

# The limits of constructedness: memory and nationalism in the Arab Middle East

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**ABSTRACT.** This paper examines the influence of the historical trajectory on the creation of nationalism in the twentieth century Middle East. While it is not claimed here that everything was decided in preexisting history, the paper claims that history *was* important. If the story of Middle Eastern nationalism is the story of the tension between ethnic Pan-Arabism and geographical state nationalism, the fact is both these phenomena are highly distinct in the sources used for this study, mainly seventeenth- and eighteenth century biographical dictionaries. The modern countries (Egypt, Syria) are in daily use, serving partially as terms of identity, non-political though it might have been. A sense of Arabism existed as well, probably surviving from the early Islamic period. It had much to do with the survival of Arabic literary genres as the preoccupation of the intellectual elite. The Ottomans did their bit in this regard, by treating the Arabic-speaking Middle East as substantially one unified unit, their provinces being superficial and unimportant barriers, mentally no less than physically. Thus, when the Ottoman Empire disappeared in the early twentieth century, the ambivalence between Arabism and state-based nationalism already existed, and was by no means invented by colonialism. The later success of this or that version of nationalism could only be explained by reference to modern factors, but the repertory owed much to the cultural history of the region.

## **Introduction**

This study seeks to apply to the Arab Middle East the current debate in the international study of nationalism concerning the importance of history for the construction of modern nations. This debate is associated mainly with the names of Benedict Anderson (1991), Ernest Gellner (1983, 1996) and Anthony Smith (1995, 1996a, 1996b, 1998). Such applications of the international debate to the Middle East have already begun (Gershoni 1997; Halliday 1999; Gelvin 1999), but these studies seem to need certain improvements: While the debate in Europe revolves around the relative importance of historical materials and memories to the creation of modern nationalism, with at least one major theorist defending the role of history as something going beyond

construction (Smith 1996a, 1996b), in the Middle Eastern context a consensus reigns whereby nationalism is pure modern construction. All nationalist identities, it is claimed, are twentieth century inventions, intended to serve present-day needs, and lack meaningful continuation with past identity patterns, which were purely Islamic (Gelvin 1999; Halliday 1999; Gershoni 1997). This study will claim that this argument is somewhat reductionist and stands in need of further study. We will claim that historical memory was somewhat more important than hitherto realised in the process of nation formation in the modern Middle East. It is not the intention of this study to endorse the primordialist position of the protagonists of Arab nationalism, that the Arab nation (even Arab nationalism) always existed (Zeine 1958: Conclusion). The claim put forward here is that between primordialism (the assumption that the nation is ancient) and total contingency (the assumption that the past has no effect on how modern nations are formed), the truth is somewhere in the middle. The documents studied here reveal that most modern Middle Eastern identities (Arabism, country-based) existed in the Ottoman period, obviously, in a non-political manner. While it is admitted that radically different circumstances might have changed things, there is nevertheless a certain continuity. It is hard to believe that this is entirely fortuitous. Nationalism was created under modern conditions but at least the repertoire of cultural possibilities was transmitted from premodern conditions and ways of perception.

This study seeks to address the most characteristic feature of Middle Eastern nationalism: its wavering between country-based nationalism (Syria, Iraq, Egypt, etc.) and ethnic pan-Arabism. The ups and downs in the relative strength of these two directions occupy the Middle Eastern annals of the twentieth century. Pan-Arabism attained its undisputed zenith in the Nasser years (1952–1970), and many suggest that it is no longer effectively extant. Others believe that it is much too early to pronounce on such an eventuality. One way or the other, any study concerned with tracing the social origins of nationalism in this culture area must deal with these two types of nationalism. We believe that one explanation for this wavering, rare in comparative perspective, is to be found in the patterns revealed in this study.

The urgency of this discussion in the Middle Eastern context is made evident by the fact that it ties in rather neatly with some older discussions of Middle Eastern history and sociology, the debate on 'Orientalism'. Bernard Lewis' study on the emergence of modern Turkey is a good example (Lewis 1963: ch. 10). According to this view, with the coming of Islam an across-the-board dichotomy was established: one could either be a Muslim or a non-believer, a member of the non-believing world soon to be annexed to Islam; and ever since that time Muslims have known no division of the world in terms of countries, states or nations. There was only the religious community, the *umma*. The rise of the Ottoman Empire in the late thirteenth century constituted an analytic hurdle to this model: it was not coterminous with the Islamic world, yet Muslims were devoted to it for centuries. But the 'problem' is explained away by claiming that the Ottoman Empire was not a state but

merely a dynasty, and only as such was it perceived by its subjects. They recognised the head of the Islamic community, nothing else. The conclusion is then reached that Muslims indeed could not understand the idea of the nation, for the importation of which they had to rely on the West. This interpretation of traditional Islam became the stock-in-trade of the Orientalist approach to Islamic societies (Dawn 1973: 122). This study will claim that this view is somewhat exaggerated, and that Muslims did know something other than the *umma*.

