Rethinking Nationalism

in the

Arab Middle East

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editors
Rethinking the Formation of Arab Nationalism in the Middle East, 1920–1945

Old and New Narratives

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Benedict Anderson's characterization of nationalism as "an imagined political community" certainly applies to the Arab Middle East. Various forms of "imagined community" have competed for Arab loyalties in the modern era: territorial nationalism, nation-state nationalism, and a broad range of Islamic or religious identities. None of these imaginings, however, seems to have been so successful in proselytizing Arab communities as a nationalism based on the cultural-linguistic dimension of Arabness, crossing geographic and religious boundaries. This "Arab nationalism" (al-qawmiyya al-`arabiyya) remains a crucial form of identity and ideology even if it has become fashionable since the end of the 1970s to speak about "the end of pan-Arab nationalism," and even if its "pan-movement" impulses have faded considerably.

Historically, Arab nationalism emerged and evolved as a theoretical and operative system in the period between the two world wars. It reached maturity at the end of World War II with the founding of the Arab League in 1945. It did not arise ex nihilo in the aftermath of World War I, however. In the latter part of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth, it emerged as an opposition movement in the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire, for the most part seeking cultural autonomy within the framework of the Ottoman state. An early minority trend espousing Arab national separatism "became the overwhelmingly dominant movement in these [Arab] territories" after World War I, following the final collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Despite the milestone of 1945, the movement's ideological impact and
political influence peaked only in the 1950s and 1960s. With Nasserism and Ba'thism, Arab nationalism was transformed into a revolutionary movement, appealing to broad masses by means of a socialist program, populist rhetoric, and a deeper commitment to the idea of establishing a single Arab state.

This essay is concerned neither with that later, revolutionary stage nor with the early, seminal period. Rather, it deals with the interregnum period of the development of Arab nationalism from 1920 to 1945. This was the era in which it moved from the intellectual periphery to the cultural and political center, being accepted by ruling elites as official ideology and policy. For research on nationalism in the Arab world, this may well be the most interesting period, for it provides an outstanding case-study in processes of intellectual formation, ideological dissemination, social reception, and political institutionalization of an idea.

The focus of this essay is the successive historiographic narratives dealing with Arab nationalism from 1920 to 1945. The study of Arab nationalism can be said to have gone through three stages. The first consisted of contemporary accounts of the aspiration for Arab unity that emerged in the Arab world in the late 1930s and in the 1940s. The sporadic surveys and reports of this stage were a mixture of journalism and scholarship on the state of the pan-Arab movement.

In the second stage, the 1950s and 1960s, the study of Arab nationalism became a scholarly pursuit and achieved academic standing. Serious historical works systematically reconstructed the formation of Arab nationalism in the interwar period and beyond, until the 1950s. These researches into the ideological origins of Arab nationalism constituted a comprehensive narrative that became the canonical framework for further study. In the present essay, the scholarly literature of this stage is termed the “early narrative” or “old narrative.”

The main thesis of this essay is the contention that in the early 1970s a new stage emerged in the study of Arab nationalism. This third stage constitutes a distinct narrative that may be defined as the “later narrative” or “new narrative.” Its thrust is a systematic reassessment of the formative processes of Arab nationalism in the period from 1920 to 1945. By treating previously unresearched topics, citing new evidence, and employing innovative methodologies, this narrative enables a thorough rethinking of the history of Arab nationalism. Rethinking, however, does not entail revisionism: the new narrative evolved out of the old, refining and supplementing it. Whatever the gradient of change, little if any notice has been paid to the very real transition in historiographic paradigms.

This essay, then, is more concerned with metahistory than history. No “direct” discussion of Arab nationalism itself is offered, though there is an analysis of the modes through which it is represented in both narratives, the old and the new. Our purpose will be to define and characterize the two narratives, to examine the internal discourse unique to each—what Hayden White terms “constituent tropological strategies [that] account for the generation of the different interpretations of history”—and to underline their specific contributions to the study of nationalism in the Arab Middle East. Although our main concern is with “metahistorical” representations relating to the development of Arab nationalism, it is hoped that such a treatment will also shed new light on its “actual history” during its formative period from 1920 to 1945, assuming, optimistically, the tenability of such a notion as “actual history.”

The Old Narrative

The early narrative was formulated in the 1950s and 1960s as Arab nationalism reached its zenith. In large measure, that narrative was an attempt by scholars to trace, from the present to the recent past, the reasons for the success of Arab nationalism and to explain how it became the premier ideological and political force in the Arab world. To a certain extent, this early narrative is already present in the works of Hazem Zaki Nuseibeh and Fayez Sayegh. However, it was only with the appearance of the influential studies by Elie Kedourie, Albert Hourani, and Sylvia G. Haim that this narrative was fully shaped. Others who contributed to the emergence of the old narrative were Majid Khadduri, Hans Tütsch, Leonard Binder, Anwar Chejne, Bernard Lewis, W. C. Smith, Patrick Seale, Nissim Rejwan, Hisham Sharabi, and Eliezer Be‘erii.

Despite individual differences, the scholarship of this era exhibited key commonalities in its approach to fundamental issues. When Did Arab nationalism begin to flourish as an idea and as a framework for action? In the periodization of the early narrative, the end of World War I, the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the founding of separate Arab states under British and French Mandatory rule form the context for the transition to Arabism. Moreover, most of the studies that represent this narrative contain the claim that only in the second half of the interwar period, and more specifically in the decade of the 1930s, did a mature ideology of Arab nationalism take shape. “It was not until the 1930s that a serious attempt was made to define the meaning of Arab nationalism and what constitutes the Arab Nation,” notes Haim. Hourani likewise states that primarily in the 1930s, there “began to grow up a new sort of [Arab] nationalism, more thoroughgoing than that of the older generation.”

What is the essence of Arab nationalism as represented by the old narrative? The studies of this narrative perceived nationalism above all
as an idea. The general paradigm that guided its approach to the study of nationalism was that of the "history of ideas." This was a popular discipline in the study of history in the 1950s and early 1960s, propounded most influentially by Arthur Lovejoy and ramifying into derivative modes of intellectual history. The major project of this form of the history of ideas was to reconstruct "unit-ideas" and "stand," individual or collective. In more ambitious cases it assumed that "the largest distinctive aim of the intellectual historian . . . is to describe and explain the spirit of an age." The underlying supposition was that besides the "theoretical" or "philosophical" interest inherent in the ideas in themselves, they were also the expression of whole cultures or societies, constituting the primary force in shaping their historical evolution and in stimulating processes of social and political change.

