



Arab Unity Against Zionism: Notes on a History of an Intellectual Debate on Arab Nationalism

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Abstract: The Palestinian cause raises the question of Arab nationalism as an anti-Zionist/anti-imperialist ideological framework for strategic political action, especially in an era that necessitates polycentrism to confront US-led global hegemony. Arab nationalism, which calls for the unity of the states constituting the Arab region (members of the Arab League), remains a subject of debate. This article traces the history of Arab nationalist thought in order to bridge the gap between previous debates on the matter—those that emerged during the golden age of the ideology (the second half of the 20th century)—and contemporary considerations of the strategy. It examines Arab nationalism and unitarism in light of the historical development of the ideology and its political practice throughout the 20th century. The study draws on the intellectual contributions of several Arab/Arabist thinkers who employed Marxist methodology to analyse the Arab world, Arab nationalism, and Arab unity. More of a summarising bibliographical work than an analytical piece, this article begins with a historical overview of the development of Arab nationalist thought. It then explores Marxist views on nations and the actual or potential existence of an Arab nation. Subsequently, it discusses critiques of postcolonial Arab nationalism before delving into perspectives on the conditions leading to Arab unity. Finally, the concluding remarks will open the discussion on the future of Arab nationalist and unitarian thought in the contemporary world.

Introduction

The events of 7th October and the brutal Israeli retaliation have called into question strategies of solidarity in the context of colonial/imperialist aggression. In a post-Soviet neoliberal era, so-called international relations are increasingly governed by unstable alliances and coalitions. Decades after the Bandung Conference and the spread of the spirit of the Non-Aligned Movement, the peripheries of global capital appear to be ever more fragmented, and the peripheral state, as a tool for international negotiations and bargaining, is no longer able to fulfil this mission. The technocratisation of the postcolonial state, following the prescriptions of good governance dictated by International Financial Institutions, has transformed politics into an automated application of recipes prepared by and for the benefit of global monopoly capital.

In the Arab world¹, of which Palestine is a part, the current political and socio-economic situation paints a bleak picture. The labour participation rate is around 45.95 percent, lower than the global average of 59.86 percent. Unemployment stands at 10.66 percent, double the global average of 5.77 percent (ILO, 2022). Moreover, employment in agriculture decreased by half, from 32 percent in 1991 to 16 percent in 2022. While industrial employment saw only

¹ The Arab World is the region constituted by the 22 states that are members of the Arab League.



a modest increase, from 23 percent in 1991 to 25 percent in 2022, the service sector now absorbs 59 percent of the labour force in 2022 (World Bank Data, 2022).

These indicators create confusion regarding class dynamics in the Arab world, particularly in times of genocide and unequal exchange. The Arab population, as part of the Global South, is witnessing a high rate of semi-proletarianisation of its labour force (Yeros, 2023). Furthermore, the dismantling of the industrial fabric of Arab economies, through compradorisation and neoliberalisation (Kadri, 2016b), has de-socialised labour, atomised its interests, and obscured its antagonisms. The non-binding and discontinuous link between labour and capital has channeled expressions of class struggle into sectarian civil wars and political instability. Moreover, the rise of 'movementism' and the NGOisation of political action have replaced classical forms of organisation, pushing neoliberal policies through lobbying, advocacy, and campaigning, rather than through thorough debate and struggle (Samara, 1998). However, these tendencies are often disrupted by seismic events such as acts of resistance, which reveal another potential for political action and expose the imbalance in the world order.

On the popular front, the Palestinian cause and the ongoing battles to liberate the last colony in the Arab region raise the question of Arab solidarity. Based on a shared cultural history of mutual belonging, the Arab masses have never ceased to express their unitarian sentiments. The liberation of Palestine is one of the most prominent slogans chanted and graffitied across Arab streets, while the popular masses continue to express their discontent with the insufficient support of Arab governments for the Palestinian struggle and the normalisation of relations with Israel by some states (Gasmi, 2024). These expressions reveal a widespread sense of unity among the Arab populations, or at least tendencies towards unity.

Arab nationalist thought is deeply embedded in modern Arab politics. Emerging as a reaction to the national oppression of Arabs under Ottoman rule, Arab nationalism developed into an anti-colonial, and later anti-imperialist, ideology advocating for national liberation and self-determination (Timoumi, 2002). In practice, however, the Arab world is a collection of 22 states that are members of the Arab League, torn between the status of independent sovereign nation-states and that of entity-states² that belong to a wider Arab nation.

In a world where the formation of regional blocs is increasingly seen as a tool for advancing economic development and strengthening political positions on the international stage, Arab unity raises the question of whether an Arab bloc, based on shared history and culture, could participate in shaping a polycentric world. The existence of an Arab nationalist ideology advocating for the unity of the Arab states predates the actual formation of an Arab nation as a unified entity. This necessitates the examination of the objective/historical conditions for the formation of an Arab bloc, as well as the subjective/political efforts to promote either unity or fragmentation.

This article, therefore, examines Arab nationalism and unitarism in light of the historical development of the ideology and its political practice throughout the 20th century. The study

² We call entity-state what is designated in Arabic as *Dawla Qotriya*. *Qotr* entails that Arab states are provinces or regions of the Arab Nation/*Umma*.



draws on the intellectual contributions of several Arab/Arabist³ thinkers who employed Marxist methodology to analyse the Arab world, Arab nationalism, and Arab unity.

More of a summarising bibliographical work than an analytical piece, this article begins with a historical overview of the development of Arab nationalist thought. It then explores Marxist views on nations and the actual or potential existence of an Arab nation. Subsequently, it discusses critiques of postcolonial Arab nationalism before delving into perspectives on the conditions leading to Arab unity. Finally, the concluding remarks will open the discussion on the future of Arab nationalist and unitarian thought in the contemporary world.

Historical overview of Arab Nationalist thought

The second half of the 20th century witnessed a widespread shift in global politics that affected intellectual processes and production. The end of the world wars, the establishment of a new world order based on the rivalry between the capitalist and socialist blocs, the proliferation of national liberation struggles against colonial subordination in the Third World, and the spread of Marxist thought, driven by the success of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and the Soviet victory over the Nazi threat, all influenced the political thought of Arab intellectuals.

