on notions of civil citizenship, but a communal democratism, based on a polity Balkanized along sectarian and ethnic lines. This is not a mosaic which is in some way natural to the history of the Arabs, mind you, but a political construct of the present moment premised on a deliberate and cultivated archaism and on the conjuration of socio-political groups. This is indeed the manner after which the so-called Iraqi National Council was constructed by chanceries in London and Washington. The latter dredged up the debris of the most archaic self-styled notability in the country, fractionalized along lines of mini-ethnicities, not corresponding to the development of Iraqi society in the last half-century — an evolution which was being at once arrested and accelerated by the savage tribalism, which governs some configurations of central power, but which by no means explains them or accounts for them with any measure of adequacy.

Another refrain is struck, and has been constant in negative construals of Arab nationalism since the era of Jamal Abd al-Nasser, that the desire by Arab nationalists for states larger than those presently in existence is in turn some-

how unnatural; it is an idle passion at best, a sordid excuse at worst. Hardly a mention is made, more than inconsequentially and in passing, of the popularity of this desire, of the extraordinary bellicosity and brutality of Israel, of Western manipulation of Arab (and of Iranian) politics starting with the coups of the Forties and Fifties, of the tremendous loss of life and resource suffered collectively by Arabs in defence of Palestine and in self-defence — this is true irrespective of the political use and abuse made of these sacrifices. There seems to be no awareness of Arab social and cultural cohesion contained in Arabism, nor of collective Arab defensiveness — this last, incidentally, in many instances, is giving way to the hyper-nationalist xenophobia of political Islam.

But the faulty optic goes beyond forcing Arab nationalism to devolve to matters of purely conjunctural concern. When it is seen, as it is today, as an unnatural transcendence of ethnic and religious locality and bearing, this is partly because social agendas in the United States, and of international organizations whose agendas are accordingly set, are dominated by a notion of social fragmentation. This fragmentation — into ethnic groups, into communities of gender and sexual preference — sustains certain postures of political correctness peculiar to the United States, where they betoken practices of puritanical and cantankerous communalism that indicate a specific form of social mobility and elite-formation. It is also because the new configuration of North-South relations is pronouncedly premised — although not without ambiguity — on the elision of developmental perspectives, and is constrained into molds of "structural adjustment" which require the containment of social stresses by efficient repressive regimes which are seen to correspond to primordial bases of polity. Hence the on-off flirtation between the governments of Germany, France and Britain with Islamist groups in the Arab World, and indeed the much more constant and intense dalliance between the United States and Islamist groups of Algeria and elsewhere.

In the recent past, as well as during the Nasserite era, requirements of the moment dictated the reduction of Arab nationalism to only one of its aspects, namely aspirations to unity. Now these had not been opposed by Britain in the days where they were mooted by friendly regimes; and indeed, forms of economic integration, (which had been dubbed hopelessly utopian only a short time ago) are today suggested by the World Bank, by Israel, and by others. The reason for this, of course, is that they are not taking place under Arabist auspices, and are indeed premised on the hoped-for willingness of Arabs to normalize relations with Israel on Israeli terms — which implies ultimately the legitimation by the victim of the oppressor. Arab states have been patronizingly commended of late for coming of age, in widely-read articles by Fouad Ajami and Bernard Lewis, published in *Foreign Affairs*, for behaving like real states, and dealing with Israel singly, i. e. for behaving according to the requirements set by Israel. The PLO is especially praised for what in certain Arab circles is known as its Zionization, which now has a history of nearly twenty years. Clearly, Arab states are being commended for thus acting irrationally:

For it would have been clearly in the best interests of each party to the present negotiations to act collectively. Had they acted so, we would not have seen in the Occupied Territories the present pattern of arrangements which are manifestly not in favor of Palestinians nor address the crucial point of refugees, most particularly those of Lebanon who have suffered most of all: A regime which shows even the Vichy government in a most favorable light, and which nurtures a tendency among many Arabs — including Palestinians I have spoken to — to conclude that the fortunes of Palestine are after all best looked after by the Hashemites. Arab states are castigated for not behaving politically and in terms of short-term self-interest, as states do, and then castigated again when they do so, for soiling the metaphysical principle of Arab unity which, in this perspective, they should never have held: damned if you do, and damned if you don't.