But in the main, this study takes off from the theoretical discussion between Benedict Anderson (1991), Ernest Gellner (1983) and Anthony Smith (1996a, 1996b). Anderson made the famous point that the basic components of the traditional European world – kingship and religion (including, crucially, the attached sacred language) – came tumbling down at the same time that print capitalism came into being, and the new nations that now came into being were the language communities created by the print revolution (Anderson 1991: chs. 2 and 3). By using examples from France, England and Switzerland, Anderson then mocked suggestions that these nations had meaningful national roots antedating the print revolution (*ibid.*: 135 ff., 199 ff.). In that sense Anthony Smith seems justified in calling Anderson a modernist or even a post-modernist (Smith 1995: 9). Gellner suggested a theory that was structurally very similar to that of Anderson. The nation was a new phenomenon, forming part of modernity and modernisation, and not having any important historical antecedents. In this case the main dynamo was not print culture but industrialisation and its related developments of urbanisation and modern education. All these developments eroded the traditional ties among people, and brought about a new set of relationships between men and women, the linchpin of which is nationalism (Gellner 1996).

Unlike many other great historical debates, in this case there is no other side to the polemic, apart, maybe, for nationalist ideologues themselves, who suggest that their nations always existed and felt themselves to be a nation. Nevertheless, it was Anthony Smith who based his contribution to the study of nationalism on pointing out not that Anderson and Gellner were fundamentally wrong, but rather that they were telling only half the truth. Nationalism was modern, but most modern nations were based on ethno-linguistic historical origins that antedated the process of industrialisation or the print revolution. In commenting on the theories that commit themselves purely to modernism, Smith remarks, for example:

What this systematically overlooks is the persistence of ethnic ties and cultural sentiments in many parts of the world, and their continuing significance for large numbers of people ... Modern political nationalisms cannot be understood without reference to these earlier ethnic ties and memories, and, in some cases, to pre-modern ethnic identities and communities. (Smith 1996b: 361)

Needless to say, in any particular case the existence of such antecedents has to be established empirically. But Smith's words imply that we should seriously

consider the potential importance of such materials and be ready to take the trouble to go to the historical sources and look for the relevant materials. This is what we intend to do in this study.

### **The discussion of Middle Eastern nationalism**

When it comes to the Middle East, the modernists – who sometime call themselves the new narrative – reign supreme (Gelvin 1999: 73; Halliday 1999: 32; Gershoni 1997: 14). The truth is that both the old and the new school are united in rejecting any idea of meaningful historical roots. The difference between them in Middle Eastern historiography is that the old school was preoccupied above all with the late Ottoman emergence of Arab nationalism, which took place after the Young Turk revolution of 1908 (Dawn 1973; Houry 1983; Khalidi et al. 1991). The new school dismisses this entire area of study by claiming not only that it concerned only a thin elite of traditional leaders, but also that since the demand of the Arab movement of the time was not full independence but merely autonomy, it did not constitute full-fledged nationalism. True Middle Eastern nationalism, according to this school, started only after 1920, initially with local, country nationalism, focused on the countries established by the colonial powers, such as Syria and Iraq. Then, in the 1930s, an angry young generation of lower-middle-class educated but frustrated products of the new school system invented pan-Arab nationalism, probably under the influence of such factors as the new print culture (Anderson 1991) and the new and modern economic and social conditions (Gellner 1983; see also Gershoni 1997).

This narrative is somewhat problematic. In the first place, it downplays unduly the late Ottoman development. This is made evident, for example, by the case of Iraq, described as an exception by becoming pan-Arab immediately after 1920 (Eppel 1999; Simon 1986). And Iraq became pan-Arab because it was given by Britain to Faisal and his wartime supporters, in compensation for the debacle in Syria. The ideology of this group was a direct derivation from the prewar Arab nationalist movement, so late Ottoman Arab nationalism had a bearing on the emergence of popular Arab nationalism. The fact that Arab nationalism at that time was limited to the elite was a common feature of all or most nationalist movements in their early stages and is not reason enough to disqualify this one. The fact that it did not demand full independence at the time is also no justification for questioning the genuineness of the awareness of separateness and nationalist individuality, which indisputably existed. The idea of Arabism, then, could not have been invented out of thin air in the 1930s, since it was already the ideology of a certain educated elite in 1910. Arabism obviously did not die out between 1910 and 1930. The intention of this study is to show that the idea was not invented even in 1910; in 1910 Arabism was merely upgraded by turning it into full-fledged national awareness.

A second problem with the new narrative is exemplified by the case of Syria. Much of the new narrative was made possible by an important new study by James Gelvin on Syria in the immediate aftermath of World War I, when Amir Faisal ruled the country (November 1918 to July 1920) (Gelvin 1998, 1999). The author discovered that a fully developed nationalist movement controlled the streets of the cities of Syria – in the main, a Syrian nationalist movement rather than a pan-Arab one (although a third of the petitions and similar materials from the period did cherish Arabism). The author, an enthusiastic supporter of the constructivist narrative (Gelvin 1999: 73), at least partially contradicts this approach by revealing that the local nationalisms in the Middle East were not created by colonialism, since the Syrian nationalist movement was clearly sufficiently long in place before the arrival of the colonial power. On the other hand, Gelvin's explanation for the appearance of nationalism in Syria does bear the mark of modernism: it was an outcome of the penetration of world capitalism into Third World peripheries – in this case, the Middle East. This process wreaked havoc with the traditional indigenous social structure; the vertical connections between people grew weaker, and the horizontal ties of nationalism took their place (Gelvin 1998: ch. 1).

