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The Concerns and the Challenges

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This chapter is the conclusion of a lengthy quantitative study on Arab nationalism that was conducted by Saad Eddin Ibrahim and associates in 1977, 1978, and 1979. The study was entitled Itajabhat al-Rai al-Am al-Arabi Nahwa Masa'lat al-Wihda (Trends of Arab public opinion toward the issue of unity) and was published in 1980 under the auspices of the Center for Arab Unity Studies. The study involved ten Arab states—Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Sudan, Jordan, Lebanon, Kuwait, Qatar, and Yemen—and included Palestinians living in Kuwait. In their research, Ibrahim and associates used 82 lengthy questions, 14 of which are open-ended and the remaining 68 closed. The respondents, who were not chosen randomly (the majority were convenient target samples), totaled 5,557. The findings of this study cannot be considered as representative of Arab public opinion.

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We have tried to present a topography of the psychological and political realities of the Arab world as documented through a series of field studies. Each chapter expanded and detailed one aspect of these realities, with its high and low points, ambiguities and clarities, and rights and wrongs. The findings were presented just as they were recorded by our researchers in ten different Arab countries, and in the way we translated them into numbers, charts, coefficient relationships, and demonstrative statements. These voluminous details may have gotten in the way of revealing a comprehensive view of Arab realities, just as an enormous trees would obscure a view of the whole forest.

More important than gathering data and interpreting them is discerning the factors that constitute the general map of Arab reality in the present time. In order to construct the map in a way that would reveal a sense

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of the future, we have to be able to separate the basic trends from the ancillary ones. The sociologist who subscribes to an objective method may be content with using statistics and measures in a way that would allow the facts to speak for themselves and would protect the derived conclusions from being influenced by his own preferences. We have tried to adhere to this scientific tradition as much as possible in presenting the data collected by our field workers and if, on occasion, we did provide some explanations or attempt to elucidate a point, it was always at the end of a chapter and was brief. But the sociologist who lives with his research for three years—as we did, who gathers an enormous amount of data; who interacts with the subjects of his research, lives with them, and interacts with the opinions they had expressed; who continues to interact with new data as he gathers it, organizes it, examines it, takes a census of it, analyzes it, presents it, and scientifically comments on it, that researcher will end up with a holistic view of the subject he is examining. This holistic view supersedes the parts from which it is made. The very process of gathering and examining these parts is bound to have influenced the researcher's reasoning and conscience. Thus, the holistic view is a complex result of all the parts making up the field data and the interaction between the data itself and the researcher's individuality.

Alongside this comprehensive view, perhaps even because of it, the researcher develops a set of feelings and perceptions, especially if he is committed both to scientific accuracy and a political cause. This writer is one such, committed as fervently to the idea of Arab unity as he is to precision in research. But his commitment to Arab nationalism is what drove him to apply his scientific training to objectively study the question of unity. An objective study, if it is accurate, will reveal aspects about the subject that will disturb and hurt the researcher—precisely because of his nationalist commitment—or will be a source of joy and elation for the same reason. Whatever those feelings, we deliberately chose to keep them out of the heart of the study and reserved them for the conclusion.

Briefly, in this chapter, we will attempt to tie together the main findings and weave a full picture of how the Arabs are disposed, psychologically and politically, to the idea of unity and all that is connected with it, and also to express some personal feelings that came about as well as some impressions we developed within the course of the three-year period during which this research was conducted.

The Nationalist Ideology

The Arab nation came into being at the end of the 8th century A.D. as a result of the spread of Islamic religion and the Arabic language

by the emigration of many Arab tribes that settled in the region stretching from the Gulf to the Ocean and intermarried and integrated with the people there who adopted Islam. The three centuries that followed laid the foundation for an immense cultural process. Not only was the Arab nation objectively in existence by the 11th century, but it had been developed educationally, sociologically, and intuitively, like any other nation in the full scientific import of the word. And it continued developing and crystallizing for the next ten centuries.

Intellectually speaking, there is a difference between the objective existence of the Arab nation and the call of nationalism. Nationalism means a people's awareness of being culturally different from other peoples, a consciousness of affiliation with a particular entity and a desire to have this consciousness transformed into a political expression embodying the people's hopes for independence, self-determination, and a better life.