More specific influences are also discernible. Elie Kedourie's Nationalism, itself distinctly a product of the history of ideas and directly influenced by Lovejoy, had an impact on some of the studies of the early narrative. A greater effect was perhaps that had by the Orientalist, textual-philo- logical tradition and the type of intellectual-cultural history written in its light in this period by G. E. von Grunebaum, W. C. Smith, and especially by H. A. R. Gibb. Thus Nuseibeh's aim in The Ideas of Arab Nationalism, "to explore the genesis, ideas, attitudes, and orientations of Arab nationalism," 19 Hourani's endeavor in Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, emphasizing "those movements of Arabic thought which accepted the dominant ideas of modern Europe," 20 Haim's anthology Arab Nationalism, focusing on its intellectual history; and, more radically, Sayegh's argument in his Arab Unity—Hope and Fulfillment that "ideas have a life of their own" and that "the evolution of an idea is in some measure autonomous"—all furnish clear proof of the impact of the "history of ideas" on the old narrative.

A close analysis of the texts produced by Arab nationalist writers constitutes the major part of the old narrative. Some of these early studies, notably Sayegh, make do with a general, somewhat abstract presentation of "the idea of Arab unity." But for the most part the studies deal with specific texts by leading intellectuals, published in the second half of the 1930s and in the early 1940s. Nuseibeh discusses the thought of seven "theoricians of the Arab national philosophy" (Qustantin Zurayq, 'Abdallah al-'Alayily, Raif Khouri, Sar'i al-Husri, Niqua Ziyada, Yusuf Haykal, and Nabihi Faris). Haim, in what is perhaps the most extensive and detailed analysis, elucidates the writings of eleven prominent "nationalist writers" (Amin al-Rihani, Sami Shawkat, Muhammad Jamil Baitum, Edmond Rabbath, 'Abd al-Latif Sharara, 'Abdallah al-'Alayily, Sar'i al-Husri, 'Abd al-Rahman 'Azzam, 'Abd al-Rahman al-

Bazzaz, Qustantin Zurayq, and Khallil Iskandar Qubrusi) and many other "secondary writers". Hourani analyzes the thought of four "shapers of Arab nationalist doctrine" (Abd al-Rahman al-Bazzaz, Qustantin Zurayq, Edmond Rabbath and Sar'i al-Husri), while Khadduri considers the ideas of five "nationalist thinkers" (Sami Shawkat, Edmond Rabbath, Qustantin Zurayq, Abd al-Rahman al-Bazzaz and Sar'i al-Husri). Thus Rabbath, Zurayq, al-Bazzaz, and especially al-Husri are identified by this narrative as the major theoreticians, those who contributed most significantly to the articulation of the new Arab nationalist doctrine.

According to the early narrative, the central feature of the Arab nationalist ideology of this era was the conviction that the Arabic language was the chief element in forging the Arab nation. "A nation has an objective basis, and in the last analysis this is nothing except language. The Arab nation consists of all who speak Arabic as their mother-tongue, no more, no less. 23 The Arab nation is therefore a linguistic entity, whose spiritual and physical boundaries are those of its tongue. 24"

The adjunct of language is history. The old narrative examines how the nationalist thinkers posited history as the second most important element in the formation of a nation. Arab nationalist theoreticians perceived Arab history as an inexhaustible store of communal heroes, events, periods, traditions, and symbols to be called in order "to produce a single unified 'past' which gives a convincing and emotionally satisfying account of the present situation of their ethnic kinship." 25 Arab nationalist writers went in quest of an erstwhile "golden age" of communal splendor to serve as model for the nation. Reviving classical Arab glory was indispensable for national rebirth. This entailed a systematic historical rehabilitation of the pre-Islamic era, of traditions and civilizations of the ancient Near East, such as those of the Babylonians, the Assyrians, the Pharaohs, the Phoenicians, and sometimes even of Judaism and Christianity. Early Islam was no longer the exclusive primeval golden era, but merely one stage, albeit an important one, in the evolution of the Arab nation. 26

Although language and history were the primary elements constituting the Arab nation, there were others. Some nationalist writers also noted "religion," "geographical environment," "racial stock," and "common national interests" as "components" of the national community. 27 The precise place and significance of these secondary constituents of nationalism was debated: whereas some writers accepted them as legitimate forces that reinforced language and history in crystallizing the Arab nation, others rejected their role (especially the allegiance to a specific race or territory), arguing that they were at odds
with the nation's linguistic-cultural-historical essence and were liable to dissolve it.33

Based on this classification of "nationalist components" into legitimate and illegitimate, the nationalist thinkers conventionalized nationalist terminology. The early narrative paid special attention to the creation of "a new vocabulary...that took into account, and that would be helpful in coping with, the divergence between the ideal and the reality."34 At its core, the new vocabulary established the distinction between an affinity for the Arab nation and Arab nationalism [qawm, qaumiyah] and a patriotic affiliation with one's specific homeland [watan, wataniyyah]. This distinction was meant to regulate the relations between these two loyalties within one legitimate framework consistent with the aspiration for cultural and political Arab unity [wahda arabiyyah].35 In contrast, other terms were coined—"alimiyyah (regionalism, provincialism), shu'ubiyyah ("narrow chauvinistic loyalty" to Egyptian-Pharaonic, Lebanese-Phoenician, Iraqi-Mesopotamian nationalisms, etc.)—"to denote a reprehensible feeling of loyalty toward a part rather than toward the whole."36

Another aspect of the new nationalist theory that was extensively treated by the early narrative concerned the modes in which its proponents portrayed relations between Arab nationalism and Islam. The early studies detail the way in which Arabist writers secularized, modernized, and nationalized Islam so as to make it comport with the postreligious nature of Arab nationalism. They stripped away its universal transcendental and legal dimensions, undermining its status as the supreme arbiter of communal identity. It was relegated to the status of a tool, another "component" to help erect the edifice of Arab national identity. Hourani succinctly describes the metamorphosis that Arab nationalism brought about in the status of Islam:

The centre of gravity was shifted from Islam as divine law to Islam as a culture; in other words, instead of Arab nationalism being regarded as an indispensable step towards the revival of Islam, Islam was regarded as the creator of the Arab nation, the content of its culture or the object of its collective pride.37

External intellectual influences that shaped Arab nationalism were also addressed by the old narrative. In general, most studies of the narrative adopt a diffusionist model whereby nationalism radiated from a European center to a Middle Eastern periphery. They point to a congeries of influences from European philosophies and ideologies absorbed by Arab nationalist thought: German Idealist philosophy from the school of Herder and Fichte; cultural Romanticism of nineteenth-century Germany; the "pan"-nationalist movements of Central and Eastern Europe, the unification of Germany and of Italy, which provided models for founding a single broad nation-state eliminating artificial political entities; the "integral" and historicist nationalist doctrine propounded by French nationalism of the late nineteenth century (notably by Barres and Maurras); and, more immediately, European fascism and Nazism of the 1930s. The impact of liberal nationalism, in its Anglo-Saxon or French form, was, according to the old narrative, overshadowed by the powerful influences originating in Central and Eastern Europe.

In the view of the old narrative, these influences were an important and generally negative contribution to the emergence of the totalitarian, organic, and utopian tendencies in Arab nationalism. Arab ideologists considered nationalism to be a total and exclusive framework for human existence. As a modern substitute for religion, it was to furnish a complete and rounded Lebenswelt. Haim remarks on the strong influence that totalitarian conceptions exercised on Arab nationalist ideology, especially in the Husri era, in which the nation is consecrated as the natural, total, and sole framework for existence.38 Khadduri points to the irenicist, integralist, Romantic and populist elements that Arab nationalist doctrine took from Europe.39 Sayegh is critical of the pan-Arab utopia that aims for an all-embracing Arab unity by refusing to recognize "the real, objective, and stubborn elements of diversity in the Arab world." In his view, "the Arab mind had adopted uncritically the European political philosophy of nationalism, and applied it to the Arab situation without adaptation or adjustment."40 Nuseibeh, for his part, dwells on the great similarity between the use of "historical traditions" by integralist French nationalism and its use by Arab nationalist ideologists.41

The old narrative's strength lies in the internal textualist presentation of ideas; it is weak in its external contextualist analysis. Since nationalism was predicated primarily as "ideology," it followed that less, if any, importance should be attached to an examination of external forces that were instrumental in its formation and change. The old narrative barely offers more than a schematic description of some of the historical developments that stimulated the emergence of Arab nationalism in the interwar period. Arab nationalism, the skimpy historical argument goes, is the response of the Arab elites to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the death of the Old Order. It is a quest for a new cultural and political identity to supersede the nonviable traditional one.42 It was also depicted as a reaction to European colonial domination in the post-Ottoman Arab world, a protest against its arbitrary division into atomized, artificial states.43 Culturally and psychologically, Arab nationalism was portrayed as an expression of deep-rooted
Arab yearning for renewal via a restoration of the splendid Arab past and classical heritage. Only on the fringes does the old narrative deal with other factors such as the connections between the growth of nationalism and social change, or between nationalist ideology and specific political interests.Hourani gives an account of the radicalization of "a younger generation" in the 1950s based on its social origins, while Kedourie provides a political etiology of the Hashemite regime in Iraq that gave the "pan-Arabist" current of the post-1930 period its "political base." Such sociopolitical explanations are exceptional in the old narrative.

Even less attention is devoted by the early narrative to the processes of dissemination and reception of the Arab nationalistic ideas at the different levels of culture and society. The old narrative pays scant attention to whether, in those societies in which Arab nationalism predominated (particularly in the Fertile Crescent), it prevailed among non-elites as well. It typically is content to draw conclusions about the nature and influence of nationalist ideology by perusing "high," "formal" texts produced by a handful of "representative" intellectuals, usually ignoring "nonformal" expressions such as can be found in the press or periodicals. In this respect as well Kedourie is exceptional, as evinced by his pioneering examination of how the Iraqi educational system, set up by the Faysal government and directed by al-Husri, functioned as a primary medium for institutionalizing and transmitting Arab nationalism. Kedourie argues that al-Husri's network of schools was effectively a collection of "seminars for political indoctrination," with a mission "to spread faith in the unity of the Arab nation and to disseminate consciousness of its past glories."

Where the old narrative does attend to the political influence exercised by Arab nationalism, it does not always establish historical connections between ideas and praxis. While generally linking the growing strength of pan-Arab ideas and sentiments in the 1930s and 1940s to the increasing interest shown by Arab politicians in forms of Arab unity that generated the inter-Arab system, crowned by the foundation of the Arab League in 1945, the old narrative does not apprise us of how deeply Arab nationalist ideology penetrated the official political mind and to what extent it affected Arab governments and policy-makers. In some cases the studies create the impression that the Arab League was not a culmination of that ideology but either the product of British imperial scheming aimed at consolidating Britain's postwar position in the Middle East or a purely political mechanism intended to alleviate tensions and rivalries among Arab states. Sayegh is perhaps the lone old narrative representative to discern in the League's founding any causality immanent to Arab nationalist ideology: "[T]he Arab cooperation and coordination, of policies and actions, were already enjoying the wholehearted support of the peoples and intellectuals dedicated to the idea of Arab unity."

A dismissive evaluation of Egypt's position vis-à-vis emergent Arab nationalism is another feature of the old narrative. Virtually all the early studies agree that Egypt played almost no role in the evolution of Arab nationalism from 1920-1945. Arab nationalism, it was argued, pertained only to the Fertile Crescent, as Egypt was then in the throes of a territorial and Pharaonic-Mediterranean nationalism with radically isolationist tendencies. According to this interpretation, Egypt's transition to Arab nationalism and to the adoption of a pan-Arab ideology and policy occurred only with the March 1952 and definitively with the emergence of Nasserism in the mid-1950s. For the old narrative, the cynical manipulations of pan-Arabist ideology by Egyptian politicians were not accompanied by a process of ideological change within Egypt's public. Egypt remained Egyptian and Arab nationalism remained decidedly foreign.