So far the narrative is convincing enough; but why Syria? Here the explanation is much less convincing. We hear that Syria was the natural outcome of the reach of the market and the movement of people (Gelvin 1999: 78–9). No substantial proof is adduced, and there is some evidence to throw doubt on this assertion. Suffice it to mention the case of northern Syria (the area of Aleppo), whose main commercial ties were with southern and central 'Turkey' (Wirth 1991-4) as were, probably, its cultural ties.<sup>1</sup> Besides, Gelvin overlooks the fact that the idea of Syria (al-Sham in earlier generations) was thoroughly rooted in the society living in this region since medieval Islamic times, and probably increasingly so in Ottoman times. This was not of course nationalism. How it became nationalism is explained by Gelvin. But the concept was well known to the population living here and was not invented in the late nineteenth century. The claim of the present paper is that the study of nationalism in the Middle East would have been better served by combining the two approaches, the modernist and the historical.

As claimed above, the argument of Middle Eastern modernists suffers from their failure to investigate the historical sources from the centuries before nationalism so as to find out whether beneath Islam and Ottomanism something else existed as well (Gelvin 1998; Gershoni 1997). On doing that foot work – for example, through perusal of the biographical dictionaries (as well as other sources) – the surprising general finding is that the modern identity terms had a certain life of their own already in the seventeenth century. The remainder of this study reviews the evidence.

We shall look first at the geographical concepts of countries, which seem to have been rooted very deeply in local history and psychology. It is true that what was found was no *strong* identification of populations or even elites with

such countries, but a very clear perception of the existence of these countries and a certain measure of positive identification.

Next we shall review the material attesting the existence of ethnic Arabism, then analyse the importance of the material for Middle Eastern nationalism.

## Syria

In the form of al-Sham, the concept of Syria was well known to its inhabitants from the time of medieval Islam (Chevallier 1992), and this continued all the way to modern times. Muhibbi (d. 1699) and Muradi (d. 1791), the two Damascene biographers on whose voluminous production this study is mainly based, use the term countless times, although whether the area of Aleppo was considered part of it remains unresolved. One problem with this material is that al-Sham was of course also the name of Damascus. But the ambiguity is clearly resolved in a large number of cases. In one such case the town of Sidon on the Lebanese littoral is defined as a town 'that belongs to al-Sham.' (*min al-àmal al-Shamiyya*) (Muradi 1883, 2: 117). When talking about the region of Hasbayya, in today's southern Lebanon, Muhibbi comments that in terms of weather this is one of the best areas of Bilad al-Sham (Muhibbi 1869, 4: 429). When talking of the fame of his grandfather, who became a renowned Sufi in his later life, the biographer Muradi comments that his fame spread in 'the land of the Turks and the various regions of Syria'.<sup>2</sup> Al-Sham was not merely a term in physical geography; the people who lived there closely associated with it and were called 'Syrians' (*ibid.*, 2: 38–9). It is more difficult to trace positive signs of subjective identification with this geographical concept, but approximations do exist, as in the case of one seventeenth century Damascene local leader, who went out at the head of a local delegation to greet the new Ottoman governor 'according to the custom of the people of Syria' (*ibid.*, 1: 113–14).

Muhibbi and Muradi are not the only sources from the time making regular use of the term Sham. Legal scholars talking about Islamic law were as deeply aware of it (for an example based on such sources see Gerber 1999). Chroniclers of the time not only used it, but in the eighteenth century some of them started to treat it with nationalistic-like affection. An example is the Christian Syrian Mikhail Breik, who treated with explicit pride the fact that a local Syrian Arab dynasty was ruling Syria (referred to by him as 'our country') in the eighteenth century (Rafeq 1977: 69), though they were loyal servants of the Ottoman Empire: Ottomanism and Islam by no means excluded other forms of identity.

Al-Sham, increasingly from the beginning of the nineteenth century known by the name Syria (probably reinvented by the Ottoman government for the province of Damascus), served as a regular, daily term to denote the country to its inhabitants (Shehadeh 1994). And it continued to do so right up to the time when the term was upgraded into full-fledged nationalism, probably with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I. A final

example showing this continuity comes from an encyclopedic book on the province of Beirut written in 1916 by two Ottoman officials on assignment of the government, Tamimi and Behjet. The two were ethnic Arabs, but the book was decidedly apolitical. Nevertheless, much of it is devoted to Syria the country, which is described with love as well as criticism, to the point of calling it sometimes 'our Syria' (Tamimi and Behjet 1916: 59). Thus, continuity existed all the way, certainly from the seventeenth century to the age of Faysal.

## Egypt

The available documents show a well-established concept of Egypt reaching back for centuries before the full-fledged onset of Egyptian nationalism at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Haarmann's study of exactly this point in medieval Egypt is a good starting point. It shows that Egyptians were aware of the discrete existence of their country, loved it and appreciated it above other countries, and gave expression to these feelings in a distinct and important literary genre (literature in praise of Egypt) (Haarmann 1980: 55–66). This was true for at least the first century of the Ottoman era (that is, the sixteenth century). A case in point is the sixteenth century chronicler, Muhammad b. Abi al-Surur al-Bakri (d. 1589–90), who says at one point that he had planned to write about the relations between the Ottomans, the Persians 'and the kings of this our Egypt' (Weintritt 1998: 193). In describing the reign of the Mamluk sultans (13th–16th centuries) the writer says it was a period of peace and quiet for all the people of Egypt (*ahl Misr*), but that finally the Mamluks lost their battle and had to leave 'their Egypt' (*Misrahum*) (*loc. cit.*).