I have so far put forward the view that Arab nationalism has generally been portrayed, in the West, from the narrow perspective of politics of the moment. This shows through in scholarly output on the subject: With the exception of passages, some of them extended, by Jacques Berque and Maxime Rodinson,[2] I do not know of any seriously creditable synthetic discussions of Arab nationalism in a Western language, discussions which engage this historical phenomenon beyond the perspective of the moment, although I do not wish to seem churlish by denying merit to some studies of meticulous detail. In contrast to this perspective of the moment, but also as a complement to it, one important strand of Arab nationalist discourse, has taken the perspective of eternity, like all nationalisms; it has generally asserted that Arabism transcends history and society, that it is a vital force on a par with other colossal forces of nature, that it is an eternal mission (I refer those who take the exceptionalist and exotic view of the Arabs, to the Constitution of the United States, which speaks of Manifest Destiny, and which was not written by Ba'thists). To this eschatological view of nationhood, mere politics and sheer history are irrelevant, or, at best, the flow of incidents that do not soil the purity of Arabism nor dent the inevitability of its destiny. Both views sacrifice intellectual rigor: The perspective of eternity gives itself up to sentimentalism, the mainspring of the politics of identity, and the perspective of the moment is captive to immediate political lusts. Both regard nations and nationalism metaphysically: They are either accomplished and consummate, or they are chimerical. In either case, they are beyond history and beyond politics, and their political engagement is seen as a sort of defilement, a profanation, a descent into materiality.

This takes me back to where I began, to nationalism as a phenomenon within history, which is precisely where Albert Hourani located it in his critical discussion of Antonius' famous book, *The Arab Awakening*, which he commemorated in the Antonius Lecture of 1977, on the fortieth anniversary of its publication.[3] He updated Antonius' narrative with a characteristically limpid account of its impact on British policy-making of the time, and equally, with the characteristically crystalline elegance and acuity of his criticism. He

brought out clearly a major anachronism which suffused Antonius' account of early Arab nationalism. Antonius was wildly enthusiastic about anti-Ottomanism, and attributed far too much strength and prevalence to this sentiment than is warranted by historical fact. He had spoken of the "unnatural alliance" between Arabs and Turks within the Ottoman state[4] when the fact was, as Hourani indicated, that the Syrian and Iraqi Arabs who joined the Arab mutiny in 1917 belonged to very much the same educational, political, and public itineraries as the Ottoman officers who led the Young Turk regime before and during the First World War. And while Hourani praised C. Ernest Dawn's writings on Ottomanism and Arabism for being the first to treat the genesis of Arabism within the organic unity of the reformed institutions of the Tanzimatist Ottoman state, he gently indicated that one should not take to extremes the view of Dawn that Arabism arose out of sheer competition for power between individual members of the new Ottoman elite. The temptation to take this point to extremes has indeed been repeatedly taken, most notably in voluminous scholarship on Syria from the late 19th Century until independence from France.[5] This trend took to easy explanations, and uniformly credited members of the Damascene and Aleppan elites with a truly superhuman capacity for egotism, venality, and mendacity, much the same way in which foreign taxi drivers and street conjurors are regarded by smart or weary tourists. Clearly, such an attitude toward the charges of one's research tends to foreclose any consequential consideration of the bearings of politics within society and polity.

Antonius' position arose out of what I termed the perspective of the moment: Regarding the alliance of Arabs and Turks as unnatural must be added the corollary that the association of Arabs and the British was far more in keeping with nature. Yet far more in keeping with the realities of history is Hourani's statement that the Arab nationalists of 1917 were men "who became nationalists gradually, reluctantly, and to some extent unconsciously".[6]

There is no better entry to the matter of Arab nationalism than this: Early Arab nationalism, like Turkish nationalism, is a by-product of Ottoman civic patriotism; and it is by no means irrelevant to be reminded that Ziya Gökalp, the prime theorist of Turkish nationalism (he was of Kurdish origin, incidentally), was closely associated in Salonika with Sati' al-Husri, who was later to formulate the most important statements of Arab nationalism in the inter-war period. Many of us Arabs, since 1924, have nurtured ideas of Ottoman tyranny which do not correspond to fact; it was as if some of us were trying to sanitize, for our own eyes above all else, our own complicity in bringing about our own subjection to Western powers after 1920. We were also sublimating, again for our benefit, a certain jealousy of the Turks, especially of national liberation under Atatürk, who fought back successive waves of invaders — British, Greek, Italian, French — and forced the abolition of the Treaty of Sèvres, while our own history took a different course, and a unique historical moment was lost. Not unnaturally, Atatürk's prodigious achievement was greeted with wild enthusiasm in the Arab World in the 1920s, to the extent that the Algerian

Muslim reformist Abd al-Hamid Ibn Badis wrote a most gloriously appreciative obituary of the Turkish leader.[7]

