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Agrarian South Network
Research Bulletin

Jan—March 2026

"Arab Nationalism and the Arab National Question"

The Arab Nation: Nationalism and Class Struggle
Samir Amin (1978)

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Haithem Gasmi

Jan-March 2026

Issue: -26

Arab Nationalism and the Arab National Question

The *Agrarian South Network Research Bulletin* (ASNRB) announces the release of its new issue along with a fresh call for contributions. The current issue brings together a set of documents on *Arab nationalism and the Arab national question*. These pieces were originally commissioned during the initial, and ultimately short-lived, ceasefire in the Gaza Strip between January and March 2025, prior to the subsequent "ceasefire" agreed on 9 October 2025, which was implemented largely through a downscaling but not stopping of Zionist violence.

The articles were initially conceived as part of a dossier titled "*The Arab-Iranian Region after the Ceasefire*." Given subsequent developments, that framing has become historically outdated. Nevertheless, the contributions remain significant for deepening ongoing debates on the nature of class and politics in the region, particularly in relation to the trajectories and contradictions of Arab nationalist politics.

The *ASNRB* (January–March 2026) issue includes three key contributions. First, it presents an excerpt from Samir Amin's *The Arab Nation: Nationalism and Class Struggle*, which intervenes in debates on the nature of Arab social formation(s), both prior to and following the rise to power of the Arab republican movements. Second, Zeyad el Nabolsy's introduction to his translation of Mourad Wahba's *Madkhal ila al-Tanweer (Introduction to Enlightenment)* highlights Wahba's qualified defense of the continued relevance of Enlightenment ideas. At the same time, it underscores his partial embrace of a form of relativism, understood as necessary for making rational claims about knowledge. The introduction also offers an immanent critique of certain patterns of thought within Arab nation-states. Finally, Haithem Gasmi, in "Adequate Consciousness: The Arab National Question in the Thought of Yassin Al-Hafiz," synthesizes al-Hafiz's reflections on Arab nationalism, its distinctions from European nationalist movements, and the need to attend to the class bases of disunity if Arab nationalism is to realize its unitarian aspirations.

We also announce a new call for contributions alongside a shift in format. The *ASNRB* will move toward a more regular publishing schedule and will no longer focus primarily on special issues. Thematically, the Bulletin remains open to the broad range of concerns it has previously addressed, and beyond. We

welcome work not only in political economy, but also political economy–inflected literary and cultural analysis engaging agrarian or urban questions. Relevant themes include political parties and social movements; technology and development; gender and social reproduction; ecology; racism; colonialism and neo-colonialism; imperialism; the caste system; and Third World (as well as settler-state) indigenous and national minority struggles. We also encourage reflections on the historical and contemporary processes of building socialism. Contributions are welcome from, or concerning, the entire Global South. In terms of format, we are open to a wide range of submissions, including:

- Short or long-form replies and reflections on material previously published in the Bulletin
- Short drafts or conference papers currently being developed for publication
- Translations of articles relevant to contemporary events and transformations around the world
- Poetry
- Interviews with theorists, activists, political leaders, or other figures whose work and experiences may contribute to ongoing debates

More broadly, we hope to cultivate the Bulletin as a space for works in progress—a forum where emerging interventions can be shared, debated, and sharpened before taking on a more formal scholarly form. At the same time, we aim to encourage critical feedback, reflections, and ongoing intellectual exchange within the pages of the journal itself.

The Editors, March 2026

The Arab Nation: Nationalism and Class Struggle

In 1976, Samir Amin engaged in the ongoing debate on the Arab nation and the political projects of Arab Nationalism. 'La Nation Arabe, nationalisme et lutte de classes' was published in French by Minuit Editions and later translated into English by Michael Pallis, published by Zel Press, London, in 1978. The text below is the first section of the last chapter of the book: The Arab Nation: Some Problems and Conclusions, which deals with the issues of nationhood in the Arab context and Arab nationalist political projects in the region. This text helps the readers – who are interested in the present of the Arab region, understand the historical evolution that is manifesting nowadays in Arab politics in regard to the Palestinian question. It also gives a vision on the possible establishment of an Arab nation, necessarily socialist: A nation of proletarians.

THE HISTORY OF THE ARAB WORLD AND THE NATIONAL QUESTION

Samir Amin, 1978.

We must now pose the problem of nationhood in new terms. The mystical and mysterious basis for nationhood proposed by bourgeois science gets us nowhere, and neither does Stalin's reduction of this social reality to the modern capitalist world. On the contrary, the history of the Arab world gives specific scientific contours to the concept of nationhood, which tie in with the general hypothesis of Unequal Exchange. The proposition concerning the definition of this social fact which we call nationhood leads to the following formulations. Firstly, the nation is a social phenomenon which can appear at every stage of history: it is not necessarily and exclusively correlative to the capitalist mode of production. Secondly, the nation appears when there exists not only the elementary conditions of geographical contiguity, reinforced by the use of a common language, (which does not exclude variants of dialect), but also a social class which controls the central State apparatus and ensures economic unity in the life of the community; this class need not necessarily be the capitalist national bourgeoisie. Thirdly, the phenomenon of nationhood is a reversible process: it can develop and grow stronger or, on the contrary, it can weaken and fade away, according to whether the social class in question reinforces its unificatory power or loses it altogether. In the latter case the society can regress into a formless conglomeration of more or less related ethnicities. These ethnicities can reform as one or several nations if history again allows a social class to fulfil the unificatory functions which allow one to distinguish between a nation and an ethnicity.

If applied to Arab history, these theoretical formulations shed a great deal of light on the contradictory aspects of the national question in this part of the world. In this sense the Arab world has only been a nation during short periods of its history; on the other hand, some, but not all, of its constituent regions were already nations when they were Arabized (Egypt, for example). After the decline of the Arab nation, some regions became autonomous nations, while others did not attain this national stage and remained conglomerates of ethnicities. The social class which undertook Arab national unification was that of the merchant-warriors. Indeed, the social formations of the pre-colonial Arab world were not feudal but commercial, that is to say that the main surplus on which the Imperial State, the civilization and the material life of its ruling classes were based was not mainly drawn from the agricultural product of the local peasants, but from the profits of long-distance trade. Let us be quite clear: the issue is not that of the origin of the State but rather of the nature of that State during the imperial stages of its centuries of greatness.