According to this definition, Arab nationalism is a new notion that goes back to the 19th century. Prior to that time, it was the religious identity embodied in Islam that predominated. This identity united the Arabs with other non-Arab Muslims and enabled them to live and socialize under the aegis of the Islamic empire. The rise of their own cultural identity, represented by Arabism, can be seen as the result of several interconnecting structural, international, and cultural factors and forces. The Islamic empire, which was started and ruled by the Arabs, was first taken over by the Persians and then by the Turks. When Arab nationalism was propounded in modern times, the reins of government were still in the hands of the Turks, represented by Ottoman Sultans. But by that time, the Arab world in both its western and middle parts had fallen into the hands of the Western imperialists. The severely weakened Ottoman Empire had failed to prevent the Western imperialists from taking those parts of the Arab nation. Although the Arab East remained under Ottoman rule until the beginning of the century, suffering harsh treatment, oppression, maladministration, and Turkish corruption, it nevertheless was affected by new cultural and intellectual trends that were sweeping the Arab world throughout the 19th century, trends that carried within them new liberal ideas about democracy, freedom, progress, science, and "nationhood."

The weakness and crumbling of the Ottoman Empire, imperialist aggression, Turkish despotism, modern intellectual currents, all these factors interacted to create the right climate for the call of Arab nationalism. This nationalist idea centered around two aims: the independence of the Arab world and the unification of all its parts into one state. The modern history of the Arab nationalist call and that of the political movements that were associated with it for a century are

historically documented and available to anyone interested in digging deeper into the question of Arab nationalism.

The nationalist call tends to preach an ideology. In this case, the ideology is an awareness of the existence of a separate Arab world that encompasses a nation whose inhabitants feel and share a sense of belonging and a belief in the legitimate political expression of the nation's hopes of achieving unity, independence, and freedom. And like any new evangelical call, those who believed in it began as small groups and then spread out to the eastern north and then to the rest of the Arab world, south and west. This call received support from the nationalist organizations and parties, and from the late leader Gamal Abd al-Nasir, although the advocacy of this call predated him by a century. These forces moved the discourse on Arab nationalism from the level of political and intellectual elitist circles to that of the masses in the street, from Baghdad to D'ar Al-Ba'daa.

What are the achievements of Arab nationalism after the century and a half since its birth?

As for belief in this idea, we found that around 80 percent of those whom we asked believe in the existence of the Arab world as a separate cultural entity and in the existence of one Arab nation living within the boundaries of that area. We found an intense desire that there be a stronger cooperation between the various parts of the Arab world and that this cooperation should assume the form of political unification. We also found a commonality of feelings and an awareness of the greater problems that face the Arab nation.

As for the political achievements of Arab nationalism; they have been rather modest and have not quite lived up to the great expectations that the people had pinned on their leaders and regimes. Most Arab countries gained independence; the Arab League was founded with its specialized agencies in different fields. The Arabs attempted to forge more than one unity, but all came to nothing. The Arabs also waged several wars against Israel on behalf of the Palestinian people, but in most of these they came away with either political or military defeats.

Arab Unity

If the nationalist ideology gained firm ground throughout the 20th century, this solid base at the level of belief and feeling was accompanied by several setbacks in the area of political achievements, both in unifying the countries of the Arab nation and in battling external enemies.

Despite these setbacks, the hope of realizing Arab unity runs strong amongst most Arabs. But today this call for unity is underlined by a measure of realism and rationalism. Arab public opinion reflects a

growing awareness of the obstacles to be overcome if such a unity is to be realized. This realism had manifested itself in many respects among those whom we interviewed.

For example, few people believe that total unity can be brought about in the near future; they regard the possibility of unity as more likely in a distant, if not a far-off, future. Nonetheless, the majority believe in partial unification in the near future, a unity that would include two or more Arab states, the probability of which would depend on whether the states are adjacent and whether their political differences can be surmounted.

The majority of Arab public opinion opted for a federal unity, in which each country preserves its internal independence and deals with its domestic affairs, leaving for a centralized government the power to oversee matters involving defense, foreign policy, and coordination of the various countries' developmental plans in the social and economic realms.

Most Arabs have expressed a preference to see the hoped-for unity accomplished through peaceful and democratic means, whether the unity in question was partial, as between two states or more, or total. They have rejected outright any use of military force to bring about that unity.

A further indication of the realism inherent in Arab public opinion bearing on matters of unity is a deep awareness of the obstacles to accomplishing such a goal. Among these are the foreign powers, headed by the United States, Arab rulers, and a diminishing political consciousness.