Distinctions in this respect are imperative, and many important distinctions of this order were made by Hourani both in *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age* and in his *History of the Arab Peoples*. First of all — and I am not here following these two works, but adding to them — the Arab Revolt of 1917 does not belong to the register of previous or contemporary Arab nationalism, and really ought to be excised from the chronicles of Arab nationalism. It was Arab only in the narrow ethnological, pre-nationalist sense, reflecting the political program of Kawakibi, which is most commonly misconstrued as nationalist: It was an Islamist rebellion, undertaken in the name of, not the Arabs, but a Meccan Caliphate under the Sharif Husayn Bin Ali, who was later to be declared Caliph by a conclave of 16 Hijazis, 3 Indians, 3 Sudanese, 2 Bukharans, and 2 Javanese, in addition to one Moroccan, one Syrian, one Turk, one Afghan, and one Daghestani. It will be remembered that the Caliph Husayn abdicated in favor of his son, who in his turn renounced that office only days before Wahhabi forces took over Mecca, with British acquiescence. None of the proclamations, statements, or speeches launching the 1917 mutiny or following it was Arab nationalist in any sense: They were all universalist caliphal statements specifying the usurpation by the Ottomans of the Caliphate from its rightful holders — not the Arabs as a nationality, but their holy family.

In this sense, the genealogy of this movement should be sought elsewhere than in the factors that made for the rise of Arab nationalism. It is a direct descendant of two previous attempts, both in the Nineteenth Century, to set up a variety of successor states around the Ottoman empire — in the Balkans, in Armenia, and in Arab territories which were not at that time thought to comprise Egypt or North Africa. Napoleon had first mooted the idea of an Arab caliphate. The idea was carried further and widely canvassed by France in the mid-Nineteenth Century — the candidate for the Caliphate at that time being a famous Algerian, the Shaykh Abd al-Qadir, first a thorn in the flesh of France in western Algeria, later resident in Damascus on a French pension. The nationalism of Najib Azuri in 1905 answered to the same political specifications, although it was formulated in secular terms.

As for Arab nationalism proper, it had different conditions of genesis. It was, like almost the entirety of modern Arab history — a history which Berque described as a story of acculturation — the product of Ottoman reforms in the Nineteenth Century. The modern Turkish state is a direct successor state to this development, as are the internal dynamics of Arab states in the Mashriq, and analogous developments in the Maghreb under direct foreign influence: accelerated in Tunisia, slow in Morocco, partial and asymmetrical in Algeria.

Let me outline briefly the main elements out of which nationalist ideas amongst Arabs and Turks were composed, and let me also recall at the outset that nationalism in its historical and theoretical aspects has been the subject of at least half a dozen important books in English alone in the past decade or so,

and no one who studies this phenomenon, in the Arab World or elsewhere, has any excuse for being innocent of their knowledge. Let me also recall the existence of a vigorous recent revisionist scholarship in Arabic,[8] of which Hourani, virtually alone in Western universities, was well aware, and with which he engaged actively toward the end of his life. But then he was always ahead of his students and colleagues, and indeed put them to shame.

The fundamental element out of which Arab nationalism was wrought was the incipient regime of modernity: People no longer seem to appreciate the extent to which the Ottoman Tanzimat was innovative, the extent to which it was at the forefront of advanced ideas not only in Istanbul, but in Paris as well, and the high-minded positivist utopianism which animated it as it did many things in Europe of that time. This politico-cultural innovativeness was not confined to Ottoman domains, but was a universal phenomenon by means of which the vigorous expansion of capitalism acted as a voracious consumer of historical and cultural particularities. There are similar phenomena across the globe: Cases in point are the establishment of the Polish and Italian states under Napoleonic impact, and the grand narrative of Latin American history scripted by Simón Bolívar and his example according to a frankly Napoleonic prototype. These are cases in point of a new form of state, which we might call the French republicanist model, which established the state as the main actor in the cultural and legal fields, making the state the node of hegemonic activity within society. As a corollary, this required eliminating, so far as this was possible, the public weight of pre-civil institutions, such as clans and guilds and fraternities, and their relegation to a field distinct from that of polity, although they remained politically active after taking on the political language of the new polity. The crucial point is that they no longer had a political language of their own, until supplied from the West with a newly legitimized and eminently bankable language of neo-communalism in the past decade, with the universal revival of the language of political romanticism associated with the Right throughout the modern history of Europe.

