

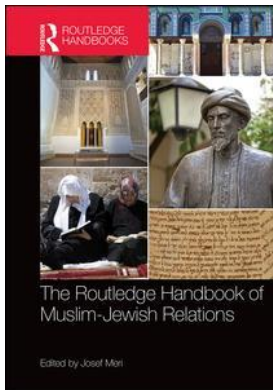
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Arab nationalism

Arabness, Arab Jews, and the Arab Spring

Youssef M. Choueiri

By the start of the twentieth century, the future of the Arab world was being pulled in different directions by three forces: the major European powers, the Ottoman state, and various Arab organizations and movements, based in Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and the Arabian Peninsula.

For the European powers, their choices had become more defined by the end of the nineteenth century, with the aim to occupy advanced positions as a prelude to inheriting the bulk of the Ottoman territories. This policy was premised on an almost unanimous European consensus as to the imminent collapse of the Ottoman Empire, or the necessity of speeding up its disintegration in order to make possible the redistribution and re-partition of its territories. The only European power that deviated from this unanimity was Germany, for reasons connected with its strategy and interests. In fact, Germany used its diplomatic, military, and financial weight to rejuvenate the Ottoman state. It did so by investing in new economic enterprises, dispatching military missions to strengthen the armed forces and turn them into viable partners in any future confrontation, and by supporting the Ottoman government at international level in its opposition to the demands of other European powers.¹

The period between the turn of the twentieth century and the eve of the First World War witnessed new multilateral political alignments. One of the most significant was the growing friendship between Great Britain, France, and Russia politically and militarily. By and large, these new bonds of friendship were woven to counter the growing power of a new Germany brimming with an ever-expanding industrial capacity, military capability, and political ambitions to change the balance of power in its favour and rein in the expansionist drive of the British Empire, be it in Europe, Asia, or Africa. It is worth bearing in mind that the British Empire at the time was, through its naval power, military bases, colonies, and bilateral treaties, in control of the main world trade routes and capable of conquering new spheres of influence by its mere presence and demonstrable ability to threaten the potential use of military power, as it did in Aden in 1839, Egypt in 1881, and the Sudan in 1899.²

France, on the other hand, became increasingly anxious to gain Greater Syria as a new prize to add to its substantial North African imperial domains in Algeria and Tunisia. This was all the more apparent in the wake of its occupation of Morocco in 1912. Both Beirut and

Damascus were coveted and made the target of new investments, financially and culturally, such as building new railways, monopolizing the tobacco industry, and increasing the number of its schools. In addition to its cultural presence and religious missionaries.

Italy, having lost its influence to France in Tunisia and Morocco, embarked on a new campaign of imperial compensation by claiming Libya as a colony to be wrested from its Ottoman masters. With the tacit approval of other European powers, it succeeded in 1912 in its endeavour.

As for Russia, it continued its role as a principal protector and ally of various Balkan communities, striving at the same time to complete their independence from Ottoman rule. This went hand in hand with its ambition to control the Bosphorus straits as a commercial artery for its imports and exports, in addition to its longstanding dream of resurrecting the glory of Byzantium under the auspices of the Czar. Having succeeded by the end of the nineteenth century in winning over France to its point of view, it intensified its efforts to reach a similar understanding with Britain. Moreover, despite its annexation of Bosnia Herzegovina in 1908 and support of Albania's independence, the Hapsburg empire of Austria-Hungary became more dependent on Germany, the new ascendant power, particularly as Russia's strategy attracted into its orbit Serbia and other Orthodox communities.

Britain appears in this context as the imperial power with the most overwhelming influence, be it in the extension of its imperial domination across vast continents or reference to the expansion of its military and commercial fleets, not to mention its territorial armies, staffed and replenished by its colonial subjects, especially in the Indian subcontinent. Although Britain had supported the integrity of the Ottoman Empire throughout the nineteenth century, the emergence of Germany and Russia as new European powers led it to reassess its policies. This was all the more so with Russia's increasing ability to threaten the British presence in India across its northern frontiers. Thus, in 1907 it reached an agreement with Russia whereby it acknowledged northern Iran as a Russian sphere of influence and gained in return southern Iran as its own sphere, while central Iran was designated as neutral territory. Afghanistan, on the other hand, was supposed to leave its foreign relations in the hands of the British Colonial and India Offices.

Prior to its agreement with Russia, Britain had reached its Entente Cordiale with France in 1904, whereby its "temporary" occupation of Egypt was finally recognized by France as a long-term commitment and its reoccupation of the Sudan as an Anglo-Egyptian affair. With its new European alliances and its perceived settled imperial domination, Britain took up the cause of Ottoman minorities and their grievances, particularly those of the Armenians, as part of its foreign policy. Sultan 'Abdulhamid was thus often lambasted by British officials for his fanaticism and reactionary attitudes.

All these new alliances and shifting policies seemed at the time designed to settle once and for all the future of the Ottoman state as well as the destiny of the Balkans. More important, underlying such developments was the emergence of new internal configurations whereby capitalism had reached a higher stage in which monopolies and financial and banking institutions had merged, with the latter gaining the upper hand in clamouring for imperialist policies. It is, therefore, no accident that the appearance of substantive theoretical studies on imperialism, its aims and significance, coincide with the same period. It was not surprising, for example, that English journalist and economist John Hobson published one of the first analytical studies of imperialism in 1902.³ He was followed by Rudolf Hilferding in 1910.⁴ Another noteworthy study was that of Nicolai Bukharin, who in 1915 composed *Towards a Theory of the Imperialist State and Imperialism and World Economy*. Perhaps one of the most publicized studies was that of Lenin, published as a booklet in 1916, under the title

Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism. They all agree that this stage began after 1870. Its main features were overproduction and the inability of local European markets to consume this surplus. This led in turn to the search for new markets and investment opportunities overseas. Furthermore, this search for markets and investments, driven by the emergence of finance capital, was accompanied by a militaristic tendency and an exaggerated sense of nationalistic pride, often tinged with racist overtones and claims of superiority of one's race as opposed to the inferiority of other races. Such theories of the racial superiority of Europeans gave license to the idea of imperialism as a natural right, or what the French called: *mission civilatrice*.