The New Narrative

The new narrative evolved in the 1970s and 1980s when Arab nationalism was in retreat. Just as the old narrative had developed in the glow of Arab nationalism's political heyday, contemporary events on the ground again impinged on historians' reflections on the past. A more generous view of historians' integrity would attribute the change to the greater distance from the formative period of Arab nationalism, as well as to the benefits of a quieter atmosphere enabling a less charged and possibly more neutral discussion of the subject. In addition, new research sources were available with the opening of archives in Britain, France, the United States, Germany, and Israel. These studies also made far more systematic use of contemporary Arab newspapers and periodicals, political and social pamphlets, memoirs, belles-lettres, and other published materials.

A prominent aspect of the rethinking that characterized the later narrative studies was its deemterizing of Arab nationalism. It is a viewpoint that is distinctly "from the periphery to the center," examining the centrifugal momentum of pan-Arabism from the perspective of the particular Arab state or society. The old narrative proceeded in large measure ahistorically, "from the center to the periphery," placing Arab nationalism at the hub of the historical discussion. The separate Arab countries and regimes were then examined from this telescoped all-Arab angle. The fact that the old narrative was composed under the powerful im-
pression of rising Arab nationalism, while the new narrative was composed during its decline and the reassertion of state particularism, may have played a part in promoting a change of perspective.

Rather than leap directly from the eclipse of Ottomanism to the rise of Arabism, as studies of the old narrative had generally done, the “peripheralism” approach lingers over the postwar political entities and local allegiances, treating them as a discrete transitional phase—the decade of the 1920s—between Ottomanism and pan-Arabism. Studies of Syria, Palestine, and especially Egypt explore the particularist tendencies that emerged in this decade, such as the National Bloc’s policy in Syria of “honorable cooperation” with French authorities so as to win local independence, the intifada Palestinian preoccupation with its struggle against the British and the Zionists, and Egypt’s pronounced territorialist nationalism and explicit rejection of Arabism as alien and reactionary.

Iraq is exceptional in that Faisal’s Sunni Arab elite had begun institutionalizing Arab nationalism and transmitting it via official state bodies already by the mid-1920s. In Syria the currents of Arab nationalism circulating beneath the reform ideologies did not gain the upper hand until 1933–1936. Palestinian Arabs resorted increasingly to pan-Arabism and pan-Islam in the 1930s as their leaders realized that they could not defeat their foes without outside help, and Arabism triumphed in Egypt only in the early 1940s when a generation of middle-stratum professionals who had been alienated from the ruling elites and hence from the established ideologies had matured and occupied positions of power and influence. The new narrative seems to achieve a breakthrough by tracking Arab nationalism’s rise from its competition with aspirations to local national independence in the 1920s, rather than deeming it as the direct fallout of Ottoman debility.

This “peripheralism” was closely interwoven with the new narrative’s methodological insights. Nationalism was no longer defined as merely an “idea” or a “consciousness.” Hence, the historian of nationalism could not confine himself or herself solely to the study of the history of the ideas and the dynamics underlying the evolution of a collective consciousness. Nationalism, rather, was posited as a multidimensional historical movement closely connected with social and economic changes, political and institutional developments, and the specific sociopolitical context of each Arab society individually and all of them together as a cultural unit. Nationalism came to be regarded as no less a political movement, a cultural system, a social phenomenon, and sometimes an economic force as an ideology. Even when studies in the new narrative address the issue of nationalism as a movement for national liberation from colonial rule, they do so within the social, cultural, and political context of each Arab state separately, and of each country as it relates to the all-Arab system.

Consequently, the protagonists of the new narrative are not bodies of ideas or their proponents, a handful of representative writers or intellectuals; they are, rather, national movements subsuming elites and non-elites, of various kinds from inside and outside. When the new narrative deals with intellectuals as producers and disseminators of a national discourse, it is likely to view them as “secondary intellectuals,” a broad “professional intelligentsia,” individual agents operating in the print media of newspapers, magazines, and books that shape public opinion.

The formal, methodological frameworks that supplanted the “history of ideas” approach included the “new” social history of the Annales school, together with the “political economy” and “world-system” theories. These focused on the study of the “deep” structures of society and the economy, on “the relationships between power and wealth” and “how each of them affects the other.” Also influential, albeit to a lesser degree, were the social history of ideas, which endeavors to locate the social basis for ideological change, the context understood as context, and anthropological approaches dealing with the study of systems of meaning and collective consciousness. The transition from “idea” to “society” also meant that sociological theories of nationalism and ethnological models of “nation formation” became increasingly significant. The earlier work of Karl Deutsch and the more recent studies by Ernest Gellner, Anthony Smith, and Benedict Anderson, although not always directly applied, provided a general theoretical background for rethinking the sources of Arab nationalism.

Guided by these novel methodological frameworks, scholars now treated Arab nationalism as an agent of modernization and development, as an outgrowth and motor of social mobility, as the product of mass education and acculturation in terms of urban culture. Nationalism was also perceived as an outcome of the disintegration of rural societies, of urbanization and industrialization, the dissemination of modern technology and science, and the expansion of the professional middle classes.

Culturally, the content of the new communal identity was studied not as a purely intellectual construct but as a sociocultural artifact that creates an ethnolinguistic community imagining itself to be homogeneous. The new community was described as “inventing” and “reinventing” its traditions and renovating its collective ethnie to comport with moderni-
Bassam Tibi, for his part, borrows methodology extensively from the social sciences to stage a critical discussion of the social and political functions of nationalist ideology generally, whereby he can compare the Arab case with that of Europe and the Third World. Tibi’s “attempt [at] a definition of nationalism from the point of view of the social sciences” adumbrates the later narrative’s methodological axiom that internal textual analysis of Arab nationalist ideology “must be complemented by an analysis of the social structures in which this ideology has emerged.”

The rethinking initiated in the work of Cleveland and of Tibi became a full-blown trend since the mid-1970s. The new narrative’s reassessment of Arab nationalism encompassed four main areas. First, the causes of its emergence and consolidation; second, the founding “community of discourse” with its media of dissemination and to some extent its modes of reception and consumption; third, the route by which it became politically important; and fourth, a new view of Egypt as integral in all these processes.