Following the evolution of Marxist theory and practice in Asia, Latin America, and Africa, several Arab intellectuals and Arabists began to explore ways of implementing a universalist method within a specific socio-historical context. Some examined the philosophical intersections between the materialism developed in Marxist philosophy and the materialist tendencies in the products of Arab-Muslim philosophy (Amel, 1985; Muruwwa, 1978). Others studied the influence of socialist thought on the national liberation movement (Amel, 1972). Whether suggesting a Marxist analysis of anti-colonial revolutions (Kanafani, 1972), or incorporating Marxist methodology into the politics of independent states (Mansour, 1976; Sabri-Abdallah, 1977), the development of Arab Marxism could not avoid the inevitable question of the national issue. With more than a century-long history of an expanding and contracting empire that both imploded and exploded due to internal dynamics and foreign intervention, the mere determination of what constitutes a nation in the Arab context remains a dilemma.

Built on a civilisational, religiously driven, and commercially expansive unification of the remnants of states in West Asia and Asia Minor, diverse semi-nomadic tribes in Northwestern Africa and Arabia, and on the peripheries of the Byzantine and Chinese Empires, the Arab Muslim World extended for over 1,400 years across an area with different ecologies, ethnicities, and ideological religious frameworks. From the Himalayan foothills to the Iberian Peninsula, through the Indus, Tigris, Euphrates, and Nile rivers, it encompassed Arabs, Persians, Assyrians, Copts, Berbers, Black Africans, and many other tribes and clans of various ethnicities and nations (Hugh, 2006). The ethnic diversity of the Arab-Muslim Empire, the ever-changing borders of its successive states, the fragmentation of the empires into dynasties, and the early imperialist interventions, particularly in West Asia and Egypt, all sowed confusion in Arab intellectual and political fields during the era of rising European nations and

³ “Arabists” refers to scholars and intellectuals who specialise in the study of the Arab World, regardless whether they were Arab or not.



nationalisms, and the expansion of monopoly capital, with the conflicts and competition between its poles.

Three dominant views on the Arab national question developed throughout the 20th century. The first was based on ethnic boundaries in reaction to both Ottoman/Turkish oppressive nationalism and European (mainly British and French) colonialism (Dawisha, 2016). General sentiments of humiliation, comparable to China's Century of Humiliation, deepened by the nostalgic civilisational pride of the Arab-Islamic Golden Ages of the Empire, led Arab rulers and intellectuals to resort to a glorious past in an attempt to restore a lost heritage, devoured by Ottoman/Turkish supremacy and threatened by the European yoke. In a pre-capitalist society, ruled by monarchs and tribal leaders, where wealth was accumulated and reproduced through long-distance commerce and a tributary agrarian economy (Kadri, 2016a), the classes that revolted against Ottoman and European aggression were mainly large landowners, wealthy merchants, and their offspring, who were privileged with the cultural capital attributed to their modern education (Amin, 1976). The nationalist views advocated by this Arab vanguard were ideologically religious (mainly Islamic) due to the strong cohesion of Islam as a religion that emerged from the tribal lands of the Arabs and spread in the Arab language of its holy book. Accordingly, this strain of Arab nationalism was primarily cultural and idealistic. In this sense, the struggle against Ottoman nationalist oppression was based on Islamic unity, with only a claim to nationalist ethnic autonomy within the framework of a decentralised empire. Meanwhile, resistance to European expansion was rooted in opposition to modern materialist Christian values (Timoumi, 2002).

Consequently, the first Arab nationalist tendencies were ambivalent in their enmities and alliances. British imperialism, for instance, supported the Great Arab Revolt of 1916 as a World War I strategy against the Ottoman Empire, which was part of the Central Powers. In the aftermath of the British-Arab alliance, the Ottoman Empire was dismantled, and the Turkish War of Independence established the modern Republic of Turkey. In parallel, the conspiracy of the Sykes-Picot Agreement between Britain and France divided Arab West Asia into several mandates under their colonial rule. The British ally, therefore, broke the promise of creating the United Arab Kingdoms, shifting the region's subordination from Ottoman control to British and French colonialism. The resolution of the anti-Ottoman/Turkish contradiction deepened the Arab identity of the Mashreq (the Eastern Arab World) and weakened the Islamic element. Indeed, Arab nationalist thought shifted to be held by secular and Christian thinkers (Touma, 1968).

The second wave of Arab nationalism grew within the context of the development of capitalism in the Arab world, driven by colonial mechanisms. Class differentiation and formation influenced political consciousness and action. On the one hand, colonial exploitation, based on the extraction of agricultural and mining resources, strengthened the alliance between the imperialist rulers and the local landowning aristocracy. In direct opposition, peasants and landless farmers faced colonial expropriation and oppression, compounded by the landlords' collusion, in dispersed revolts without a consistent ideological foundation (Kanafani, 1972). However, on the other hand, the disruption of industrial development and the dumping of European commodities in the colonies inflamed sentiments of oppression among the nascent local bourgeoisie. Additionally, the political repression of the middle classes—shopkeepers, artisans, liberal professionals, and managerial functionaries in the colonial administrations—



resulted in the proliferation of anti-colonial thought and action, framed in an Arab nationalist ideological content (Murqus, 1970).

The economically-driven opposition of the Arab bourgeoisie to colonialism, motivated by a desire to defend their interests, was infused with a political framework developed by petty bourgeois intellectuals who received modern education in European universities. Impressed and inspired by Western progress, particularly the values of the French Revolution, such as bourgeois democratic individual liberty, secularism, and political pluralism, Arab intellectuals adopted European republicanism and nationalism. In doing so, Arab nationalist thinkers sought to align the Arab cultural heritage with contemporary political advancements, which led to a rift between traditionalism and progressivism. On one extreme, violent criticism of Arab heritage gave rise to Westernised political tendencies that blindly copied European values. On the other, there was an emphasis on cultural legacy, which sometimes reached the point of chauvinism and ethnic pride (El-Hafiz, 1977). However, what predominantly emerged from this strain of Arab nationalism was the rehabilitation of a fixed, above-history nation through a modern European model (Amel, 1974). Indeed, the slogan of one of the first consistent Arab nationalist parties, the Arab Socialist Ba’ath Party, which ruled Syria and Iraq, was: “One Arab Nation with an *eternal* message” [emphasis added].