All the evidence at our disposal shows that the awareness of the 'Egyptians' of Egypt continued under the Ottomans. One historian summarises the situation thus: 'The Egyptians felt that even though Egypt was relegated to the status of a province in the Ottoman Empire, it still remained a separate country' (Winter 1992: 31). And indeed, there was no reason for the situation to change: the Ottomans kept the entire country unified as one province bearing the name Egypt (Misr) throughout the Ottoman period. The term appears in the biographical collections countless times, very often with enough clarity to prevent confusion between Cairo and Egypt (Misr being also the name of Cairo). An example is a biographee who was said to have been born in 'Southern Egypt' (Sàid Misr) (Muhibbi 1869, 1: 95). Some biographies used the term *Iqlim* Misr (the region of Egypt) (*ibid.*: 158–9) to refer specifically to the entire land, while others use the terms *al-Diyar* al-Misriyya or *al-Bilad* al-Misriyya (both meaning the country or land of Egypt) (Muradi 1883, 2: 182). Egypt also bestowed its name on its inhabitants, called in the biographies Misriyin, Egyptians (Muhibbi 1869, 2: 38–9; 3: 66–7).

A pre-nineteenth century clear case of Egyptian solidarity comes from the pen of the famous Egyptian historian Abd al-Rahman al-Jabarti (n.d. 1825), who in his youth was helping the biographer Muradi to gather materials for

his collection. Jabarti is quoted as the source for the description of the Egyptian ruler's campaign in the direction of Palestine and Syria in 1775. Jabarti tells us that as soon as the military job was done, 'the commanders and the soldiers ... were joyful at the thought of returning to Egypt, and they became excited to go and return to the country (*awtan*)'; they were bitterly disappointed on hearing that their leader wished them to fill various governmental jobs in the country they had just occupied (Muradi 1883, 3: 185–6). Jabarti is obviously describing a longing for home and country – something that latter-day nationalism merely upgraded, did not invent.

It must be admitted that the sources sometimes mention areas with the qualifier 'land', such as *bilad Nablus* (Muradi 1883, 1: 11; 2: 10) or *bilad Safad* (*ibid.*, 2: 254) or *bilad Halab* (Muhibbi 1869, 1: 419) that did not become modern nationalisms; but it is quite clear that the biographers had a clear idea about what was a 'country' and what a 'region': in the biography of one professional wanderer it was indicated that he travelled to all the 'mother countries' (*ummahat al-bilad*) – Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Rum, Persia and India (Muradi 1883, 1: 155).

### Arabism

It has long been assumed that the Arabs of the seventh century soon lost their Arab identity within the world of Islam and forgot all about it until it was newly constructed in the early twentieth century. However, while there is no question that during these intervening centuries 'Arabs' saw themselves *mainly* as Muslims, the term 'Arab' being applied mainly to the Bedouins of the desert (Muhibbi 1869, 4: 426; Muradi 1883, 2: 61), fresh evidence throws serious doubt on whether the elite among them really ever forgot its Arabness. There are in fact some old pieces of evidence pointing in this direction, but they are all secondary in nature; having never been found in authentic Arabic documents, they were never taken seriously. For example, James Finn, the British consul in Jerusalem, 1848–1861, mentioned that the urban elite of Jerusalem was fully aware of being Arab, despised the Ottomans and severely questioned their right to hold the Islamic caliphate (Finn 1878, 1: 215). Roughly contemporaneous consular reports from various places in the Middle East indicated much the same, according to Moshe Maoz (Maoz 1968: 245–8). It is also pertinent to mention an old reference to this thorny question in a study of Albert Hourani (1961: 59), where it is claimed that Arab self-awareness was kept alive by the 'Arab' elite of *ashraf* (descendants of the Prophet Muhammad and a loose sort of elevated status group in pre-modern Islamic societies) and families of religious scholars. The problem is that Hourani did not specify an empirical source for such subjective Arabism. The information is worth mentioning only because of Hourani's unusual authority among Middle Eastern scholars.

But a more intensive perusal of the admittedly scant body of sources available to us from the late Mamluk and Ottoman periods nevertheless



indicates that there is much more to the evidence than meets the eye. Such evidence comes for example from the Mamluk period (1250–1517) in Egypt and Syria, that is, more than five centuries after the supposed disappearance of the proto-national meaning of the term ‘Arab’. The evidence is contained mainly in two studies by Ulrich Haarmann (1988a, 1988b), who studied the discursive and ideological relations between ‘Turks’ and ‘Arabs’ in this period. While on the whole Haarmann can be criticised for using the term ‘Arabs’ uncritically (that is, assuming the subjective existence of such a category rather than proving it), the evidence he marshals contains several references of contemporary intellectuals referring to the proto-national meaning of ‘Arab’ as part of normal discourse, not as part of an effort to prove a point.

The famous Ibn Khaldun is a case in point. He in fact quite often uses the term ‘Arab’ in the proto-national sense, in addition to using it to refer to Arabs of the desert. Right at the beginning of his famous book he says that his book will deal on the whole with the Arabs and their dynasties, as well with those ‘famous nations’ (*al-umam al-mashahir*) that were their contemporaries, such as the Nabateans, Syrians, Persians, the ancient Israelites, the Copts, the Greeks, the Romans, the Turks and the Europeans (*al-Ifranja*) (Ibn Khaldun n.d.: 6). Not only is it clear in this quotation that the Arabs are a proto-nation, but it is also made evident that other ethnic communities within Islamdom are recognised as ethnic groups or proto-nations, viz., the Turks and the Persians. Moreover, it turns out that the supposedly sacred term *umma*, the Islamic community, is used for completely secular ethnic communities, some of them not even Muslim.