The revision begins in periodization. The old narrative dated the mid-1930s as the onset of the intellectual crystallization of Arab nationalism. The new narrative pushed periodization back. It placed the embryonic stage of a meaningful Arab nationalist discourse in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Dawn shows that history textbooks used in the new state-controlled educational system in Iraq in the late 1920s and early 1930s, which were produced in Egypt, Syria, and Palestine as well as in Iraq, already contained “important expressions of pan-Arab thought.” Their nationalist themes and their relatively large circulation provide Dawn solid evidence that “by the end of the 1920s, a more or less standard formulation of the Arab self-view had appeared and received comprehensive statement.” Simon, in her studies on education in Iraq at primary level for the dissemination of Arab nationalism; Hurwitz, in a pioneering work on Muhibb al-Din al-Khatib’s early (i.e., 1928) theories on Arab nationalism; Gershoni, who presents incipient intellectual manifestations of Arabist identification in early 1930s Egypt; and more generally Marr and Cleveland in their works, all reinforce the new periodization.

As to the political sphere, the new narrative showed that even though “a system of inter-Arab relations” had “become fully developed [only] after 1945, its major attributes had been adumbrated during the preceding two decades.” Gonna and Porath, in comprehensive discussions of “Hashimite attempts at Fertile Crescent unity” beginning as early as the late 1920s and early 1930s, Rabinovich in his study of political ambitions to the “Syrian throne” in the 1920s and 1930s as a prism through which...
the emergence of the inter-Arab system "can be most clearly examined," and Khaldun S. Husry in his discussion of King Faisal I's plans for Arab unity in the period from 1930 to 1933, clearly specify the early 1930s as the birthdate of the formation of pan-Arabist political designs.73

The new narrative largely followed the old in describing and analyzing the crucial formative forces underlying Arab nationalism. Among these were the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the recognition that only a new communal identity based on Arabic language, culture, and history would be viable in the post-Ottoman world; the common Arab struggle against Western imperialism fostering political solidarity and boosting of indigenous, non-Western national culture; the reaction against "regionalism" (the European-imposed fragmentation of the Arab nation into artificial territorial entities following World War I); Hashemite political ambitions as a catalyst to strategies for Arab unity; and in counterpoint, the attempt by Syria and Egypt to frustrate them via their own plans for promoting unity; the influence of fascism and Nazism as a model for unifying nationalism based on a "community of strength"; Islamic revivalism in various parts of the Arab world that also advanced identification with the idea of Arab unity; and the exacerbation of the Arab-jewish conflict in Palestine that fueled powerful sentiments of Islamic and Arabist loyalty. Although these factors had been studied previously, the later narrative drew on abundant new primary sources, enabling a sweeping elaboration and refinement of the old narrative.74

One major difference between the two narratives is the new narrative's stress on the socioeconomic engines of Arab nationalism, especially the emergence of new middle-class strata in the large urban centers. This was explained by the rapid urbanization that eroded and uprooted traditional rural and tribal communities; the high social mobility of evolving urban society; and the accumulation of new publics to modern urban life in state schools, the print media, and professional training. In time, the urban, educated middle class, defined as effendiyya, became the dominant social force in urban culture and politics. The generational profile of the effendiyya was quite young, as it acted as a magnet for pupils and students. The effendiyya embraced Arab nationalism partly as a side effect of their alienation from the higher elite groups, as the new professional intelligentsia grasped its socioeconomic power and aspired to political and cultural hegemony. The professional intelligentsia sought a new ideology and political strategy to pursue its interests. They found it in Arab nationalism and in the idea of Arab unity. The new professional intelligentsia did not receive and assimilate Arab nationalism passively, however, but rather imbued it with a far more radical, populist, and politicized hue.75

How was the link between the effendi professional intelligentsia and Arab nationalism established? The new narrative, although not unaware of this connection, does not always elucidate it. Here recent theoretical work on nationalism is helpful. Ernest Gellner's model emphasizing modern industrial society, massive urbanization, and the new centrality of a uniform culture based on and disseminated through mass literacy, as well as Benedict Anderson's complementary model stressing the nation-building effects of "print-capitalism" in forging linguistic uniformity and a common sense of identity, enhance our understanding of the connection between the Arab professional intelligentsia and Arab nationalism. More than any other group or social stratum in Middle Eastern society, the professional intelligentsia were creators of the urban print culture, groomed in the state schools to look to it as its font of information and, in turn, overseeing its content and distribution. In the process, Arabic language and the literate Arab culture became the professional intelligentsia's focus of communal identification. "New media of expression," Hourani notes, "were creating a universe of discourse which united educated Arabs more fully."76

Another crucial process, not discussed in the old narrative, is what Anthony Smith has termed "radicalising the intelligentsia."77 Smith argues that as the professional intelligentsia climb the social ladder en route to power, they are blocked or delayed by certain forces in the society. In their effort to overcome or circumvent these obstacles, they are radicalized in the form of commitment to a nationalist ideology that is particularly nativist, populist and militant.78

Three main obstructions engender the professional intelligentsia's radicalization. The first is the educational overproduction of professionals and a paucity of jobs, inducing the intelligentsia to turn to politics in order to initiate policies ensuring their class full employment. The second is the hostility shown the emergent professional intelligentsia by the "old hierarchical bureaucrats," drawn mainly from the established landed elite, which furthered their interests by collaborating with colonial rule. The third hindrance to the professional intelligentsia's rise is competition and conflict with foreign professionals, thought by the "natives" to benefit from preferential employment and the promotional policies of the colonial rulers.

