

NATIONALISM AND THE ARABIC LANGUAGE: AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW*

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Introduction

In his preface to Jaroslav Stetkevych's book *The Modern Arabic Literary Language* (1970) William Polk writes (xviii):

"It is easy for speakers of English, secure in the imperialism or even colonialism of their language- conquering and settling, as it were, whole vocabularies of German, French ... and Arabic- to scorn what appears to be puerile or at least pedantic defensive linguistics. Secure in the far-flung domain of our language, we cannot really understand the desperate defensiveness of those who stand against us. Is not language, after all, merely a means of communication, and, as such, to be judged merely in pragmatic terms? If a better means is available, should it not be adopted? Can there be any real virtue in maintaining inefficient, ... or ... obsolete languages? To the defenders of other languages, the case appears quite differently ... [They] have found in those languages not merely a means of communication but the genius of their nationhood."

The treatment of language as the core ingredient and the most prominent manifestation of nationalism is characteristic of Arabic discourse on the topic. In spelling out the content of this position, the Arab nationalists adopt as an article of supreme faith the view that language is not just a means of communication, of conveying messages between interlocutors, but a most eloquent symbol of group identity (Edwards 1985) and one whose ultimate strength lies in its ability to provide the cultural and instrumental backbone of the group's legitimate objective of furthering its ethnocultural self-interest. This

participant at the 1983 symposium on the 'Arabic Language and the Nationalist Awareness' (*al-Lughā al-'Arabiyya wa al-Wa'y al-Qawmī*, 1984) held in Baghdad. One contributor, Muḥammad Jābir al-Fayyāḍ (ibid.), indirectly likens the function of the Arabic language in the construction of Arab nationalism to that of the air the Arabs breathe or the water on which their life so crucially depends. He then goes on to say that any attack on the Arabic language represents an all-out attack on every aspect of Arab culture. In the Arab nationalist discourse the universal theme that language cannot be separated from culture, in the same way as culture cannot be separated from language, is imbued with meanings whose significance encompasses a broad spectrum of issues—particularly the role of the glorious Arab past, with its proud achievements in the human sciences—as the dominant authenticating base and legitimising infrastructure. Accessing culture through language thus becomes an exploration of the contribution of the medium and an articulation of the very essence of its content. Arab nationalism as a modernizing force is dynamically and inextricably rooted in this conception of the role of language in the life of the people; it is thus equipped with the durable ability to transcend the vast fluctuations in political fortunes which have befallen it over the past few decades.

In dealing with the relationship between Arabic and Arab Nationalism in the 19th and 20th century I shall proceed as follows. I shall first deal with the early beginnings of Arab nationalism, including the role of external factors and the Turkification policies in the last years of the Ottoman Empire in developing a heightened nationalist awareness in the core part of the Arab Middle East. I shall then examine the basic tenets of Arab nationalism as formulated by al-Ḥusri, the most prominent thinker of this ideology in the 20th century, and the anti-nationalist response to Arab nationalism in Egypt and Greater Syria. Finally I shall examine the impact on this interaction between language and nationalism of the recent resurgence of Islamic Orthodoxy which gripped, and is still gripping, parts of the Arab World. Throughout Arab nationalism is set squarely in its linguistic context, just as Arabic is set in its nationalist context.

In developing these themes nothing will be said concerning the interaction between nationalism and the Arabic language in North Africa in the colonialist period, and how this situation unfolded in the post-independence era in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia. This is a vast topic and one of immense linguistic and

political significance which deserves separate treatment (see Holt in this volume)

Arabic in the Pre-Nationalist Stage: External Impulses

The ideology of Arab nationalism—in its most abiding formulation as a *Pān*-movement whose ultimate goal is to transcend the boundaries of the individual nation-states which make up the Arab World to form an extended national state—developed in the first half of the twentieth century. Its staunchest proponent was Sāṭi' al-Ḥusri who wrote extensively on the subject. However the roots of Arab nationalism go back to 1798, the date of Napoleon's expedition to Egypt, and the coming to power in 1805 of Muḥammad 'Alī who vigorously promoted a programme of social reforms in the country based on the increased contact between the Egyptian elite and Western culture as represented by France. Recognising the importance of Arabic as a group-solidarity symbol and its capacity to serve as an instrument for challenging the dominance of the Turkish elite, the Mamlukes and the Ottomans, in the affairs of the state, it is not surprising that Napoleon brought with him to Egypt the first Arabic printing press to publicise his message and that he cunningly chose to encode his first proclamation to the people of Egypt in Arabic, beginning it with the religious formula "In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful: there is no God but God" (Tibi: 1981:54). The dye was cast: here we have the first real attempt by the Europeans to resort to Arabic as a means of, not so much articulating a nationalist ideology on behalf of the Arabs, but as an effective instrument for displaying the 'otherness' of the Ottomans and for weakening the dependence on common faith in Islam as a factor which brings the Arabs and the Turks together.

