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International Relations in the Middle East — Pr. Fawaz Gerges

WAS ARAB NATIONALISM A CAUSE OR A SYMPTOM OF THE LOW SALIENCE OF SOVEREIGNTY IN THE MIDDLE EAST?

“When co-operation with other Arab states is the priority, or when a state wishes to legitimate its intervention in the affairs of another state, the qaumi [pan-Arab identity] predominates. When a state wishes to downplay the shared interests of the Arab world, or justify confrontation with another state, the qutri [local identity] comes to the fore.”

As Halliday (2005) puts it in the above quotation, the specificity of the Middle East does not lie in an exceptional pattern of powerful “*supra-state identities (Arabism and Islam) [prevailing] over state conduct, and the near absence of national states*” (Hinnebusch 2009), but rather in the strong interplay and alternation between two identities, one at the State level and one at the regional level.

Much of the work of International Relation theorists on the Middle East has, in an Middle East Studies/Orientalist view, often relied on the assumption that Arab culture and identity was deemed so salient that it could prevail over national identities and sovereignty, and keep the implementation of the State-system from succeeding. The perceived unity of the region was thought to be at the root of high permeability of State affairs and borders. The Arab Nationalist movement has had recourse to this broad identity to advocate for the creation of an Arab nation, and used this as the rationale not only for many attempts at State mergers, but also for justifying many interferences in domestic affairs at the regional level. Thus, there seems to be a real entanglement between regional identity bounds claimed by Arab Nationalists, and the low salience of sovereignty in the region. But could we say that Arab Nationalism was at the origin of the low saliency of sovereignty in the Middle East? Is low sovereignty the sickness of the Arab state-system, and Arab Nationalism one of its symptoms? Does Arab Nationalism embody a rejection of this system at the government or popular levels?

In fact, after analyzing these complex ties between Arab nationalism and Arab tendencies to interfere in their neighbors’ affairs, I shall argue that the dichotomy between State sovereign interests and Arab nationalist ideas needs to be qualified. The widely spread belief that repeated interferences and the existence of an Arab Nationalist movement are proof of the failed adaptation of Middle East to the system of nation-States has to be seriously questioned, as this supra-national identity actually constitutes a strong basis for nationalist ideas and rather reflects a different conception of the boundary between domestic and foreign issues. Moreover, the development of Arab Nationalism demonstrated the importance of state interests and national independence desires at the scale of the Middle East, contradicting the incompatibility of the system of States with the territorial organization in the region.

First, I will try to shed light on the links between the low salience of sovereignty in the Arab world and the Arab Nationalist movements, and try to nuance the strong opposition between sovereign interests and pan-Arab ideas.

One should first take a look at the history of the region, especially how States came into being. It has been argued that Arab Nationalism was born in reaction to the formation of artificial borders by external powers onto a unique and unified space and community, which could not in turn identify with this new structure. It is true that in fact, when the Sykes-Picot agreements planned the repartition of Middle-Eastern territories between France and Great Britain, little attention was paid to the sociological logics and cultural identities of the territories, who had long organized themselves at the community-level and enjoyed a certain (yet varying) degree of autonomy and self-rule. Yet although Sharif Husayn appealed to the sentiment of unity of the Arab people, as early as in 1915, the existence of this pan-Arab idea is already questionable. Even at the time of the Ottoman empire's fall, there seems to be no real Arab identity nor desire for an Arab nation among the population (Sharif Husayn's discourse on Arab unity is most often analyzed as an opportunistic move to gain popular legitimacy in prevision for his rule of the – never to be created – pan-Arab nation).

Another common argument is that the only way to build identity and sovereign states was to rely on pan-Arab characteristics, as there was no specific feature to these "imagined communities" (Benedict Anderson 1983). Arab nationalism was one feature of this broad identity, which explained the collusion of national interests at the domestic and at the regional level that triggered interference on multiple occasions. As Halliday puts it (2005), Arab State governments "use[d], and abuse[d] Islamic identity and solidarity in the Middle East".

Moreover, we can consider, as Dieckhoff and Jaffrelot argue¹, that this example crystallizes a common misconception, which still shapes the Western vision of the Middle East: similarities in culture, language and religion do not equal collusion of interests and political coherence. Talking about an encompassing "Arab identity" makes little sense for such a vast and diverse area as the Middle East. In this sense, Arab Nationalist movements can be seen not as the voice of a region-wide community, but rather as a discourse wishing to compensate for the originally low State sovereignties in the region.

Thus, this presumed "incongruity of nation and territorial state" (Binder 1964) is thought to be at the origin of the violence and instability at the domestic and regional level, as this supposed continuity of territory and identity across borders is often put forward to justify interference between the Arab States. Middle Eastern states, then and now, have used this perceived continuity in Arab culture, history and identity claimed by Arab Nationalism, as rhetorical justifications for first the ousting of external powers and the assertion of their own independent States, but also as the reason of their "concern"

¹ "Most pan-nationalist movement aborted because they rested on the wrong premise that territorial contiguity and cultural affinity would be sufficient to produce common interests and social proximity. Yet it was never actually the case." (Dieckhoff et Jaffrelot 2006)

for other Arab States' matters. The rationale behind this is that, as part of an "Arab nation", States want to maintain stability on their neighbors' territory and thus "need" to "rescue" the "little sister" nations when times of trouble or challenges to order come. As an example, this type of discourse is still visible today, as in the case of Saudi Arabia, helping the Bahraini government to fight back against their domestic Arab Spring movements in 2011 for the sake of regional stability.

