

August 31, 2009 - CDDRL, FSI Stanford Op-ed

Back to the future

The Arab nationalist tradition and the political imagination of today

Appeared in *Le Monde Diplomatique*, August 1, 2009

Hicham Ben Abdallah - Stanford University

The Arab and Muslim world is indeed in crisis. This crisis, however, may give us a new opportunity to reclaim our fate from foreign powers, local autocrats, and religious fanatics. To do so, we can benefit from recuperating the best elements from our great tradition of Arab nationalism.

Under the banner of "Arab nationalism," we have had many moments of bravery, unity, and triumph. Arab nationalism ended colonialism and forged connections among emerging states, making an indelible mark on the history. This nationalism was not perfect, but it was crucial in our struggles for self-determination, and provided a unifying vision--a project for a future beyond sectarian or even national interests. It is a vision that we need more than ever today.

This vision is still alive among the peoples of the Middle East and North Africa. We can see it, for example, in the constant demonstrations of support for the Palestinian cause. It also underlies the appeal of various forms of fundamentalism. As much as they discomfit the West and secular Arabs, these currents embody precisely that yearning for a unified community. The *umma* may have replaced the Arab nation, and Islamism may have taken up the banner of resistance from Arab nationalism for many Muslims, but forms of Islamism have always been with us, and nationalist and Islamic currents have always been intertwined

Arab nationalism itself aimed to be a pan-Arab "supra-nationalism." Even while fighting for national independence, it maintained a vision of the transnational community and a respect for the shared Islamic character of peoples and cultures. The secular nationalist Michel Aflaq saw the strong connections between Islam and Arab nationalism, and prophesized that "A day will come when the nationalists will find themselves the only defenders of Islam.

Thus, Arab nationalism always shared a number of themes with Islamist movements: the search for a unified collective consciousness, the desire for a renaissance of Arab language and culture and, of course, anti-imperialism. Resurgent political Islamism, in turn, has absorbed many positions and lessons from its secular nationalist cousin.

It has become commonplace to remark how Islamism has taken up the banner of resistance to Western domination, and of cultural and even national independence. For decades, however, it was the West and "moderate" Arab governments which sought to exploit the conservative Islamist currents against the radical nationalists. Our "dirty little secret" - Islamists and secular nationalists included - is that no one has been immune to the opportunistic lure of complicity with foreign powers bent on regional hegemony for their own purposes. We must get past this deadly mutual instrumentalism. It has corrupted great nationalist movements and turned Islam into a doctrine of division and - at the extremes -- armed fanaticism.

The attempt to set the Arab world against Iran is the latest instance of this futile strategy. A generalized Sunni-Shiite conflict would destroy pan-Islamism as surely as national selfishness destroyed pan-Arabism. Regimes and populations have resisted this strategy. Arab states have insisted that concerns about Iran be addressed in the context of the region as a whole. During the latest Gaza crisis, populations throughout the Arab world kept in check the opportunistic tendencies of certain regimes, and expressed trans-confessional solidarity with the Palestinian

resistance. At moments like these, we see that the spirit of pan-Arab nationalism *and* pan-Islamic solidarity lives.

A revival of this spirit will not come from governments, but from the region-wide popular movements that form in the abyss between regimes and people. A revival of this spirit will not come from governments, but from the region-wide popular movements that form in the abyss between regimes and people. There, we see the yearning for a new form of "nationalism without a nation" that can provide justice, unity and true independence throughout the Arab world. Islamic movements are not the true fulfillment of the nationalist promise, but they have infused it with a renewed spirit of resistance and collective energy. If the self-perpetuating authoritarian regimes, built by nationalist parties, helped to bury Arab nationalism, the new resistance movements, often led by Islamists, are helping to revive it.