As we advance along the centuries, there are additional references to awareness on the part of ‘Arabs’ of their being not just Muslims or Ottomans, but Arabs. We mentioned above the Syrian chronicler Mikhail Breik, who was particularly proud about the fact that the ‘Azms, Syria’s rulers in the eighteenth century, were ‘sons of the Arabs’ (*awlad Arab*) (Rafeq 1977: 69). Several similar references crop up in the pages of the Syrian biographers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the aforementioned Muhibbi and Muradi. Thus Muhibbi says of a certain Ishaq b. Abi al-Lutf al-Maqdisi that he obtained the teaching position of the Salahiyya school (*madrassa*) in Jerusalem, ‘earmarked [in the endowment deed] for the best Shafi’i scholar in the land of the Arabs (*diyar al-Arab*)’ (Muhibbi 1869 I: 394). Needless to say, ‘Arab’ in this context does not refer to the Bedouins of the desert. In another biography, that of Muhammad b. Umar, a judge in Jerusalem in the seventeenth century, we hear that the biographee managed to retain the virtues of his teacher, the Ottoman Sheyhulislam Yahya b. Zakariyya, ‘for which he had been praised in the lands of the Arabs (*bilad al-Arab*) at the time he had served as *qadi* in Aleppo, Damascus and Cairo...’ (*ibid.*, 4: 82).

Some particularly interesting remarks on self and other occur when the biographers speak of ‘non-Arabs’. Kurds, for example, were supposed to be completely transparent, since they were Sunni Muslims (the denomination of the majority). But they were not. One Damascene biographee of Kurdish

origin who excelled in the legal sciences, Monla Muhammad al-Kurdi, was singled out by Muhibbi as an exception among ‘members of his race’ (*abna jinsihi*), who did not usually excel in good memory (*ibid.*, 4: 329). One wonders what base-line of comparison Muhibbi had here in mind. Was the implicit comparison made with ethnic Arabs, who traditionally were supposed to have a special talent for the legal sciences (Haarmann 1988b: 183)?

Particularly interesting information is presented by the biographers concerning ‘Turks’, that is, members of the Ottoman bureaucratic and religious elite, many of whom served in places like Syria, and were thus very well known to the biographers. One such is a man known as Kara Chelebi-zade, who attained one of the highest religious positions in the empire. When giving the details of his posts, the school he endowed in Istanbul and his excellent character, Muhibbi also adds that ‘he was naturally fond of the sons of the Arabs’ (*muhibban bi’l-tab’ li-abna’ al-Arab*) (Muhibbi 1869, 4: 322). Would an Ottoman of high status have a predilection for the Bedouins of the desert? Obviously not. And would a highbrow Damascus intellectual consider such liking for the Bedouins a virtue so cherished in a man as to be mentioned in a highly condensed and selective biography? The answer must again be in the negative. *Abna’ al-Arab* is here obviously the proto-national category of old, to which the writer not only belonged (in his own estimation) but was proud to observe as being an object of admiration by (some of) the ruling Ottoman elite. Another ‘Turk’ singled out for boundless praise was Molla Ahmad b. Nur Allah, a *qadi* and an almost incomparable expert in the land of Rum (land of the ‘Turks’), in both the legal sciences and Arabic literature and poetry. His greatness is summarised thus: ‘He combined the meticulousness of observation (*tahqiq*) of the Persians with the eloquence of expression (*fasaha*) of the Arabs’ (*ibid.*, 1: 365–6). Again, it is quite obvious that the reference here is not to Bedouins but to Arabs in the proto-national sense.

Another ‘Turk’ who eventually attained the highest religious positions in the state’s center was Muhammad b. Burhan al-Husayni. He was formerly a *qadi* in Jerusalem, and while there composed a poem (*qasida*) that he caused to be read in the Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem every night, through an endowment he established for the purpose. The first two lines of this poem read: ‘The snow on the holy precinct (Haram) and the mountain is not [really] snow; it is light created by Allah, nothing is like it since the time of Musa, and it engulfs the Arabs and the non-Arabs (Ajam)’ (*ibid.*, 4: 177–8). Several points are worthy of comment here. In the first place, it is again evident that what is being referred to here is the Arabs as a proto-nation, not the Bedouins. And while the author of these words is an ethnic Turk, they were written after a longish stay in Jerusalem, so we should assume a fairly good acquaintance with local sociological perceptions. Moreover, and most importantly, whereas the former pieces of information really reflect elite meanings, what took place in al-Aqsa mosque touched the life of the popular classes, not just the elite, so there are here perhaps some grounds to infer that ‘Arab’ awareness did touch the common people as well.

