

pan-Arabism

Beginning with academic debates about the role of Islam in the struggle of Arab nations against increased Western imperial expansion, pan-Arabism ultimately became a political doctrine, the application of which had far-reaching consequences for power relations in the Middle East and beyond.

In the second half of the 19th century, a variety of Middle Eastern intellectuals began to theorize about the future of the Islamic world in relation to the increasingly powerful imperial nations of northern Europe. One of the most influential movements for the future development of pan-Arabism was that of pan-Islamism. Led by Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani, early pan-Islamists were fiercely anti-imperialist and framed their desires for parity with the West along religious lines. Afghani did not believe that the West was superior to the Muslim East; rather, he believed that over time Middle Eastern governments and religion had become corrupt and had lost touch with the true message of Islam. For him, there were two major Islamic tenets that needed to be revised in order for the Muslim world to become as powerful as the West (as it had been in the past): unity and action. Unity of the Muslim world was crucial in the eyes of Afghani; he looked back to the early Muslim kingdoms and the success of early Islam as something that could be re-achieved in the Middle East. Muslims only needed to unify behind a progressive Islam, which would encourage its followers throughout the world to forget their ethnic and national differences and see themselves as part of one supernational of believers. In doing so, Muslims would actively unite against European expansionism and economic exploitation.

Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani led pan-Arabism

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Muhammad Abduh (student)

* Education on ability to reason

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Muhammad Rashid Rida

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question gov.

One of Afghani's most influential students was Muhammad Abduh, a well-respected theologian who ultimately became the mufti (interpreter of Islamic law) of Egypt in 1899. Abduh formulated one of the most influential modern interpretations of Islam in a book called *Risalah al-Tawhid* (*A Treatise on the Oneness of God*). This treatise asserted not only that Islam and modernity were compatible but also that modernity complemented Islam rather than restricted it. Abduh believed that Islam demanded that educated Muslims use their abilities to reason, in order to both interpret the revelations of Islam as well as question their governments if they appeared to be acting in ways detrimental to Islam. With those ideas in mind, Abduh founded the Salifiyya movement, which called for the reopening of interpretation of Islamic law (ijtihād) for the first time since the 10th century. That radical move was crucial because it allowed for the acceptance of modern technological innovations as well as Western-style governmental reforms in Muslim societies.

As pan-Islamists, both Afghani and Abduh were concerned about Islamic affairs more than Arab affairs; Islam was something that transcended the Arab world. Along those lines, Abduh's most famous student was Muhammad Rashid Rida, a Syrian intellectual who founded a journal in 1898 called *al-Manar*, which asserted that Muslims—especially Arabs—lost power in the world because they turned away from the original spirit of Islam and allowed corrupt leadership to take control. Justice—the foundation of Islam—had been forgotten by such governments. Rida advocated that governments be purified of their corruption and taken over by Muslim scholars who were free of corruption and open to the positive discoveries of modernity.

Although Rida was concerned with the appeal of Islam throughout the world, another of Abduh's students was more concerned with the special connection between Arab society and Islam. Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi was a Syrian journalist who spent the last three years of his life in Cairo publishing two key books, *The Nature of Despotism* and *The Mother of Cities—Mecca*. Kawakibi was disgusted by the corruption of the Ottoman Empire, which ruled large segments of the Arab world, and he blamed the decline of Muslim rule on the fact that non-Arabs had taken control of the Middle East. He looked at Islam as the greatest achievement of the Arabs, and because God had chosen to reveal Islamic teachings to an Arab prophet in Arabic, the Arabs were an ideal people for leadership. He wanted to see the restoration of an Arab caliphate, which, he believed, would hasten a revival in the

region as well as in the religion. Al-Kawakibi's ideology gave some Arabs a framework for opposing the Ottomans that eventually took on nationalist tones.

As the Ottoman Empire collapsed in the wake of World War I, and as Western domination was secured over much of the Middle East, a variety of Arab intellectuals inspired by the pan-Islamists began to look for models for creating powerful local political entities that could challenge European expansionism. It is in the ideas of those thinkers that historians see the foundations of pan-Arabist thought.

One of the first pan-Arabists to gain serious recognition was a Syrian Arab named Sati al-Husri, who had made a name for himself during the Ottoman era as a Westernized bureaucrat committed to educational reform. After the collapse of Ottoman rule in 1918, Husri became a leading voice for the pan-Arabist cause in the interwar years. While helping the Iraqis build an educational infrastructure in the 1920s and 1930s, Husri wrote a series of pamphlets—*Arabism First*, *On Arab Nationalism*, and *What is Nationalism?*—in which he called for the creation of a single, independent Arab state. He believed that the Arab people constituted one nation and that language was the primary marker of that fact. Because the Arabic language came before Islam, both Muslim and Christian Arabs should be united under this nation, according to Husri. He hoped that the common language, shared culture, and shared history would inspire Arabs to unite against the Western forces and found a modern nation-state.

Another pair of thinkers who picked up on Husri's ideas were the Syrian intellectuals Michel Aflaq and Salah al-Din al-Bitar. As students in 1930s Paris, they were attracted to socialist ideology, particularly its anti-imperialism and messages of social justice, and they returned to Syria with a political doctrine. Calling their movement Baath (Arabic for "resurrection"), Aflaq and Bitar expressed a pan-Arab agenda in the context of social restructuring to build a powerful and independent Arab society. Members of the Baath movement believed that the Arabs could regain their confidence only with unity; that unity would hearken back to Arab greatness under the conquering caliphs of early Islam and would put the Arab world on par with the West. In that way, Aflaq and Bitar were influenced by Kawakibi. Indeed, the Baath movement, although inclusive of Muslims and Christians, idealized Islam as a symbol of what the Arab world was capable of producing: a great religion that had spread across the globe. In that way, the Baath movement did not alienate Muslims; it attracted them, yet its inclusive rhetoric also appealed to non-Muslim Arabs who wished to see their nation resurrected as well.

