

## ***Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century: From Triumph to Despair***

By Adeed Dawisha (Princeton, New Jersey 2003)

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### **Book Review**

By Zihni Ozdil

Adeed Dawisha is Professor of Political Science at Miami University, Ohio. His main focus of research is comparative and international politics of the Middle East. In his 2003 book *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century: From Triumph to Despair*, Dawisha chronologically describes the rise and decline of twentieth century Arab nationalism. Starting with the ideology's nascence in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, the book analyzes the important theories, events and personalities that shaped Arab nationalism until its eventual demise after 1967.

In Chapter one, Dawisha provides the theoretical framework for his book. He states that Arab nationalism is a 'hollow and meaningless concept if it did not strive to gather its children under one roof in one unified and sovereign Arab state' (Dawisha, 2003, p.4). Consequently, Arab nationalism is defined as Arabism, that is, Arab cultural uniformity, combined with a 'strong desire for political unity in a specified demarcated territory' (Dawisha, 2003, pp.13).

The second chapter argues that the 'intellectual seeds' of Arab nationalism can be traced to a number of nineteenth century thinkers. A certain Arab consciousness, however, has been preserved since the beginning of Islamic expansion and the spread of the Arabic language. When the Ottoman Empire put most of the Arabic speaking peoples under her realm from the sixteenth century, the center of Islamic power was no longer Arabic. Simultaneously, Western influences from that period onwards – with the Roman papacy's establishment of colleges for priesthood for the eastern churches – started an Arabic literary revival, which was the seed for the first signs of Arab nationalism among Arab literary figures in the nineteenth century. These early signs were, in contrast to later forms of Arab nationalism, religiously motivated. Authors like Jamal al-Din al Afghani, Muhammad Abdu, Rashid Rida, and Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi essentially propagated a regeneration and reformation for the sake of Islamic unity. It was predominantly Arab Christian thinkers who in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century started to promote secular nationalism modeled on the European nation-states. For example, Syrian Christian Negib Azoury was, according to Dawisha, the earliest thinker to promote Arab national independence. These Christian intellectuals did not appeal to the majority of the 'Arab' population of the time.

Chapter three focuses on Sati al-Husri's Theory of Arab Nationalism. Husri was a Syrian Muslim who was a bureaucrat for the Ottoman government. In this function he was sent to the Balkans, where he saw the mass appeal of nationalist movements. There, Husri developed a theory of Arab nationalism, which put primacy on the

importance of forming a national consciousness by creating a national educational system, thereby surpassing any sub-identities. Moreover, Dawisha points out two secular conceptions of 'nation' that were developed in Europe; the English/French political concept based on nation-state reciprocity, and the German cultural concept based on ethnic, linguistic and historical homogeneity. Husri favored the German notion of linguistic and historical unity. Keeping in line with the secular hallmark of European theories of nationalism, Husri also developed the secular notion of 'Umma al Arabiya', by which he separated the term 'Umma' from Islam and focused instead on the Arab community.

The next five chapters trace the rise of Arab nationalism as a mass-appealing political paradigm from the nineteen twenties until her 'apex', marked by the creation of the United Arab Republic and the Iraqi revolution in the late fifties. Dawisha describes Iraq's importance as a point of departure. Iraq was perceived to be most useful by early Arab nationalists, because it was at that time the most autonomous of all Arab regions and was the main base of Husri's ideas. For the nationalists of the twenties and thirties, both Islam and competing sub-identities needed to be eliminated as a dividing factor. Besides sectarianism, regionalism, and tribalism, high illiteracy rates further challenged the early nationalists in their quest to disseminate their secular-nationalist ideas among the broader Arab population. Furthermore, Egypt was a problematic region in Arab nationalist paradigms since Egyptians already considered themselves to be ethnically 'Egyptian' rather than Arab, which was associated with a nomadic way of life in contrast to the settled Egyptians. A catalyst for the eventual spread of Arab nationalism in the mid-twentieth century was the Palestinian-Jewish problem. Starting with the Palestinian Revolt in 1936 the plight of the Palestinians became a unifying factor.

Gamal Abdel Nasir was an essential figure for the peak of Arab nationalism during the fifties and sixties. Dawisha described Nasser's evolution from an Egyptian nationalist to a pan-Arabist. Aided by demographic and socio-economic developments, Egypt under Nasser became the hot bed of Arab nationalism. Nasser cleverly used radio, public education to propagate his ideas. Furthermore, as an important part of independent nationalism, Nasser worked on building up a strong military. Dawisha states that because of his assertive and strong message and policies, like nationalizing the Suez Canal and thus taking on the former colonial master, Arab nationalism took a revolutionary turn under Nasser.

The Arab nationalist movement reached its zenith with the establishment of the United Arab Republic in 1958. This union of the nations of Egypt and Syria was fraught with pitfalls from the onset. While Arab nationalism had ascended to being the supreme political ideology among the masses, the kingdoms of Iraq, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia were suspicious of the radical language of Arab nationalism, and sought to strengthen their ties with the West. At the same time, both Egypt and Syria were wary of entering into a union and did so irresolutely. Not only did the two nations lack a common geographic border, but many within the Egyptian government were suspicious of what they perceived to be the instability of Syria's diverse political system. Moreover, the momentum resulting from the establishment of the United Arab Republic produced further political repercussions. In Lebanon, civil war broke out as crowds of

Nair supporters called for Arab unity. In Iraq, the government of Nuri al-Said moved to position military units in Jordan, near the borders of Syria and Lebanon, but were overthrown by forces under the revolutionary command of General Abd al-Karim Qasem before they could do so.

To the surprise of Arab nationalists, however, the new Iraqi government espoused a form of nationalism based on state sovereignty, rather than Arab unity. Similarly, the rise of the Ba'ath Party in Syria eventually began to drive a wedge between Nasir and his Syrian counterparts. Also, Syria had experienced a great deal of economic hardship in the process of adjusting to Egypt's socialist economy. As a result of these conditions, Syria seceded from the UAR in 1961 by means of a military coup, marking the beginning of a political shift from Arab unity to Arab solidarity. The decline of Arab nationalism was further cemented through Egypt's unsuccessful intervention in the Yemeni Civil War. Dawisha argues that the shift toward cooperation rather than unity among Arab states is evident in Egypt's response to Israel's 1963 announcement that it would divert water from the Jordan River for irrigation. Perceiving this action as a threat to Jordan and Syria, Nasir called for Arab solidarity in the face of a common enemy. This ideological shift was further described in Egypt's pledge at the 1964 Arab Summit to "respect the sovereignty of each of the Arab states and their existing regimes in accordance with their constitutions and laws, and to refrain from interfering in their internal affairs."

Adeed Dawisha's *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century: From Triumph to Despair* is well-written, and is organized in a logical manner. His presentation of data is more or less objective, and demonstrates a good use of primary and secondary sources in both Arabic and English. Perhaps the greatest strengths of this work are Dawisha's sensitive treatment of political issues that remain contentious to this day and his argument that, despite significant differences among the political elite, Arab nationalism inspired a great amount of enthusiasm among the masses. Nonetheless, Dawisha's writing centers on the activities of political leaders, largely neglecting cultural and social histories of the masses involved, which may have enriched this study.