Al-Muradi, the great biographer of the eighteenth century, was no less aware than his predecessor of 'Arab' ethnicity and geography, again in a totally non-political sense. An example is the biography of the Ottoman Sheyulislam Ibrahim Karahisari, who met extensively with and imparted his knowledge to many scholars in 'the Arab lands (*al-aqtar al-Arabiyya*) and elsewhere' (Muradi 1883, 1: 12–13). Another example is the biography of the great scholar Mustafa al-Bakri, who is said to have written more than two hundred works and is described as a scholar who composed works that became known in the East and the West, 'And the range of their fame included the non-Arabs (Ajam) and the Arabs' (*ibid.*, 4:190). Clearly, these works were intended for a contemporary ethnic group called 'Arabs'.

Like his fellow biographer, Muradi too was quite sensitive to the attitude of members of the Ottoman elite to Arab culture and its bearers. An extreme example is the case of Ishaq Efendi Monlajik-zade; he reached almost the top of the Ottoman religious hierarchy and in addition excelled in Arabic and Arabic literature. This man not only spoke fluent Arabic but held a regular salon in his house where experts in Arabic literature were regularly welcomed, and where Arabic poetry was read and discussed. And the biographer makes a special point of mentioning the vignette that this man 'had love for the sons of the Arabs, whose virtues he would point out'.<sup>3</sup> It is difficult not to feel the personal involvement that the biographer had in this piece of information.

Proofs of Arab self-awareness exist also for the nineteenth century. In addition to evidence adduced at the beginning of this section, some other points can be mentioned. Thus a geographical dictionary published in Turkish in 1890, twenty years before the emergence of nationalism, speaks of 'Syrian Arabs' in northern Syria, clearly differentiated from Bedouins and Turks (Jevvad 1890: 116, 126, 335). Another book from the last phase of Ottoman rule in the area, that by Tamimi and Behjet, also refers explicitly to 'settled Arabs', differentiated from Bedouins of the desert (Tamimi and Behjet 1916: 8). Again, the information is not political but ethnic, and it does not smack of a recent discovery. Again one gets the impression that the old notion that awareness of Arabism was totally submerged in Islam was simply a myth.

It would be interesting at this point to observe the personal narratives of early known Arabists and learn about their 'Arab' identity before 'conversion'. Scarcely a single one of these people left such reminiscences, but Abd al-Rahman Azzam and Zaki al-Arsuzi, two well-known pioneers of Arabism, claim that they always felt themselves to be Arab, before being aroused to political Arabism (Watenpaugh 1996: 364; Coury 1998: 18ff., 173–4). None of them is trying to make a primordial point in his memoirs (that is, the 'eternity' of Arab nationalism), so maybe the information can be trusted.

### **The role of the Arabic language**

One possible explanation for this persistence of subjective Arabism is that psychological habits of self-portrayal tend to perpetuate themselves unless

strong factors effect deep-seated changes. One major factor that ‘came to the aid’ of Arabism was the role of the Arabic language in the intellectual life of the ‘Arabs’. There is no intention here to make any automatic connection between nationalism and language. Gellner’s comment against any such facile connection is well known and needs no repetition (Gellner 1983: 44ff.). Common language did not create a single nationalism in Latin America, nor did it unite Canada and the United States. Hence it is not enough to point out that Arabic was the sacred language of the Quran, hence secure in its central cultural position; this was exactly the situation of Latin in Christendom before nationalism, and yet modern nationalism is not based on Latin. So the sanctity of Arabic is by no means an automatic argument. But what our sources do make abundantly clear is that the role of Arabic in the cultural life of the ‘Arabs’, specifically in the Ottoman age, was *exceptionally* important (it seems obvious that this pattern goes all the way back to the beginning of Islamic history, but the evidence marshalled here was specifically sought for in the period immediately preceding the age of nationalism). It is that exceptionality that makes the difference here.

An additional point of importance is the fact that the preoccupation with the language and its literature perpetuated an identification with the substantive materials of that literature. And the main topic of that literature were the ancient Arabs.

Contemporaneous biographers speak of some literary experts of the time in the most glowing terms – not so much, it is true, in so far as literary *production* is concerned, but mainly in the context of knowledge and the ability to preserve, teach and pass on to the next generation. For matters of identity these issues are crucial, and it is indeed the major finding of this study that classical Arabic, the official, written language of the Arab world since before Islam, was in many ways a major marker of identity for the ‘Arab’ elite in the Ottoman centuries. All this is made abundantly clear in the biographies. It turns out that one important group of biographies was that of people whose main, and sometime sole, expertise was superb knowledge of the language, often with some allied area such as literature, ability to recite large bodies of traditional poetry and, more surprisingly, knowledge of Arab history (*tárikh*), primarily military history.<sup>4</sup> It must be emphasised that only a very select group of people made their way into the biographical collections, and if among them were people who had made their name in old literature and old Arab history, it means that these types of knowledge were highly valued by the society being studied here. There is unquestioned love for the topics of this expertise, and deep identification with them and, I would say, also with those Arabs mentioned therein – all of course in this case the Arabs of early Islam. At the supposedly darkest moment of Islamic and Arab history there is, in cities like Damascus, a proliferation and exuberance of literature, history and other non-religious sciences, not in dark corners of the society but in the salons of the rich and powerful. There is also a clear feeling of cultural embrace – we are of them, and they are of us.

An additional crucially important point that should not be missed is that these people knew sections of the old literature and history by heart. This element is rarely missing from the biographies. And what does it mean if not that this knowledge was imparted to various groups within the population, rather than kept by the biographees for themselves? We have no hard evidence as to who these audiences were, but that a certain audience is implied there is no doubt. We can assume that part of the process took place via privately held literary and historical salons,<sup>5</sup> as well as in coffeehouses and on street corners. The fascinating possibility here is that such knowledge went much deeper into the non-elite layers of society than we usually care to believe.