Ottoman reformers in the Nineteenth Century pursued very energetically the role of breaking up intermediate institutions, by setting up a homogeneous legal system based on the principles of universality and codification (i.e., unlike English and Muslim law), a new educational system — performed by means of the *lycée* in France and the *gymnasium* in Germany — radically distinct in its mode of organization, certification, curriculum, and instruction from the previous, classical system. These were all means toward the modernist homogenization of the political sphere, and this was a point well-perceived by Auguste Comte in a very revealing letter to Reshid Pasha.[9]

The result was a very new class of intellectuals, a class which German scholars, with reference to their own history, refer to with dread as the *Bildungsbürgertum*. It was a class dependent, to a large extent, on state employment, which acquired with much energy and enthusiasm modern scientific, political, and administrative ideas. Through the new educational system,

they disseminated the new means of cultural production and distribution based on print, and the overall systems within which these novelties were impressed: new literary genres, forms of political and scientific discourse, new aesthetic forms and norms, privileging among other things very novel criteria such as originality, and much else. These ideas and norms are universal, and have been described by one particularly acute writer on nationalism as "modules".[10] So universal are they, indeed, that I have shown in various writings that they constitute the structuring and constitutive elements in contemporary Islamist political discourse.[11] And I should like to stress: That although these modules are of European provenance, their universality implies, in the strongest sense, that they have become indigenous elsewhere, being locally produced and reproduced, not unlike cricket, which is played rather better in the former colonies than in its country of origin, or like Japanese and East Asian capitalism; like democracy in South Africa, or indeed like the use of the English language in India, which has not yet fully caught up with the sparse vocabulary and the rasping syntax now prevalent in Anglophone countries, which is making English more contiguous with the near-orality arising out of the digital age. The mediatization of language implies the modular storage of semantic indication in a form severely circumscribed and devolving to its visual associations, thus inhibiting the flow of argument and reasoning, and freezing sense in identifiable images.

Universal modernist acculturation was thus the environment in which the Ottoman intelligentsia at the end of the Nineteenth Century was nurtured, and this comprised both Turks and Arabs, who had followed the same educational and bureaucratic itineraries, and were exposed to the same body of knowledge. So novel was this, and such was the disaggregation of the old system, that around the turn of the century the Arab World, most particularly in Egypt, saw the emergence of a substantial corpus of books on etiquette, on the norms of a successful marriage, on success in social and professional life. All this indicates that a fundamental conduit for socialization had been broken, and sociality had to be re-learnt, from books, which became the novel means of acculturation and indeed of socialization. The old social system being to a large extent intact still, new forms of association where this modernity could be cultivated were developed, and the overall context of this was the Masonic lodges. Later, clubs and political parties emerged. Religious learning was not fought, by any means, but was reduced and marginalized, along with its social and institutional equipment. This was an area in which developments in Egypt fell far short of the central Arab lands, chiefly for administrative and financial reasons, and the deleterious effects of dependence on al-Azhar continues to this day.[12]

We will be very hard-pressed indeed to find any members of this Arab *Bildungsbürgertum* whose national passion was Arabist as opposed to Ottomanist. One could mention at random the names of many Christian and Muslim Arabs in this respect. The Bustanis, Azuri, Marrash, Shidyaq, Abduh,

Zahrawi, Uraysi, al-Sayyid, Husri, and many others over three generations, were Ottoman citizens, and defined their citizenship with reference to civic Ottoman patriotism, combined with an Arab linguistic and local patriotism. Indeed, some of these persons, along with many others, instituted one of the most important cultural revolutions in the history of the Arabs, namely, the crafting of modern Arabic: Though national languages normally antedate nations, they do not precede them as national languages, for these have to be generalized by the cultural system of modernity. For instance, acculturation in Italy, by means of modern Italian, implied the generalization of a language that, in the mid-19th Century, was spoken by a mere 2.5% of Italians, while in France, only 50% of the population spoke French in 1789, and of these only 12% spoke what was to become standard French.[13] Modern Hebrew is an example of a more rapid transformation in this sense. The prerequisite of this great transformation is a series of syntactic and lexical developments that make a language suitable for dissemination in print, and for the targeting of individual readers. This entails marginalizing — though never destroying — the affective, syntactic, and semantic properties of orality, and specifying administrative and legal language as a linguistic convention of its own with profound continuities with the past. Incidentally, the oral-formulaic form that many critics detect in contemporary Arabic political language is a result as much of the bureaucratization of politics as of mytho-poetical rhetoric. It contains very much the tenor and form of the administrative directive, even in its construal of past and future. Our glorious language was thus subjected to a transformation easily on a par with the momentous systematic invention of the classical language in the first century-and-a-half after Islam, and of the profound changes it underwent in the Eleventh Century.