The Ottoman state was caught up in all of these developments. However, its reactions were characterized by a certain ambiguity owing to the fact that it was itself a direct target of these imperialist policies, on the one hand, and because it considered itself an imperial power occupying an acceptable position within the concert of European nations, on the other. Furthermore, it inaugurated, under Sultan 'Abdulhamid (1876–1909), a number of strategies and measures designed to preserve the integrity of its territories and ward off European expansionism. One of these measures was the idea of reviving the Islamic Caliphate as an institution representing all Muslims, irrespective of their nationality, language, or race. Although this strategy did work for a while, it was, nevertheless, doomed to fail as a result of the mounting tide of nationalism throughout Ottoman dominions. However, the short-term effects of what became later known in India as the Caliphate movement was a noticeable resurgence of Islamic sentiments straddling countries as diverse as Indonesia, Egypt, and Tunisia. More important, European powers began to take this Islamic wave very seriously, especially in those regions of their colonies with a Muslim majority or a substantial minority.

Whereas Britain was troubled by the potential disruptive effects of this new Islamic movement, particularly in its Indian context, Germany went out of its way to harness its repercussions to its own advantage. This German interest was clearly linked to a deliberate policy of undermining the British presence in both India and the Ottoman Empire.⁵ At the same time, Sultan 'Abdulhamid was exerting all efforts to be included as a genuine member of a European club that included emperors and kings. He went as far as to try to convince that German chancellor Bismarck to set up an Ottoman–German–Austrian alliance, in order to deter Russia's ambitions, on the one hand, and reassert the political presence of Istanbul at the heart of European diplomacy, on the other.⁶

It is in this context that the special relationship that had developed between the German kaiser Wilhelm II and Sultan 'Abdulhamid should be understood. Thus, in 1898, the German Kaiser visited Istanbul, Damascus, and Jerusalem. In the course of his extended visit, Wilhelm II praised the Islamic credentials and policies of 'Abdulhamid as well as his endeavours to spread the idea of one Muslim community under his leadership. Such declarations by the German emperor led to wild rumours, including of his conversion to Islam and the imminent liberation of Muslim lands from French and British colonialism. These rumours were fed by the deliberate use of certain symbolic images. In Damascus, for example, Wilhelm declared, "Let me assure his majesty the Sultan and the three hundred millions of Moslems who, in whatever corner of the globe they may live, revere in him their Khalif, that the German Emperor will ever be their friend."⁷

Despite the Young Turk Revolution in 1908 and the disappearance of 'Abdulhamid from the political scene the following year, the general international alliances and European strategies in the Near East did not undergo much change. Moreover, the relentless movement of separation and nationalism became more potent as the Ottoman state, in its

new constitutional phase, stressed in a more systematic way the absolute integrity of the empire and the need to bring all of its territories under centralized control.

It was at this stage that a form of Arabism began to be articulated by a new generation of Arabs, be they military officers, professional civil servants, students, journalists, or lawyers.

The Arab world that Arabism sought to create as a new imagined community had never been constituted in its long history as a nation-state. One could plausibly refer to the Umayyad and 'Abbāsid empires (661–1250 CE) as states built by Arab dynasties, but this is a far cry from assuming that the inhabitants of the Arab world had formed in their past an identifiable nationality that could be politically and culturally separated from its wider imperial and religious contexts. In this sense, Arabism in its modern connotations undertook to endow this particular entity with a well-developed political and historical identity. In order to do so, it had to reassemble its constituent elements and reconfigure them according to contemporaneous criteria. Thus, at the Arab Congress held in Paris in 1913 at the instigation of newly formed political parties, 'Abd al-Ghanī al-'Uraysī alluded, in the course of justifying Arab demands for autonomy within the Ottoman Empire, to the most recent theories in political science, sociology, and international relations to show that “the Arabs constituted a political community and a nation on the basis of five interrelated factors: language, ethnicity, history, customs, and political aspirations.”⁸

More important, defining Arab nationality according to modern criteria entailed the inclusion of all religious groups within its purview, be they Muslim, Christian, or Jewish. This was a momentous development that constituted a political rupture that shifted cultural debates to a new level exemplified by legal and social equality. However, one should not ignore in this context the prior advent of Ottomanism that aspired in the nineteenth century to act as an overarching umbrella for all the diverse populations of the Ottoman Empire. The failure of various Ottoman experiments to implement policies based on this concept, particularly in its approach to the question of nationalities, opened the way for the emergence of a wide array of national movements, ranging from Serbia and Albania to Armenia and Bulgaria. The Arabs were the last nationality to agitate for a new political settlement based on a decentralized system of government whereby the two main national components of the empire – Arab and Turkish – would enjoy equal rights. By the outbreak of the First World War, decentralisation gave way to self-determination.

It was at this stage that Arabism came into its own as a common cultural identity that cut across different religious and sectarian divisions. In this sense, the social bearers of this new national marker could be Sunnis, Shi'is, Christians, or Jews. What mattered in this context was their newly bestowed or ascribed Arab identity that was supposed to subsume and transcend their traditional affiliations. While Arabic-speaking Christian communities were concentrated in Iraq, Greater Syria, and Egypt, Arabic-speaking Jewish communities had been for centuries a feature of North African, or Maghrebi, societies, in addition to those of Yemen in the Arabian Peninsula, and the Fertile Crescent,⁹ with Iraq featuring as one of their most sought-after lands of settlement and national affiliation.