In the Arab case, the professional intelligentsia's struggle against these various obstacles entailed fashioning a political counterculture based on populist nationalism combined with socialist elements as an alternative to the established conservative political culture with its constitutional parliamentary orientation and its links with the West. To foster its cause, the professional intelligentsia sought an alliance with lower
social strata, employing nativist rhetoric and presenting themselves as
the authentic voice of the aspirations of "the people." Their protest was
vented in ethnic and nationalist forms: as the struggle of the autoch-
thonous (Arab-Muslim) ethnic community against ethnic interloppers
(Greeks, Italians, French, British, and in some cases Christians or Jews).
In Smith's pungent phrase, the surging radicalization of the new profes-
sional intelligentsia is channeled toward an "ethnic solution" in ethnic
nationalism. This ethnic solution serves a double function, providing
"not only the basis of an alternative status system and power center for
an excluded stratum, but a resolution of their identity crisis through a
revaluation of their function and purpose."80

The new narrative devoted considerable attention to the mediational
role of the new professional classes in the dissemination and popular-
ization of their brand of nationalism among broad sectors of literate
society. In Iraq, as shown by Cleveland, Mazz, Porath, Eppel, and mainly
Simont, the state educational system was a prime agent of socialization
and acculturation to Arab nationalist culture. The state-controlled sys-
tem produced, in the 1920s and still more in the 1930s, generations of
new professionals (more broadly, urban middle-class effendiyya) who
soon served in central positions in the state bureaucracy, as young offi-
cers in the army, in municipal public life (particularly in Baghdad), in
political parties, and as founders and managers of literary and journal-
istic enterprises. In the 1930s, in an effort to translate their rising social
strength into immediate political power, the professionals began acceler-
ating processes of ideological and political radicalization that were chan-
neled primarily into the promotion of ardent pan-Arabism.81 The Iraqi
state-run system also "exported the revolution" happenstentially, for it
solved its manpower problem by recruiting educators from abroad, who
absorbed the penchant for Arab nationalist instruction during their
stints in Iraq and who later dispensed the doctrine upon returning to
Teaching posts or other positions of cultural influence in their countries
of origin.82

Pan-Arab radicalism was expressed in diverse forms in 1930s Iraq. In
1935 the "Muthanna Club" was established in Baghdad and rapidly
became a forum for the educated from all parts of the Arab world and a
center for the dissemination of Arab nationalist propaganda.83 National-
ist radicalization was also evident in the formation, in the late 1930s,
of a paramilitary youth movement [al-futuwwa] modeled on fascist and
Nazi youth organizations, sponsored by the government and officially
instituted in Iraqi schools. Students were indoctrinated to believe that
"the youth represented the [Arab] nationalist ideal, the heroic qualities
of the Arab, and [that] they were to restore past glory."84 From 1938 to
1940 the futuwwa inculturated a particularly militaristic Arab nationalism
into an entire generation of young Iraqis, advocating violent means to
realize Arab unity and British withdrawal from the Middle East. The
anti-British coup of Rashid Ali Al-Kaylani in 1941, a pro-German and
violent expression of Arab nationalism, was the culmination of the pro-
cess of ideological ferment and political radicalization in Iraq; it was a
process generated, primarily, by the new urban middle-class effendiyya
in their role as shapers of public opinion through state education and the
print media.85

Similar developments took place in interwar Syria. In the 1930s a new,
urban, educated middle class containing a significant professional com-
ponent sprang up in the expanded cities, particularly Damascus. It con-
stituted the chief social reservoir of a new Syrian political class and cul-
ture. Philip Khoury provides a systematic analysis of the social formation
of the Syrian middle-class professionals and their entrance as an active
opposition force into the political arena; he defines the entire process as
"radicalization," and the new forces as "radicalized movements [that] left
their mark on the politics of nationalism."86 These new elements, rep-resenting
primarily the new modern middle class of students, bureaucrats, and professionals, entered the political arena "armed with European edu-
cations and new, sophisticated methods of political organization acquired
abroad."87 Their political parties, "based on more systematic and rigorous
systems of ideas," sought a reformation of nationalism "that corresponded to
and accommodated the structural changes" then underway in Syria. "The language of nationalism itself was refined and altered; these
ascendant forces placed more emphasis on social and economic justice for
the masses, [and] an pan-Arab unity" as an alternative to "the old na-
tionalist ideas of constitutionalism, liberal parliamentary forms and per-
sonal freedoms." The new populist-radical nationalism was designed to
bridge the gap between "the nationalism of the upper classes and the na-
tionalism of popular sentiments."88

The most important of the radicalized organizations to emerge in
Syria in the 1930s was the League of National Action [lisbat al-'Amal
al-Qawmi]. Established in 1933 and operating throughout the remain-
der of the decade, the League was the mouthpiece of militant, anti-
imperialist pan-Arabism. It rejected the National Bloc's opportunistic
strategy of "honorable cooperation" with the Mandatory authorities,
calling instead for mass mobilization and direct action to obtain Syr-
ian independence. Its membership was primarily composed of Syrian
students who had graduated from the state-run school system and en-
tered middle-class professions.89

Khoury's view is comprehensive—a rarity among the composers of
the new narrative—in plotting Syrian developments in the broader Middle East context:

In terms of its class and educational background, political style, and ideological orientation, this new generation of nationalism in Syria displayed characteristics that were remarkably similar to those of an emerging second generation of nationalists in Palestine, Iraq, and Egypt. In fact, the politically active members of this new generation were able to forge a panoply of ties across the Arab world.90

Palestine in the 1930s also witnessed a “process of radicalization” and “the rise of radical organizations” among the nationalist public.91 The unique experience of the simultaneous struggle against Zionism and British rule, together with the new middle class’s characteristic alienation from the traditional forces and leaders whose conservatism was blamed for all political setbacks, bred ideological and political radicalization among new, educated, urban middle-class groups in the Palestinian Arab society. Porath and Lesch address this process, demonstrating the analogy with other Arab societies of the 1930s. Porath stresses that the radicalization first appeared in urban centers, levied by the younger and better educated generation that functioned as “an independent and more radical political force.”92 These young, educated forces established their own political bodies in the early 1930s, such as the “Young Men’s Muslim Association,” the “Arab Young Men’s Association,” the “National Congress of the Arab Youth,” the “Patriotic Arab Association” and the “Arab Boy Scouts Association.”93 The party al-Istiqlal became the leading pan-Arab nationalist organization of the period. The founding of al-Istiqlal, Porath writes, “was an outcome of the growth of an educated class of young radicals who saw in Pan-Arabism the panacea for all the illnesses of Arab society.” Porath shows that the party’s leading activists came from the Palestinian “professional intelligentsia,” among them physicians, bank managers and financial experts, journalists and schoolteachers.94 Lesch also contends that the party’s support came primarily from young professionals and government officials.95 In addition, Porath and Lesch note that the “new professionals” founded and staffed the new nationalist press, of which the leading papers were al-Jami‘a al-Islamiyya, al-Wahda al-Arabiyya, al-`Arab, al-Difa‘, and al-Lub‘a, and impelled the radicalization and more frequent publication of veteran papers such as Biladistan, al-Jami‘a al-Arabiyya, and Mir‘at al-Shara‘. The print media’s success in popularizing Arab nationalism in Palestinian society was reflected in the press becoming a significant force in the political struggle against Zionism and imperialism in the 1930s.96