The ideology of the Baath movement was coupled with two other powerful political developments in the Arab world: the dispossession of the Palestinians from their homelands and the emergence of Nasserism in Egypt during the rule of Gamal Abdel Nasser.

Many Arabist thinkers, like Husri, called on Egypt to take the lead to promote the Arabist cause, and such ideas took hold during the 1930s and 1940s. At that time, Western imperialism seemed to the Arab world to be most destructive to the Arabs in Palestine, who were on the eve of losing their homeland to the Zionist settlers from Europe (who wanted to create a Jewish State in the region). In 1945, seizing on the hope that strength could be achieved in a postwar world, the Arab League was formed in Cairo, the city with the most active movement for pan-Arabism. The league was a coalition of Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Jordan, who pledged to support each other in building economic, political, and cultural strength and cooperation.

In May 1948, during the Israeli War, the member nations of the Arab League invaded Palestine to halt the formation of the state of Israel, but they were defeated by the Israelis in December. The defeat of the Arab countries, known as the "Liberation Army," was a turning point for the pan-Arabist movement. The loss of Palestine to the Israelis was made more bitter by the humiliating crisis of the Palestinian refugees, who were trapped in

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dismal refugee camps while the Arab countries looked on, unable or unwilling to assimilate those people into their own societies, yet unable to liberate them from the Israelis and implement Palestinian national sovereignty in the Holy Land. For Arabs throughout the world, the rhetoric of uniting in an effort to restore the Palestinians to their homeland and defeat the Israeli state became a powerful tool of political unification.

It was Egyptian leader Nasser who ultimately became the most well-known spokesperson for pan-Arabism. During his rule (1952–1970), Nasser used the rhetoric of pan-Arabism to rally the Arab world behind the policy of nonalignment. He convinced Jordan and Syria not to join the British-sponsored Baghdad Pact of 1954, and in 1956, he successfully faced off against the Western powers and nationalized the Suez Canal. Nasser used his authority—enhanced by his humiliation of the British, French, and Israelis in the Suez Canal crisis—to promote Egypt's leadership of the pan-Arabist cause. He mounted an aggressive foreign policy campaign that resulted in Egypt's meddling in the political affairs of the other Arab countries. Egypt also began the Voice of Cairo, a powerful radio network that broadcast throughout the Arab world and beyond to spread the doctrine of pan-Arabism.

In late 1957, the Baath Party in Syria turned to Nasser and asked him to support their rule, which was under threat by rival parties. In February 1958, the United Arab Republic (UAR) was founded, a total political unification of Syria and Egypt. Baath leaders believed that the union would assure their control over Syria, while the Egyptians saw the move as the first step to a larger pan-Arabist state led by themselves. The unification of Baath ideology and the potent leadership of Nasser was a dream combination for millions of Arabs, who ardently felt that the UAR was the beginning of a new Arab superstate that could challenge Western hegemony.

However, it became clear very early that the relationship between Egypt and Syria was unequal. The leaders of the Baath Party in Syria were moved to Cairo, while Egyptian bureaucrats went to Syria in order to run the country along Egyptian lines. Not only did that exchange result in a loss of power for the Baath leaders, but also the programs of land reform and other aspects of industrialization that were suitable for Egypt were not suitable for Syria, a country with an entirely different history of land use as well as population demographic and geography. The UAR was not a well-thought-out formation but rather a hasty attempt by the Syrian opposition to capitalize on Nasser's power in a way that he could not refuse. Nasser next decided to implement the one-party military regime of Egypt in Syria; he replaced Syrian officials with Egyptian ones, which bred resentment between the two countries. When all political opposition was outlawed and land reform stripped the powerful notables of Syria of their holdings, Syrians had had enough. In September 1961, Syrian military units staged an insurrection against the Egyptian commanders and destroyed the UAR.

The failure of the UAR was coupled in 1967 by the humiliating defeat of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan by the Israelis in the Six-Day War. The war resulted in huge territorial losses and dramatic increases in the number of Palestinian refugees. For the Arab world, it appeared that now, more than ever, Arab unity was needed. Yet the governments of the Arab nations were unable to work together to create anything like the Arab superstate envisioned by early pan-Arabists, and the failure of the one concrete attempt at such a state, the UAR, was a symbol of how impossible that dream was to achieve. Moreover, with the 1967 defeat, it was clear to Palestinians that their cause could not be left in the hands of the Arab states. Although the Palestinian cause remained a symbol for Arab unity, real action for change was moved away from the Arab League and concentrated in the Palestine Liberation Organization and other Palestinian movements.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Arab leaders used the rhetoric of pan-Arabism to rally their populations behind a number of issues, particularly the struggle against Israel, but in 1990, an event occurred that spelled the end of pan-Arabism. After Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990, the Western powers, led by the United States under the guise

of the United Nations, convinced a number of other Arab nations to join their alliance against Iraq. Egypt and Syria committed troops to the Persian Gulf War in exchange for debt cancellation and other economic rewards, while Saudi Arabia agreed to host coalition forces. With the punishing defeat of Iraq in February 1991, wrought in part because Arab states were willing to fight other Arab states, pan-Arabism seemed completely dead.

Today, although there are still dreams of Arab unity, millions of people in the Arab world search for other alternatives to their political, social, and economic problems. Many have turned to nationalist and religious movements, particularly Islamic fundamentalism.

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FURTHER READING

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