The increased consciousness of the importance of Arabic as an associative and affiliative bond between the Arabic-speaking people received a second boost as a result of the work of the Western missionaries in the Levant in the 19th century. In stark contrast to the French missions, which openly and uncompromisingly pursued a determined policy of French self-interest, revolving around the promotion of the French language chiefly among the Maronites, the American Protestant and the Russian Orthodox missions initially chose to deliver their message through the medium of Arabic. In his work on the

genesis of Arab nationalism, Bassam Tibi explains the basis for the practice of the American Protestants as follows (ibid:74):

"... since Protestantism situates Christianity firmly within the vernacular, the American missionaries learnt Arabic. The missions also employed Arab scholars on a new evangelical translation of the Bible into Arabic. In addition they encouraged a number of other scholars who were attempting to revitalise the Arabic language, and with their help religious texts were written in Arabic for use in the mission schools. The American missionaries naturally worked in Arabic because this brought greater and more obvious success. The revitalisation of Arabic also meant the revitalisation of the national culture, and thus the creation of a new national identity".

The motives of the Russian Orthodox church in supporting Arabic were rather different. As one of the primary objectives of Czarist Russia was that of challenging the control which the Greeks exercised over the Eastern church, they gave their support to the lower ranks of the clergy who were predominantly of Arab origin. This Russian policy inadvertently led to the promotion of Arabic within the Church, which, in turn, found itself having to compete with the American Protestant missions in their fruitful emphasis on the 'vernacular' as a means of achieving success in their activities. Not even the French missions were able to ignore this success, for, at least for a time, they thought it prudent to include Arabic as one of the subjects in their school curricula.

It is clear from the above discussion that the roots of the Arab nationalist idea in its prenationalist stage were underpinned by the increasing contact between the Arabic-speaking peoples, mainly Christians in the Levant, and European culture. To this we may add that the early impulses of Arab nationalism were influenced, at least on the emotional level, by the success of the Balkan nations in achieving their independence from Ottoman rule in the 19th century. The important and unifying role of language as a symbol of national identity in the struggle of these nations for independence was not lost on the Arabic-speaking elite in their efforts to promote the interests of their people, whether within or outside the Ottoman Empire. However the major impetus in the development of the Arab nationalist idea at the beginning of the 20th century came from the aggressive policy of Turkification, adopted by the Young Turks after their arrival to power in 1908. This policy is most vividly represented

in the vigorous and repressive promotion of the Turkish language at the expense of Arabic in the Arabic-speaking lands in the Fertile Crescent.

Turkification, Arab Nationalism and the Arabic Language

In his book *Min Hādir al-Luḡha al-'Arabiyya* ('The Arabic Language Situation', 1971) Sa'īd al-Afghānī, a leading Syrian linguist of the classical persuasion, outlines some of the policies of Turkification which were implemented in Syria at the beginning of the 20th century, and the responses they elicited from the educated elite. In promoting their policy the Young Turks decreed that Turkish was the language of instruction in the government sponsored schools in all subjects, including the teaching of Arabic. Thus Arabic was taught through the medium of Turkish by Turkish teachers whose command of the Arabic language was less than adequate. Prince Muṣṭafā al-Shihābī, who attended a government secondary school in Damascus for one year at the beginning of this century, reports that his Turkish Arabic language teacher spoke Arabic with a Turkish accent, and that he had a very limited command of its complex morphology or its rules of gender agreement (ibid:93). Pupils at the government schools were not allowed to use Arabic among themselves, even during their free time. Those who were unlucky enough to fall foul of this rule, whether consciously or accidentally, were punished. Teachers of Arabic were paid less than teachers of other subjects. Employment opportunities in the government sector, except in the Department of Religious Endowments (*awqāf*), were geared towards school graduates who knew Turkish, and knew it well. The Arabic names of some mosques, particularly those of the four rightly-guided Caliphs, were removed and replaced by the names of the presumed ancestors of the Turks, for example Jankiz Khān, Hūlākō and Taimūrlīk (al-Daqqāq n.d.:48). These and other practices cast doubt on the commitment of the Ottomans to even continue with the pretence that Islam was sufficient to unite the Arabs and the Turks within the Empire. Derision and abuse were hurled on the Arabs and their language, with the attack being lead by two newspapers "*Iqdām*" and "*Tanīn*". The latter newspaper was launched by an ex-governor of Diwāniyya, outside Baghdad, who wrote in the said newspaper how shocked he was to find that none of the town people could speak Turkish;

the idea of course did not cross his mind that he could be at fault for not knowing any Arabic, the language of his charges.

The Response to Turkification: Promotion of Standard Arabic

The Arabs' response to the policy of Turkification took different forms. On the linguistic front, the response crystallised in the form of repeated calls for the revitalisation of the Arabic language and for its use as the language of education and administration in the Arabic-speaking parts of the Ottoman Empire. The conference of Arab activists which took place in Paris in 1913 demanded the use of Arabic, instead of Turkish, as the medium of instruction in all the primary schools in the provinces of the Fertile Crescent. It also called for the building of new secondary schools in which Arabic would be the medium of instruction, leaving Turkish as the language of teaching in the old government schools in what appears to have been a conciliatory attempt at placating the Ottoman authorities. As a result of these demands, and the agreement which was reached between the Arab activists and the Ottoman authorities, two secondary schools were started, one in Damascus and the other in Beirut. Although Arabic was adopted as the language of instruction in these schools, this experiment ran into the ground very quickly soon after the start of World War I.