The third view on Arab nationalism was Marxist. It advocated for a crude separation between class struggle and national struggle, downplaying the importance of the latter. The communist parties in Arab colonies and semi-colonies exalted the social question, aspiring to unify the struggles of the proletariat of the colonising nations and the colonised proletariat in the context of anti-colonial struggles. However, this was not a successful strategy for mobilising the masses (Rodinson, 1968). Communist influence was largely restricted to strikes at workplaces or spontaneous acts of sabotage. The attitude of the Arab communist parties can be explained by two broad reasons. First, their disdain for nationalism and nationalist sentiments, stemming from an analytical confusion between European imperialist/fascist nationalism and anti-colonial national struggles for self-determination. Hence, the adoption of an absolutist internationalism. Second, the dogmatic interpretation of Stalin's views on the national question (which will be discussed thoroughly later), which tends to be deterministic and alien to the Arab context.

Nevertheless, proletarian sentiments favouring Arab unity and solidarity were expressed in 1956, as a reaction to the Tripartite Aggression, executed by British, French, and Israeli forces against Egypt. Workers in several Arab countries sabotaged oil facilities: Syrian workers blew up Iraqi pipelines transporting oil through their land towards Europe, and Saudi workers blocked the pumping of oil from their grounds, alongside general strikes in other countries across the Arab world. Moreover, unitarian syndicalist collaboration was manifested in the establishment of the International Confederation of Arab Trade Unions (ICATU) in 1956. The first meeting was organised by five unions, namely Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Sudan, with representatives from Libya and Iraq, and the support of Bahraini, Kuwaiti, and Saudi unions. The values advocated by the union included anti-imperialism, Arab unity, improving Arab workers' living standards, and the industrialisation of the Arab world. Originally based in Egypt for more than twenty years, ICATU moved to Syria in 1978 in protest against Anwar Sadat's visit to Israel and the signing of the Egypt-Israel peace treaty, in keeping with its anti-imperialist/anti-Zionist values (Touma, 1968).



The takeaways from this historical overview of the development of Arab nationalist thought are as follows:

One, unlike European nationalism, which emerged from the evolution of bourgeois revolutions and the necessity of establishing a national market for commodities and labour, Arab nationalism was a movement that struggled against Ottoman/Turkish national oppression in Arab regions, and against British, French, and later Zionist colonial invasions. In summary, it was a local resistant nationalism in opposition to foreign invasive nationalisms.

Two, the deformed and dependent capitalist mode of production developed in the Arab world resulted in weak class formation, which manifested in ambivalence of class interests regarding national liberation.

Three, the fragmentation of the Arab world into regional state entities—due both to the pre-colonial disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, especially in the northwestern African side of the Arab world, and to colonial fragmentation in the eastern part of the Arab world—along with the post-colonial establishment of more than 20 states, has complicated the discussion on the possibility of Arab national unity and its form (whether as a united state, federalism, or autonomous regions).

The long history of Arab national unitarian thought has been shaped by deep social and geopolitical changes, rendering the Arab national question very complex to study, especially for Arab/Arabist Marxist intellectuals who are attempting to apply a universalist methodology to a specific context. The conversation that this article seeks to (re-)create is an attempt to place a frantic train on solid theoretical and methodological rails, as the Arab national question remains on the agenda, particularly in the specific struggle against Zionism and the global fight against imperialism.

This more-than-a-century-long debate is complex, yet its importance remains urgent in our times for many reasons. First, the anti-imperialist strategy to break with a monocentric world order through the establishment of polycentres, as advocated by Amin (1990), involves the formation of centres, with the Arab world being a contingent one. The Arab region is treated by monopoly capital as a single bloc (Kadri, 2014), despite current attempts to separate its constituent states from their cultural and historical continuum. Building on the popular sentiments of collective belonging, coupled with the ecological, demographic, and geopolitical potential of the region, could provide solid grounds for the formation of an anti-imperialist bloc.

Furthermore, the Zionist settler-colonialism of Palestine, backed by US-led imperialism, serves as the latter's strategy of containment against the evolution of the region. This evolution surpasses the Arab world, threatening Iranian anti-imperialist state policies and disrupting geopolitical connections with the Far East. Whether it concerns fossil resources, strategic commercial maritime routes and ports, or sovereign economic and political independence, the implementation of Israel as a barking and biting watchdog in the heart of the Arab world represents a perpetual threat to Arab emancipation. As Yassin El-Hafiz (1977) simply puts it: Since Israel is backed by imperialist forces, the liberation of Palestine should be supported by anti-imperialist forces.



Finally, and as a corollary of the previous point, the dispersed anti-imperialist efforts of separate entities have proved weak, despite substantial positive achievements. The recent political developments in Syria have raised numerous questions about "entititarian" anti-imperialist efforts.

Do the Arabs have a nation?

Rodinson (1958) provided the most extensive critique of Stalin's view on the national question (2021 [1913]). He examined the historical context in which the text was written and published, emphasising an objective critique without resorting to the ad hominem attacks that were common among Marxists of the era. Rodinson argued that Stalin's work was more of a political programme aimed at the various regional social-democratic parties than an extensive theoretical framework for universal application. Thus, Stalin's focus on the specificities of the Caucasus and Russia was influenced by the development of nations in Western European bourgeois societies. Furthermore, the scholastic approach of Stalin's text—initiating the argument with a definition of a nation as comprising land, language, psychological traits, and economic unity—led to dogmatic Marxist interpretations. These interpretations adopted a formulaic approach to determining whether or not a nation exists, stipulating that if one element of this definition is missing in a given situation, the existence of a nation is denied.

From this point, Rodinson raises the question of economic unity in colonies and semi-colonies. Since their economies are subordinated to the colonial metropolises, can they truly be considered nations? How does this affect the demands and struggles for national liberation? Furthermore, in our contemporary neocolonial world, where the global economy functions as a socio-political unit, can the established entities in the peripheries—postcolonial independent states—be considered nations? Or, more broadly, does this mean that the entire world is, in effect, one nation, given the economic unity and complementarity that exists?

