NATIONALISM VS. ISLAMISM: OLD HOSTILITY IN NEW ARENA

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**Nationalism vs. Islamism: Old hostility in New Arena**   
Prepared By: Professor Michel NEHME   
Researcher

**Foreword**

One must admit that the literature dealing with the Arab world and the historical role of nationalism and Islamic movements in the region is vast. Brief articles that could successfully sum up the essence of this long and painful history are difficult to produce. Nationalism and religion have had their own complex development in the West and Arab nationalism vs. Islamic movements is replicate of long bloody history that assumed its own intricate course. Any ideological-free and subjective analysis of Arab nationalism vs. Islamic movements is especially timely at this critical juncture of rapidly changing regional and international affairs. The Arab World has recently exhibited diverse political and ideological trends and it is hard to clarify them all in one article. The objective here is to bound the larger picture to salient trends i.e. Pan-Arab Nationalism, secluded Arab state nationalism, and Islamism.

**Nationalism Ambiguity**

Ernest Gellner[[1]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/nationalism-vs-islamism-old-hostility-new-arena" \l "_ftn1" \o ") argues that nationalism does not represent some timeless, nature-given force, but rather is a man-made creation that tends to arise as a consequence of industrialization. Phenomena like Islamic fundamentalism can be seen as a similar phenomenon of the transition from one mode of production to another. Earlier hunting or agricultural societies are too small, segmented, or stratified to support genuine nationalism; only with industrialization and its high degree of occupational mobility does a system that links large numbers of non-kin on the basis of a high culture become feasible.[[2]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/nationalism-vs-islamism-old-hostility-new-arena" \l "_ftn2" \o ") If this very interesting traditional argument has merit, then, all non-western non-industrialized societies that have economic dependence on the industrialized world developed resulting nationalistic reactions by the mere fact of the existing extension between them and the industrialized West. Thus the consequence of industrialization in a world of economic dependency has an impact beyond its immediate society. It has impact on other societies that does not have the prerequisites for nationalism.

Then again, one must admit that learning about Arab nationalism is an interdisciplinary enterprise. It is not at home in any of the academic or professional disciplines, and as a large critical literature testifies, its epistemological status is notably ambiguous. Consequently its relationship to the organized intellectual world is always somewhat adventitious and even, at times, opportunistic. Adding to this, one could assert that Arab nationalism’s impact on the diverse Arab societies, because it was exploited by a few oppressive elite, has been upsetting and disorderly. Not always clearly, often crudely in its oppression to assimilate all subjects. It reminded some people of their immaturity, brought them back to painful experiences they would prefer to disregard, asks them to tolerate the very anxieties their personalities and their theoretical discourses have been structured to avoid especially in religious and confessional matters. It threatens them with a return of the repressed memories and, for this reason, tends to be repressed. At times even valid criticism can function to ward off an unpleasant truth.

**Quandary of Arab Nationalism**

Before the Arab Spring, the assumption was that Arab nationalism had been tried and failed, and Islamism is the old-new left option as an ideology and movement capable of mobilizing the Arab masses. The Arab Spring projected that nationalism is back as an option that should not be dismissed in the Middle East. In reality and despite its downfall, nationalism had never actually been crushed, but had been in political remission.  
Nationalism with its major diversification was the crucial element enabling the various factions in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya to unite behind a common cause. They have used their national (state) flag for the lack of Arab national flag as their symbol and drive.