To the majority, the idea of Arab unity is no longer the mere expression of a romantic, symbolic, and emotional longing, though these feelings are still present. What is novel is a clear conception that the prospect of unity depends on linking such a hope to practical considerations and interests. Arab public opinion perceives unity not only as a buffer to foreign domination but also as a means to serve each country, bringing prosperity to all its members.

Islam, Nationalism, and Arab Unity

Islam as a religion and a culture was an essential factor in the expansion of the Arab nation, whose population lives in the area stretching from the Gulf to the Ocean. But the definition of who is an Arab today is first a cultural definition, not a religious one. An Arab is anyone who speaks Arabic, adopts the Arab culture, intuitively feels it, and is also conscious of belonging to a particular human group known as the Arab nation. Among the leaders of the Arab nationalist movement are those

who are not Muslims. In other words, religion is not a condition either for being an Arab or for Arabism. At its outset, the Arab nationalist movement attempted to stress the cultural and the secular identity of Arab nationalism over every other identity. This emphasis was necessary and functional, for at that time the Arabs were struggling against the Turks, who are Muslims and who were ruling the Arabs in the name of the Islamic Caliphate. Although that period came to an end with the fall of the Caliphate and the secession of the Arabs from the Turkish Empire, the emphasis on the cultural and the secular identity of Arabism continued to be a factor among the second and third generations of the leaders of the Arab nationalist movement and remains important today. But the truth is that none of those leaders denied the essential role Islam played in the creation of the Arab nation; they were not hostile towards Islam nor did they attack it in the name of Arab nationalism. All this confirms another identity pushing to the surface, that is, a stress on Arab culture as a link and a uniting factor between the Muslim and non-Muslim Arabs.

This secular presentation of Arab nationalism, advocated by nationalist thinkers and those supporting Arab unity, was confined to learned elites. But the popular masses, especially the peasants, the workers, and the Bedouins, did not intellectually distinguish between their cultural and religious identity. For them, there is only one identity in which religion, culture, language, and nationalist affiliation mix. Furthermore, these masses see Arabism and Islam as being the same, i.e., they are inseparable. This explains why they respond to the call to Arabism as a call to Islam, and to the call to Islam as a call to Arabism. This phenomenon manifests itself more in the North African countries where all the people are Arab Muslims; and, to a great extent, in Egypt.

That is why we have found that the majority of the people whom we interviewed consider Islam as one of the essential components of the Arab nation. A large group—if not the majority—among those interviewed do not oppose uniting the nation on an Islamic basis. Some would even go as far as to see Arab unity as a first step towards a greater unity, namely the unity of all the Islamic peoples. Those preferring such unity, however, are not a majority, but they seem to represent a minority that is growing.

There are several reasons why we raise the question of religion at the end of this study, an issue that was also referred to in the third section. Firstly, the religious factor kept coming back on more than one occasion while we were conducting our field work, and mainly by those who were interviewed. Secondly, the revivalist Islamic movements have grown considerably in various parts of the Arab world. The Iranian events further confirmed that religion remains a powerful force in Middle

Eastern societies. "The reawakening of Islam," as it is called in the West, grew stronger with the increasing difficulties of the Arab ruling regimes (mostly those of secular orientation) in confronting major problems. In other words, most people take refuge in religion as the road to salvation in the times of trial and overwhelming crisis. It was therefore not surprising that the religious movements had been strengthened in the wake of the 1967 defeat.

What we intend to focus on here are the following:

- There is neither a basic contradiction nor an inconsistency between the Islamic religion and Arab nationalism. Any attempt to create artificial preferences between the religious and the secular identity would lead to a vicious circle. In fact, such attempts would entail waste of effort and energy and would benefit the enemies of Islam and Arabism.

- If Arab nationalism in its recent rebirth stressed the cultural identity, it was to draw a distinction between Arabs and Turks. This was essential, for the Arabs were waging a battle against Ottoman despotism, which claimed to speak in the name of Islam. But this battle was waged and settled a good half-century ago. There is no longer anyone dominating the Arabs in the name of Islam. Those who attack Arab nations in particular and the Islamic ones in general are from outside the region, the foreign powers.