A series of major historical events brought about the national regression: the crusades and the shifting of the commercial center of gravity from the Arab to the Italian cities, the fall of Baghdad under the assault of the Mongols in the 13th century, then the Ottoman conquest in the 16th, the shift of Mediterranean trade to the Atlantic during the same period, and consequently the direct link Europe established with Eastern Asia and Black Africa, thereby depriving the Arabs of their traditional role of intermediary.

The disappearance of the Arab nation gave new life to other nations. Because the Egyptian oasis constitutes a peasant formation, Egypt has always retained a certain autonomy, even during the Arab nation's greatest period. While this world as a whole lost its nationhood and became a conglomerate of peoples during the 13th and 14th centuries, Egypt asserted itself again as an autonomous nation.

The social class which undertook this renaissance was not that of the merchant-warriors but the landowning bureaucratic aristocracy. Under Ali Bey in the 18th century, and especially under Mohammed Ali in the 19th, this class gave a national character back to Egypt and not just that of a geographical reality. The other attempts at constituting a nation – notably those in Morocco, in Tunisia, in Algeria under Abdel Kader, in Sudan with Mahdism, in Yemen and in Lebanon- were not very far-reaching, not only because in some cases they fell prey to foreign attacks (for example in Algeria and the Sudan) but also and especially because the level of development of the local (agricultural)

productive forces was not sufficient to ensure a surplus adequate enough to establish the class which attempted to build up the nation. The fate of the dominant class was thus dependent mainly on its ability to draw on foreign surplus through international trade, and consequently was never independent of circumstances external to the society. These attempts at nationhood therefore remained embryonic and unfinished, while in Egypt a thousand-year-old nation, whose fate was not tied to foreign relations, was reborn. In Syria and Iraq, where Arab feeling has always been lively, the attempts at throwing off the Ottoman yoke in the 19th century were incomparably weaker than in Egypt: the Syrian commercial class, which was once so flourishing, had become feeble, the landowning bureaucratic aristocracy was impoverished by the re-desertification of Mesopotamia, and the peasantry was locked in by the closed horizons of their isolated mountain holdouts…

With the integration of the Arab world into the capitalist system, as a dominated and oppressed region, do we see the birth of a new social class which could pretend to be national hegemony, that is to say could unify the economy and centralize power? And in which context: that of States or that of the Arab whole? The vicissitudes of the internal politics of the various States, particularly of Egypt, Iraq and Syria from the 1920s prove that the new (latifundist and commercial) bourgeoisie engendered by integration into the capitalist system could not pretend to this hegemony, neither in terms of the various States, nor a fertirri, in terms of the Arab world as a whole.

Indeed, this class was not the one which ensured the economic and political unity of the country. These functions were fulfilled by the dominant imperialism of which this class is nothing but the appendage. The weakness of this class is thus that of the Arab (Egyptian, Syrian, Iraqi) nation and of the Arab 'nation'. The first Palestinian war (1948) brought the point home. It was not the implacable power of Zionism's penetration which opened up the possibility of its establishment; rather it was the weakness of the Arab nations (or nation).

The new social classes which took over from the latifundist and commercial bourgeoisie following the defeat of 1948 were not noticeably more capable of assuming a real national hegemony, either in terms of States or in terms of the Arab area as a whole. Indeed, State capitalism replaced latifundist and commercial capitalism by three sets of measures: firstly, an agrarian reform which replaced the old aristocracy with a class of kulaks, thereby widening the internal market; secondly, a program of public nationalizations

which expropriated both the dominant foreign capital and the big local bourgeoisie associated with it; thirdly, a program of public industrialization made possible by the wider market created by the first two measures. A set of measures of this kind does not necessarily constitute a stage of transition towards socialism. For that to be the case, these measures would have to be associated with an effective form of popular power and a proletarian ideology. Then, and only then, agrarian reform becomes a first step towards the mobilization of the whole of the peasantry, especially the poorest (and most numerous) layers of the latter, and not an end in itself which must be stabilized as soon as kulakization is completed. Then, and only then, the planned industrialization and agricultural development are not based on the partial widening of the market made possible by kulakization; or simply on the transfer to the State of profits which until then were appropriated by foreign capital and its associated private local capital (the transfer which established the economic base of the new bureaucracy). Failing the above, the model of accumulation described is in every way analogous to that of capitalist accumulation, and can hardly be called socialism, since it leaves the masses outside of its system. It is then just development for a minority, albeit a widened one; a minority made up of the class of kulaks and of the bureaucracy, which has become a State bourgeoisie. But this program offers no development to the broad masses. It is thus incapable of really mobilizing the latter, of constituting itself by their democratically organized everyday will. One could invoke the Western bourgeois revolution as evidence of the possibility of a capitalist road to development which excluded the masses. But to do so would be to assume that history can reproduce itself, to forget the subtle transformations which imperialism has brought about. Integration into the imperialist system has already created a specific situation different to that which characterized today's advanced capitalist countries when they were going through their industrial revolution. In the Third World integration has proletarianized and impoverished the broad masses, without managing to integrate them into the system of capitalist accumulation: there has been no extension of wage labour keeping pace with the disintegration of pre-capitalist society; there has been no constant improvement in wages; integration failed to achieve all this in the Third World precisely because of domination by an already existing imperialist system. This is the sense in which the capitalist road is closed and in which socialism is an objective necessity in the underdeveloped countries. The fact that it was

not the proletariat which exercised hegemony during the changeover in the Arab world removes any possibility of Statist rule being a possible transition to socialism. From then on, the new State capitalism, which benefits only a minority of the new classes, must accept to remain trailing along in the wake of a system which dominates the world. This dependence, renewed and deepened in comparison with that of the old latifundist and commercial bourgeoisie, manifests itself at all levels: that of technological dependence, that of the privileged classes' pattern of consumption, that of ideology.