After the revolution, the Egyptian military have been trying to regain the political initiative by stoking xenophobia, particularly anti-Americanism, in order to discredit the pro-democracy movement. This was explained in an important article by Yaroslav Trofimov[[3]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/nationalism-vs-islamism-old-hostility-new-arena" \l "_ftn3" \o ") in the Wall street Journal on 10 August 2013. For example, the state-run media criticized the finance ministry for negotiating a $5.2 billion stand-by loan with the IMF as an example of neocolonial exploitation, even though the 2.5% interest rate was half that being offered by Qatar. The government has announced that international observers will not be allowed to monitor the elections in November.  
On the other hand, nationalism may yet slip out of the Egyptian military’s control. The protesters’ repeated attacks on the Israeli embassy has been motivated by nationalism, and was something the government did not want to see happen. President Anwar Sadat had persuaded the Egyptian people that Egypt had won the October 1973 war, so Egyptians don’t realize that the Camp David peace with Israel was a result of Egypt’s military defeat. Instead they thought that Sadat had sold them out to the Americans.  
The rise of nationalism is not confined to the countries of the Arab Spring. In the New York Times Ethan Bronner[[4]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/nationalism-vs-islamism-old-hostility-new-arena" \l "_ftn4" \o ") on September 18 has noted the resurgence of nationalism in some proclaimed democracies of the region like Israel and Turkey. He wrote that the two countries have gone through remarkably similar political shifts in recent decades from aggressively secular societies run by Westernized elites to populist ethno-religious states where standing up to foreigners offers rich political rewards. It is not surprising, then, that the Palestinian National Authority wants to join the nationalist bandwagon by applying for recognition at the United Nations.

It is worth noting that the conceptualization of the phenomenon of nationalism; whether we look at it as an identity, philosophy, or political trend has been in a dilemma everywhere in the world[[5]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/nationalism-vs-islamism-old-hostility-new-arena" \l "_ftn5" \o "). Arab nationalism is not different especially because the romantic flight toward a monolithic entity through assimilation by using symbols and institutions of the state failed. Ironically, the concept of nationalism, as imperfect as it is, has filtered into the everyday usage of many writings in the Arab literature of ideologues, social scientists, politicians, and journalists. There exists no correct theory or absolute notion of nationalism. The early political philosophers that dealt with social contracts exposed alternatives to the emptiness and chaotic condition of human social nature from anthropological perspective. Serious theorizing about the nation originated in romantic circles, mainly by Hegel and Hegelians, who saw wisdom, or historically emergent truths, embodied in most national (usually expressed in the language of volk) traditions.

For Rousseau, whether his writing addresses Poland's specific needs, or in dusting off national obstruction to the joy of citizens, he accorded blind support for the nation. Blind support for the nation in his book Emile reflects an idealist and romantic understanding of the nation rather than providing realistic predispositions. Socialists such as Bauer and Renner picked up on national ideas in the context of managing the Austro-Hungarian multinational state; their work was incomplete. Later, Fanon and a generation of socialists tied nationalism to a form of anti-colonialism but without any guide on how to bring together a nation[[6]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/nationalism-vs-islamism-old-hostility-new-arena" \l "_ftn6" \o ").

Another reason, which might justify contemporary uncreative literature about nationalism, is that it is incorrectly thought of as providing, by the virtue of its designation, sufficient protections to individuals and minorities within a context of individual rights[[7]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/nationalism-vs-islamism-old-hostility-new-arena" \l "_ftn7" \o ").

Here, to put it bluntly, all of these disparities were less than enlightening. But, the fact remains that Arab nationalism failed because it dwelled on the eccentricity of culture in the different Arabic-speaking countries, on the pre-modern legacy of dictatorship, and on the winner-take-all atmosphere that dominates Arab politics[[8]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/nationalism-vs-islamism-old-hostility-new-arena" \l "_ftn8" \o "). In fact, the nationalist ruling elite have almost nothing to say about the motor forces of Arab life; their attention was focused on the crushing of opposition destroying, in the process, the balance of society thus giving leeway to the emergence of Islamic militancy which has evolved to protect old regional confessions, culture and values.

**Egypt and Islamists**

In light of the above assertions one could explain the landscape of Egypt's militant and former militant organizations that evolved significantly since the 1990s. Thus, the continued presence of actors that were in the past involved in a protracted conflict with the state does not, in and of itself, provide an accurate prediction for the direction that Egypt could take. However it is worth noting that Egypt constitute one fourth of the total population of the Arab world and is considered as the center of Arab activities. What happens in Egypt shadows other Arab countries.