The aim of promoting the Arabic language was also pursued by the many cultural societies which were established to achieve this and other related objectives, including al-Muntadā al-Adabī (1909), al-'Arabiyya al-Fatā (1911), al-'Ahd (1913) and al-Nahda (1907). The latter was the most active of these societies. The second article in the constitution of this society explicitly states that one of its aims is the active promotion of the Arabic language. In implementing this policy statement the Nahda society took the following steps, some of which are notable more for their symbolic value than for their wide-spread applicability: (1) instilling the love of Arabic in the hearts and minds of the young Arabs living in Istanbul, and teaching them the mother tongue to eliminate the interference from Turkish in their speech; (2) giving weekly lectures in standard Arabic and holding weekly seminars in which Arabic language texts were read and discussed in the standard; (3) performing plays in the standard; (4) replacing the customary Persian/Turkish numbers in backgammon by their Arabic equivalents, for example using

khamisa (five): *sitta* (six) instead of the Persian/Turkish *shēsh*: *pēsh* respectively; and (5) refusing to give beggars any money or charity until they asked for it in the standard. We may also mention in this connection the *Iṣṣāḥ* Society ('The Society of Clear/Eloquent Arabic') which was formed in Beirut by 'Izz al-Dīn al-Tanūkhī. This society required its members, as its name indicates, to use the standard at all times and in all places in their speech.

Sa'īd al-Afghānī reports how the promotion of the Arabic language in its standard form was vigorously pursued in the locally-funded private Arab schools in Syria in the first two decades of this century. As a symbolic application of this attitude pupils were required to use the classical and archaic form *labbayka* (Here I am! At your service!) when their names were called out by the teaching staff. He also reports how students who transferred to these schools from the government schools- where Turkish was the language of instruction- were subjected to corporal punishment if they used the Turkish form *afandim* (Yes, sir!), instead of the positively marked and highly regarded *labbayka*, when spoken to by their teachers. This commitment to the promotion of the standard form of the Arabic language seems to have had an impact on the ordinary people, at least in the villages surrounding Damascus. Al-Afghānī reports how one Friday, while out on a family picnic in the *ghawṭa* area just outside Damascus, he went with his father to perform their Friday Prayers at a mosque in a nearby village. The *Imām* delivered his Friday *khutba* (lesson) in standard Arabic, reading from a book- as was the custom in those days. In the middle of the proceedings however he resorted to the use of the local Arabic dialect to explain to his congregation a matter of local concern. Al-Afghānī reports how on his way out of the mosque he heard one villager asking another if, because the *Imām* used the local dialect, their prayer was annulled. The other villager asked God to forgive the *Imām* for his errant behaviour and said that he himself would reperform his prayer when he got back home.

The commitment to the promotion of the standard form of the language was also reflected in the attempts by a number of Arab intellectuals to employ it in its most ornate expression and in its most highly cherished poetic form in journalism. An example of the former practice is the use of rhymed prose in the editorials of the newspaper *Lisān al-Hāl* by its proprietor, the Christian writer Khalīl Sarkīs. This took place in 1887. At the beginning of the

20th century the journalist Amin ʿĀl Nāṣir issued his newspaper in Lebanon and chose poetry as the medium for reporting the news, thus committing himself to the use and promotion of a high form of the standard.

In responding to the challenges posed by the Turkification policy in its linguistic aspects, efforts were made to promote the standard form of Arabic as a means of transcending the divisive role of the prevalent dialects, as well as in order to underscore the unifying symbolic function of this variety as a nationalist asset. The fight against the local dialects took different forms and delivered its punch through different channels. Poetry was one of these channels. A good and humorous example of this trend is a little known short poem by Shaykh Abū al-Suʿūd Murād, written in 1908, in which he pokes fun at the affected use of the local Damascene dialect. He begins his poem using the standard form of the language to bewail the lamentable state of the Arabic language situation in which the dialects were prevalent in daily use. He then moves on in the second part of his poem to show the ridiculous and inferior status of the local dialect, by juxtaposing in each line a number of lexical items drawn from the dialect in question. Here is this part:

- za 'wiṭ naṭniṭ āh ya mbaṭbiṭ : ḥāje t'at'it iḥfaz 'ahdi

(Yell at the top of your voice! Jump up and down! Oh you fatty one: Enough toing and froing! Keep the pledge you have given me!)

- 'ēwā 'ēwā lēk lēk hey hey : āh āh shū shū? dis dis khud di

(Aye, Aye! Look over there, look! Hey You! : Aye, What? Aye, What? Push it in! Push it in! Take this!)

- wīlī' min fīz iṣṣubḥ wmin : 'albukrā fī wa't al-bardī.

(He left very early in the morning. And : he will leave tomorrow in the cold)

- arjini yā ruḥ yiṣṭiflū : ḡhrak bālak, iw'ā di di!

