

# Arab unity: myth and reality

by Tareq Y. Ismael

What impact has the Arab nationalist movement had on the Middle East? In its origin, Arab nationalism represented diverse and segmented ideologies emerging from the equally diverse and segmented Arab world as new classes rose to the fore in the nineteenth century with visions of a new Arab reality. These visions were shaped by the specific historical experiences within the great cultural expanse of that world, and reflected the diversity of experience and potentials for change within that world. Religious, petit bourgeois and tribal ideologies and many others, have all been part of the "Arab Awakening," and have provided the dominant ideology in various places at various historical periods. Underriding all these ideologies, however, was the view of an Arab world — of a world bound together by language and history and destined to achieve a new political reality. It is the consistency of this vision that we identify as Arab nationalism.

At the same time that different classes all over the Arab world were emerging to compete for the dominance of their particular vision of the Arab world, another ideology, encompassing a more technologically advanced economic system and a more cohesive class structure — the ideology of imperialism — was also actively asserting its vision of reality on the Arab world. Each region of the Arab world has had its own experience with imperialism over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. From these experiences has emerged an ideology of Arab nationalism — a more cohesive vision of an Arab reality. This ideology has taken shape under the impact of imperialist exploitation which has, in effect, progressively homogenized the Arab experience.

## Threat of destabilization

In the context of the contemporary Middle East, the concept of Arab unity appears an empty phrase at best, a threat to peace and stability at worst. To the casual observer, the Arab world appears to be moving towards chaos rather than unity. Daily headlines suggest that the Middle East is destabilized by the increasingly bitter rivalries in the region precipitated by greedy, irrational Arab governments. The images of the Arab people as brutalized and ignorant masses or marauding, uncivilized tribesmen are presented in the Western media against a background of opulence, religious fanaticism, political corruption and deep-seated racial hatreds. The inference to be drawn seems to be that unity is neither desirable nor possible.

The trend toward destabilization is real enough, not only in the Middle East but all over the world. Contempo-

rary Arab nationalism, contrary to the popular western myths, however, represents the manifest resistance of the Arab people to the destabilization of their world. Ideologically, this is symbolized by the centrality of the Palestinian struggle in Arab politics. This is because imperialist exploitation in the Arab world had its profoundest impact on Palestine. As a result, Palestine developed as the central political issue in the Arab world during the twentieth century. Not only does Palestine manifest the failure of Arab nationalism to meet the supreme challenge — the challenge of national survival — but it also signifies the necessity of Arab unity in a hostile world. Ideologically, the struggle for Palestine symbolizes the quest for Arab unity. This was expressed by Michael Aflaq, founder and philosopher of the Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party, when he observed that "the road to unity passes through Palestine."

## The Palestine glue

The obliteration of Palestine as an historical, cultural, social and political entity, and the ensuing plight of the Palestinian people, initiated a profound reappraisal of all aspects of Arab society — social, political, economic and religious. Manif al-Razzaz, an eminent Arab intellectual, described the impact of Palestine on Arab nationalist ideology:

A crisis — a total catastrophe — to completely overwhelm us and threaten our very existence was necessary, in order to open our eyes to the reality of our existence. A catastrophe was needed to teach us the true difference between facade and reality and to make us aware that the rottenness and corruption of the past were still with us. Instead of altering our society at its very base, we had tried to cover up the unhealthy core by a thin, attractive but brittle veneer, which, although pleasing to the uncritical eye, did not alter reality. A disaster was necessary to strip off this deceptive veneer and to lay bare our desperate need for facts, not illusions, for changes in the very fundamentals of our society, for a revolution in means and techniques — in short, for a total rejection of

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