But language was not by itself the most crucial factor in Arab nationalism: The crucial factor here is a policy of cultural homogenization, which had differential impacts on different regions and social strata, and which sustained an idea of civility as constituted by citizenship. Where this notion was most accomplished, among the political classes, the armed forces, and the *Bildungsbürgertum* which fed both of them, this entailed the almost-complete constitution of new forms of subjectivity: forms and correlative themes of study which have come to be visible in studies by Foucault, and which are well brought out in a recent study on punitive and penitentiary regimes in the modern history of Iran,[14] although the recent study of contiguous topics in Nineteenth Century Egypt, interesting as some of the issues it raises may be is, was rather a touch-and-go-affair.[15]

It was this class — irrespective of the social origins of its individual members — which, as Hourani indicated, drifted unconsciously into Arab nationalism: Nationality was to them the prime form of civilized political organization. This idea is a universal module which predominates in the political culture of the Arab World to this day. Nationality here indicates civility, and civility is counterposed to sociality based on sheer blood, to the existence of

unmediated folds of sociality such as sects and *ethnoi*, or at least to their impertinence to a public life in conformity with modernity. Needless to say, this was conceived as part of an evolutionist concept of history, which saw it as a progressive movement in which simpler forms of social and political organization are superseded by more complex and more developed forms of civility, and in which nationality supersedes community.

The transition to Arabism was painless: not only because no incompatibilities had been posited between Arabism and Ottomanism — these were the result of retrospective historiography, including the work of George Antonius and colonialist historiography as reflected in some Arab school curricula[16] — but also because the same political and public outlook was brought to bear on public affairs, and also because many Arabs of this class had an instant colonial enemy in Britain and France against whom the nationalist project could be directed. And indeed, this simultaneity of nationalist advocacies — Arabist and Ottomanist before the First World War — continues today in parallel nationalisms: Syrian and Arab, Iraqi and Arab, Egyptian and Arab, and so forth, without the one detracting from the force or the incidence of the other, representing two enfolded horizons of polity.[17] There is no mystery therefore, nor can we impute incompatibilities, to the reclamation of Babylon in Iraqi historical writing, or to the profuse writing in Syria today, much of it autodidactic, on ancient Semitic cultures, for the register which inscribes the one within the other is not new, and people have been writing this kind of nationalist history since the Thirties. One may indeed recall a speech by King Faisal in Aleppo in 1918 in which the entire history of monotheism was inscribed within the register of Arab history.[18]

Thus was Arab nationalism born and constituted. It was the political culture, initially of a political class which was acculturated to it and deployed it in struggles for independence, later of the entire population, through the state educational and cultural systems. It was the animating idea of a whole range of large-scale political and social forces which arose out of the profound social transformations of the Arab World since the mid-19th Century. It is also the expression of a social fact articulating various levels of social structuration and interaction — one might refer here to the writings of Kamal Salibi on Lebanese Christians with respect to this matter.[19] The idea that oriental Christianity stands in the same relation to the Latin as does the Arab World to colonial powers is in very wide circulation, even among very senior clerics,[20] and the idea that the Greek Orthodox church should be re-baptized the Arab Orthodox church is often heard, most particularly in Syria. This was and is a political culture that transcends Arab boundaries, which in the last couple of decades, despite appearances, has forged a cohesive pan-Arab intelligentsia and civil institutions which the efforts of the Ba'th parties or the Arab League combined could not accomplish.

Arab nationality has thus in the course of many decades become an accomplished and central cultural fact, not only because a high-cultural,

"modular" cohesion has been accomplished, but also because the mass-cultural field has been to a large extent homogenized, and in the same breath, co-modified. One would cite here, for example, the circulation of a largely but by no means exclusively Egyptian output of television serials, films, songs, and school teachers: A mixed blessing, as it should really more aptly be described as low, rather than popular, culture. Much like the crassness of the gutter press in Britain and the United States, it has the effect of obliterating entire regions of lived culture and substituting for them a cultural surface which might be read as a text no less canonical for being, or rather for becoming, popular. This by no means implies the disappearance of local particularisms, and such ethnographic distinction, indeed distinctiveness, is the normal condition of all societies, although England, Holland, and parts of the Nordic countries bespeak a homogenization of a thoroughness that is truly original, not matched by conditions in, say, France or Germany.

In view of all this, we must be wary of the simplifications I began with — perspectives of the immediately political moment, perspectives of eternity. Nations and nationalisms are complex historical phenomena, always made, unmade, remade, but not as rigid wholes. It would be instructive for all who tackle these matters to read Braudel's work on the identity of France, where the subject is textured by differentiations, geographical and otherwise, where different systems of coherence are sought, where the great historian speaks of the "possible France", not of an ahistorical accomplishment.[21] And it is certainly important that nations should not be assumed to have been immaculately conceived outside history, or to have existed before nationalism, and before nationalist projects sustained by states, as some sort of primal form of infrahistory. And though nations are indeed imagined communities, they are not entirely imaginary; shared language, traditions, ethnicity, high culture, and so forth, are not sufficient conditions for the emergence of nations or even for a common nationality, although the existence of some of them is always necessary: Nations are created by national political organization.