(Give us a shift! Oh! Buz off! No skin off my nose! Out of my way! Take care! Out of my way! [addressing his donkey] Come on, move faster)

- ma' ma' saffa' laḥḥa' balla' shalla' fayit yihdi .

(The sound of a bleating lamb/sheep; he clapped; he came along; he lost all sense of shame; he cursed/used foul language in a tiff; he has come into the room singing a particular type of song)

Al-Ḥuṣrī's Nationalism

It is clear from what has been said above that the scene was set for the launch of an attempt to anchor Arabic in a more organic fashion into a robust formulation of the increasingly more vocal Arab nationalist feelings and inclinations, and that the whole process was speeded up by the final collapse of the Ottoman Empire after World War I and the arrival on the scene of France and Britain not as liberating powers, but as a colonising menace. This formulation was provided by Sāṭi 'al-Ḥuṣrī, the most influential theorist of the ideology of Arab nationalism this century.

Al-Ḥuṣrī's formulation of the main tenets of Arab nationalism are based on the two primary principles of a common language and a common history, whose interaction in the life of the people creates a commonality of objectives and a vast store of shared feelings, hopes and sentiments. Al-Ḥuṣrī believes that "neither religion nor the state nor a shared economic life are the basic elements of a nation, ... and nor is common territory" (Tibi 1981:122). He also rejects ethnic/racial purity, or the idea of common origin, as a necessary condition in the construction of nationalist ideology. In negating the role of religion as a necessary condition in defining his secularist nationalist ideology, Al-Ḥuṣrī relies on Ibn Khaldūn's home-grown formulation of the notion '*aṣṣabiyya*', which, although problematic to translate into English, may be most usefully understood in the present context as pertaining to a form of social group solidarity. Al-Ḥuṣrī's commitment to providing a definition of the Arab nationalist ideology in terms of the affiliative/associative functional roles of the language is illustrated by his declaration that "Every Arabic-speaking people is an Arab people, [and every] individual belonging to one of these Arabic-speaking peoples is an Arab", whether they consciously choose to be one or not (Tibi, *ibid*: 163).

Al-Ḥuṣrī's views on the role of language in nation formation and the construction of nationalist ideology are remarkably

similar to those of the 18th century German writer Herder (cf. Edwards 1985). They also bear close resemblance to the ideas put forward by the 19th century writer Fichte on the same topic, a fact which has given rise to the mistaken impression that al-Huṣṣrī's formulation of Arab nationalist thinking is nothing but a variation on the theme of German nationalism. Al-Huṣṣrī however differs from these writers, and some later spokesmen for German nationalism, in that his formulation of the ideological foundations of Arab nationalism are devoid of any traces of the linguistic xenophobia encountered in that characteristically anti-French language feeling in the work of the German authors. Al-Huṣṣrī has no truck with such pronouncements in his formulation of the theoretical underpinnings of Arab nationalism. This spirit has survived intact to the present day and is clearly reflected in the work of later authors, for example Sa'dūn Ḥamādi who stresses the inalienable humanist message of Arab nationalism and the fact that, if it is opposed to anything, it is opposed only to Marxist internationalism, local nationalisms and religious sectarianism in the Arab world (1984: 260).

Considering the importance of language in nationalist thinking, it is not surprising to find that al-Huṣṣrī took an active interest in the state of the Arabic language and the manner in which it is taught in the schools. In those heady days of the first Syrian Arab government under King Faisal I in the 1920s al-Huṣṣrī served as an education minister, a position he used to good effect in promoting a modest reform in the way Arabic was written and taught in the schools. Later he wrote with passion and considerable expertise on the need to achieve uniformity in the use of technical terminologies in the administrative sector in the Arabic-speaking countries, as well as on the means of coining and Arabising new terminologies to meet the modernizing needs of the Arabic-speaking peoples. He was opposed to the promotion of the colloquials because of their divisive influence, although he continued to treat them as a rich source for the coining of new terminologies in the standard language (cf. al-Huṣṣrī 1985). This interest in the Arabic language and its elevation to the status of *the* primary ingredient in the articulation of the Arab nationalist ideology acquires an added meaning when we consider the fact that al-Huṣṣrī's first standard language was Turkish, not Arabic, and that his determination to master the latter came to fruition after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, when he had to face the issue of deciding

whether he was a Turk or an Arab. Explaining the significance of this aspect of al-Huṣṣrī's life, Hourani reasons that, for al-Huṣṣrī, "what had made him an Arab was not his choice to be Arab rather than Turk but the fact that, having made this choice, he then set himself to acquire the Arabic language and make it the first language of his life and thought; and that the need to do this proved the fundamental importance of language in the life of a nation" (1983:313).