As for Islamic movements that have concentration in Egypt and used to be at the forefront of the violent opposition to the regime in Egypt, al-Gama’a al-Islamiyya (“Islamic Group”) is in a fundamentally different situation today. This is only an example with no intention to dwell on all Islamic factions. Politically, the group currently leads the Construction and Development Party, which has proven its political moderation in its positions for the past two years. Building on their rejection of violence, which resulted from the group's ideological revisions of the past decade, leaders of the group have demonstrated their understanding of Egypt's political scene after the 2011 revolution. For example, not only did they condemn the call for violence from the supporters of Salafi devotee Hazem Abu Ismail after the latter's disqualification in last year's presidential elections, they also refused to lend him or Mohamed Morsi their political support at the time, preferring to back the more comprehensive platform of moderate candidate Aboul Fotouh.

Organizationally, the group is a mere shadow of its 1980s self, when it enjoyed large popularity across the country. Its limited popularity and strained resources today seriously hinders a repetition of the contentious relationship with the state that prevailed in the 1990s. Back then, al-Gama’a al-Islamiyya’s popularity as a rebellious movement and the sympathy it enjoyed promoted it as an alternative to the authoritarian state and encouraged many youths from the lumping-proletariat to join it. In return, it facilitated a cycle of violence with the security services that neither its leadership in prison nor abroad desired at the time. The new generation of Egyptian militants has rejected al-Gama’a al-Islamiyya altogether, as confirmed by the leadership of the group, whose mufti, Sheikh Abd al-Akhr Hamad, acknowledges that it has failed to reach out to the new generation, whom he contends have been socialized by “Sheikh Google.” The group returning to its belligerent past is therefore highly improbable according to these new ideological, political, and organizational realities[[9]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/nationalism-vs-islamism-old-hostility-new-arena" \l "_ftn9" \o ").

Under the current circumstances, an insurrection led by a well-organized armed group is therefore highly unlikely. However, the absence of structured militant organizations does not exclude the sporadic use of armed violence, which could set off a new violent confrontation. The clashes that have been witnessed since the military coup could unleash an uncontrolled spiral of violence. In similar circumstances in the past, the use of force by various actors led to cycles of violence that progressively legitimized the use of armed violence against political opponents. This further led to the emergence of ‘entrepreneurs’ of violence who fueled and spread the conflict.

The current chaotic situation could also allow Islamist militants, who are more prone to adopting violent views even if they have not used violence until now, to promote their own agendas and use their antipathy toward the army as a possible justification to target the armed forces with violent attacks. Some members of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad have already expressed their anger at Mohamed Morsi for his failure to prosecute well-known officers of the security services who were complicit in the use of torture against their members. A deterioration of the security situation could provide a cover to settle old scores. If one is to drag the argument further it is feasible that the opposition on one hand or the army on the other could arrive at the view that they have a blind support from the population to suppress Islamist movements and exclude them from the political process; this development alone could trigger a violent reaction among Islamist supporters who fear potentially facing the same repression they experienced under past regimes.

**Impact of Arab Spring**

Unexpectedly, the Arab Spring changed the ruling elite not only in Egypt but also in Tunisia, and Libya. It introduced major constitutional reforms in Morocco and Algeria. The movement also ignited deep divides within these countries, including a civil war that is still ongoing in Syria[[10]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/nationalism-vs-islamism-old-hostility-new-arena" \l "_ftn10" \o "). The question is by what force this is taking place? Is it by the Nationalists or the Islamists?

The question of whether the Arab Spring has reunited the Arab world has many sides to it. While the Arab Spring has provided some countries with new regime changes and debatable democracies, monarchies of the Arab world are still reluctant to absorb such a change. They are averse to the slightest critiques and have already engaged in drastic oppressive measures to block out the spread of the protestation movements in their respective territories. In fact, popular sentiment in Arab Spring countries (exclusively republics) has turned against the Gulf. The two blocs share an old rivalry: Pan-Arabism (secular, but anti-neocolonialist ideology) vs. Pan-Islamism (the forcible implementation of Islam as sole reference).