In Egypt the rise of the indigenous professional intelligentsia in the interwar years would prove even more consequential. More than any other Arab society, the Egyptian professional stratum was quantitatively far larger and qualitatively more diversified. In addition, because it sprang up against the backdrop of a serious economic crisis that sharply curtailed employment opportunities for high-school and university graduates, it had to wage a more intensive struggle against the established landed elites, their Westernized political culture, and the fierce competition with the “foreign” professionals. The radicalization of Egypt’s “new effendiyya” was thus bound to leave a deeper impression on Egyptian national life in the 1930s and 1940s.97

The professional intelligentsia in Egypt played a pivotal role in steering the country away from territorial nationalism focused on the Land of the Nile, to a supra-Egyptian, Arab-Islamic nationalism assuming Arabic language and culture and Islamic heritage as the primary registers of Egyptian identity. The radicalization of the young, new effendi and the transformation they wrought in Egypt’s communal identity have been treated extensively by Mitchell, Jankowski, and Gershoni. Their studies have shown that in the Egyptian case, too, the radicalization of the effendiyya originated in the unemployment crisis of the educated, overurbanization, disruptions of the parliamentary system, the intensification of the struggle against colonialism, and a creeping fascist influence. This prompted their alienation from the Wafd, the Liberals, the Palace, and the other parliamentary parties. They saw themselves as an “angry young generation” fighting “the corrupt establishment,” against whose Westernized, political culture they counterposed nativism, Arabism, Islam, and Easternism.98

Organizationally, the familiar pattern of other Arab countries reappeared in Egypt. The new social forces established their own political bodies in the 1930s, such as the “Young Men’s Muslim Association,” “Young Egypt,” the “Muslim Brothers,” as well as radical student organizations and various intellectual and literary movements, constituting an entire new counterculture. As with its sister movements elsewhere in the Middle East, the Arabism and Islam of Egypt’s effendi were nationalistic, populist, and militant, endorsing violence against the British occupation and the “foreign” communities allegedly enjoying British protection.99

The new narrative also takes note of the Egyptian intelligentsia’s distinctive role in the mass dissemination of their radicalized Arab-Islamic nationalism in the 1930s and 1940s. Cairo-based publishing houses owned and operated by effendiyya churned out works of philosophy, history, poetry, belles lettres, textbooks, and the popular Ismailiyat literature, while new effendi periodicals such as al-Risala, al-Thaqafa, al-
Rabiq al-'Arabiyya and the "official" journals of the new radical organizations such as the YMMA's al-Fath, Young Egypt's Jarida Misr al-Fatah and the Muslim Brothers' Jarida al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin appealed to a less highbrow readership.  

The new narrative also documents the Arabist cultural activity conducted across political borders. The new professional groups created a pan-Arabist atmosphere with the mushrooming of inter-Arab cultural associations, especially in the capital cities Cairo, Beirut, Damascus, and Baghdad. The associations increased literary cooperation among Arab countries by institutionalizing inter-Arab professional meetings, workshops, and congresses of teachers, university lecturers, students, physicians, engineers, lawyers, journalists, poets, writers, and artists. Other inter-Arab cultural activity included an Arabist press addressed to reading publics across the Arab world (such as al-Hadith in Aleppo, al-Makshuf and al-Adib in Beirut, al-'Arab in Jerusalem, al-Risala, al-Thaqafa and al-Rabita al-'Arabiyya in Cairo), and cultural exchange delegations comprised of students, journalists, writers, poets, teachers, university lecturers, politicians, businessmen, and financiers. All these created a new common universe of Arabist discourse based on a shared culture and print language. A solid foundation was forged for what contemporaries called the "unity of Arab culture."  

No less significant is the contribution of the new narrative to the rethinking of the political history of Arab nationalism in the 1930s and 1940s. In a number of spheres at least, its reassessment of political processes and events has led to a thorough revision of the old political narrative. A prime case in point is the 1936-1939 Arab Revolt in Palestine and its impact on the political consolidation of Arab nationalism not only in Palestine (on this specific point the new narrative presented a completely new historical portrait) but throughout the Arab world. A prevalent theme of the new narrative is that no event in the 1930s captured the attention of the Arab world as did the Arab Revolt in Palestine. Its progress was eagerly followed in the daily press of Cairo, Baghdad, Damascus, and in the capitals of North Africa. It was also carefully monitored by Arab leaders and regimes. On the one hand, the revolt aroused Arab nationalist sentiments . . . on the other, it alarmed Arab rulers who feared its repercussions on domestic political life in their respective countries.  

Simon and Eppel show that in Iraq the issue of Palestine in general, and the Arab Revolt in particular, significantly strengthened pan-Arabist forces within the Iraqi ruling elite and aroused Arab nationalist sentiments among broad educated segments of the young middle class effendiyya. The frequent pro-Palestinian articles that appeared in the press, and a series of speech protests reinforced the radical political parties that demanded greater Iraqi involvement in Arab affairs and mobilized Iraqi public opinion on pan-Arab causes. In Syria as well the Palestinian Arab Revolt inspired the new urban middle class to maneuver Syrian foreign policy closer to engagement in the Palestinian cause and broader Arab affairs. As Khoury shows, the general public expressed solidarity and offered material aid for the uprising in Palestine. Toward the end of the 1930s the intensification of this unofficial activity, together with the support given the revolt by pan-Arabist politicians, forced the Bloc's government to step up its official support for the Palestinian struggle and beyond that to lay the basis for a continuing Syrian activist policy in Arab affairs.  