It is as such that Arab nationalism was conceived in one of its major currents. I have already mentioned Husri: a sober minded positivist, acerbically critical of Aflaq's nation-mysticism.[22] In the same vein of modernist positivism, one should not forget the vital contribution of Constantine Zurayq to modern Arab political thought; Albert Hourani called him the "consulting don to a whole generation of nationalists".[23]

Yet there was another trend, and this brings me back to the *topoi* of post-Communism. I have indicated that one of the derivative themes is the transcendence of nationalism: We do indeed live in a world economically structured by transnational forces and movements. But the corollary that is being derived from this with respect to the Arab World is that economic integration, locally and globally, is to be correlated with a condition of political fragmentation, a fragmentation responsive to the post-modern taste for the pre-modern. Hence various formulae, dressed up in a pseudo-sociological and pseudo-historical

cloak, and having the outward form of scholarship, for the reconstitution of Arab polities along communalist and Islamist lines.

In this are polemically used against Arab nationalism, both as a local motif and a descriptive trope, the mystical notion of the state associated with the names of Aflaq and Arsuzi and with the classical formulation of Ba'thist and crypto-Ba'thist nationalism. This regards the Arab nation as some kind of prelapsarian truth and an Earth-Mother, an androgynous Gaia who speaks Arabic. In tandem with the revival in Europe and the United States of romantic political notions of identity, which have animated all right-wing movements with their discourse of communalist particularity and their tribalistic notion of nationality in terms of *Blut und Boden* — the very two constituent elements of Zionist ideology — this ideological trend was brought to perfection by Islamist movements, in whose present enunciations it occupies the position of locus. The discourse of authenticity in the Arab World, and the contemporary discourse, in the West, on Arab identity as coterminous with an Islamic communitarianism, are mirror images.

The politics of identity conceives the future as a reenactment of a glorious past, and it fully uses the organismic metaphor of nationality and of history, which has been the staple fare of right-wing populist and nationalist movements in Europe and elsewhere since the early part of the 19th Century. It is no accident that this trend developed in the Thirties, and was always correlated to a fevered anti-Communism.[24] It is not surprising that this organismic notion of nationality has been unsuccessful in forging a political unity, it being captive to what must surely be regarded as the curse of a glorious past, a past which inhibits rather than incites action. It has a fatalistic attitude which assumes nations are constituted prior to politics, thus charting a history of spasmodic pulsations and alternations of fatalism and voluntarism.

The nation is here conceived as a large tribe, without internal differentiation. This notion was absorbed fully by the communalisms we live with today, in the Arab World as in the world at large, most specifically by political Islamism and, at a certain point in time, by Maronitist micro-nationalism at the University of Kaslik and in the monasteries of Mt. Lebanon, which provided a Phoenician genealogy to communities which, until the day before yesterday, were composing ballads boasting of their Yemenite tribal origins. So have we really, as it is said of us both by Arab communalists and by Westerners who claim Arabist expertise, reverted to type, returned to a fragmentary prelapsarian innocence? Are we realizing the fantasy of anthropologists — in their incessant quest for the ultimate native — who tend to be far keener on tribalism than tribesmen themselves? Are we relapsing to an elemental propensity to internal violence (our killing fields, the Lebanese civil war excepted, seem rather like a garden-party compared with intra-European bloodshed,[25] or with the endemic violence of life in the United States)? Are Arab Christians, as common parlance has them these days, merely "Arabic-speaking Christians"?

I do not think so, not least because history is not reversible, although it might give the illusion of being so. The Arab World has passed through a period of transformation of staggering depth, amplitude, and tempo; those of us who are acquainted with recent scholarship on Seventeenth Century England[26] will be familiar with a time equally accelerated. As for Christian Arabs, it is not only that their vast majority find the epithet applied to them highly offensive, not believing themselves to be conceived in Christianity and then accidentally learning to speak Arabic — a language, it is implied, somewhat foreign to them as Christians; these are the very Christians who were Arabs long before Islam ever was, and who are perhaps the most purely Arab in terms of ethnicity, if we exclude bedouin Muslims and mountain-dwellers. It is, in fact, city Muslims who form the typically Ottoman cocktail of origins, but who are not as a consequence any less Arab. It is therefore particularly galling when certain Arabs in the West, Christians and Muslims alike, succumb to commonplace cant and refer to Christian Arabs as minorities, or who in their writings or public statements identify their sectarian affiliation, with quite gratuitous inconsequence, as they themselves derive no minoritarian political or cultural consequences from it, at a time when their wider readership is primed to derive momentous consequence from this.