Sāḥī' al-Ḥuṣrī (d. 1968), the first consistent theorist of pan-Arabism, captured the connotations of this crucial transition to a different configuration of allegiances by offering the following explanation:

Ottoman reforms produced no tangible changes in the attitudes of the Christians and the Muslims in the Arab countries towards the Ottoman state: the Muslims continued to consider this state as their own and manifest their submission to its rule, it being the state of the Islamic Caliphate, while the Christians persisted in considering it an

alien power, in that it treated them as second class subjects. Hence their endeavour to seek protection from European powers, that was often extended even with some direct assistance.

Arab nationalism had simultaneously to overcome these two trends: it had to divert the expectations of the Muslims away from the Ottoman state, and those of the Christians from European powers. It did so in order to draw both to rally under the banner of Arabism which derives its strength from language and history.¹⁰

Language and history were thus seen as viable substitutes for religion and undifferentiated memories of one's past as a source of national pride.

It was after the end of the First World War that Arab Jews began to differentiate themselves and eventually were detached in their majority from their indigenous environment as a result of the emergence of Zionism and its function as a new pole of attraction. The gradual disappearance of Jewish representation in Arab public life was a long-drawn-out process that reached its critical point with the foundation of the State of Israel in 1948 and the expulsion of the bulk of its Palestinian population, be they Muslim or Christian, but Jewish mass migration from Arab countries did not begin in earnest until the early 1950s.

Jews had been part of the economic, cultural, and religious public affairs of the Arab world since the formation of the first Muslim state. Their professions and crafts were integrated into the social structure of their societies, where they acted as physicians, accountants, tax-collectors, merchants, tailors, jewellers, artisans, money-lenders, poets, and philosophers and in many other functions. In these long centuries before the onset of modernity as a pervasive force, the main rivalry, or even enmity, in an Islamic society was between Christians and Jews rather than Jews and Muslims. As both the first two were subjects of an Islamic state, their subordinate position tended to pit one against the other in their eagerness to demonstrate loyalty or usefulness to their Muslim masters. This was still the case when Napoleon invaded Egypt in 1798, thereby accelerating the relentless advance of modernity into Middle Eastern societies, especially with the military defeat of the Mamlūks as a ruling elite.¹¹

In their drive to modernize their states and societies, Arab elites and intellectuals began to articulate a new political vision. This vision aimed at creating a well-defined neutral ground that could assemble within its boundaries or perimeters an invited audience that was expected to celebrate its status as a national community. Hence, being a patriotic Arab often overlapped with being a proud bearer of a new nationality centred on a particular Arab country, such as Egypt, Iraq, Morocco, or Lebanon. Religion was thus assumed to merge its dynamic elements into a national entity that should always take priority in its history or political development. Perhaps one of the most celebrated examples of such a transmutation was the Egyptian Jewish playwright and journalist Ya'qūb Ṣannū' (d. 1912), who criticised both local oppression and mismanagement as well as the British occupation of his country. Although not known for pan-Arabist views, his fervent Egyptian patriotism was not unlike that preached by many of his Muslim and Christian compatriots. Jacob Landau attributed to Ṣannū' the virtue of advancing and propagating the twin ideas of Egyptian patriotism and Western notions of liberty in a manner that was accessible to the masses at large.¹² Moreover, by the turn of the twentieth century, the term "Arab Jews" (*al-Yahūd al-'Arab*) was being increasingly used by both Muslim and Jewish writers, denoting a national consciousness that sought to forego ethnic, religious, and sectarian differences. Nationality and secularism were gradually combined, whereas the adoption of a heightened or exclusive sense of nationalism was relegated to the background.¹³ However, the appellation "Arab Jews" itself was not

a newly invented term but largely inherited as an Ottoman legal label used by the state bureaucracy for fiscal and tax purposes.¹⁴

Cairo, Aleppo, Damascus, Jerusalem, Baghdad, Casablanca, and Fez had substantial Jewish communities ranging from 4 per cent to 10 per cent of the total inhabitants.¹⁵ This indicates that the Jewish presence was overwhelmingly urban, with both the advantages and disadvantages of occupying such a central position, particularly at times of war, economic prosperity, or riots. Baghdad boasted at the turn of the twentieth century one of the highest proportions of Jews to non-Jews in the entire Arab world.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the articulation of a new Arab identity based on the concept of nationality and citizenship did not find widespread support within the rank and file of the Jewish community. It is generally assumed that the Jews felt well integrated into Ottoman societies and avoided on the whole the sectarian strife that pitted Muslims against Christians in the long nineteenth century and its persistent and varied modernization programmes. In other words, whereas Muslim and Christian educated elites saw in Arabism a national identity and a common denominator capable of transcending religious and sectarian differences, the Arab Jewish community did not feel the same urge or necessity. It is instructive in this context that the Damascus Affair of 1840 arose as a result of social and economic rivalries between the Damascene Jewish merchants and their Catholic rivals, with the latter accusing the former of abducting a Capuchin (Catholic) monk, Father Thomas, and his servant, Ibrahim Amara, for the purpose of using their blood in a Passover sacrifice. The entire incident turned out to be a fabricated libel that revealed the depth of commercial competition in a world dominated by global market forces.¹⁷ Moreover, Jewish community members tended either to cling to traditional notions of communal coexistence or to send their children to schools founded by the Alliance Israélite Universelle, a Paris-based organization that directed its educational efforts toward Ottoman and Moroccan Jews. It set up its first school in Morocco in 1862 and in Baghdad in 1865. By 1947, it had ten schools in Iraq teaching at least 6,000 pupils. Its program of French culture and vocational training, spanning by the turn of the twentieth century more than 100 such schools both for boys and girls, precluded Arab culture or its relevance. Nevertheless, in Egypt and parts of the Fertile Crescent, where the Jews were susceptible to Western ideas over a long period of time, local community leaders sponsored modernized rabbinical schools with little reliance on the AIU. This was especially true for Egypt and Iraq, for their Jewish communities prospered from the second half of the nineteenth century and consequently were able to promote private initiatives of great magnitude.¹⁸

Moreover, Algerian Jews were granted citizenship *en masse* in 1870; thus, an unbridgeable chasm was created between them and their Muslim compatriots.¹⁹ After independence, almost all Algerian Jews emigrated either to France or the United States.