Is Arab nationalism doomed to failure; is the Arab nation condemned to remain a chimera? In fact, the negative reveals the positive: the incapacities of the dependent State bourgeoisie reveals the necessity for a proletarian outcome. But where does nationalism come into this?

Not all the social formations known to history necessarily imply a nation; it is only those which are based on a mode of production which demands a centralization of political power and economic organization which do so. The formations of feudal Europe are typical examples of cases where the absence of political and economic centralization reduces an ethnicity (be it Germanic or Italian or French) to a non-national conglomerate of regions. On the other hand, the formations of ancient Egypt and China, where centralization was essential to the major works which had to be undertaken, were able to create nations. The formations based on major trade have also often engendered nations, as is borne out by the case of ancient Greece (despite the absence of a centralized political authority) or by that of the Arab world. Similarly, in Europe, when the absolutist monarchies united territories into nations, they had to base themselves on the merchants of the mercantilist period; the examples of England and France are typical.

The capitalist mode of production brings about a level of nationhood which is far more intense than those which existed in pre-capitalist social formations, because the centralization of economic power is itself greatly intensified, by the creation of an internal market for labour, capital and merchandise. This doubtless explains why Marxists have tended to think of the phenomenon of nationhood as a concomitant of capitalism – especially as in Europe the old pre-capitalist society, feudal society, had not been a national one.

The Third World's necessary transition to socialism will also have to create this internal market – but not in the forms, or with the content, of the capitalist market: this difference, according to our analysis, is precisely the one which separates State

collectivism from socialism. Nonetheless this market must be capable of integrating people, of integrating them more fully than that of a Third World capitalism which can only be dependent, and thus limited, State capitalism. The vehicle for this integration, for its proletarian content, remains the nation: a nation of proletarians (as opposed to a proletarian nation). To the Trotskyists, socialism is purity and nationalism a deviation. In fact, in real social terms, both Vietnam and China demonstrate the existence of a proletarian nationalism. They even show that proletarian nationalism is the only kind which still has the strength which bourgeois nationalism once had, and that the only socialist revolutions of our time take place where nationalism does not figure as an autonomous tendency which is juxtaposed, albeit allied, to socialism, but where socialism is also nationalism. In a world which capitalism has unified and hierarchized, the oppression of the proletariat and proletarianized masses of the dominated periphery is not just social oppression, it is also national oppression. The complete fusion of socialism and nationalism then becomes the precondition for the liberation of oppressed peoples. Were this liberation to be generalized, it would close one chapter of history and open another: that of the transcendence of nations in a socialist universe.

The necessary and possible national hegemony of the proletariat, in a revolution which is both national and social is one thing, and nationalism as an ideology is quite another. Nationalism as an ideology expresses the hegemony of the petty bourgeoisie, the effective domination of the movement by this class. There is no historical fatality about this. The strength of the petty bourgeoisie is tailor-made according to the weaknesses of the proletariat.

In the last analysis it is thus Arab communism, in its weaknesses, which is responsible for the petty bourgeois hegemony. That communism in the Arab world originally developed in petty bourgeois circles is neither an anomaly (it happens this way as a rule in the Third World) nor a latent vice. But Arab communism could not move beyond this stage without a correct theory. And a correct theory is one which understands that only the proletariat can liberate a country oppressed by imperialism, and that the revolution must be led by that proletariat; a theory which grasps that while that revolution's first task is to bring about democratic change, this is not a stage which is distinguishable by the class nature of the powers that carry it out from the next stage, socialist revolution. This is the true lesson of China and Indochina. Instead, Arab

communism eventually accepted, although not without reticence, a theory and a practice which in the last analysis was a theory of stages, a theory which either straightforwardly allowed the petty bourgeoisie to retain their leadership of the national stage, or, which amounts to much the same thing, accepted to place the party of the proletariat under the petty bourgeois banner. Communist and nationalist petty-bourgeois thus came to lose their distinct visions of the future, and were reduced to the same common denominator, State socialism. The revisionist conception of Marxism necessarily had to lead to such an outcome. It is only now that the Arab communists are beginning to develop the first elements of a critical analysis of the situation. But an analysis, however correct, is not enough. Without a revolutionary practice, theory is condemned to degenerate. What is needed today is a break with the petty bourgeois milieu, with its lifestyles and with its limited forms of political action, in order to undertake another kind of action, among the proletarianized and popular masses, especially the rural ones. In this case, practice is more important than theory, for a fundamentally correct practice (action within the struggle of the revolutionary classes which are the motor of history) helps the re-evaluation of partially false theory – but this does not work the other way around. Were it to break with revisionism, Arab communism could implant itself among the proletarian and pauperized masses of the Arab world. Its nature would necessarily change, for it would then have to assimilate itself to the history of its people, their culture and their traditions (as happened in East Asia), in order to discover the road towards socialist revolution. It would cease to be a foreign ideology stuck onto a national reality, an avatar of European history and of Europe's domination over the Arab world. It would finally become capable of settling the national problems, both political and cultural, and the problems of the socialist transformation of society.

Mourad Wahba, *Madkhal ila al-Tanweer* (Introduction to Enlightenment), 1994

Zeyad el Nabolsy (2024)

Mourad Wahba's *Madkhal ila al-Tanweer* was first published in 1994. The 1990s in Egypt were characterized by the dominance of Islamist thought in the cultural sphere.[i] The attempts at independent modernization which were the most salient features of the Bandung era-Egyptian state were abandoned. It is thus not surprising that Wahba would write a defence of the relevance of the ideas of the Enlightenment in this context. Wahba is primarily concerned with understanding the key principles which animated the Enlightenment as a philosophical movement and then offering a defence of the relevance of these principles to the Global South. Among the principles which he emphasizes is the idea that human reason ought not to acknowledge any authority except that of its own. Wahba thus has a very Kantian reading of the history of Enlightenment philosophy. His interpretation of the history of the philosophy of the Enlightenment is quite similar to that of Ernst Cassirer.[ii] Yet, surprisingly, he does not refer to Cassirer at all anywhere in this book. However, he does refer to Peter Gay's work and Gay does rely heavily on Cassirer.[iii]