Rodinson's approach (1968) aimed to challenge Marxist dogmatism by examining the concrete realities that Stalin had overlooked, whether due to lack of attention or political interest, or historical developments. He even proposed a new terminology to clarify existing confusion. He introduced the term "nationalitary" (originally in French *Nationalitaire*) to move beyond the restrictive notions put forth by Stalin and, by extension, Mauss (1969 [1920]), regarding the national question. The concept of nationalitarism, which Rodinson borrowed from Johannet (1918), applies to all human formations that surpass the level of clans and tribes, and is roughly analogous to the Russian "Narodnost," generally translated as "ethnicity." In further developing this concept, Rodinson argues that Anouar Abdel-Malek (1969) appropriately uses it to distinguish between the aims of oppressed nations struggling for independence and the old European nationalist tendencies.

In opposing Marxist dogmatism, which led to the weak positions of Arab Marxist parties in the anti-colonial struggles and paved the way for the establishment of postcolonial non-Marxist petty bourgeois nationalitary socialisms, Rodinson also revisited Marx's positions and ideas on the national question. He argues, first, that Marxism is not a "set of beliefs" but rather general sociological concepts influenced by the ideological premises and objective conditions of their



time. He then demonstrates that Marx advocated for internationalism, not cosmopolitanism, meaning that he recognised nations as historical facts and entities that could not be ignored.

By examining Marx and Engels' views on the unification of Germany, Rodinson concluded that Marxist class analysis intersects with the concept of nations as a sociological and political space for struggle. In other words, since classes constitute nations, the dominant class (or classes) determine the nature of the nation in order to serve their own interests. Therefore, by redefining nationalist notions within socialist frameworks, the proletariat — which has no nation (Engels and Marx, 2015 [1848]), because it is exploited within a bourgeois nation — should become the ruling class in order to establish its own nation, i.e., to become the national class.

Rodinson concludes his analysis by defining a nation as: “the form of the total and comprehensive society, a societal formation that appears under certain socio-historical conditions” (p. 39, translated from Arabic by the author). By giving this broad definition, he stresses that socio-historical formations are always in flux, and the components of a nation may be as homogenous as they are divided. From this, he opposes the idealistic view of history which claims that Arabs inherently constitute a nation. Instead, he argues that studying the objective catalysts of divisive elements — arising from the pre-colonial disintegration of the Ottoman Empire and colonial fragmentation — alongside the unifying elements – reinforced by nationalitary sentiments and reaction to external aggression –, would provide a more useful and comprehensive understanding of the trajectory towards either national unity or entitarian fragmentation.

The dogmatic and idealistic views on the national question, which overlook the contingent nature of nation formation, either underestimate nationalitary sentiments — expressed, especially, in times of war and aggression — or overestimate them, treating them as self-existing and essentialist. For instance, calling on an imagined Arab nation, with its oil kingdoms and normalising states, to stand with Gaza, or, more delusionally, to liberate Palestine, belongs to the realm of Platonic forms. Conversely, denying any intrinsic common Arab solidarity with the Palestinian people, as expressed by the popular masses in the streets and on the internet, or more materially, in the military support from Yemeni Ansarullah, Lebanese Hezbollah, and the Syrian Arab Army, is equally counterproductive — even nihilistic. Subjective wishes and actions can only be effective when they intervene in appropriate objective conditions.

For Yassin El-Hafiz (1965), the historical evolution of human groups is governed by qualitative shifts. Tribes evolve into peoples (using the Russian notion of *Narod*) through the transcendence of bonds from blood to culture. Thus, sharing language and psychological traits constitutes what makes a people. Nevertheless, the evolution of peoples into nations is conditioned by the unification of their economic connections. Up to this point, El-Hafiz's definition of a nation does not differ significantly from Stalin's. However, El-Hafiz argues that the Eurocentrism of Stalin's theory stems from the fact that, unlike the formation of European nations driven by the capitalist market and bourgeois interests, the Arab nations and nationalist sentiments emerged from anti-colonial struggles led by various classes, rather than just the bourgeoisie. Here, he intersects with Anouar Abdel-Malek (1972) and Rodinson's (1968) use of the notion of *nationalitary* bonds (without using the exact term), which are characteristic of



national struggles for independence from colonialism, in contrast to the imperialist/fascist tendencies of European *nationalism*.

What El-Hafiz adds to the debate on nationalist unitarism is the distinction between what he terms "objective unity" and "subjective unity." The former is evolutionary, in the sense that it develops when two or more peoples consistently interact at the economic level, ultimately achieving economic unity that could form a nation. In contrast, subjective unity is more revolutionary, intentional, and responsive to necessity. Therefore, subjective unity transcends economic factors and manifests in the realm of political thought and action. In this way, unity becomes a tool for defence against aggression, such as imperialism and Zionism, in the contemporary Arab context.

When developing his theory of unequal development (1976a), Samir Amin built upon his thesis regarding the origins of underdevelopment, particularly through the study of pre-capitalist social formations in non-European spaces and societies. Relying on a materialist view of history as a methodology to discuss Stalin's perspective on the formation of nations, Amin suggested that economic unity is a necessary condition for the formation of a nation but not a sufficient one. Hence, he stressed the importance of the existence of a ruling social class governing society via a central state, which ensures the organisation of production, exchange, and distribution of surplus, resulting in solidarity between different regions.

Accordingly, the limits set by Stalin, which assert that nations are a bourgeois phenomenon, are deemed by Amin to be Eurocentric, as they do not apply to fully developed pre-capitalist nations such as the Chinese and Arab-Muslim empires. In fact, the rise of capitalism, which went along with the crystallisation of the Western European national moment, was merely an amplification of a historical phenomenon. It guaranteed higher economic centralisation, commodification of capital and labour, and market integration, combined with administrative centralisation, leading to the completion of the wealth distribution circuit.

For the Arab-Muslim state, Amin (1976b) contends that the completion of the tributary mode of production, coupled with the centralisation of state authority and the ability to commercialise surplus, were sufficient conditions for the formation of the Arab-Muslim nation even before the capitalist modernisation of society. Nevertheless, the reliance on long-distance trade to accumulate surplus rendered the nation unstable, particularly due to the dominance of the merchant-warrior class as the ruling class and the weak development of productive forces.