These external intrusions into local cultures and customs were furthermore compounded by the emergence of Zionism in the second half of the nineteenth century, with its exclusive nationalist agenda and insistence on an invented identity rooted in ancient biblical mythologies.

Arabism, on the other hand, did not at this stage envisage the exclusion of Arab Jews from its proposed community as the First World War loomed on the horizon. In a public statement issued shortly before the war, a group by the name of the Revolutionary Arab Organization called on all Arabs to rise up against “the Turks” and declare their freedom and independence. It went on to state,

Let Muslims, Christians and Jews unite in working for the interest of the nation and the fatherland. You dwell in one territory, utilize one single land and speak one single

language: be therefore one nation, one force and do not be divided according to the whims of the corrupt who pretend to be good Muslims [i.e., the Turks].²⁰

Divesting the Ottoman establishment of its Islamic credentials by referring to its “criminal acts and oppressive policies” throughout the Arab world, the declaration revisits more than once the imperative necessity of creating one single national front of resistance:

O Arabs who are Christian and followers of Moses! Grasp the hand of your Muslim Arab brothers. ... The Muslim Arabs are your brothers in patriotism [*al-wataniyya*]. Should there be amongst them individuals who manifest abhorrent fanaticism, similar fanatics are found in your midst. Both parties learnt this fanaticism from non-Arab foreigners. Our forefathers were not fanatic in this way: Jews and Christians used to acquire knowledge in the mosques of al-Andalus [Muslim Spain] and Baghdad as brothers.²¹

Such entreaties were unlikely to elicit widespread support among Arab Jewish communities, who were torn in different directions with no single leadership, program, or strategy. However, a sense of Jewish Arabness could be said to have made itself felt as part of the wider Arab nationalist movement. What transpired after the First World War and the settlement of Versailles was re-establishment of the European powers in the Arab world under different circumstances.

Pan-Arabism and local patriotism

Arabism espoused by various social forces and groups who joined the ranks of the Arab Revolt in 1916 was largely at this stage a Western Asian affair. Hitching its cause to that of Britain and France and pinning its hopes on promises of independence and the restoration of Arab glories, it fell victim to its internal contradictions and the empty promises of its presumed allies. Thus, instead of a single federal entity comprising the Arab portion of Western Asia, the region was further divided into additional states soon to be placed under the direct occupation of the same allies. It was also in this period that the Balfour Declaration was issued by the British government, promising the Zionist movement the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people and pledging its “best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of the object.” This was the only pledge that was faithfully kept and implemented over the next 20 years.

Between 1919 and 1962, various Arab national movements sprang up to launch varied forms of struggle in order to gain independence from European powers (mainly Britain, France, Italy, and Spain). These European powers had managed to complete their occupation or control of almost all Arab countries by the end of the ~First World War. Iraq, the Arab Gulf sheikhdoms, South Yemen, Transjordan, Palestine, Egypt, and the Sudan were firmly under British domination, in one form or another. Lebanon and Syria were added by the League of Nations (as mandates) to the French protectorates of Tunisia and Morocco, in addition to Algeria as a full-blown colony, while Italy succeeded in clinging on to Libya until its military defeat in the Second World War.²² Only North Yemen and Saudi Arabia were able to achieve formal independence, the former in 1918 and the latter in 1932. The drive for independence was largely conducted under local patriotic goals and programs but with an underlying common reference of shared Arab culture, history, and aims. Most Arab states had achieved their independence by 1962 (Algeria). Arab countries that achieved their independence either partially, as in the case of Egypt in

1922, or completely, such as Lebanon and Syria in 1943 and 1946,²³ granted citizenship to all their local communities, irrespective of religion, ethnic origins, or language.

Moreover, Arab countries that managed to achieve independence between 1922 and 1952 tended to adopt liberal forms of government, be they monarchical, as in Egypt, Iraq, or Jordan, or republican, as in Syria and Lebanon. Their constitutions spelled out all the rights of citizenship: freedom of speech, assembly, and religion; the inherent entitlement to form political parties or join professional and trade unions; and the conduct of periodic and regular elections. Although women were not granted the vote until the late 1940s and the letter and spirit of liberal politics were often violated, accompanied by the suspension of the constitution, rigging elections, and arresting opposition figures, there was a general consensus that liberal forms of government, with one European model or another in mind, were the political norm for a newly independent state wishing to join the modern world. In this sense, a common Arab culture imbued with modernistic notions of nationality and citizenship entered the political field as the emblem of an independent and modern state. It is worth mentioning in this respect that even the short-lived Kingdom of Ḥijāz (1916–1925) under the traditional leadership of Sharīf Ḥusayn (d. 1931), who proclaimed the Arab Revolt in 1916 against the Ottoman Empire, conformed to the same pattern. His kingdom adopted, at least in theory, a moderately liberal constitution for its new state. Fayṣal (d. 1933), Ḥusayn's son, did the same upon being proclaimed king of Greater Syria by the Syrian National Congress in 1920. In other words, these "liberal states" embraced and expected to be required to welcome the concept of a multi-religious nation in which an all-inclusive nationality would supersede or transcend other loyalties, be they tribal, sectarian, or religious.