Yet Wahba does not just offer a neo-Kantian interpretation of the history of the philosophy of the Enlightenment without modification. In fact, he introduces a quite startling idea, namely that the core of the philosophy of the Enlightenment requires a commitment to a form of relativism. What is especially interesting is that Wahba presents himself as a proponent of the Enlightenment qua universal project. However, unlike many participants in the contemporary "Culture Wars" of North America he seems to think that a commitment to the Enlightenment project with its attendant secularization entails a commitment to the rejection of absolutism in epistemology and an embrace of relativism. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that, for Wahba, relativism does not imply that "anything goes". Wahba seems to think of relativism in negative terms, i.e., simply as the rejection of the thesis that knowledge claims can ever be of an absolute nature. This makes Wahba's relativism quite close to the relativism which is endorsed by the philosophical spokesperson for the Strong Program in the Sociology of Science, David Bloor. Bloor claims that "all knowledge is conjectural, all knowledge is partial, all knowledge is open to revision, scientific theories always have some point at which they break down, scientific theories nearly always – possibly always, but certainly nearly always – get some things right and some

things wrong. They get things right to a certain degree of approximation, and some they get right at a better degree of approximation. All of those things mean that you cannot meaningfully attach the word 'absolute' to the knowledge claim, and I would say, from which it follows, that you necessarily must therefore accept or embrace some form of relativism" (Bloor and Briatte 2007 [unpublished]).[iv] This Bloorian model of relativism seems to adequately capture Mourad Wahba's views. On this view, we can, in a given context, determine that one theory does a better job of representing the phenomena that we want to represent, but that we do not have any Archimedean standpoint from which we can ascertain whether any given theory is correct in an absolute, context-independent manner.

Moreover, and perhaps unlike Bloor, Wahba does not think of this form of relativism as involving a revolt against "Enlightenment Reason" or any such thing, instead he thinks of it as simply the logical consequence of taking seriously the revolution in philosophy that was enacted by key Enlightenment philosophers such as John Locke. In this respect he is influenced by Paul Hazard's account of the Enlightenment, which he frequently cites. According to Hazard, Locke's key contribution was to teach philosophers to be satisfied with "relative verities".[v] One can summarize Wahba's views as follows: human reason cannot acknowledge any other authority than that of its own, but human reason cannot arrive at absolute de-contextualized knowledge claims. To pretend otherwise involves drawing on something other than human reason and imputing a false authority to it.

Given the rise of decolonial approaches in the academy, Wahba's attempt to defend the relevance of the philosophy of the Enlightenment to the Global South is liable to raise accusations of servility towards the West. However, this would be unfair. Wahba does not simply accept the image of the Enlightenment that has been created by European philosophers and intellectual historians. For example, Hazard's claim that Europe is characterized by a "spirit that is forever seeking [after the truth]" is implicitly rejected by Wahba.[vi] Far from holding that there is something unique about a posited European collective spirit or mind, Wahba seeks to explain the rise of the philosophy of the Enlightenment through appealing to facts about Europe's economic and social history. Moreover, Wahba does think that non-European philosophers, such as Ibn Rushd, played an important role in the prefiguration of certain ideas which later came to influence the philosophy of the Enlightenment. Hence his emphasis on the significance of Ibn Rushd's notion of *ta'wil* and the connection that he draws between this notion and the

development of hermeneutics in Europe, and the role of hermeneutics and Biblical criticism in the development of the philosophy of the Enlightenment.

This is not to say that Wahba does not sometimes uncritically accept historical narratives which have been proved to be inadequate. For example, Wahba uncritically accepts the claim that the relatively muted reception of Ibn Rushd in the Islamic and Arab-speaking world from the thirteenth century onwards, shows that the spirit of critical inquiry had been crushed in that part of the world. This is a claim which goes back to at least the nineteenth century in the Arabic speaking world, and it was put forth by proponents of the *Nahda* [Renaissance] such as Mohammed Abdu, and later by Arab nationalists.[vii]

However, this is narrative is too simplistic insofar as it neglects the fact that, in a sense, Ibn Rushd's approach to doing philosophy through commentaries on Aristotle's works was itself falling out of fashion by the time that Ibn Rushd was writing in the twelfth century due to the influence of Ibn Sina.[viii] The neglect of Ibn Rushd in the Islamic world can thus be explained without appealing to the thesis that the critical spirit was extinguished in the Islamic world by the twelfth century. Furthermore, Wahba has a tendency to understate the extent to which Ibn Rushd was read in the eastern lands of the Islamic World. There is textual evidence to support the view that Ibn Rushd's *The Decisive Treatise* [*Faṣl al-Maqal*] continued to be read in the eastern lands of the Islamic world up until at least Ibn Taymiyya in the fourteenth century and probably beyond that.[ix] Nevertheless the question of why there was no full hearted embrace of secularism in the Islamic and Arabic-speaking world, which is really the question that Wahba seeks to pose through his *Rezeptionsgeschichte* of Ibn Rushd, remains vitally important. Moreover, Wahba is right to point out that debates on the fate of Ibn Rushd were a crucial battleground for the proponents of the *Nahda*. In fact, Ibn Rushd's *Fasl al-Maqal* [*Decisive Treatise*] would be invoked into the twentieth century by those who wished to argue for the harmony of Islam with scientific discoveries such as the theory of evolution by means of natural selection.[x]

Wahba is particularly interested in the manner in which efforts at *Tanweer* [Enlightenment] from the early nineteenth century onwards were undermined by a refusal to recognize the radical nature of the changes that the embrace of modernity would entail. For example, he notes Rifa'a al-Tahtawi's unwillingness to recognize the importance of unqualified and unfettered freedom of thought for the development of an environment which was conducive to the kind of scientific progress

that Tahtawi so clearly admired. Wahba's point, stated bluntly, is that if by "Islamic modernism" we mean a form of modernism that does not accept unfettered freedom of thought, conscience, and expression, then there could be no such thing. Wahba is thus launching an attack on moderate reformism in the Arabic-speaking and Islamic world. According to Wahba, the fundamental problem with all hitherto existing attempts at the institutionalization of the philosophy of the Enlightenment in the Islamic and Arabic speaking world is that they have resorted to piecemeal measures when only a radical and unqualified embrace of the principle of the autonomy of reason will do.