Samir Amin is familiar with the scholar Abd al-Rahman Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406), who is considered one of the first thinkers to establish a scientific concept of history (Mahdi, 2015 [1957]), sociological theorisation (Weber, 1999 [1922]), and materialist thinking (Amel, 1972). Amin (1988) acknowledged the existence of the Khaldunian scientific impulse in the fact that it considers society to be governed by nature-like laws. However, while he praises Ibn Khaldun's contribution as unprecedented and unsurpassed until the emergence of scientific sociological and historical thought in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Amin (1988) explains that the limit of Ibn Khaldun's general theory of the cyclicity of states lies in the thinker's class position, being largely privileged by monarchs and rulers, as well as the geographical boundaries of his study, which were primarily North Africa/the Maghreb (Arab-Islamic West).



Nonetheless, Ibn Khaldun's views on the state still hold relevance when studying its historical evolution of the Arab-Muslim world. For Amin's critique, driven by valid universalist tendencies, the Khaldunian understanding of the state stems from a specific history of perpetual falls, rises, and dynasties. Ibn Khaldun lived in an era during which the Golden Age of a widespread, unified, and centralised Caliphate/Empire, namely the Abbasid (750-1517), was witnessing both high civilisational development and several secessions, particularly in its Western parts. Furthermore, far from post-structural linguistic determinism, the notion of the state in Arabic, *Dawla*, comes from the meaning of an ever-changing, ever-revolving entity, unlike the Latin sense, which implies a static condition and position. In the latter, unity and equilibrium are the *raison d'être*, while for the former, cyclic dissolution is a destiny⁴.

Building on Amin's theory of the formation of nations, which is necessarily conditioned by the existence of a ruling class that takes control of a central authority (the state) and distributes wealth within a unified economy, we can incorporate Ibn Khaldun's views on the state/nation for an additional critique of Eurocentric bourgeois-deterministic definitions of this complex phenomenon in the Arab World. In his *Muqaddimah* (2020 [1377]), Ibn Khaldun defines the state/nation as a living being that has its own nature, governed by the laws of causality. It is a human and natural institution necessary for social and political unity, on which civilisation relies. More specifically, a state/nation presupposes a people ruled by an elite, who are bound together by the effect of *Assabiya* (loosely meaning 'group feeling' or solidarity), which may arise from blood or kinship, alliance, or allegiance. *Assabiya* is maintained through the coercion or persuasion of a central authority and reproduced by religious means, i.e., the ideological apparatus of the state. The unity of the territory on which a people exist results in economic connections and unity among the population, based on the division of labour, the mobilisation of surplus, and the distribution of wealth.

In a synthetic reconciliation between Amin and Ibn Khaldun's views, the instability of the Arab-Muslim states/nations (read *Dawla*) is rooted in Amin's (1976a) analysis that an economy based on the extraction of surplus from external sources—namely, long-distance trade, a process dominated by a merchant-warrior class—cannot sustain itself for long. This strain of the tributary mode of production downplayed the agrarian element, which provides internal sources of surplus, and excluded peasants, who ensure spatial stability and geographical unity (Amin, 1976b).

Critique of Postcolonial Arab Nationalism

Yassin El-Hafiz (1965) compared European and Arab nationalisms by distinguishing between the social classes that championed each ideology. On the one hand, he argues that the capitalist market served as the environment in which the European bourgeoisie developed its nationalism. Through this process, the establishment of European nation-states on the remnants

⁴ Linguistics may provide some insight into the culture of the speakers of a particular language, without necessarily disrupting the evolving understanding of concepts due to historical development. In relation to the meanings of "state" in non-Latin languages and pre-capitalist civilisations, the Chinese word for state (*guójiā*) means "nation-family" or "country-house," alluding to the functions of the state as a spatial and sociological unit that entails care and protection. On the other hand, the Ancient Egyptian word for state (*Tawy*) translates to "the Two Lands," which merely indicates the political unification of Upper and Lower Egypt.



of feudal ‘islands’ transformed nationalism from a mere possibility into a concrete reality. This shift was driven by class struggle between the emerging bourgeoisie, on one side, and the nobility and landlords, on the other. Ultimately, the triumph of the bourgeoisie led to the spread of European nationalism, which paralleled the expansion of the capitalist mode of production. On the other hand, the emergence of the Arab bourgeoisie was not the result of class struggle against the pre-capitalist social formation, but rather a continuation of feudal relations, based on merchant capitalism that was subordinated to colonial powers. As the Arab bourgeoisie was deeply dependent on global monopoly capital, its nationalist sentiments did not reach the point of advocating for political independence, out of fear of jeopardising its own interests. Consequently, it was the old petty bourgeoisie – including artisans and shopkeepers who were adversely affected by the dumping of European commodities – alongside the new petty bourgeoisie – consisting of managers, civil servants, liberal professionals, and intellectuals who were exposed to modern politics under colonial rule – that took the lead in transforming their nationalistic, emancipatory sentiments into a political ideology and strategy. Torn between European influences and a strong inclination to sanctify its cultural heritage, the Arab petty bourgeoisie asserted a superficial confirmation of its identity (Amin, 1976b).

El-Hafiz’s view of petty bourgeois Arab nationalism was that its ideology was mired in idealism, expressed through vindictive, contemplative, and subjectivist tendencies that could either lead to despair or fascism (El-Hafiz, 1965). By ignoring the social question and elevating the national question to the status of the primary, if not the sole, contradiction, petty bourgeois Arab nationalism purported to adopt socialism as a discursive element of its ideology. In reality, however, the banner of socialism was used primarily to preserve national unity, rather than to promote class struggle. In other words, it represented a strategy of class reconciliation, assuming no distinction between classes within an ideal nation, which was framed as a unified family. A striking example of this petty bourgeois nationalistic paternalism was the Tunisian variant of socialism, which did not hide its opportunistic aims. President Bourguiba (1903–2000) stated in several speeches (cited in Timoumi, 2008) that the socialism adopted by the newly independent Tunisian state in the 1960s was the most efficient path to progress, one that even Western European and US states were following at the time. However, Tunisian socialism did not aim to abolish private property or private investment, as it did not believe in class struggle, which was considered nonexistent in a society where Islam and the national liberation struggle reconciled the hearts of all Tunisians.