- Like most great heavenly religions, Islam in practice has two faces: ~~the first concentrates on reviving the past and on metaphysics.~~ It resists change and preaches obedience to outdated conventions and thus becomes a power in the hands of despotic regimes and local and international forces, powers known for their hostility towards the people. The other face is revolutionary Islam, which focuses on originality, justice, progress. It spearheads the resistance against internal exploitation, imperialism, and foreign domination and thus becomes a power in the hands of nations. The Algerian revolution is a classical example of this second face of Islam. Everything this Islam calls for coincides and is consistent with the call of modern Arab nationalism. What Arab nations rejected at the end of the last and the beginning of this century was not this type of Islam. Instead, what had been rejected was the metaphysical and the outmoded practice that was preached in the name of Islam and did not protect Islam from foreign domination.

- Metaphysical, despotic, and rigid Islam not only is the enemy of the people but also resists progress, nurtures blind dogmatism, and fails to offer basic solutions to the question of citizenship and of the rights

of the non-Muslim minorities. Revolutionary Islam, however, is more able to address today's problems and to lay down a basis for equality and justice to all citizens, Muslim and non-Muslim alike.

- Foreign powers are disturbed by any political movement that calls for independence, freedom, and justice—whether the movement is of an Arab or Islamic orientation. The West had encouraged any Islamic movement or alliance that opposed progress. We have witnessed this in the fifties (the Baghdad Pact) and the sixties (the Islamic Alliance). This type of Islam posed no danger to the West. On the contrary, it furthered the West's aims and interests. As for the rise of any revolutionary political Islamic movement, the West would try to crush it in its inception, and the same would be the fate of any Arab coalition. It is the West, represented by Britain, that encouraged the creation of the Arab League in the forties. And it is the West too that tried to seize the first opportunity to break the back of any nationalist Arab revolutionary movement like Nasserism.

- The Islamic revolution and Arab nationalism are complementary, or at least the common ground between them is great. Both oppose imperialism, Zionism, and racism; both call for justice, equality, and liberation. This demands a reevaluation of Islam by leaders of nationalist thought and proponents of Arab unity. These leaders should realize that for the majority of the masses, mainly peasants and workers, religious and national identity are interlocked to the point of being one and the same. It is neither possible nor in the interest of the Arab nation to arbitrarily distinguish between the two identities.

- This same common ground between Islamic revolution and Arab nationalism places a similar responsibility on the shoulders of Muslim intellectuals. They too have to take a second look at Arab nationalism and should become aware that there is no contradiction between religious and national identity. It is neither possible nor in the interest of Islam to arbitrarily separate one identity from the other, and these intellectuals should not encourage their followers to establish illusory preferences between the two identities. Muslim intellectuals have a further task, which is to extend the common ground so that it becomes complementary. Even more important, they should come out with new formulas regarding citizenship and the non-Muslim minorities. It is insufficient that these minorities live safely in countries where the majorities are Muslims; what is needed is that they should be able to feel and exercise their rights and responsibilities according to the principles of justice and equality.

Lebanon, Sudan, and Morocco

We have seen that the level of national consciousness and enthusiasm for Arab unity is weaker in some Arab countries than in others. In this regard, we mention Lebanon, Sudan, and Morocco. We attempted to explain the reasons for the weak Arab unionist tendencies in these countries. We will not belabor this point except to say that the three countries combine human, social, and ethnic groups more diverse than those of the other seven countries in which we conducted our studies. This means that we cannot underestimate the importance of the lack of homogeneity in education and in ancestry as factors influencing the formation of values and orientations.

Most people in the Arab world speak Arabic and embrace Islam. This unity of religion and language is the basis for a unity of culture and values and for a unity in lifestyle and an overall view on issues. We have mentioned that in each of the three countries there are communities which differ from the majority either in language or in religion, or in both. It is this fact that creates differences in directions, as well as in national affiliation and the desire for achieving Arab unity.

We would like to point out that these differences are in no way metaphysical or permanent. There are structural factors that could create an opportunity for changing these directions in a way that serves the nationalist and unionist ends of the majority. Class and particularist factors have shown throughout history their tremendous power in forging beliefs and nationalist tendencies. This means that the ethnic groups that show little enthusiasm at the present time for Arab unity may be won over to support the nationalist cause if the right conditions become available. Among these conditions are the following:

- Creating Arab unity schemes that include tangible material and economic interests for the ethnic groups' members.
- Ensuring and solidifying their political participation and their perception of citizenship and equality with those of the Arab majority groups.
- Offering these groups the opportunity to protect and develop their own cultural heritage within the framework of the broad Arab culture.