It is important to note that Wahba does not repudiate the anti-colonial efforts of the mid-twentieth century. Instead, he is interested in attempting to explain why they failed in achieving all of the goals that they set out to achieve. According to him one of the reasons why they failed was because endogenous cultures were, for the most part, denigrated by the colonial masters, the anti-colonial movements sometimes tended to valorize those cultures in an uncritical manner. They thereby forgot that one of the reasons why colonialism was possible in the first place was there were significant weaknesses in these endogenous cultural forms which rendered the colonized societies vulnerable to conquest and domination.

Wahba does not deny that the thesis that colonialism contributed to the underdevelopment of the colonized societies insofar as capitalism has not done away with archaic social relations in the colonized societies, instead it has only formally subsumed them. This point is especially made clear in Wahba's *Fundamentalism and Secularization*, which was published in 1995 and serves as a kind of companion volume to this book.[xi] What this means is that while capital may be dominant in those social formations, it does not revolutionize productive forces and transform social relations to the same degree of intensity as it does when real subsumption, to use Marx's term, has taken place.[xii] Nevertheless, Wahba maintains that to hold that colonialism is solely responsible for the underdevelopment of the colonized society would be to engage in sophistry for the simple reason that such a thesis renders the very fact of colonization and subordination inexplicable. Wahba is primarily concerned with the fate of the philosophy of the Enlightenment in the Arabic speaking world, thus his focus is on figures such as Rifa'a al-Tahtawi, Mohammed Abdu, Abbas al-ʿAqqad, and Louis Awad. Yet he also thinks that the dilemmas that are faced by the Arabic-speaking countries are similar in kind to those faced by other societies in the

Global South. In fact, he is one of the founding figures of the Afro-Asian Philosophical Association, thus he also engages with philosophers such as Kwame Nkrumah and Léopold Sédar Senghor in this text. Thus, this book is also of special interest to anyone who wishes to overcome the Saharan divide in the study of African philosophy and its history.

But perhaps the most significant facet of this book is that it strives to examine the relationship between the philosophy of the Enlightenment and the Global South not through fixating on what European philosophers such as Kant, Montesquieu, Hume, and Hegel wrote on the non-Western world, which has hitherto been the main way in which academic philosophers have approached the problem of Eurocentrism in European Enlightenment philosophy, [xiii] but rather by trying to understand how philosophers from the Global South have grappled with European Enlightenment philosophy from the nineteenth century onwards. If Wahba is right in claiming that many philosophers from the Global South were able to make a distinction between the modernist emancipatory moments in the philosophy of the Enlightenment and colonialism, then we have good reasons for thinking that the contemporary decolonial approaches, which uncritically equate colonialism and the philosophy of the Enlightenment,[xiv] are rather too simplistic. Thus, Wahba's book contributes to a recent wave of critiques of the decolonial framework in African philosophy.[xv] Whether Wahba is right in claiming that the philosophy of the Enlightenment offers valuable resources for ending the cycle of dependency and weakness in the Global South is left to the reader to decide.

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[i] Zeyad el Nabolsy, "The Military, the Developmental State and the 2013 Coup in Egypt," in *Democratization and Military Coups in Africa: Post-1990s Political Conflicts*, ed. George Klay Kieh Jr. and Kelechi Kalu (New York: Lexington, 2021), 97 – 128.

[ii] Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, trans. Fritz A. Koelln and James P. Petergrove (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), viii – ix.

[iii] Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966).

[iv] David Bloor and Francois Briatte. "Interview with David Bloor (2007)". Unpublished version with corrections by Bloor. Accessed through: https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-01511329/file/InterviewDB_FBriatte2007.pdf

[v] Paul Hazard, *The European Mind: 1680* – 1715, trans. J. Lewis May (New York: Meridian Books, 1963), 400.

[vi] Hazard, *The European Mind*, 440.

[vii] Khaled El -Rouayheb, *Islamic Intellectual History in the Seventeenth Century: Scholarly Currents in the Ottoman Empire and the Maghreb* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 360.

[viii] Peter Adamson, *Philosophy in the Islamic World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 295 - 302.

[ix] Fouad Ben Ahmed, "Ibn Rushd in the Ḥanbalī Tradition. Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya and the Continuity of Philosophy in Muslim Contexts," The Muslim World 109, no.4 (2019): 566 – 567. Some of Ibn Rushd's

work was also read in the Ottoman Empire during the fifteenth century. Mehmed II asked Hocazade and ʿAla al-din al-Tusi to compare al Ghazali's *Tahfut al-Falasifa* with Ibn Rushd's response to it, *Tahfut al Tahfut*, see Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, "Ottoman Science," in *Encyclopedia of the History of Science, Technology, and Medicine in non-Western Cultures*, ed. Helaine Selin (Berlin: Springer, 2016), 3478 – 3488.

[x] John W. Livingston, *In the Shadows of Glories Past: Jihad for Modern Science in Muslim Societies, 1850 to the Arab Spring* (London: Routledge, 2018), 273 – 275.

[xi] Mourad Wahba, *Fundamentalism and Secularization*, trans. Robert K. Beshara (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), 59. See also the discussions in Geoffery Hughes, "Review of *Fundamentalism and Secularization* by Mourad Wahba," *ReOrient* 7, no.2 (Winter 2022): 233 – 235; Zeyad el Nabolsy, "Review of *Fundamentalism and Secularization* by Mourad Wahba," *Marx & Philosophy Review of Books* (16 July 2022): https://marxandphilosophy.org.uk/reviews/20331_fundamentalism-and-secularization-by-mourad-wahba-reviewed-by-zeyad-el-nabolsy/

[xii] Dipanker Gupta, "Formal and Real Subsumption of Labour under Capital: The Instance of Share-Cropping," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 15, no.39 (27 Sept 1980): A98-A99+A101-A103+A105-A106.