With this superficial treatment of the social question, petty bourgeois Arab nationalism, according to El-Hafiz, viewed socialism merely as an economic organisation of society through state-bourgeois reformist measures. While it is true that Arab societies, in the current neoliberal climate, are in dire need of even the most basic level of development from the second half of the twentieth century (Kadri, 2016b), the historical opportunity was unprecedented, had the class basis of the Arab postcolonial states been more popular. The failure of the communists to radicalise Arab nationalism by asserting leadership and spreading cultural hegemony led to opportunism, which in turn facilitated the spread of petty bourgeois nationalism, increasingly hostile to scientific socialism (Rodinson, 1968).

Samir Amin, for his part, focused his critique of petty bourgeois Arab nationalism on the political implications of this path. Grounding his analysis at a global level, he argued that the Golden Age of Arab nationalism operated in a world where the contradictions of the global



economic system were manifesting within a unified structure, namely the global capitalist market. The struggle, according to Amin, was between independent political systems represented by sovereign states (Amin, 1993). This was the era of neocolonialism (Nkrumah, 2004 [1965]). The Arab awakening occurred during a period marked by the decline of Britain's global hegemony and the rise of both the USA and the USSR, alongside the expansion of Zionism in the Mashreq. The middle classes began to develop nationalist sentiments, as they felt increasingly alienated from their society, where the bourgeoisie and landlords were allied with imperialism, and the popular classes were suffering from severe poverty (Amin, 1976b).

Petty bourgeois nationalism was initially grounded in cultural projects that failed to achieve their hegemonic and transformative roles; as a result, Arab intellectuals turned to political organisation. The nation-states established by Arab petty bourgeois nationalists heavily relied on the USSR's support for state-capitalism projects, which were viewed as a path to socialism. Nationalisations and agrarian reforms were at the forefront of the development agenda. Despite their progressive and revolutionary outcomes, the agrarian reforms, aimed at targeting the landlords, led to the emergence of a new class of wealthier peasants (kulaks) at the expense of the poorest peasants. Meanwhile, nationalisations, which sought to dismantle the old dependent bourgeoisie, ultimately benefited the bureaucratic middle class to the detriment of workers (Amin, 1993).

Based on his class analysis of the transformations within these states, Amin concludes that the petty bourgeoisie did not commit class suicide (Cabral, 1978). Instead, it created a class of state-bourgeoisie (Amin, 1976a). Consequently, the 'compradorisation' that later affected the Arab states was not the result of a 'counter-revolution' per se, but rather the acceleration of the process of integration into the global market, a process that was facilitated by populism (Amin, 1993).

On another level, El-Hafiz assessed petty bourgeois nationalism through the lens of Egypt's defeat in the Six-Day War of 1967 (El-Hafiz, 1977). He began his critique by placing Nasserist nationalism within its historical context. The unification of the Arab World had been on Egypt's political agenda since the reign of Muhammad Ali in the nineteenth century, long before these aspirations were thwarted by French and British imperialism. Moreover, the young Nasser participated in the battles against the Zionist project in Palestine before 1948 and was convinced that the liberation of Egypt could not be separated from the liberation of Palestine, famously asserting, "looking beyond Sinai," and from the Arab World. Subsequently, the 1952 Egyptian Revolution, led by Nasser and the Free Officers, advocated for Pan-Arabism.

Nasserite Pan-Arab thought evolved from revolutionary romanticism, born out of a limited understanding of imperialism, into revolutionary realism. The Tripartite Aggression of 1956, in which British, French, and Israeli military forces attacked Egypt following its decision to nationalise the Suez Canal, convinced Nasser that unitarian nationalism in the Arab World was the appropriate response to imperialism. As a result, Egypt took the lead in the struggle "against imperialism, Zionism, and Arab reactionism," a refrain frequently echoed by Nasser in his speeches. This stance was practically realised through Egypt's crucial role in supporting the Palestinian struggle and its solidarity with the Yemeni republican revolution of 1962, which opposed the royalists backed by Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Britain, and Israel (El-Hafiz, 1977).



Nevertheless, the defeat of 1967 prompted numerous critical reactions regarding a progressive, yet limited, Arab nationalism. The petty bourgeois class basis of Arab nationalism hindered the horizons of liberation due to ideological obstacles. On the Palestinian side, Amin (1976b) argued that the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), which self-identified as Marxist-Leninist, failed to recognise the class nature of petty bourgeois nationalism. This form of nationalism does not rely on the mobilisation of the popular masses for its emancipatory project. As the military bureaucracy dominated the popular social forces, monopolising politics, desperate petty bourgeois reactions—manifested in dramatic individual acts driven by infantile impatience—delayed the maturation of the masses into organised political action.

El-Hafiz (1969) also criticised what he considered the “ultra-revolutionary assumptions” of the Palestinian forces struggling against Israel in the 1960s. These assumptions stemmed from petty bourgeois ideology, which resorted to mere rejection and negation rather than a thorough critique. In the wake of the defeat of the official standing armies in 1967, Marxist-Leninist rhetoric proliferated, with guerilla warfare being adopted as the correct path to liberate Palestine, following the examples of Guevarist, Vietnamese, and Chinese traditions. El-Hafiz viewed these inspirations as superficial, as they fetishised the victorious tactics of previous revolutions without considering the specificities of each experience or the actual conditions of the Arab-Zionist conflict. For El-Hafiz, guerilla warfare in Cuba, Vietnam, and China was not the ultimate goal of revolutionary action but rather a means to establish a larger, more organised, and more popular army. Moreover, guerilla warfare was conducted in terrains where the opponent was not fully supported by the local population, and was often opposed by them. In contrast, in the case of Palestine, the settlers supported the colonial army, which presented a distinct challenge. Finally, El-Hafiz argued that the Blanquist approach to struggle alienated the popular masses, preventing them from joining either the official army or the guerilla ranks. This strategy, he contended, led to what he termed “nationalist nihilism,” which isolated the Palestinian cause from its broader Arab context, reducing it to a purely Palestinian issue and postponing Arab unity until after the liberation of Palestine.

Furthermore, El-Hafiz's critique of the 1967 defeat (El-Hafiz, 1977) aligns with that of Amin, as discussed above. He argues that the absence of a revolutionary socio-economic project led to the chronic weakness of the proactive forces and the persistence of feudal ideology within industry, where managers acted more like landlords. While progressive up until the 1960s, Arab nationalism became increasingly dominated by archaic tendencies in an ahistorical manner, torn between the past and the future, traditionalism and progressivism. Consequently, El-Hafiz emphasises the crucial role of ideological and political struggles in the development of an emancipatory Arab nationalism.