Arab Jews were thus granted the nationality of their countries, whether in Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, or Libya and later on in Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria and other Arab countries.

It is in this context that one has to understand the Palestinian and Arab rejection of the idea of a state based on religion as the only signifier of its identity.²⁴ Apart from its extreme program, with the ultimate aim of driving out the indigenous population of Palestine, and acting as a barrier between the eastern and western regions of the Arab world, a Jewish state as envisaged by Zionism seemed an obsolete idea that ran against the modern norms of statehood. This was the gist of innumerable arguments offered by countless Arab nationals in articulating their refusal to countenance the possibility of endorsing the establishment of a Jewish state on their land. At a conference held in London in 1939 to bridge the gap between Palestinians and Zionists, one of the Egyptian delegates, 'Alī Mahir, appealed to the Zionist leaders to scale down their demands and try to work within a single Palestinian state in which all its citizens enjoyed the same rights.²⁵ This proposal was put more forcefully, in 1937, by both the Iraqi and Egyptian foreign ministers to the annual meeting of the Assembly of the League of Nations. The Egyptian foreign minister, Wāṣif Buṭrus Ghālī, rejected both the idea of the partition of Palestine and the creation of a Jewish state. He contended that the partition of Palestine would not lead to the resolution of the Jewish question, while the creation of a Jewish state was not feasible because it ran counter to the idea of nationality, basing itself as it did on religion as a common denominator of individuals with different national and ethnic backgrounds. The Iraqi foreign minister, Tawfiq al-Suwaydi, advanced the same argument and called for the creation of a single state in which the Jews would enjoy self-rule and their full rights as citizens of that state.²⁶ Both pointed to the presence of Jewish communities in their countries, with al-Suwaydi emphasising how Iraqi Jews had been part of Iraq's social and economic life since the sixth century before the birth of Christ. He went on to state that Iraqi Jews were full citizens, occupying high positions in the civil service and government

of his country. There were thus no differences between Iraqis, be they Muslim, Christian, or Jewish.²⁷

What was at stake in this respect boiled down to two different attitudes: one looking forward to achieving its independence and putting behind the shackles of colonialism, and another brandishing a new and more pervasive form of colonial rule. It would not make sense in such a historical context to blame the Arabs for their obstinacy and laud Zionist leaders for their insightful politics. Such contexts do not, and are not, supposed to yield easily to temporary solutions or diplomatic compromises. All Arab countries fought for independence, using all means at their disposal or according. The leaders of these national struggles, be they kings, statesmen, lawyers, warlords, or army officers, expected their independence to result in ushering in a stable settlement that ensured the integrity of their territory and the sovereignty of its people. No compromises were entertained short of these two goals. Palestine figured in similar terms, whereby all the criteria required for achieving independence by other Arab countries applied more rigorously to its particular circumstances. By placing this unique historical juncture in its own national context, it becomes more plausible to restate a Palestinian stance that has been repeatedly impugned or made to sound a peculiar piece of bigotry and short-sightedness. This colonialist characteristic of Zionism has recently become part of internal Israeli debates, marking a convergence of analytical approaches that spans both Palestinian and Israeli communities.²⁸

Arabism in the socialist age

Arab liberalism began to lose its lustre by the end of the Second World War. This was the era in which liberalism was perceived to have exhausted itself in all fields, particularly in matters such as economic development, social justice, and national renewal. From the New Deal in the United States to the welfare state in Britain, not to mention the Soviet Union, shortly to be joined by China, a new paradigm of human development was being forged across continents and cultures. Since formal independence in the Arab world, with its attendant liberal constitutional arrangements, turned out to be an empty shell unable to tackle poverty and workers' rights or to resolve land ownership issues, housing, and military performance, the tide of socialist planning and active state interventionism slowly penetrated large swaths of the political landscape. In this respect, the defeat of the Arab armies in Palestine in 1948 and the formal declaration of Israel as a Jewish state, coupled with the destruction of Palestinian society in all its diverse structures, sealed the fate of liberalism in its old guise. From Egypt to Syria and Iraq, radical movements gained popular support and were distinguished by their agitation for a new scheme of things. This was the age of Arab nationalism as articulated and applied by a new generation of teachers, lawyers, engineers, writers, and army officers. The Arab middle class, despite its limited size, had finally succeeded in wrenching power from the aristocratic scions and notable families who had dominated Arab life since the nineteenth century with its Khedival and Ottoman reforms.

Up to 1950, most Arab Jews were still trying to cling to their national societies, with only some groups seriously contemplating the possibility of uprooting their families and moving to a new state holding itself out as a safe haven for all Jews, irrespective of their nationality or social background. However, such ambivalence or hesitancy underwent a process of slow transformation, turning over time into a hardened determination. Such hardening of attitudes was shaped to a large extent by the traumas of 1948 and the subsequent radicalization of Arab politics.

By declaring itself a Jewish state and refuge, Israel established a viable focal point that could act as a magnet for a wide variety of Jewish malaise, with the spectre of the Holocaust ever present to flag up as a warning sign. The bungled failure of the Arab states to check the onset of Palestinian demise fuelled the anger of the Arab masses on the one hand and led leaders of the Jewish communities to look ahead for alternative routes of safety on the other. Occasional mob looting of Jewish property, and vengeful acts such as the Farhūd riots in Baghdad in 1941, in the wake of the British reoccupation of Iraq, were seized upon as a foretaste of things to come.²⁹

For all that, what played the decisive role in driving the Arab Jews out of their countries over the following decades was an aggressive Zionist policy³⁰ that marshalled all its resources to convince, oblige, or cajole well-integrated Iraqi, Egyptian, Moroccan, Yemeni, Tunisian, Syrian, and Lebanese Jews to leave their countries of origin and join the Ashkenazi (European) project of setting up a Jewish state on the ruins of erased Palestinian villages and towns.