Language, Culture and Political Power

To return to the similarities between Ṣāṭi' al-Huṣṣrī and both Herder and Fichte we may begin by underlining the espousal by these authors of the view that language is not just a means of communication, but is the very substance and soul of the culture of a people, whose concepts and thoughts it embodies and articulates. Language according to these authors constitutes a reservoir in which the cultural heritage of a people, its songs, traditions, history, literature, religion and folk mythologies are preserved and handed down from generation to generation (cf. Tibi 1981). Language therefore is, in and of itself, both the medium and the substance of cultural delivery. Its maintenance in the face of the challenges mounted against it either by the enemy outside, or the enemy within, thus becomes the best and perhaps the only effective means of cultural survival and continuity. This is particularly true in view of the fact that language can be, and often is, used as an instrument through which the exercise of political power may be pursued. The history of Arabic itself provides one of the best examples of this aspect of the interplay between language and the exercise of political power in the life of nations. The policy of Arabisation which the Umayyad Caliph 'Abd al-Malik successfully put in place during his reign in the early periods of the Islamic polity amply illustrates how political, economic and social power accrues to those whose language is in ascendancy. The reverse applies to the fortunes of Arabic in the context of the policy of Turkification set up by the Ottomans, and, more recently, in connection with the vigorous promotion of French, and the deliberate weakening of standard Arabic, as a means of trying to turn the French military grip on the countries of North Africa into a more permanent, and in the case of Algeria, lasting one. Clearly language can be a lethal weapon of nation destruction

and, at the same time, the best means of self-defence and cultural survival. According to Joshua Fishman language may be said to be "worthier than territory" in preserving the cultural identity of a people (1972:49). A remarkably similar view is expressed by Al-Huṣṣrī in a manner reminiscent of Herder. Al-Huṣṣrī believes that language is the guarantee of the cultural continuity of a people, and that, if it preserves its language, a nation can survive the worst effects of foreign domination and alien rule. A nation which can maintain its language under foreign rule can, al-Huṣṣrī says, "one day win back its freedom and autonomy, because, due to the fact that it has kept its language, it remains alive and does not lose its existence, although it may have lost its statehood to foreign rule. A nation, however, which has given up its own language with the passage of time, and has taken up the language of a foreign power, is a dead nation" (Tibi 1981:120).

The Influence of the German Romantics Re-Considered

It is clear from the preceding section that al-Huṣṣrī could not be said to have created or invented Arab nationalism in a 'cultural' vacuum. Nor could he be said to have invented the role of language in his formulation of the ideology of this movement. His major role has been to set up a theoretical framework for this ideology, by providing a synthesis anchored in relation to the views of the German Romantics, particularly Herder and Fichte, and the notion of 'asabiyya' as propounded by the famous 14th century thinker Ibn Khaldūn.

As is generally the case in modern scholarship, the influence of Western thought on Arabic scholarship is often inordinately extended to breaking point. This is not the position I adopt here, for I believe that al-Huṣṣrī could and would have been able to develop his ideas very much along the lines he finally chose to follow, particularly with respect to the specific issue of the role of language in nationalist ideology, without ever having to resort to the pronouncements of Herder and Fichte on the topic. I say this because the Arabic intellectual tradition readily lends itself to the construction and manipulation of a view of nationalism in which language is the primary functional ingredient. There is also the undeniable fact that the 19th and early 20th century challenges and counter challenges in Arab life under the Ottomans have created a heightened awareness of the importance of language in maintaining and enhancing a

specifically Arab group identity, which, at times, was not very different from the nationalist formulation later developed by al-Huṣṣrī. What matters here however is the provision of a proper perspective for assessing al-Huṣṣrī's utilisation of the German Romantics as a source in his thinking. It may be suggested that the influence of the German Romantics on al-Huṣṣrī was more legitimising than actually formative, an assessment which differs in emphasis from the general thrust of some of the aspects of the "acculturationist" thesis mentioned by Bassam Tibi in dealing with the genesis of Arab nationalism in his influential book *Arab Nationalism: A Critical Enquiry*. According to the acculturationist thesis Arab nationalism is viewed as "the product of an imitative adaptation of Western culture" (ibid:23), spearheaded by "Western-educated colonial intellectuals" (ibid:22). My position on the genesis of Arab nationalism is somewhat different, being in the main based on the view that the content of al-Huṣṣrī's ideas, particularly with regard to the role of Arabic in Arab nationalism, would not have been significantly different from what they eventually turned out to be even if he had not discovered Herder and Fichte. However it also means that the general direction of his approach in promoting the acceptability of his ideas, on both the national and the international levels, would not have been endowed with the same degree of legitimacy if he had failed to anchor his views in relation to a Western source or tradition, in this case the German Romantics. By utilising the German Romantics al-Huṣṣrī places his views in a wider context than he would have otherwise been able to achieve if he had restricted himself to a completely Arab mode of discourse. In this respect Arab nationalism becomes a particular expression of a more general idea. This tinge is historically and sociologically significant, not least because it provides further manifestation of the trend in the recent history of the Arabs to respond to externally induced threats by marshalling formulations that are intellectually and materially commensurate with the outside forces triggering them. Seen from this angle Arab nationalism, in the form developed by al-Huṣṣrī, may be interpreted as a predictable response, at a critical period in the modern history of the Arabs, to an external threat whose basis, following J.A. Hobson, may be said to be imperialism as the "expansion of nationality" (in Edward W. Said 1993:99). From the pragmatic viewpoint this type of response seems, subconsciously at least, to be usually premised on the assumption that the forces behind the external threats