Arab Unity

Arab nationalist sentiments continue to be expressed in popular circles, despite decades of deepening separatist nationalism across various Arab states and entities (Tarabishi, 1982). Calls for Arab solidarity are often raised during crises, indicating dormant aspirations for unity. However, as Rodinson (1968) notes, national identification is easier to recognise than class consciousness. National belonging is a premise that does not require complex formulations. Therefore, there is no subjective or voluntarist notion of a nation; rather, it is the historical process of accumulating objective elements (kinship, language, psychological traits, etc.)



within a structural unity. Nevertheless, in a world governed by imbalanced power dynamics, manifested in imperialist aggression and exploitation, the subjective and political intervention required to preserve the objective elements of already-established national bonds becomes a necessity. This intervention involves following the unitarian path towards economic unity and complementarity, underpinned by a revolutionary class that channels wealth towards the development and welfare of the productive forces.

The centrality of politics is explored by Ilyas Murqus (1970) in his examination of the fragmentation of the Arab world. On the one hand, he opposed what he termed "nationalist falsification," which overlooks class struggle within the boundaries of the nation and treats the realisation of the nation-state as a "paradise on earth" and the end of history. This nationalist perspective views the fragmentation of the Arab world as the mere imposition of territorial borders by "evil" colonialist Western states against the "glorious" Arab nation. In reality, however, fragmentation is the objective consequence of imperialist action in the Arab world and, more generally, in the periphery of monopoly capital. Fragmentation—more precisely, the Balkanisation of a large entity into separate states on a historical-political level—fosters dependency on the core through the haemorrhagic flow of value (Amin, 1973). On the other hand, Murqus criticised what he saw as the "economicist falsification" of Arab Marxists. This perspective interprets fragmentation as a natural result of historical economic underdevelopment caused by imperialism. Accordingly, unity should be postponed until the separate development of each entity's internal economy—what is termed "objective economic evolution"—spontaneously leads to Arab unity. In opposing both undialectical and ahistorical viewpoints, Murqus proposed that fragmentation should be understood as a process—a dialectical element in the unity of the struggle against imperialism. Therefore, the correct strategy is to build upon spontaneous unitarian sentiments and direct development towards the unity of the Arab world, which would be better equipped to confront imperialist aggression.

Amin (1974) extrapolates the class alliance that governs states, reproducing internal accumulation, to its global extent. The reproduction of international hierarchy is mediated by major bodies of states (such as the United Nations, World Bank, NATO, etc.), which are controlled by a global ruling class alliance. In the neocolonial world order, constituted by politically sovereign states, the political realm manages international economic relations, characterised by competition between the centres of monopoly capital and a core/periphery division of labour. Consequently, accumulation on a global scale leads to the reproduction of the reserve army of labour in the peripheries, alongside the atomisation of the working class in the core. This, in essence, defines a highly polarised monocentric world. In summary, international economic relations are the product of the reproduction of class alliances, rather than mere 'economicist' comparative advantages or the conspiracy theory of multinational hegemony (Amin, 1980).

Subsequently, since the bourgeoisie in the periphery develops under the yoke of, and with the support of, imperialism—i.e., in dependency on global monopoly capital—it is incapable of leading even a bourgeois revolution, let alone pushing for national liberation. This is further compounded by the tendency of the separatist bourgeoisie in each Arab entity to sever ties with their fellow Arab bourgeoisies, competing among themselves for a more privileged position in the global capitalist market. Therefore, deepening class struggle to secure the victory and leadership of more revolutionary classes becomes a fundamental political task.



Amin (1976a) suggested that Arab nationalist sentiments of unity could be channelled towards the struggle against imperialism. This would entail the unity of anti-imperialist classes and peoples, namely the proletariat, peasants, the ‘non-corrupt’ petty bourgeoisie, and the revolutionary intelligentsia. He called for a national popular alliance (Amin, 1993) to confront global monopoly capital through the internal development of productive forces, achieved via self-centred national planning and the democratisation of society, particularly for the working classes. This approach involves delinking from global capitalist structures (Amin, 1990).

He also emphasised the role of the intelligentsia in adopting global perspectives, in contrast to narrow methodological nationalist frameworks, advocating for a scientific approach to reality and change, as well as socialist aspirations (Amin, 1993). Indeed, from Amin’s standpoint, the unitarian struggles of the peoples of the Arab World against imperialism and Zionism should align with the socialist revolution. Furthermore, he insists that the state capitalism adopted by petty bourgeois Arab nationalism is not a transition towards socialism (Amin, 1976a).

Thereafter, the socialist revolution in the Arab World would sever ties with the global capitalist system, under the leadership of a national popular class alliance, advancing the dialectical development of the productive forces and the relations of production. A nation governed by the national proletariat, which would carry out democratic tasks and lead the socialist revolution, would liberate the oppressed peoples and establish a central force of resistance.

Yassin El-Hafiz aligns with Murqus on the centrality of politics and the necessity of socialism to achieve Arab national unity. Building on the idea that unitarian nationalist sentiments are more strongly expressed by the popular classes than by the bourgeoisie, he emphasised the importance of mass leadership in the unitarian movement, which must begin with the struggle against the local bourgeoisie. The tasks of the unitarian popular movement are twofold: first, the liberation from archaic socio-economic structures through a democratic revolution that eliminates remnants of ethnic, sectarian, and religious divisions; second, the struggle against colonialism in Palestine and neocolonialism in the broader fight against imperialism and local dependent capitalism (El-Hafiz, 1965).