Zionism, a colonialist movement impelled by the momentum of European expansionism, chose to anchor its brand of nationalism in an outmoded form of religious adherence and discredited racial affiliations. By conflating the fate of its targeted Western constituency with that of “Oriental Jews,” it exerted all its efforts to uproot both and deprive them of their original nationalities. Its endeavours yielded meagre results with the first category, as most “Ashkenazi” Jews opted for their hard-won rights as citizens of Western democracies, whereas its Eastern calculations came to fruition at a more comprehensive rate. In both cases, a new Jewish identity was forged out of disparate elements, with religion, a revived version of Hebrew and extensive nationalist indoctrination thrown in as the ingredients of a reborn personality. This Zionist enterprise was initially conceived, organized, and implemented by European Jews, who had no Middle Eastern background and were utterly oblivious to the protests of Arab Jews, Muslims, and Christians.³¹ Arab nationalism in its socialist mode, on the other hand, articulated its own differentiation between Jewishness as a religious signifier and Zionism as a marker of an aggressive drive, born and nurtured within the wider context of European imperialism.³² Consequently, Arab Jews were to a large extent the victims of such an encounter that often took on the form of military confrontations, as in 1956, 1967, 1973, 1982, and 2006.³³ In this highly charged atmosphere, shared common cultures, stretching back to pre-Islamic times, were either submerged, annihilated, or buried in the trenches of the battlefields.

Arabness

Over the last two decades or so, originally muffled or shunned voices of Mizrahi Jews have managed to pierce this curtain of silence and announce their objections to such a project in lucidly articulated narratives.³⁴

These Jews, known in Israel as Mizrahi, were smuggled, induced, and compelled by acts of extortion, manipulation, and fear-mongering to settle in their new homeland in order to be civilized by their more enlightened Western co-religionists, who despised all things Oriental and Arab. Numbering at least 700,000, some of these who found themselves in the new state were placed in transition camps in order to be processed before being allowed to become second-class citizens in a state that treated them as primitive brutes. Forming the majority of Israelis until the early 1990s, their status has not undergone much improvement despite decades of militant and peaceful activism, beginning with the Black Panthers³⁵ in the 1970s and civil rights movements in the 1990s.

Despite years of brainwashing, official propaganda, and campaigns of “de-Arabisation,” the second generation of these Mizraḥi-Arab Jews seems to have rediscovered a fresh identity that is being increasingly designated under the cultural title of “Arabness.” Speaking of her experience as a daughter of a Jewish couple who had migrated to Israel from Iraq in the early 1950s but chose to settle in England two decades later,³⁶ Rachel Shabi eloquently describes this transformation: “There was never any doubt that Arab culture was an integral part of our Jewish home: respected, enjoyed and admired. But growing up, I wasn’t really into it.”³⁷

As it turns out, scores of Israeli children were experiencing something similar at that time. Approximately half the population of Israel is from Arab or Muslim countries: Iraq, Iran, Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, and Yemen. Known as Mizraḥi (“Eastern”) or Sephardi Jews, they arrived in Israel during various periods after its creation in 1948. Jews of Mizraḥi origin were for many years the majority in Israel and until the arrival of slightly fewer than a million migrants from the former Soviet bloc during the early 1990s reshuffled the ethnic pack. Mizraḥis grew up in a Jewish society that was desperate to yoke itself to Europe and belittled the Arab world as an uncivilized cultural desert. The majority of Mizraḥis were assumed by the ruling European minority to be bearers of an inferior culture that should not come to represent or define the Jewish state. And, inevitably, many of the Mizraḥi children internalized this story.³⁸

Such paradigms of depicting racist classifications and projects of defying marginalisation have now penetrated into various circles of Mizraḥi men and women, generating in the process a new discourse of liberation and self assertion.³⁹ Zionist programs designed to deracinate and recreate individuals and their cultures were pursued with a vehemence bordering on outright racism. Rediscovering one’s identity in such contexts is an act of imagining and reasserting the reconfigured positive aspects of former identities, whereby reactions hankering for tolerance and human dignity are bound to inscribe themselves with indignation and denunciation.⁴⁰

It is also of no coincidence that similar approaches were being broached by young Arab men and women, in the Arab world itself and in Arab diasporas across the continents. Apart from common notions of human rights and democratic values, including the equality of men and women, narratives of identity in its multifaceted configurations found their social niche and outspoken inscriptions in an idiom of “Arabness” that decentred and reshuffled the traditional pronouncements of Arab nationalism in its most intense phases. In other words, Arabness is being redefined and divested of its old baggage. This is all the more so with the advent of what has been dubbed “the Arab Spring”.

The Arab Spring

The Arab Spring shifts our attention away from abstract theory to real life and political activism. It adumbrates the agency of new social forces (young, pragmatic, and determined) that have left behind the slogans and strategies of a previous generation. It also reveals pragmatism tinged with idealism, whereby both are supposed to reinforce each other but according to criteria that never entertain despair, compromise, or defeat.

The unfolding revolutions had a clear aim: to bring down and dismantle the old regimes. All Arab countries were caught up in this process, with Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, and Syria being directly involved in an ongoing transformation, while other Arab regimes, particularly of the monarchical variety, are still trying to limit or control the pace of their internal transformations.⁴¹

This process of social and political transformation has advanced most rapidly in Tunisia and Egypt, with other countries still wrestling with civil wars, as in Syria, or internal power struggles, as in Libya. In Tunisia, the operation was quicker and more precise, and seems to have yielded, albeit falling short of earlier promises, clearer and better defined results.