In Egypt, as shown by Coury, Mayer, Gershoni, Gomaa, and Jankowski, the Arab Revolt rapidly eroded Egypt's traditional isolation from Arab affairs. Even more dramatically than in Iraq and Syria, the radical nationalist urban effendiyya of Egypt aroused public support the Palestinian struggle, and skillfully exploited it as an argument for Arab-Islamic unity. By the end of the 1930s radical forces induced the political establishment—the Wafd, the Palace, and the parliamentary parties—to adopt Arabist policies and heighten official Egyptian involvement in the Arab world.  

The Palestinian Arab Revolt also spawned a number of inter-Arab congresses and meetings. These were mostly of an unofficial character and demonstrated that Arab nationalism had filtered down to relatively broad popular levels. The general Arab congress in Bludan (Syria) in September 1937, and more tellingly the "Inter-Parliamentary Congress of the Arab and Islamic Countries for the Defense of Palestine," convened in Cairo in October 1938—to cite only two prominent examples—reverberated throughout the Arab world. Hundreds of representatives from various Arab countries participated in the discussions and drafting of resolutions. They clearly reveal how extensive popular support for pan-Arabism had become by the late 1930s, and they augmented this support in turn, so much so that Porath concludes that "the developments in Palestine during the 1936-9 years stand as perhaps the single most important factor which contributed to the growth of pan-Arab ideology, to the feeling of solidarity among the Arab peoples and to the attempt at shaping a unified general Arab position and policy."  

There was another central political issue that the new narrative thoroughly revised: the developments from 1941-1945 that culminated in the formation of the Arab League. Where the old narrative found no necessary connection between the Arab nationalist idea that developed
in the 1930s and 1940s and the establishment of the Arab League in 1945, the new narrative hypothesized and then proved the connection to be both necessary and immediate. In the latter narrative, the gestation stage of the Arab League, 1941 to 1945, was ambivalently linked to the formative years of Arab nationalism in the late 1920s and early 1930s and to the period of its more advanced development after 1936. Thus, according to this narrative, a series of "internal processes"—the Hashimites' repeated efforts to unify the Fertile Crescent; the prolonged crisis in Palestine and the enlistment of broad support for the struggle; and, perhaps above all, "the rise of political pan-Arabism" in the 1930s and 1940s, which soon rallied around Egyptian leadership in the form of Mustafa al-Nahhas' Wafd government—cumulatively led to the establishment of the Arab League.109

The role of the British in this process did not escape the attention of the new narrative. However, as Porath concludes, "Britain did not create the Arab League, nor did it deliberately encourage its formation; at best it may have indirectly contributed to the process of its formation.”110 According to this version of events, Britain's sole aim from 1943 to 1945 was to further inter-Arab economic and cultural cooperation. This goal was secondary for the Arab leaders headed by al-Nahhas, whose priority lay in realizing inter-Arab political coordination. Hence the bemused reaction of British officials to the formation of the Arab League in March 1945: "a surprising achievement for the Arabs," specifically given its "surprisingly practical" dimensions.110

As the above implies, the new narrative depicts Egypt as an integral, often central player in the intellectual and political formation of Arab nationalism. Gomaa, Mayer, Janowski, Coury, Gershoni, and Porath demur from the earlier view that "politically opportunistic pan-Arabism" had motivated Egyptian politicians rather than "ideological pan-Arabism." Their studies show how Arab nationalism replaced Egypt's territorialist, Mediterranean, Pharaonic, and isolationist orientations, as Egypt evolved from its 1920s self-exclusion from the Arab sphere into deep cultural and political involvement in Arab affairs.110 Indeed, the consensus of the new narrative holds that Egyptian participation in and ultimate leadership of Arab nationalism was the key to a new phase in its historical evolution.111

The new narrative advances a set of novel representations and interpretations of the formation of Arab nationalism from 1920 to 1945. Nevertheless, the new narrative has not yet reached full maturity as a paradigm for research and a new agenda for understanding the roots of modern Arab nationalism. Three weaknesses are particularly note-worthy. First, the new narrative is characterized more by monographs than by synthesis. Its greatest strength seems to lie in case studies that deal with one country, a particular society or individual group of Arab thinkers, but rarely does it endeavor to construct a comprehensive and integrated picture of the region's history of nationalism. The new narrative still awaits the generalizing historians who will take the pieces of the puzzle researched to date with such meticulous scholarship and put them together, producing an overall synthesis of the sources of Arab nationalism. Porath and certain chapters of Hourani's recent book point to possible directions.

Second, the narrative suffers from its inattention to the reception of Arab nationalism among women as well as among subaltern socioeconomic strata such as the lower-middle classes, the working classes, and various levels of the peasantry. Although its discussion of the role played by the new effendiyya enormously improves on the old narrative's fixation on a handful of elite intellectuals, the reader is still relatively uninformed as to the modes in which women, the poor, and the illiterate—constituting the overwhelming majority of the societies in question—reacted to the radicalized upper middle stratum's struggle against the Westernized "ancien régime." The new narrative needs further deepening from the already enlarged portrait of effendiyya alongside and often supplanting luminary intellectuals in the propagation of the Arab national idea; the narrative must encompass the strains of nationalism from below percolating upward as a supplement to the research on effendi-driven nationalism trickling downward.

Third, in overreacting to the reductionist "history of ideas" schema, the new narrative all too often avoids a systematic discussion of ideology and often neglects the intellectual-textual dimension. In many of its studies, nationalism is treated solely as a social and political phenomenon. Nationalist ideas are actually depicted as mere rationalizations for social structures, economic forces, and political processes. There is insufficient appreciation of the integrity of nationalist texts and artifacts at all levels of society. The new narrative has focused on the "history of nationalist experience" and neglected the "history of nationalist meaning."112 It needs historians who will study the two dimensions both as autonomous and irreducible spheres and as operating through interaction and mutual feedback.113 The history of nationalism is undoubtedly the history of the national experience; but that experience, to be sure, is "burdened, limited, and shaped by the already constituted, inherited world of meanings in which, and from which, it was constructed."114 The old narrative still has a certain relevance, after all.