These arguments, very present in the literature on International relations in the Middle East up until today, however reflect a bias of interpretation that sees the "imported" State model as incompatible with regional identity feelings, and fails to distinguish how each of these countries, from the unification discourses built stronger national identities. Moreover, one needs to account for the discrepancy between the rhetoric of Arab nationalism and the actual attitudes towards unity, which leads me to argue that although there is a constructivist attachment to ideas as vectors of norms in Arab Nationalism, there is also a very strong influence of realist State interests in adopting such a discourse.

Arab Nationalism, as a set of ideas that was supposed to carry international norms shared by all the Arab nations, could seem at first sight to be a perfect example of constructivist approaches to International Relations. Yet paradoxically, Arab Nationalist ideas always gained momentum in times where (State) nationalism was needed to create new structures, or legitimize government changes. For instance, the key moments of attention to Arab Nationalism were at the end of World War One, when the status of Ottoman provinces was being discussed (with el-Fatat, Sharif Husayn of Mecca), or in the 1930s-40s, when European empires started to dismantled (with Mehmet Ali in Egypt, the pan-Arab Bloudan Conference in 1937, the creation of Arab Nationalist Party in 1938 in Iraq, Palestinian Nationalist movements...). It reached its climax in the 1960s with Egyptian president, Gamal Abdel Nasser, making Arab nationalism one of the key features of his mandate. Thus, already from the context one cannot omit the federating role of these movements inside Arabs society: never was a unique and encompassing Arab State created, however all these states managed to get strong popular support from appealing to these transnational ideas. Gamal Abdel Nasser needed to gain legitimacy to rule after his coup, Palestinians were seeking a strong voice to oppose Israel's expansionist tendencies, and the young Ba'ath party in Iraq and Jordan needed to appeal to the masses. In fact, by resorting to these appealing symbols of Arab grandeur and to feelings that resonated among Arab populations, such as the Islamic Umma, the Arab nationalists managed to secure their own position at the head of their country. Thus, as contradictory as it seems at first sight, appealing to regional identity through examples that magnifies one's important role in this region was a crucial drive in building national identities in these heterogeneous States, allowing them to reinforce their legitimacy and sovereignty.

In a realist perspective here, we could also say that those countries who sought to realize the objectives of Arab nationalism were not only few, but also strongly motivated by their own interests in this quest. "Arab leaders felt little hesitation in appropriating the symbols of Arabism in their search for regime stability and regional influence, recognizing that such symbols were ripe for accumulation and highly effective in controlling the foreign policies of the other Arab States because their populations more readily identified with the symbols of Arabism than with the symbols of State" (Barnett 1995). One striking example of this opportunism could be the impulse by Nasser to create the United Arab Republic in 1958 (only to die 3 years later) gathering Syria and Egypt under a single nation. In fact, besides the discourses of sisterhood and friendly cooperation, Egypt's domination of the alliance and its obvious attempts to assert its might over the Syrian part of the Republic demonstrated the pragmatic discrepancy between the ideology and values of Arab nationalism and the actual behaviors of States who held this discourse.

One could also easily argue that the Arab unification initiatives emanated mainly from the "centers" of the Arab world, that is to say, the most powerful countries, who were trying to assert their power on a wider scale. Indeed, the main Arab unity calls were made by Egypt and Iraq at a time when they had substantial roles in the region, and Arab nationalist ideas are today relayed particularly strongly by the first Arab military power, Saudi Arabia, although it takes a clearer side towards its religious dimension. This center-periphery assertion could draw us to see the Middle East case as somewhat related to the Marxist theories of International Relations.

In this sense, Arab nationalism was not so much a threat to national sovereignties, but a tool, used by these increasingly national States, to reinforce their role and power at the regional level. Then, one could expect that the dislocation of the UAR and the Egyptian defeat against Israel in 1967 would have given a deadly blow to the Arab Nationalist idea. In fact, although the idea of an Arab States' unification lost popularity, the movement has stayed quite lively. In the past fifty years, we still have seen appeals to Arab Nationalism in government discourses and actions – going back to the "sister-interference" in the Arab world, but also as leaders kept on appealing to its principles for self-reinforcing purposes, as did Saddam Hussein, and like in Palestine since the beginning of its territorial and legitimacy struggle with Israel. On the other hand, it gained popularity among smaller groups seeking to counter-balance the powers in place, such as the Hezbollah or the Egyptian Kefaya movement. Maybe one could argue, as Dawisha did, that we are not experiencing a demise of Arab Nationalism, but rather its transformation and re-appropriation by "National" nationalists, arguing for the ideas without aiming at the structural change (namely the unification of all Arab nations). As he rightfully says, the idea of demise "downplays the extent to which Arab nationalism was a condition and a dynamic causal element in the emergence of the plurality of nationalisms in the Arab Middle East" (Dawisha 2005)

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