Hence, the Arab Spring denotes a democratic Arabness that is still in the early stages of its articulation, but a clearer vision of Arab identity and its future is bound to emerge. It will not hark back to the old days of Arab nationalism. Its premises will highlight more emphatically modernity, democracy, and human rights.

It is in this context that the emerging Arabness of Arab Jews may find a more receptive ground, or both sides of the divide may start to see common threads of cultural and political attitudes. Such awareness should lead in due course to the conduct of dialogues at various levels. By foreseeing the possible emergence of a widely ranging dialogue, with Arabness and its distant as well as immediate genealogy foregrounding shared values of human rights and democratic practices, one has to identify points of convergence and try to consolidate their nascent configurations despite temporary setbacks.

Hence, a new national identity is a distinct possibility. It will be a modern identity embracing as its emblem the human rights of all its citizens, irrespective of religion, creed, or ethnic background.

Notes

- 1 Caesar E. Farah, "Great Britain, Germany and the Ottoman Caliphate," *Der Islam* 66, 2 (1989): 264–288; Jonathan S. McMurray, *Distant Ties: Germany, the Ottoman Empire, and the Construction of the Baghdad Railway*, Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001.
- 2 John Gallagher, *The Decline, Revival and Fall of the British Empire: The Ford Lectures and Other Essays*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004; Peter J. Cain and Antony Gerald Hopkins, *British Imperialism: 1688–2000*, London: Routledge, 2014.
- 3 See John A. Hobson, *Imperialism: A Study*, London: Nisbet, 1902
- 4 Rudolf Hilferding, *Das Finanzkapital. Eine Studie über die jüngste Entwicklung des Kapitalismus*, Vienna: Wiener Volksbuchhandlung, 1910 (*Marx-Studien*, vol. III); Rudolf Hilferding, *Finance Capital. A Study of the Latest Phase of Capitalist Development*, Tom Bottomore (ed.), London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981. Hilferding, born in Vienna in 1877, was a social democrat and a socialist who spent most of his working life in Germany.
- 5 Selim Deringil, *The Well-Protected Domains. Ideology and the Legitimizing of Power in the Ottoman Empire*, London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 1998, pp. 16–43.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 139.
- 7 Quoted in Donald M. McKale, *War by Revolution: Germany and Great Britain in the Middle East in the Era of World War I*, Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1998, p. 9
- 8 Quoted in Youssef M. Choueiri, *Arab Nationalism: A History*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000, p. 91.
- 9 It was in largely tribal societies with their fairly simple economic structures that Christian and Jewish communities were absent as indigenous inhabitants or nonexistent. This applies in the main to the Arabian Gulf and Saudi Arabia before the discovery and commercial exploitation of oil shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War.
- 10 Sāṭi' al-Ḥuṣrī, *al-Bilād al-'Arabiyya wa'l-Dawla al-'Uthmāniyya*, Cairo: League of Arab States, 1957, pp. 82–83.
- 11 "Jews, Copts, and members of other Christian sects had performed important functions in the administrative, financial, and commercial structure of the Mamluk state for centuries, as they had throughout the Islamic world since its establishment." Charles Wendell, *The Evolution of the Egyptian National Image: From Its Origins to Ḥmad Luṭfi al-Sayyid*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1972, p. 100.
- 12 Jacob Landau, "Abu Naddara: An Egyptian Jewish Nationalist," *Journal of Jewish Studies*, 3, 1 (1952), pp. 43–44.