cannot claim legitimacy for their nationalist based positions, and therefore give themselves the freedom to execute their expansionist policies at the expense of outsiders, without falling into the logical inconsistency and moral duplicity of denying, or having to deny, the external targets of those policies the right to respond by invoking an equally legitimate instrument, that of nationalism. We may also add here that by invoking the German Romantics in his enunciation of the ideology of Arab nationalism, al-Ḥusayn aimed to clothe his ideas in the garb of modernity which, in the developing nations, is invariably synonymous with Western cultural influences. From the intellectual viewpoint, the role of the German Romantics may therefore be interpreted as being one of investing the ideology of Arab nationalism with a European feel, thus enhancing its currency and 'marketability' as a desired mode of attitudinal commitment within an overall modernizing programme.

The anti-Arab Nationalism Response.

The vigorous promotion of Arab nationalism in the first half of this century did not go completely unchallenged. On the whole, this challenge was provided by two main trends, the Egyptian nationalist movement and a spectrum of mainly Lebanese Christian ideas in Greater Syria. What these two trends have in common is the call to return to a period in the history of each country which pre-dates the arrival of the Arabs and the spread of Islam in the country in question. In Egypt the authenticating glorious past starts with, and culminates in, the Pharonic period and its stupendous achievements in all spheres, thus assigning a more or less marginal status to the contribution of the Arabs in the cultural development of Egypt. In Lebanon the emphasis is placed on the Phoenicians as the worthy ancestors of the modern day Lebanese, pointing out their contribution to the development of writing, trade and sea navigation. By appealing to their respective pasts, both the Egyptian and Lebanese Christian nationalists aim to overcome the religious/sectarian differences which divide their own communities, as well as to positively encourage the emergence of a sense of cultural and national identity which would set them apart from the sea of Arab peoples surrounding them. In furthering the uniqueness of their nationalist ideologies some Egyptian nationalists, for example the celebrated writer and doyen of Arab letters Ṭahā Ḥusayn, and

the overwhelming majority of Lebanese Christian nationalists, sometimes tried to anchor their identity to an overarching Mediterranean culture which at one and the same time would link them directly to the ancient cultures of Greece and Rome and to the modern culture of Europe. This in turn is said to place Egypt and, more so, Lebanon in the unique and cherished position of being able to act as bridges between the dominant culture of Europe and the modernising forces in the Arab countries. By promoting themselves as alternative ideologies to Arab nationalism, with its emphasis on the role of language as an integrating force in the Arab countries, Egyptian and Lebanese Christian nationalists find themselves obliged either to ignore the function of the linguistic link which binds them to other Arabs outside the borders of their own countries, or to publicly oppose the claim that Arabic is invested with any linkage or bonding functions of the type claimed by the Arab nationalists, or, in extreme cases, to claim that, historically speaking, Arabic is a foreign element in the life of the country: the language of the Arab invaders. In the nationalist discourse of these Egyptian and Lebanese local nationalists Arabic is principally regarded as a means of communication and, as such, is divested of its cultural content. The only notable exception to this trend is the range of views concerning Arabic as expressed by the famous Egyptian nationalist Ṭahā Ḥusayn.

In his book *Mustaqbal al-Thaqāfa fī Miṣr* ('The Future of Culture in Egypt') Ṭahā Ḥusayn deals with the position and significance of Arabic in the moral and spiritual life of the Egyptians, regardless of their religious affiliations (Cairo 1938, 2 Vols). He confidently declares that "the Arabic language is not the language of the Muslims only, but the language of all who speak it however much they differ in faith" (in Hourani 1983:334). This sounds very much like what al-Ḥusayn and other proponents of Arab nationalism would say or have actually said, only that Ṭahā Ḥusayn intended his comments to apply to Egypt and the Egyptians within the overriding context of Egyptian nationalism. Ṭahā Ḥusayn's concern for the healthy survival of Arabic in Egypt is a genuinely felt one, so much so that he is reported to have offered to help the Christian Churches in Egypt to rewrite their 'badly' written liturgies "so that the Arab Christians could worship in good Arabic" (ibid.). However, in spite of his unqualified enthusiasm for the Arabic language and its development as the dynamic national language of Egypt, Ṭahā Ḥusayn does not espouse the Arab nationalist idea of

postulating a common nationality between all those who speak Arabic as mother tongue.

The views of the Egyptian and Lebanese nationalists came under fire from Arab nationalists thinkers. In the context of Egyptian nationalism, for example, Al-Ḥuṣṣī criticises Ṭāḥā Ḥusayn as being misguided in his almost unqualified enthusiasm for Europe. Al-Ḥuṣṣī also points out that Ḥusayn's argument for a separate Egyptian nationality, that is different from Arab nationality, is based on a misunderstanding of the distinction between the 'nation' as a cultural entity based on a commonality of language and history, and the 'nation state' as a political framework for organising the affairs of the people. Having made this distinction, al-Ḥuṣṣī then proceeds to declare that "Egypt is undoubtedly part of the Arab world, as long as it shares its language, its culture and its long history The Egyptian people is as Arab as the Iraqi or the Syrian" (in Tibi 1981:163).