I define communalism not as a "primordial loyalty" according to the commonplace cant of today, but as the para-nationalist self-constitution and self-representation of a social group in the process of crystallization under particular conditions and leaderships. It is a fact which belongs to the register of new identities invented under contemporary conditions of structural involution, buttressed by nearly two centuries of Balkanist policies by the Western powers, and made possible by internal stresses and by Arab states whose legitimacy is in deficit. It is also a fact based on a transformation of profound consequence, the transmutation of social and confessional units into political units, into tribes.[27] Given the overall high-cultural and popular-cultural homogeneity[28] of the urban and rural Arab communities, and given that cultural cleavages do not correspond, except rarely, to sectarian or ethnic differences, but to distinctions of ecological and class origin, the communalist reading of the Arab present and of Arab eternity amounts to the representation of minor ethnological differences of a daily order, as if they were ethnographic incompatibilities. This is reminiscent of the endemic warfare witnessed by Gulliver on one of his travels, where blood was continuously being spilt in a dispute on whether a boiled egg, in order to be eaten, should be broken at the big or at the little end.

Some may recall that when Ottoman statesmen of the Tanzimat were constituting an Ottoman nationality by attempting to eradicate the public effect of communal identification, by abolishing notions of *dhimma* and of Muslim extra-territoriality, Stratford Canning, British Consul in Istanbul, was constantly nagging for ever more privileges for groups he was trying to constitute as para-national minorities, in the same breath as he called for equality before the law. This sort of attitude toward groups of nationals is very destructive, as the

fate of the Phanariot Greeks and Armenians of Istanbul bears witness. Yet it has remained a constant in colonial and so-called post-colonial policies. As examples one might cite no better instance than the division of Syria, twice, during the French mandate along regional and sectarian lines — a policy that was singularly unsuccessful. One could also cite the political fragmentation of Iraq implied by the Iraqi National Council, of Anglo-American manufacture, according to the Balkanizing conceptions current today. I should add here that, much as one must respect the aspirations of some Kurdish forces for self-determination, I fear that the Kurds, living in rural communities at the interface of large national and cultural territories within whose polities they had formed fragmentary parts in a complex geopolitics, will never achieve the critical territorial and demographic mass necessary for statehood, at least not in the foreseeable future. This situation is unchanged since the Mehabad Republic. Iraqi Kurdish leaders are perfectly aware of this and have hence never severed links with Baghdad. And finally, one could not but cite the Israeli paradigm of a state built on notions of religious and racial exclusivity as a political and conceptual motor for fragmentation.

Fragmentation and Islamism as the natural condition of political life in the area was and still is a policy relentlessly pursued, dressed up as facts of nature or of history. I have tried to indicate that this perspective and the social forces with which it is articulated has a history, and has had a certain receptivity among sections of Arab societies, but a very inconstant receptivity. A very important part of this history was a plank in the Truman Doctrine. Alongside the Baghdad Pact and its successor arrangements, we have had what we might call the cultural Baghdad Pact: encouraging the political contestation of nationalism and Communism in the Arab World by recourse to socially conservative forces reclaiming lost ground by means of appeal to religion. Those who remember Western writings on the area in the late 1950s and in the 1960s will recall this very clearly, and should be able to confirm how this went in tandem with ideas of Islamic internationalism, support for Islamist parties, and so forth. Today, this is cast, in the Arab World, in terms of the rhetoric of authenticity. Within this register can be found the desperate acquiescence of some elements in the Arab World, fearful of social regression and indeed of the undoing of civilized order itself: Algerian intellectuals desperate to leave their country where they are systematically targeted and butchered by Islamist terrorism, Christians from the Levant emigrating in large numbers — although this emigration is easy to exaggerate, as this forms part of a general migratory trend. All this is the result of acquiescence to chimerical, communalist and salvationist solutions to real problems that beset the Arab World, like everywhere else.

There is a certain irony in this: The financial and institutional infrastructures which led to the formation of Islamist political and ideological movements also facilitated, in the past couple of decades, the crystallization of the Arabist intelligentsia of today. There are other ironies at play: Communalist

and Islamist ideologies today are also the product of the state educational system, which set the sense of Arab cultural history since the 19th Century, but which emerged from this system after it had in many respects atrophied.

What we must conclude from all this is that modern Arab history, in its international context, has nursed two trends, one constant, autochthonous, and homogenizing, the other episodic, dependent upon foreign favor, but gathering strength in the past decade, not only because of direct manipulation of internal Arab forces, but also because structural conditions have led to a universal slide into barbarism, in Eastern Europe, in India, in Africa, with the rise of fascism and its analogues in Western Europe. This has of course produced the phantasmagoric scenario of the War of Civilizations, in which a hitherto respected political scientist resurrects the idea of the Yellow Peril, and adds to it the Saracenic Menace.[29] Thus political phantasms threaten to become realities, imagined communities threaten to become real. There is today in the Arab World a contest between these trends, the nationalitarian civil trend, and crypto-fascist communalism and Islamism, at all levels, cultural no less than political and social.