- 13 Writing in 1900, for example, the Syrian 'Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi called on Muslim, Christian, and Jewish Arab youths to oppose political dictatorship and embrace a democratic system of government. Youssef Choueiri, *Arab Nationalism*, p. 86. On Şannū', see Jacob Landau, "Abu Naddara: An Egyptian Jewish Nationalist," *Journal of Jewish Studies*, 3, 1(1952), pp. 30–44. See also Ella Shohat, *Taboo Memories, Diasporic Voices*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006; and by the same author, "Rupture and Return: Zionist Discourses and the Study of Arab Jews," *Social Text*, 21, 2 (Summer, 2003), pp. 49–74.
- 14 According to Bruce Masters, *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 55–56. Jews in the Syrian city of Aleppo were listed for tax purposes under two categories in 1677: *Yehud-Araban* (Arab Jews) and *Yehud-Efrenk* (Frankish or European Jews).
- 15 Baghdad was the exception, with perhaps a quarter of its inhabitants being Jews.
- 16 To the extent that sources give figures as high as a quarter of the total population, or 50,000 out of 200,000. See, for example, Bruce Masters, *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World*, p. 59.
- 17 Mary C. Wilson, "The Damascus Affair and the Beginnings of France's Empire in the Middle East" in *Histories of the Modern Middle East, New Directions*, ed. Israel Gershoni, Hakan Erdem, and Ursula Wokock, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2002, Chapter 4, pp. 63–74.
- 18 Michael M. Laskier, "Aspects of the Activities of the Alliance Israélite Universelle in the Jewish Communities of the Middle East and North Africa: 1860–1918," *Modern Judaism* 3, 2 (1983): pp. 147–171. Quotation p.158. Furthermore, "In Egypt, the role of the AIU was significantly minimized since 1918, for Jews sent their children in ever increasing numbers to private and public secular schools, in accordance with their improved social and economic status." *Ibid.*, p. 166.
- 19 James McDougall, *History and the Culture of Nationalism in Algeria*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 72.
- 20 Suleiman Taqi al-Din (ed.), *Muhakamat al-Haraka al-Arabiyya fi Lubnan*, Beirut: Dar al-Ra'id al-Arabi, 1982, p. 86. This is a reprint of an official Ottoman publication under the title *Idahat* ("Clarifications"), issued by the Commander of the Fourth Army, Ahmad Jamal Pasha, in 1918.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 88. It is thought that this declaration was penned by Haqqi al-Azm (1864–1955) who was at the time a Syrian exile in Egypt and Secretary of the Decentralization Party established in 1912.
- 22 Libya was occupied by Britain and France under the auspices and administration of the United Nations. It was granted independence in 1951.
- 23 Iraq was formally granted independence in 1932 and became a member of the League of Nations, while Britain maintained military bases on Iraqi soil and its armed forces were granted transit rights in time of war.
- 24 Even Saudi Arabia identified itself nationally and politically in its new designation as "an Arab country" i.e., *al-Mamlaka al-Arabiyya al-Sa'ūdiyya* – The Saudi Arab Kingdom.
- 25 Israel Gershoni and James P. Jankowski, *Redefining the Egyptian Nation 1930–1945*, Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp. 187–188.
- 26 Fu'ād Khalil Mufarrij, *al-Mu'tamar al-Arabi al-Qawmī fi Blūdān*, Damascus: al-Maktab al-Arabi al-Qawmī lil-Di'āya wa-al-Nashr, 1937, pp. 171–183.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p.181.
- 28 See, for example, Gershon Shafir, "Zionism and Colonialism. A Comparative Approach," in *The Israel/Palestine Question: A Reader*, edited by Ilan Pappé, London and New York: Routledge, 2007, pp. 78–94.
- 29 Iraqi Jews were among the most integrated of all Arab Jews. For more details, see Reuven Snir "My Adherence to the Creed of Moses Has Not Diminished My Love for Muhammad's Nation": The Emergence and Demise of Iraqi Jewish Literary Modern Culture', *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, 98, 1 (Winter, 2008), pp. 62–87.
- 30 See, for example Ilan Pappé, *A Modern History of Palestine: One Land, Two Peoples*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, p.177.
- 31 An interesting collection of articles penned by various Mizraḥi Jews, *Modern Middle Eastern Jewish Thought*, ed. Moshe Behar and Zvi Ben-Dor Benite. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2013, bears this out. However, some Mizraḥi (Eastern) and Sephardi or Ashkenazi (European) families declared their adherence to Zionism as early as their European counterparts. However, intellectual and political leadership was vested in leaders of European Jewry.
- 32 In some cases, these differentiations were either blurred or ignored.

- 33 The last two dates refer to Israeli invasions of Lebanon: the first under the pretext of driving the Palestine Liberation Organization out of the country and the second to disarm the Lebanese militant party, Hizbullah.
- 34 “[B]y the early 1940s Zionist emissaries were operative in the Middle East. They helped set up underground organizations that sought to inspire Jews to migrate to then Palestine. Scores of Middle Eastern Jews recall that Jewish Agency officials dazzled them with stories of a better life in Israel. Many of them felt betrayed when they set foot in the new Jewish state – and continue to feel that way today.” Rachel Shabi, “Another side to the Jewish story. Many Jews left Arab countries because they wanted to live in Israel, not because their lives back home were miserable.” *The Guardian*, Friday 27 June 2008: <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2008/jun/27/religion.israelandthepalestinians>, accessed: 3 May 2016
- 35 The Black Panthers adopted a vague political platform that called for an end to discrimination against Mizrahi Jews, who hailed from Arab or Eastern countries. It is generally observed that Iraqi Jews or their descendants living in exile articulate a clear paradigm of their Arab cultural identity, while those still in Israel are more likely to voice anti-Arab notions.
- 36 See her book, *Not the Enemy: Israel's Jews from Arab Lands*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009.
- 37 Rachel Shabi, “Finding my roots in Tel Aviv,” *The Guardian*, 16 May 2009: <http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2009/may/16/rachel-shabi-iraqi-jewish-heritage>, accessed: 18 March 2016.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 On gender discrimination, see Henriette Dahan-Kalev, “Tensions in Israeli Feminism: The Mizrahi-Ashkenazi Rift,” *Women's Studies International Forum*, 24, 6 (2001), pp. 669–684. On the study of Arab Jews, see Ella Shohat, “Rupture and Return: Zionist Discourse and the Study of Arab Jews,” *Social Text*, 75, Palestine in a Transnational Context (Summer, 2003), pp. 49–74.
- 40 For a historical analysis of this metamorphosis, see an illuminating article by Lital Levy, “Historicizing the Concept of Arab Jews in the ‘Mashriq’,” *Jewish Quarterly Review*, 98, 4 (Fall, 2008), pp. 452–469.
- 41 For diverse Arab views of these uprisings, see Khair El-Din Haseeb (ed.), *The Arab Spring: Critical Analyses*, London: Routledge, 2013.

Further readings

- Bashkin, Orit, *New Babylonians: A History of Jews in Modern Iraq* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012).
- Beinin, Joel, *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry: Culture, Politics and the Formation of a Modern Diaspora* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998).
- Gottreich, Emily Benichou, “Historicizing the concept of Arab Jews in the Maghrib,” *Jewish Quarterly Review*, 98, 4 (Fall, 2008), pp. 433–451.
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- Shenhav, Yahouda, *The Arab Jews* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006).
- Shohat, Ella, *Taboo Memories, Diasporic Voices* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).
- Shohat, Ella, “Rupture and Return: Zionist Discourse and the Study of Arab Jews,” *Social Text*, 75 (21, 2) (Summer, 2003), pp. 49–74.
- Snir, Reuven, “‘We are Arabs before we are Jews’: the emergence and demise of Arab-Jewish culture in modern times,” *Electronic Journal of Oriental Studies (EJOS)*, 8, 9 (2005), pp. 1–47.