A new form of pan-nationalism is arising - generally secular, while still assertive of Arab and Islamic identity, and proud of being involved with the other cultures and languages of the world. This form of consciousness is embedded in new means of international communication, in new networks that have been created among the diaspora and indigenous communities, and in new, creative and profane uses of culture and language that have developed. It detests authoritarianism and corruption, and yearns for democracy and the rule of law, while firmly rejecting foreign military intervention and refusing Western condescension. Where traditional nationalism and Islamism want to be restrictive and controlling, it wants to be capacious and daring, opening our imaginations to new cultural and social possibilities.

This incipient form of transnationalist, pan-Arab consciousness still lacks political effectiveness. It gets squeezed between politically adept forces that speak for state authority or preach *sharia*. Societies remain divided between an ossified "patriotic" nationalism (*wataniya*) and a powerful but politically amorphous yearning for transnational solidarity (*qawmiya*). The result is a kind of three-way divorce *à l'italienne*, with the three parties - the state and its clients, secular and progressive constituencies, and Islamic currents - living uncomfortably separate lives under the same national roof.

The present economic crisis may provide new opportunities for those with a secular and democratic perspective to shape the debate. In the face of worsening social conditions, Islamists do not have a particularly attractive economic agenda. Their substitute, *sharia*, has some popular appeal as a means of reducing crime and corruption, but their notion of social justice is caritative, not political; it seeks to alleviate the plight of the poor through alms, rather than to reduce poverty through structural change.

Thus, it was independent activists who mobilized thousands of Egyptians against the reversal of popular Nasserite land reforms, and organized strikes and demonstrations in the Nile delta during the spring of 2008, while Islamists either hesitated or fully adopted the defense of state policies. Islamists are generally uncomfortable with these kinds of movements, which engender a discourse of popular empowerment that slips beyond their control. As these movements spread, they will offer progressive forces new opportunities to shape the agenda with a discourse of justice based on social rights.

We must be wary of false optimism, however. These mobilizations remain rare, and regimes use every tool to prevent such social movements from coalescing with each other or, especially, with Islamist movements. Regimes have become adept at co-opting discourses of cultural or national identity, defending putatively Islamic values against demands for social and human rights, characterized as Western intrusions. This helps to reproduce the division between Islamists and progressives, pushing the latter into a culturalist "identity trap."

Of course, we cannot ignore the fundamental disparity between progressive and Islamist perspectives. On a theoretical level, these two notions are irreconcilable. Still, there will be significant opportunities for alliances that can be tactically advantageous to both currents and substantively important to the people of our region. And the principles that will enable effective, unified action will be the same principles that motivated our historic nationalist movements: a passion for national and regional independence, a commitment to regional cooperation, an insistence on equal and consistent treatment in international affairs. Across ethnic and confessional groups, the people of the region share a vision of a polity that provides political freedom and the rule of law for all citizens, while improving the economic and social lives of our populations. Whether they call themselves secular or Islamist, the most successful movements in our region will be the ones which can most credibly claim to advance these principles.

We do not wish to underestimate the difficulties we face. Neither nationalism nor Islamism is necessarily about democracy. It is understandable, given the arrogant and hypocritical foreign discourses in which they are embedded, that many of our people view the concepts of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law with suspicion. The interventions of the West create a lot of trouble, but also introduce new strategies and ideas - ideas that we can use to create new openings for ourselves. We can see how, in places like Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine, the promotion of "democracy" has, however unintentionally, opened new possibilities that have been exploited by local forces to strengthen their credibility and independence.

We must use all opportunities to reawaken the progressive spirit of nationalism, to transform the best of our past into something real and new, creating spaces of unity, democracy and pluralism. We must use all opportunities to reawaken the progressive spirit of nationalism, to transform the best of our past into something real and new, creating spaces of unity, democracy, and pluralism. In doing that, we cannot afford to ignore any of the lessons of our history, or of the rest of the world. We must insist on incorporating the new and powerful lessons of the last 60 years. To paraphrase Michel Aflaq again, democracy, political and intellectual freedom, a respect for human rights, and the rule of law are, we find, the only effective defenders of nationalism *and* Islam. The day has come.