### **Pax Ottomanica and its role in preserving the unity of the Arab world**

The sense of unity of the 'Arab' world in Ottoman times is enhanced by a strong sense of cultural unity, which is vividly conveyed by the biographical collections. Such unity was maintained by intensive movement between regions and centers, particularly of members of the elite. Such journeys, thousands of which are mentioned in the biographical dictionaries, were of four main types: (1) wandering for its own sake; (2) wandering 'in search of knowledge'; (3) travel for the purpose of study in a specific institution; and (4) permanent emigration from one region to another. Let us look briefly at some cases.

Professional wandering is of course a major topic in the cultural history of Islam, with Ibn Battuta as the archetypal model (Dunn 1993). Surprising as it may be, such a pattern of wandering is reflected also in the sources for the period under study, less renowned for its vibrancy and curiosity. Some wanderers in the biographies look like small-time Ibn Battutas. Ahmad Shakir al-Hakawati, born in Hamat, northern Syria, in the eighteenth century, from an early age took to travelling in all the countries of the Middle East, then went on to Persia, India and even further. While in Damascus in early adulthood he occupied himself by storytelling in coffee houses (Muradi 1883, 1: 155). Abu Bakr b. Barakat from Damascus was likewise described as one who loved to travel; he too wandered for years in the Middle East and went as far as India (Muhibbi 1869, 1: 99ff.). But such professional wanderers were rare. The most common travelling in our sources was by young aspirants from relatively secondary intellectual centers to go to the major centers for the sake of study, then return home to assume some religious-legal post. This could mean either to Istanbul or to Cairo, very often both.<sup>6</sup>

The accumulated effect of this ongoing movement of people between Syria, Palestine, Egypt, Iraq and Anatolia was that for the intellectual elite these lands constituted a region in the fullest meaning of the word – sociologically and psychologically. The relevance of this information for the modern formation of Arab nationalism is quite obvious.

It is appropriate at this point to conclude our findings concerning the role of historical factors in the rise of Arabism. The usual claim is that it was

invented in about 1910, and then again in 1930. But the material presented here shows that among the educated and intellectual elite, Arabism never really died out. The classical Arabic language remained a tremendously important cultural trait of the 'Arab' elite throughout the centuries. It was of course the language of the Quran and of the sacred law; but to say this is certainly not enough, since that was also roughly the position of Latin in Europe. Classical Arabic remained the center of the cultural world of 'Arab' elites in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and continued to do so right up to the time of the formation of Arab nationalism. This comparison between the fate of Arabic and Latin highlights the shallowness of mechanical applications of Anderson's print culture to the study of Middle Eastern nationalism. In the Arab world nationalism came into being via the vehicle of classical Arabic, not spoken Arabic. Moreover, when we look at the supreme role of Arabic as a cultural and symbolic artifact for modern Arabs, and at the same time keep in mind that this intense identification existed as well in the eighteenth century and the late nineteenth century, we must realise the measure of continuity involved here.

Nor is it possible that Arabism could be simply invented. An additional historical factor makes such random modern invention impossible. The factor that comes to mind is Anderson's analysis of Latin America, which is logically unconnected to his print-culture theory and is therefore in effect a different route to nationalism taken by societies under the control of imperial powers (Anderson 1991: ch. 4). The problematic raised by the case of Latin America is, how did it happen that a unified culture area, speaking one language, under the control of a single power gave rise to a series of separate national movements? Anderson's explanation is that Spain controlled each province of the continent as if it were a world unto itself with almost impermeable borders, each run solely from the imperial center. In the course of the centuries such an approach created also a psychological sense of discreteness in the provinces, which thus became separate countries, with separate national movements. Logically this theory goes against the grain of modernism, since it is essentially and genuinely historical: the accumulated psychological effect of the historical process materially affects the present. A mirror image of this theory is deployed by Anderson to explain why the Scots of the nineteenth century did not develop their own nationalism: Scotland was quite well integrated into the social fabric of the kingdom in terms of merchants and intellectuals moving across the border, thus blurring its distinctness (Anderson 1991: 90).

The story of Arabism in the Ottoman Middle East and later is best explained in the same terms. It has been shown above the extent to which the Middle East was culturally unified. The factor that allowed it to be unified to such an extent was what is sometimes called the 'Pax Ottomanica'. This in effect meant that though the empire was sub-divided into provinces, the names, borders, dimensions and every other possible variable kept changing over time. What is more, though the Ottomans were fully aware of the terms 'Iraq', 'Syria' and 'Palestine', none ever matched the borders of a province – with the notable

exception of Egypt, an exception that had consequences which are dealt with below. In that sense, the term 'provinces' was almost meaningless. Not only did the delineations keep changing, but they rarely touched the life of the citizens. Borders were not seen on the ground: there were no border guards nor any hindrance to movement (Cohen 1973: 119ff.; Masters 1992). Characteristically, neither the biographers nor religious-cum-legal scholars ever mention Ottoman provinces, only 'countries' (Gerber 1999). Small wonder that under such conditions no psychological barriers between areas came into being.