The second point that we raise in this regard is that we completed our study in the Arab countries at one historical period. This means that what appeared to be weak Arab nationalist sentiment or unionist tendencies in Lebanon, Sudan, and Morocco is, firstly, weak in relation to the other seven countries. The majority in these three countries—

over 50 percent—confirmed its nationalist affiliation and unionist tendencies. Thus, what we consider “weakness” is only in comparison with other countries where over 80 percent of the population expressed their Arab nationalist affiliation and unionist tendencies.

Secondly, the present orientations in these three countries—as documented during the 1978–1979 period—tell nothing about past or future orientations.

Most likely the Arab nationalist and unionist consciousness was stronger in Lebanon in an earlier period than it is at the present. No doubt the Lebanese Civil War, the complications of the Palestinian problem, and the overall deteriorating situation in the Arab world during the past ten years had a tremendous impact in defining the political currents in Lebanon at the time we were conducting this study. The Lebanese events polarized the opinions of the major groups that make up Lebanon. This polarization—as we had seen in different parts—assumed the form of feeling strongly either for or against Arab affiliation and unity.

Moreover, we have noticed a reduction in the number of those espousing moderate views, namely those who cautiously support or oppose the idea of Arab unity and nationalism. It is believed that once the political turmoil of Lebanon settles, this polarization will be reduced, especially if the future stability is accompanied by an increase in the size and interdependence of the economic interests between Lebanon and other Arab countries, as it was in the 1950s and the 1960s.

It is most likely that in Morocco and the Sudan, nationalist and unionist tendencies are on a constant rise. In the Sudan, this can be attributed to the end of the civil war in 1973 and also to the growing cultural and economic interaction between the Sudan on one hand and the Arab oil-producing countries on the other.

It is evident in several ways that the nationalist idea is beginning to be influential in Morocco. There is a continuing process of Arabization and an increase in the number of those reading Arabic, a development reflected in an increased circulation of publications from the Arab East in a market that had formerly been monopolized by French-language publications. There has also been a growing interest among Moroccans, rulers and citizens alike, in Arab affairs, especially the Palestinian question. Morocco’s participation in the 1973 war, and its hosting of several Arab summit conferences, tallies with the Arab nationalist tide, a phenomenon many observers have noted to be common to all the countries of North Africa. We have already shown the responses given to us by the Tunisian community, whose strong nationalist tendencies turned out to be one of this research’s surprises. Morocco appears to be moving in the same direction. That is, we would expect—should we

in the perspective of a few more years conduct a similar study—to find nationalist feelings and unionist tendencies in Morocco to be increasing rather than decreasing, especially if the oil-rich countries continue to interact with Morocco.

The Major Problems at the Outset of the Eighties

What this fieldwork explicitly revealed was presented in the preceding chapters. What it implicitly revealed, however, was derived and stated in this concluding chapter. We want to end this research with a word on the important issues that will confront the Arab world in the decade of the eighties.

We should hasten to point out, as we begin, that the social-political history of any society does not follow a chronological order. Instead, it works in a dialectical manner, leaving little room to distinguish a day or a decade from the next. Moreover, human reason tends to perceive matters according to systematic methods, perhaps due to its inability to understand them comprehensively within time and place.

Despite this limitation, the following issues are bound to preoccupy the Arab world throughout the decade that began a few months ago:

- An increase in external threats and the intensification of the struggle between the superpowers over the domination of the Arab world.
- The growing complexity of the relationship between religion and state.
- The struggle between the Arab rich and poor.
- The eruption of internal class struggle within various Arab countries.
- The question of democracy and the revolution against oppressive regimes.
- The sectarian question and the issue of minorities in general.

It suffices to mention those main points without going into their complex implications. This is not the proper place for such a discussion. In various parts of this study, we have already touched upon some of these issues. But the main reason for reiterating these points in this concluding section is to highlight them in order that they may assume top priority on the future agenda of Arab nationalists. It is imperative that thinkers who emphasize Arab unity should research and study these problems and arrive at rational solutions that are highly verifiable and to which the Arab people from the Gulf to the Ocean can relate. To reach a correct theoretical position is no great feat. To turn a theoretical proposition into a viable political program is the challenge.

These are the concerns and these are the challenges.