El-Hafiz criticised the ideology and politics of petty bourgeois nationalism, which he believed contributed to the defeat of 1967, for its lack of rationality. He argued that this deficiency stemmed from an impaired understanding of both Arab historical evolution and Western modern values and technologies (El-Hafiz, 1977). In response, he strongly advocates for rationalism in the construction of Arab socialism. This, he suggests, requires transcending conservative and evolutionary bourgeois rationality in favour of a socialist revolutionary realism that engages dialectically with reality, grounded in both solidity and resilience. Thus, socialist rationalism would interact with objective conditions without succumbing to pre-modern superstition or the adventurism of the petty bourgeoisie. It involves assessing the balance of power in each given situation, while recognising that the unitarian movement may progress slowly or quickly, and may be intermittent or continuous. Therefore, the key task is to remain vigilant to historical revolutionary opportunities in order to seize them when they arise (El-Hafiz, 1975). El-Hafiz's rationalism supports modernity, encompassing democracy, citizenship, and the inclusive participation of the popular masses, all of which are essential to advancing an Arab internal political history in harmony with the contemporary world:



For those rhetorically asking the question: “Why do we need a modern state? We only need a socialist state”, we respond: The premise and foundation of the socialist state is the modern state. Without this foundation, as demonstrated by the Arab experience, the socialist state will be nothing more than a traditional state with a socialist veneer. Yes, a modern state cannot be established in a backward country in one fell swoop without a political foundation. The political foundation is represented by a socialist vanguard that truly understands the values and methods of the modern era, supported by a progressive and popular intelligentsia. Those who seek to build a modern state ‘the American way’—with its hollow model of ‘the state of science and faith,’ relying on administrative and technological formulas—are both delusional and disingenuous. They are distorting and oversimplifying the question of building the modern state, which can only begin with the modernization of politics and culture. Modernising politics entails democracy; modernising culture demands secularism and rationalism. The emphasis on modernity, which stems from the failures of traditional Arab socialisms to lead Arab society down the path of modernisation, does not advocate a stagist perspective: first the modern state, then the socialist state. This is a naïve perspective, particularly in the era of imperialist suppression. What is meant here is the emphasis on the fact that the required Arab state must be both socialist and modern, in equal measure—i.e., not a socialised traditional state, but a socialist state that assimilates the achievements of the bourgeoisie, bridges its gaps, and surpasses it towards greater rationality and democracy. (El-Hafiz, 1975, 171).

El-Hafiz also criticised Arab progressive politics and thought of adopting an ‘interpretative’ methodology. In addition to dogmatism, Arab ideology of his time tended to reduce all the problems of the Arab world to colonialism. While the effects of global forces’ intervention were indeed profound, attributing all the blame solely to colonialism risked undermining constructive self-criticism. El-Hafiz draws on Marx and Lenin’s critiques of, respectively, German and Russian backward consciousness and nostalgia, rejecting the ‘exceptionalist’ sentiments of any particular people. Yet, he maintained a deep trust in the revolutionary potential of the masses. To underscore the importance of rightly mobilised masses, despite external obstacles, in the anti-colonial struggle, El-Hafiz cited several historical examples: Republican Turkey after the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire in World War I, the Yugoslav anti-colonial and socialist revolution of 1945 (despite the Yalta Conference agreements), the Chinese Revolution of 1949 (despite US aggression and the USSR’s reluctance), and the Vietnamese victory over France and the US (El-Hafiz, 1977).

For this ideological and political revolutionary work, El-Hafiz advocated what he called ‘adequate consciousness,’ which is based on three essential conditions. First, universalism, which sees Arab unity as a step toward the liberation of all oppressed peoples. Second, modernism, which stems from and leads to social revolutions, not merely the transfer of technology. Third, historicism, which understands the objective reality of the Arab World, rejecting both nostalgic aspirations and alien influences, whether European, Soviet, or Chinese (El-Hafiz, 1975).

The Syrian political thinker further emphasises that Arab unitarian perspectives must align with political, social, and economic progress on a revolutionary realist track. This means advancing subjective efforts in line with the objective revolutionary conditions. As a result, the economy



must be modernised based on regional complementarity among the Arab entities, covering capital, labour, markets, and technology. Thus, Arab unity would reduce inequality and dependency. These unitarian perspectives stand in contrast to romantic views that consider Arab unity to be mechanical and spontaneous, requiring no political action for its realisation, as well as the ‘evolutionist’ view that postpones unity until each Arab entity has reached a supposed ‘full’ stage of development on its own (El-Hafiz, 1974).

Conclusion

The debate on and criticism of Arab modern political thought can be summarised by the Egyptian historian Sherif Younes’ observation on the centrality of the ‘romantic self’ (Younis, 1995). This concept originally described the social basis for the rise of fundamentalist political Islam as a symptom of the defeat of progressive Arab politics in the context of the decline of Marxist thought, the dismantling of the Soviet Union, and the spread of neoliberalism (Amin, 2010). The idealistic view of history, society, and politics is fixated on an ‘essence’ of Arabness that either regresses to purely ethnic elements or transcends into religious frameworks concerning how the Arab world would unite.

Nevertheless, on a materialist level of analysis, Arab unitarian nationalist aspirations remain on the agenda. Ali Kadri (2014, 2016b, 2018, 2019) discusses the political economy of the Arab world after the decline of socialist republics and the encroachment of late imperialism, particularly in the Western Asian part of the region. The de-development of Arab economies, either through neoliberal policies or direct military aggression, resulted in the scattering of productive forces, both qualitatively (semi-proletarianisation, petty-bourgeoisisation...) and quantitatively (malnutrition, war, migration...). Accordingly, the class basis necessary to push for development must be consolidated.

Palestinian Pan-Arab Marxist Adel Samara also discussed Amin’s delinking, suggesting development through popular protection in the colonial Palestinian case and in the context of compliant governments (Samara, 2005). Furthermore, he outlined a two-stage strategy for the integration of the Arab economy, combining the capital from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) oil revenues with the agricultural capacities of fertile Arab lands (such as Sudan) and the surplus of labour present in several Arab countries (Samara, 2014). Such common programmes would establish a more solid working class, which would develop the capacity for organising labour and politics.

Thereafter, the depth of the comprador grip on Arab societies and the reach of monopoly capital across much of the economy would only be challenged by the intervention of the “Sixth Great Power” (Yeros, 2024). In the meantime, ideological work must be prioritised against Western/imperial schools of thought that solidify the status quo through the Americanisation of local issues and debates.

The contemporary era appears to be ‘Kautskyian’, in the sense that the present ebb mirrors the conditions of the time of the Second Internationale and the dominance of German social-democracy. Therefore, the urgent task is to ideologically prepare for the birth of Lenin(s).

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