[xiii] For a critique of such approaches, see Emir Yigit and Zeyad el Nabolsy, "Reconciling Hegel with the Dialectic: On Islam and the Fate of Muslims in Hegel's Philosophy of History," *Hegel Bulletin* 45, no.1 (April 2024): 93 – 119.

[xiv] For examples, see Ramon Grosfoguel, "A Decolonial Approach to Political Economy: Transmodernity, Border Thinking and Global Coloniality," *Kult 6 - Special Issue: Epistemologies of Transformation* (2009): 10 – 38; Martin F. Asiegbu, "The Disputed Humanity of the African: An Essay in the Philosophy of Modernity," in *Human Nature: Stable and/or Changing?*, ed. John P. Hogan (Washington, D.C.: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2013), 161 – 178.

[xv] Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò, *Against Decolonisation: Taking African Agency Seriously* (London: Hurst, 2022); Olúfémi Táíwò, "The African Case for the Enlightenment," *Liberties* 3, no. 3 (2023): 85 – 114; Jeanne-Marie Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas: Philosophy and Individualism in the Age of Global Writing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021).

Adequate Consciousness: The Arab National Question in the Thought of Yassin al-Hafiz

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Introduction

The events of October 7 2023, the subsequent Zionist genocidal response, and the international reactions, institutional and popular, have occurred within the context of a global transition, as the world hegemon is threatened and competing powers are emerging. On the other hand, neoliberal 'end of history' and postmodernist 'faux radicalism'[iii] have distracted political thought and practice from rigorous analysis.

The liberation of Palestine from Zionist settler-colonialism has been – more or less, yet decreasingly – related to the Arab national(ist) question. The recurrent struggles take place within a context of 'denial of Arab development'[iv] and the several defeats of sovereign Arab politics. Meanwhile, Arab popular support for the Palestinian struggle is still expressed within a framework of Arab unity against imperialism and Zionism.[v] These popular sentiments, however, seem to lack a coherent political and ideological foundation. Herein lies the intellectual and political necessity of critically revisiting the Arab national(ist) question in order to add to the ongoing debates on the Palestinian cause, advanced by the Arab masses.

Yassin al-Hafiz (1930–1978) was one the most prominent Arab intellectuals interested in and involved in the Arab national(ist) question. The Syrian thinker made a significant contribution to Arab/Arabist Marxist thought, challenging Eurocentric generalisations regarding nationalism in the peripheries of the modern World-System. Al-Hafiz was also critical of both the ultra-leftist and rightist tendencies within the Arab nationalist movement. He has as well long argued that the anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist struggle in the Arab World is conditioned by Arab unity.

In summary, Yassin al-Hafiz's oeuvre, inaccessible for lack of translation, gives urgent insight into the ongoing debate on the Arab national(ist) question and its anti-imperialist potential. Hence, this article revisits the writings of one of the most prominent, yet underappreciated, Arab Marxist thinkers of the twentieth century, who was deeply concerned with the historical development of a region struggling for national liberation from a constant imperialist aggression. After a brief biography of the thinker, we will delve into his omnibus to explore his views on Arab nationalism and the unitarian project he advocates.

I. Brief Biography

Yassin al-Hafiz was born in 1930 in the Syrian region of Deir ez-Zor, on the banks of

the Euphrates River. He lived through the great transitions of the long twentieth century. Not long before his birth, the Sykes-Picot accords of 1918 took effect in Syria putting the country under the French Mandate in 1923 until independence in 1946. Coming of age during the Second World War and French colonialism, al-Hafiz lived through the proliferation of national liberation struggle and nationalist thought in the intertwined milieu of Syria, Palestine and Lebanon. Syria was the cradle of Arab Renaissance thought, expressed in *Ba'ath* ideology – part of the intellectual and political continuation of the nineteenth-century's Arab *Nahda*. Furthermore, al-Hafiz was barely eighteen when he participated in the 'Arab Rescue Army' that fought in northern Palestine against the implementation of the Zionist state in 1948. Then, his life came to an end just after the Lebanese Civil War broke out.

In a series of interviews conducted on his deathbed, and published in his collected works under the title *Unfinished Biography,*[vi] al-Hafiz recognised the experience of being part of the 1948 military confrontation as the starting point for his interest in politics.

After a brief experience in the Ba'ath Party between 1949 and 1950, al-Hafiz began to delve into Marxist literature. During this period, the popular sentiment was anti-Marxist due to the USSR's foreign policy, which was favourable to the 1947 UN Partition Plan. Nevertheless, al-Hafiz joined the Syrian Communist Party between 1955 and 1956, before leaving due to irreconcilable issues. Among other things, he criticised the personality cult surrounding its leader, the party's subordination to the Soviet Union, its alienation from local/Arab realities, the lack of a coherent programme, and the neglect of the agrarian and peasant questions.

Yassin al-Hafiz's life was a rollercoaster ride on a parabolic curve, a function of both hope and tragedy. He lived through the optimism surrounding the independence of Syria in 1945, the July Revolution in Egypt in 1952, the Bandung Conference in 1955, the nationalisation of the Suez Canal in 1956, the Egyptian-Syrian unity and the Iraqi revolution of 1958, as well as the independence of Algeria and the revolution in Yemen in 1962. However, he also witnessed the Naksa of 1967, the death of Nasser in 1970, Sadat's takeover in 1971, and the Lebanese Civil War, during which he spent his final years before his death in 1978 in Beirut. Despite these setbacks, al-Hafiz remained committed to his intellectual project: Arab unity, democracy, and socialism, thoroughly criticising defeatism and its ideological and political roots.

Al-Hafiz's oeuvre comprises a mixture of themes. *On Issues of the Arab Revolution* (1965) is a collection of articles he has written between 1958 and 1965 where he engaged with Arab nationalist thought in the contexts

of Syria, Egypt, and Palestine. In *Irrationality in Arab Politics: Critique of Arab Politics in the Post-Nasser Era* (1975), he investigated the ideological and political contradictions in the thought and actions of Arab leaders and society, while in *The Vietnamese Historical Experience* (1976), he compared the Vietnamese national liberation movement to the Arab experience.