### **The role of Egypt**

Egypt was an exception to all of this and Egypt constitutes the major case study supporting the validity of Anderson's theory under discussion here. In general, Egypt's peculiarity in the context of the rest of the Ottoman Middle East bears such a resemblance to the position of Egypt vis-à-vis modern Arab nationalism as to constitute almost a case study of the effect of real (as opposed to constructed) history on the Middle Eastern present. Many of the points made above about the Pax Ottomanica were not applicable to Egypt. Egypt (Misr), a country well known to the Ottomans, was made a single province under its own name (Gibb and Bowen 1957: ch. 4), and this remained the case throughout the Ottoman era. The country was also differently administered: the *timar* system was not introduced here, probably in order to facilitate deployment of the surplus grain of Egypt to feed the giant city of Istanbul, as well as to provide grain to Mecca and Medina at the time of the hajj (Shaw 1964: Introduction). Collection of this surplus needed a relatively centralised administration, yet the distance and the appalling communication conditions made it natural that this exceptionally important provincial administration also became relatively autonomous from very early on. This autonomy increased when the old Mamluk elite, which had fled the Ottoman conquest of Egypt, gradually made its way back into the country and then into the local Ottoman administration (Holt 1966: chs. 5–6; Piterberg 1990). The Ottomans, content with the flow of grain, never seriously tried to stem this development, which made Egypt an independent country in all but name by the second half of the eighteenth century. It was left to Muhammad Ali (Turkish: Mehmet Ali), an Ottoman army officer in Egypt, to utilise the near anarchy that prevailed in Egypt in the wake of Bonaparte's withdrawal, to take control of the country (1804) and establish himself as an effective independent ruler bound to the Ottoman Empire by a threadbare tie of formality. Soon Egyptian nationalism appeared (Wendell 1972). Although signs of Arabism were evident in Egypt before the nineteenth century, they were distinctly flimsier than in the rest of the 'Arab' world.<sup>7</sup> And when Arab nationalism appeared in the Levant in the late Ottoman period, most of Egyptian public opinion remained hostile or at best indifferent, hardly perceiving what the point of it was (Jankowski 1980 and 1991).

Thus, the match between the administrative-cum-historical separatism of Egypt from the rest of the 'Arab' world and the resultant effect on nationalism seems near perfect. But this match should not be exaggerated. In the first place, Egypt after 1882 had a fairly good common-sense reason to stay aloof from Arabism: Arabism meant anti-Ottomanism, but with the British conquest of Egypt in 1882, the Egyptians became suddenly deeply attached to their formal connection to the Ottoman Empire, which they were loath to see consigned to the grave. In addition, while Egypt, as shown above, was administered quite differently from the rest of the 'Arab' world, the cultural ties of Egyptians and 'Arabs' were intense throughout the Ottoman era. It was in fact under the Ottomans that the al-Azhar Mosque University became the effective cultural heart of the Arab world, drawing thousands of 'Arabs' into long stays in Egypt in Ottoman times (Dodge 1961: ch. 4).

One could thus conclude this point by saying that what characterised Arab–Egyptian relations was ambivalence. It seems quite obvious that this is also the term that should be used to characterise the relations between Egypt and Arab nationalism in the twentieth century. Even when Egypt was drawn into Arab nationalism from the 1930s, it never was as selflessly committed to it as Syria; its role was always conditional: Egypt would join only on condition of primacy and, if possible, formal leadership (Coury 1998: 434–46). And what is the meaning of such a condition if not joining and remaining independent at the same time? It seems that the major factor in explaining this ambivalence is the psychological or memory effect of the Ottoman legacy.

## Conclusion

Just as Arabism was heavily influenced by historical conditions in the Ottoman period, so was regional nationalism. We have seen that regional identities in the Middle East are old. They were in no sense invented by colonialism. It is evidently truer to say that colonialism invented itself according to the ancient divisions in the area, which Islam clearly inherited from antiquity. The explanation for the existence of these identities should probably be looked for in what Grosby has referred to as the territorial tie in human societies, which is universal and primordial (Grosby 1995). The game of nationalism in the Middle East is thus to a large extent treading the fine line between ethnic pan-Arabism and regional feelings. Modern factors are certainly important here, but so is history.

## Notes

1 An example is an entry in an eighteenth century biographical dictionary which says that a well-known scholar of Aleppo attracted students from many countries, but especially from Anatolia. See Muradi 1883, 4: 13.

2 *Al-Diyar al-Rumiyya wa'l-mawatin all-shamiyya* — Muradi 1883, 4: 115.



- 3 *Wa-lahu mahabba li-abna' al-Arab wa yashhadu bifazlihim* — Muradi 1883, 1: 221–2.
- 4 Called in the biographies *ayyam al-Arab*, days of the Arabs, or waqā'ial-Arab, campaigns of the Arabs — e.g. Muhibbi 1869, 4: 451; 1: 116; 3: 83; Muradi 1883, 1: 6–7, 275; 2: 216; 4: 10–11, 91 and many more.
- 5 An example of this is mentioned in Muhibbi 1869, 4: 435–36.
- 6 Examples: Muhibbi 1869, 1: 488, 455, 408–10, etc.
- 7 It must, however, be emphasised that such awareness of Arabism definitely existed in Ottoman Egypt, as is well attested in Ralph Coury (1982 473) and Winter (1992: 31; 1980: 110ff.).

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