But al-Ḥuṣṣī was not the only one to take it upon himself to challenge the basis of Egyptian nationalism in its publicly proclaimed dictum "Egypt for the Egyptian". The Coptic nationalist leader Makram 'Bayd was another. And so was the well-known writer 'Abd al-Qādir al-Mazīnī, who severely criticises the Egyptian nationalists for ignoring the plain truth that language, the Arabic language, is what unites the Egyptians with the other Arab peoples and sets them apart from other nations. He addresses the Egyptian nationalists saying that "the Arabic language is the only thing you need wherever you go in this Great Orient [*al-sharq al-ʿaẓīm*], which you [falsely] divide up into disparate nations: Egyptian, Palestinian, Syrian-Lebanese, Hijazi ..." (al-Daqqāq n.d:138). He then goes on to say that "Arab nationalism is synonymous with the Arabic language" and "If different peoples share the same language then they must [almost by definition] constitute the same nation" (ibid.). He anchors this argument in relation to the thesis that it is language which moulds the thought of a people. If so, it then must follow that the Egyptians, by virtue of having a common language with other Arabic speaking peoples, are part of an Arab nation, being in this regard on equal footing with, for example, the Iraqis, Syrians, Palestinians, Hijazis and Yemenites.

The Battle Lines Drawn

It is clear from the above discussion that the Arabic language is pivotal in the debate about Arab nationalism. For its supporters, Arab nationalism is impossible without the Arabic language. In its most extreme form, this commitment to the role of language in nation building makes language equal to nationality. For those who oppose Arab nationalism, language continues to be a powerful element, for without it strategies must be devised whereby other factors are shown to be more important than language in positing a national identity. One strategy of this type is to ignore the question of the role of language in both the formation and formulation of nationality altogether. Another consists of acknowledging the role of Arabic in the life of a community, but without investing it with any integrative function outside the boundaries of what the Arab nationalists would call the nation-state. A third strategy openly rejects the historical authenticity of Arabic as a shaping force in the cultural life of the community, treating it as the language of the Arab invaders. Viewed in this way Arabic ceases to be a formative impulse in the consciousness of a people. In trying to posit a special identity for their own people, the detractors of Arab nationalism seek to locate themselves in an orbit which places them outside their most immediate surroundings and away from their most recent past and extended history. In return, Arab nationalists continue to insist that the 'defectors' are part of one big Arab nation, simply because they share with the rest of the Arabs a common language. Seen in this way, the tension, and sometimes open hostility, between the 'big' and the 'small' nationalists in the Arab lands is one which is fought on lush linguistic turf: hallowed to one group, profane to the other.

The Islamic Resurgence

More recently interest in the politically integrationist message of Arab nationalism has been on the wane. Analysis of this trend reveals a number of contributory factors. To begin with we may mention the abject failure of all attempts to achieve the desired unity between the various countries which make up the Arab World, particularly the short-lived union between Egypt and Syria in the late fifties and early sixties. *Second*, Arab nationalism as an avowedly liberationist force lost much of its

appeal to the broad spread of the Arab masses, chiefly because of the failure of the Arab countries to produce any credible challenge to the seemingly invincible Israeli military superiority with respect to the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict over the land of Palestine. *Third*, in spite of its broadly consistent ideology and aims, the Arab nationalist movement espoused different particularities and orders of priorities in different parts of the Arab World and at different junctures in its recent history, thus producing confusion, uncertainty and disillusionment even in the hearts and minds of those who in the past had formed its natural constituency. *Fourth*, the nationalist and liberationist fervour which gripped the Arab World in the fifties and sixties, and upon which the political message of the Arab nationalist movement largely depended for its vitality, if not survival, started to lose steam as a result of the success in achieving political independence in those Arab countries which were fighting for it, particularly in North Africa. *Fifth*, these factors coincided with the increasing interest in pursuing economic and social development as more pressing alternatives to political action in the Arab World; this was made possible in the seventies by the increased oil revenues which started to flow into the coffers of the Gulf states directly and into other Arab countries indirectly. *Sixth*, one may also observe the fact that the debate about the political utility of nationalism as an organising force began to subside world-wide in the late sixties and early seventies, particularly in the Third World, thus depriving Arab nationalism of the wider arena which in the past served to give it added credibility in its capacity as a manifestation in the Arab context of a more general phenomenon. *Seventh*, the incessant inter-Arab rivalries and at times bloody disputes between the different member constituencies in the Arab fraternity caused many Arabs to doubt the veracity of the brotherly pronouncements of Arab nationalism and to treat them as empty declarations, or, at best, as statements of pious hope rather than expressions of triumphant reality. *Finally*, any continuity, let alone revival, which Arab nationalism might have hoped to achieve in the seventies was dealt a body blow at the hands of the increasingly strident Islamic movement. Secularist Arab nationalism, whose message was designed to encompass all the Arabic-speaking people, whether Christians or Muslims, was more or less completely side-lined in the Arab political arena, in favour of an Islamic ideology whose geographical and cultural spread extended far beyond the boundaries of the Arab World.