The 1967 Naksa had a profound emotional and intellectual impact on al-Hafiz. He dedicated the remaining ten years of his life to studying the root causes of this defeat, collecting all his writings on the topic in his 1978 magnum opus; *Defeat and the Defeated Ideology*. Finally, a posthumous volume of al-Hafiz's writings was compiled from articles he wrote between 1973 and 1977: *On the Nationalist Democratic Question* (1981), edited by his lifelong comrade and fellow Marxist intellectual Ilyas Murqus, in which he addresses issues such as Arab unitarian thought and projects, sectarianism and secularism, and Marxism and religion in the Arab world.

The short 47 years that al-Hafiz spent in the heart of the twentieth century represents a journey of a Third World intellectual in pursuit of a project he deeply believed in, through both thought and practice.

II. Critical Intellectual History

1. The Arab Nation

Yassin al-Hafiz lived through the twentieth century's anti-colonial national liberation struggles and the global proliferation of nation-states. The Arab region was transitioning from Ottoman subordination into European colonialism, and towards national independence. This historical context provided a fertile environment for the development of nationalist ideologies. Therein, al-Hafiz built his views on the Arab national question by critiquing two mainstream currents: the Soviet-leaning analysis held by Arab communist parties, and non-Marxist nationalist tendencies.

Opposing Eurocentric Marxist views on state formation, al-Hafiz argued that the role of the bourgeoisie in the formation of a modern nation is specific to the Western European context. This role was driven by an internal class struggle, both economically against the feudal landlords, and politically in the face of absolute monarchy, in the pursuit of establishing nation-states. While the European bourgeoisie developed its nationalism within and through the capitalist market, Third World nationalism is the product of the struggle against colonial nationalism, a struggle that could be embraced by several classes.[vii]

However, nationalism ought not bypass the historical objective elements necessary for the formation of a nation. This is the other side of al-Hafiz's critique directed towards non-Marxist nationalist ideology. This

current builds its nationalist views on the assumption of a 'natural' existence of an Arab nation, despite the historical disintegration of its different parts long before the intervention of European colonialism. Indeed, al-Hafiz reproached this current of Arab nationalist ideology for reducing nearly all the issues of Arab national unification to colonialism, while overlooking the internal historical conditions of disunity. In this sense, al-Hafiz refutes unitarian projects that fail to take into account the endogenous political and cultural contradictions of Arab societies.[viii]

2. Arab Nationalism

Al-Hafiz investigated Arab nationalist projects in order to understand their deficiencies, which, according to his analysis, led to the 1967 defeat. He opposed the strain of nationalism carried by the Arab bourgeoisie, which was defended by what he considered 'ultra-leftists' in Syria who were against the unity between Egypt and Syria.[ix] Defending what was dubbed the 'national' bourgeoisie under the pretext of its role in the development of the productive forces, the Syrian Communist Party clashed with the leaders of the United Arab Republic (1958–1961). Al-Hafiz was critical of the Arab bourgeoisie on ideological grounds, as well as from structurally-global economic premises. Not only was this class unable to develop the productive forces within a capitalist world-system that imposes dependency on global monopoly-capital, but this peripheral bourgeois class also failed to rid itself of its feudal mindset. The Arab bourgeois class had not emerged from a struggle against feudalism but rather represented the continuation of the old aristocratic landowning class. As such, it could not possess revolutionary potential.[x]

Given that the most prominent, actually-existing Arab nationalist project was Nasser's experience in Egypt, al-Hafiz took it as a case study to advance his views on Arab nationalism. Al-Hafiz's critique of the Nasserite project was prefaced by the appreciation of its emancipatory advancements. Al-Hafiz contextualised Nasser's nationalist ideology as a historical understanding of the necessity of Arab unity in the struggle against imperialist aggression. According to al-Hafiz, Nasser recognised that the liberation of Egypt could not be preserved without the liberation of the Arab World, especially neighbouring colonised Palestine.[xi] Overall, al-Hafiz appreciated the nationalist anti-colonial, democratic/anti-feudal, and socialist-leaning elements of Egyptian republicanism, as well as its unitarian character and support for the liberation of Palestine and the social revolutions in other Arab countries like Yemen.

Nevertheless, he was critical of the failure to develop popular/working-class institutions

to consolidate the achievements of the Revolution. This failure resulted in the hegemony of the military-bureaucratic apparatus, which manifested in the reification of the people as ideal agents, and the experimental economic practices — symptoms of petty bourgeois rule that sowed the seeds of compradorisation.[xii] Therefore, for al-Hafiz, Nasserite socialism elevated the *national* question to such an extent that it overshadowed the *social* and popular requirements, becoming more of a class arbitrage model rather than an advancement of socialism and economic sovereignty.[xiii]

From this point, al-Hafiz details three key issues with what he dubbed 'petty bourgeois nationalism'. First, the mechanical, top-down economic organisation of society, i.e., economism. Second, the idealistic belief in a specific, exceptional, 'culturally intuitive' Arab socialism, which builds on socio-cultural heritage without taking into account the modern developments of Arab society and the world. Third, the Eurocentric inspirations and aspirations that alienate Arab nationalism both in time and space.[xiv]

3. The Palestinian Ideology

Later, al-Hafiz addressed the Palestinian question to advance his critique of contemporary Arab ideology and politics. He thence traced the internal roots of the 'colonisability' of the Palestinian society. He examined the semi-natural economy, feudal relations of production, and predominant tribal affiliations that hindered the development of a Palestinian nation. These factors generated an archaic nationalist movement based on sectarianism and disconnected from the countryside, where the actual confrontations were taking place.[xv] Al-Hafiz also observed that the 1967 defeat was not only technological but ideological and political as well. He rejected the economist notion that development is defined solely by technology transfer and opposed calls for "catching up" through technological modernisation without considering the cultural, social, and political evolution of the Arab people.[xvi]