NOTES

1. An abridged version of this text was delivered as the 19th George Antonius Lecture at St. Antony's College, Oxford, on 16 June 1994. Small adjustments have been made, but it was thought appropriate to retain, in some measure, the flavor of oral delivery.

2. For instance: Jacques Berque, *Arab Rebirth: Pain and Ecstasy*, translated by Q. Hoare, London, 1983, and Maxime Rodinson, *The Arabs*, London, 1981.

3. Albert Hourani, "*The Arab Awakening* Forty Years After", in *Studies in Arab History. The Antonius Lectures, 1978-87*, ed. Derek Hopwood, London, 1990, pp. 21 ff.

4. George Antonius, *The Arab Awakening*, London, 1938, p. 103.

5. Philip S. Khoury, *Urban Notables and Arab Nationalism. The Politics of Damascus, 1860-1920*, Cambridge, 1983; idem., *Syria and the French Mandate. The Politics of Arab Nationalism 1920-1945*, Princeton, 1987.

6. Hourani, "*The Arab Awakening* Forty Years After", p. 28. See now the provisional synthesis of Mahmoud Haddad, "The Rise of Arab Nationalism Reconsidered", in *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 12(1994), pp. 201-222.

7. *Al-Shihab*, 9/14 (November 1938), pp. 130-134, reprinted in *Athar Ibn Badis*, ed. 'Ammar Talbi, Algiers, n.d., vol. 4, pp. 213-217.

8. For instance, *Wajih Kawtharani, Al-Sulta wa al-Mujtama' wa al- 'Amal al Siyasi. Min Tarikh al-Wilaya al-'Uthmaniyya fi Bilad al-Sham*, Beirut, 1988.

9. Auguste Comte, *Système de politique positive*, Paris, 1853, pp. xlviii and *passim*.

10. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, London, 1983.

11. Aziz Al-Azmeh, *Islam and Modernities*, London, 1993, chapters 2-4.

12. On these and other matters addressed below, see Aziz Al-Azmeh, *Al-'Ilmaniyya min Manzur Mukhtalif*, Beirut, 1992, chapters 2-4.

13. Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism*, Cambridge, 1990, pp. 38 and 60.

14. Darius Rejali, *Torture and Modernity. Self, Society, and the State in Modern Iran*, Boulder, Colorado, 1994.

15. Timothy Mitchell, *Colonizing Egypt*, Cambridge, 1989.

16. For instance: Ulrike Freitag, *Geschitsschreibung in Syrien, 1920-1990*, Hamburg, 1991, pp. 124 ff. and *passim*.

17. See *mutatis mutandis*, Anthony D. Smith, "National Identity and the Idea of European Unity", in *International Affairs*, 68(1992), pp. 58-62, 70-71.

18. Sati al-Husri, *Yawm Maysalun*, Beirut, 1947, p. 215. See Al-Azmeh, *Al-Ilmaniyya*, pp. 256-259.

19. Kamal Salibi, *A House of Many Mansions. The History of Lebanon Reconsidered*, London, 1988, pp. 223-225.

20. For instance, Bishop George Khidr, "Al-Masihiyya al-' Arabiyya wa al-Gharb," in *Al-Masihiyyun al-Arab*, ed. Elias Khuri, Beirut, 1981, pp. 84-87.

21. Fernand Braudel, *L'Identité de la France*, Paris, 1986, vol. 1, pp. 112, 238, and *passim*. The idea of a "perpendicular" relationship between Mediterranean and other Arabs is of great fecundity, and can serve as a possible starting point for geographical investigation in the Braudelian sense: Berque, *Arab Rebirth*, p. 4.

22. Sati al-Husri, *Al-Amal al-Qawmiyya*, Beirut, 1985, pp. 2403-2405.

23. Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, London, 1964, p. 309.

24. For instance: Zaki al-Arsuzi, *Mashakiluna al-Qawmiyya wa Mawqif al-Ahzab Minha*, Damascus, 1956, p. 7.

25. See, for instance, G. Hirschfeld and W. J. Mommsen (eds.), *Social Protest, Violence, and Terror in Europe*, London, 1982.

26. See most particularly C. John Sommeville, *The Secularization of Early Modern England. From Religious Culture to Religious Faith*, New York and Oxford, 1992.

27. See most particularly George Corm, *L'Europe et L'Orient de la balcanisation à la libanisation*, Paris, 1989.

28. On this, see Sami Zubaida, "Components of Popular Culture in the Middle East", in *Mass Culture, Popular Culture, and Social Life in the Middle East*, ed. G. Stauth and S. Zubaida, Frankfurt and Boulder, 1987, pp. 137-161.

29. Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilization?" in *Foreign Affairs*, 72/3(1993) pp. 22-49.