This happened at a time of extreme disillusionment in some progressive non-Muslim Arab circles over the manner in which the message of Arab nationalism was translated on the ground.

The supremacy of the bonds of Arabism over the ties of Islam in the political articulations of the Arab nationalist movement in the fifties and sixties thus gave way to the dominance of the universal message of Islam as a non-nationalist religion. Gone is the time when a nationalist thinker could publicly and uncompromisingly espouse the dictum that 'We are Arabs [and we were Arabs] before the arrival of Jesus, Moses and Muhammad' (al-Huṣri 1985:158). There was even a time during the last two decades when the funeral rites of the secularist idea that Arabic is the mainstay of Arab nationalism were gathering pace. Few tears were shed. Obituaries were written not so much in mourning, but in celebration of the rejuvenation of the 'sanctity' which Arabic has always enjoyed as God's chosen language. The 'secularist' gave way to the 'godly'. Death ushered in a new life. The baby in its full glory was not born, but reborn: an Arab Muslim, not a Muslim Arab.

However, the news of the death of Arab nationalism as a cultural edifice turned out to be 'grossly exaggerated'. Arab nationalism as a cultural phenomenon has managed to survive the worst effects of the massive onslaught mounted against it by the increasingly vibrant forces of 'religious orthodoxy'. While it is true that the rise of the Islamic movement led to an enhancement in the position of Arabic as the primary Islamic language it, not unsurprisingly, did not lead to any significant diminution in the status of this language as the strongest tie uniting those individuals who viewed themselves as Arabs. This is testimony to the resilience of Arabic as an index of the multifarious affiliative bonds which exist in Arab society, and, to some extent, it may be interpreted as a measure of the success of Arab nationalism in permanently promoting the Arabic language as a nationality symbol. In a bold attempt to reconcile the particularist message of Arab nationalism with the universalist message of Islam, modern-nationalist minded scholars used Arabic as a vehicle for this exercise, but with a twist. We see this in the work of Ibrāhīm Anīs (*al-Lughā bayna al-Qawmiyya wa al-'Alamiyya*, n.d.), Nāzī Mu'awwad Aḥmad (*al-Ta'rib wa al-Qawmiyya al-'Arabiyya fī al-Maghrib al-'Arabi*, 1986) and 'Umar al-Daqqāq (*al-Itijāh al-Qawmī fī al-Shi'r al-'Arabi al-Hadith*, fourth printing: n.d.). The latter author refers to a Prophetic tradition related by Ibn 'Asākir in his *History*

according to which the Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said "Oh my people! God is one and the same. Our father [i.e. Adam] is the same. No one amongst you inherits Arabic from his father or mother. Arabic is a habit of the tongue, so whoever speaks Arabic is an Arab" (ibid:216). This attempt at reconciliation emphasises the unity of all Muslims in Islam and their affinity by virtue of their being part of the human race, while, at the same time, recognising the special position of Arabic as a yard-stick by which to decide who counts as an Arab and who does not. In underscoring this approach the argument is made that Prophet Muhammad was an Arab before he proclaimed the message of Islam, that the Arabs were the first people to embrace Islam and to embark on the task of spreading it in the world and, most importantly, that God's word as revealed in the Qur'an was delivered through Arabic. The substance of these arguments is not entirely new, for similar views were expressed earlier this century by the Muslim reformist Rashid Ridā who defines his identity by saying "I am an Arab Muslim and a Muslim Arab", which he organically builds on the place of the Arabic language in the life of the Muslims (in Albert Hourani 1983:301).

Conclusion

In the above discussion I have outlined three strands in the debate concerning the place of Arabic in the life of the Arabic-speaking peoples. One strand revolves around whether Arabic is a necessary criterion to underpin an Arab nationalist ideology or not. To Sāṭi' al-Husri and the proponents of Arab nationalism it is. To the proponents of local nationalisms it is not. Another strand concerns whether Arabic can sustain a secularist Arab nationalist ideology or not. While the proponents of Arab nationalism believe it can, the adherents of Islamic orthodoxy deny the validity of the basis upon which this nationalist analysis is built, *albeit* the case that the two parties share a common love and admiration for Arabic. These two strands of the debate are particularly pertinent in the North African context, by virtue of the existence of sizeable Berber communities in this region, the rise of so-called Islamic fundamentalism and the existence of bilingualism (Arabic/ French), even trilingualism (Berber/ Arabic/French). The third strand concerns the provision of a pertinent analysis of the roots of Arab nationalism, with specific

reference to the role of the German Romantics in this regard. To one group this influence is crucial for our understanding of the full significance of this ideology; to others it is less so.

A fuller discussion of the place of Arabic in Arab society would reveal a host of other debates, which, ultimately, derive their significance from varying views about the role of Arabic in defining Arab identity, both on the collective and the individual levels. There is nothing new in this. Throughout its long and proud history Arabic was the centre of a rich array of debates.

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NOTES

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