On the other side, he did not support the tendency among Palestinian fighting groups, which, in reaction to the 1967 defeat, rejected the strategy of standing armies in favour of guerrilla tactics and individualist acts. Al-Hafiz considered this political line a retreat from the mobilisation of the masses as the main strategic cornerstone of the liberation of Palestine.[xvii] He analysed the crisis of the Arab revolution as a subjective emotional outcry expressed in fedayeenism,[xviii] which failed to sufficiently address the objective conditions of defeat, rather rejecting what it quickly considered the 'failing' statist strategy as a whole. As a result, a new line emerged from this tendency, arguing that the Palestinian question would not be resolved by Arab unity and support. Therefore, the

liberation of Palestine is rather framed as a Palestinian-only question. Al-Hafiz described this line as 'nationalistic nihilism.'[xix]

4. Arab Unity

Al-Hafiz believed in the importance of a thorough critical analysis of one's society in order to develop a revolutionary theory to be carried forward by the revolutionary movement. He drew this tradition of national self-criticism from Marx and Lenin, who attacked 'backward consciousness' in Germany and Russia, respectively, as they both opposed reactionary politics based on exceptionalism and nostalgic sentiments of a glorious past that should be revived. He compared the ideological traits held by the German and Russian peoples before their national uprisings with the Arab nationalist ideology of the second half of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, he also emphasised Marx's and Lenin's perseverance and trust in the revolutionary potential of the masses, instead of dismissing them and opting for Blanquist strategies.[xx]

Al-Hafiz also advocated for the rejection of idealistic ideologies of defeat. One, 'Triumphalism,'[xxi] which propagated a false sense of hope and optimism through wishful ahistorical prophecies. Two, 'Weaponism,'[xxii] which overemphasised adventurist armed struggle without any backend political thought or theorisation. Three, 'Destructivism,'[xxiii] which embraced accelerationism without considering the necessary simultaneous building of social structures.

Al-Hafiz's approach to the critique of his time's dominant Arab ideology addressed the roots of defeat and defeatism. He identified what he called 'compliant consciousness,' which refuses the rationality of history, i.e., struggle, and explains defeat as a matter of unlucky coincidence, or treason and conspiracy. Al-Hafiz sought to turn this consciousness upside down: conspiracy, in his view, was not a mystical force but a dynamic of global powers serving their own interests. Whereas victimhood was more a sign of weakness that needed to be overcome. He hence introduced the notion of 'adequate consciousness' in international relations, which opposed mystical solutions and 'easy victories,' and emphasised universalism over methodological nationalism, social revolutions over mere technological transfers, and historicism that addresses issues in their actual, evolving context.[xxiv]

Building on all of the above, al-Hafiz advocated for a revolutionary Arab nationalism that pushes for Arab unity, motivated by political will that subjectively advances the objective conditions of unity and liberation.[xxv] For al-Hafiz, a unitarian Arab nationalist movement is socialist by definition, as it contradicts the dependent local bourgeoisie and is carried by the masses,

within the context of global revolution.[xxvi] The tasks of the unitarian movement are, accordingly, twofold: liberation from archaic socio-economic structures and anti-imperialist struggle against colonial Zionist expansion and dependency on global capital.

Conclusion

In revisiting the intellectual legacy of Yassin al-Hafiz, this article has sought to excavate a critical voice from the depths of Arab revolutionary thought. Al-Hafiz's life's work, from the battlefields of 1948 to his deathbed in war-torn Beirut, was a relentless pursuit of a single, complex question: what are the objective and subjective conditions necessary for genuine Arab liberation? His answer, forged in the crucible of defeat, consistently pointed to the indispensable and dialectical relationship between profound social revolution and transformative Arab unity.

In the wake of October 7th and the subsequent genocidal response, his call for an "adequate consciousness" resonates with an urgent clarity. Remains to say, that the liberation of al-Hafiz's oeuvre from its linguistic dungeon through translation, would add to the ongoing debates on the Palestinian question and overall anti-imperialist struggles.

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[ix] Al-Hafiz, Y. (1965). *Hawla ba'd qadaya ath-Thawra al-Arabiyya*. Markaz Dirāsāt al-Waḥda al-ʿArabīya.
[x] Al-Hafiz, Y. (1978). op cit
[xi] Ibid
[xii] See also Amin, S. (1976). *La nation Arabe: Nationalisme et luttes de classes*. Les Éd. de Minuit.
[xiii] Al-Hafiz, Y. (1965). op cit
[xiv] Ibid
[xv] Al-Hafiz, Y. (1978). op cit
See also: Kanafani, G. (1972). *The 1936-39 revolt in Palestine*. Committee for a Democratic Palestine,.
[xvi] Ibid
See also: Sabri Abdallah, I. (1977). *Development and the international order* (No. 1210). The Institute of National Planning.
[xvii] See also: Amin, S. (1976). *La nation Arabe: Nationalisme et luttes de classes*. Les Éd. de Minuit.
Murqus, I. (1970). *Afwiyyat al-Naẓariyya fi al-ʿAmal al-Fidā'i [The Spontaneity of Theory in Guerrilla Action]* (Dar Al Haqiqa).
[xviii] From "fedayeen" which comes from the Arabic fidā'īyīn, the plural of fidā'ī, which means "one who sacrifices himself" or "redeemer". It designates Palestinian militants who executed small-scale operations. Al-Hafiz's critique here is directed towards what he considered adventurism.
[xix] Ibid
[xx] Ibid

[xxi] Al-ẓāfirūyya, neologism from the root ظفر (ẓafara), which means to win, triumph, or achieve victory. Therefore, Al-ẓāfirūyya is the quality or ideology of being triumphant; a state of victory; triumphalism.
[xxii] Al-Silāḥawiyya, neologism from سلاح (silāḥ), meaning weapon.
[xxiii] A*l-kharābawiyya*, neologism from خراب (ruins) suggesting a doctrine, state, or system characterized by destruction and ruin.
[xxiv] Ibid
[xxv] Al-Hafiz, Y. (1981). *Fi al-Mas'ala al-Qawmiyya ad-Dimuqratiyya*. Markaz Dirāsāt al-Waḥda al-ʿArabīya.
[xxvi] Al-Hafiz, Y. (1965). op cit