The answer is: Despite public and media support between Arab Spring countries and other Arab countries, diplomatic and trade relations [have not changed](http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/MENAEXT/EXTMNAREGTOPPOVRED/0,,contentMDK:22492441~pagePK:34004173~piPK:34003707~theSitePK:497110,00.html). Free movement in the Arab world is not nearly like the Schengen Area in Europe, not even close. Most Arab citizens are required to have visas to move anywhere from North Africa to the Middle East. Free labor and capital is still restricted. Work visas are nearly impossible to obtain for major financial hubs such as the Gulf, and in most cases, visas won’t be granted at all unless the traveler proves that he or she has no intentions whatsoever to stay in the country of destination. The Arab Spring has also drawn mixed reactions from different Arab states as to the fate of the Syrian political turmoil. Unlike past cases of civil wars and unrests in the region, the most powerful bloc in the Arab world, the Gulf, has no genuine interests to resolve the issue.

Concerning the future identity of the Arab world, as long as there won’t be new wars with Israel or any Western power, the religious, confessional, and ethnic diversity of the Arab world is and will remain a major disintegrating factor between present governments in the region. In the same token, the Arab Spring has some inclination for youth in the Arab world. Despite their visible number everywhere, Arab youth still do not yet have any grip on power, not even made possible by the latest democratic elections. There are, now, different joint movements between youth from different Arab countries to unite. Efforts to break the ice between these countries are subjected to prejudice and a cultural divide between the diverse Arab societies[[11]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/nationalism-vs-islamism-old-hostility-new-arena" \l "_ftn11" \o ").

Still one needs to understand the relationship between Islam and Arab nationalism which has always been problematic. The separation between Islamists and Arab nationalists, and the period of their political conflict, is a relatively recent development in Arab history. In the early 1950s, a series of military coups brought young Arab nationalist officers to power in many Arab countries, including Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Sudan, and Algeria. It was during this period that Arab nationalism, expressed in exclusive, radical and even socialist discourse, became the official ideology of the Arab states.

But the military background of the ruling forces, their fragile base of legitimacy, and the sweeping programs of modernization and centralization they pursued, turned the Arab nationalist entity into an authoritarian state.

One of the major results of this development was the eruption of a series of confrontations between the Arab nationalist regimes and the Islamic political forces, in which questions of power, identity and legitimacy were intertwined.

One of the first confrontations came in 1954, when Egypt embarked on a desperate drive to destroy its Islamic opponents. Thousands of Muslim activists were jailed, while eminent ulama and Muslim intellectuals were executed or forced to live in permanent exile. Supported by scores of nationalist intellectuals and brandishing a utopian project of socialist development enveloped in anti-imperialist rhetoric, the Arab state accused its Islamic opponents of being reactionary, employing religion for political purposes and serving the interests of foreign powers.

The Islamists, in turn, depicted national radical regimes and their supporters in a preset picture of a deliberate war against Islam and the Islamic identity of the Arab peoples. Both views were essentially self-serving, non-historical and fell captive to the contingencies of political conflict. Years of inter-Arab conflicts re-enforced the political division and laid heavy layers of memory loss over the formative period of Arabism and its inextricable association with the Arab-Islamic reform movement. Both the Arab Islamists and Arab nationalists moved to legitimize their existence by de-legitimizing the other. This is continuing with the Arab Spring[[12]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/nationalism-vs-islamism-old-hostility-new-arena" \l "_ftn12" \o ").

Though Libya appears to have elected a relatively moderate national government, but tentative because popular allegiance to a central national authority is weak. Even if the government is able to rein in the militias and maintain stability, it will be always facing the rejection of the militant Islamists. Considering Tunisia and Morocco, they elected Islamist governments. Moderate, to be sure, but Islamist still. Egypt, the largest and most influential, has experienced an Islamist sweep. The Muslim Brotherhood didn't just win the presidency. It won nearly half the seats in parliament, while more openly radical Islamists won 25 percent. Combined, they command more than 70 percent of parliament and that was enough to control the writing of a constitution (which is why the generals hastily dissolved parliament and later ousted Morsi). As for Syria, if and when Bashar al-Assad falls, the Brotherhood will almost certainly inherit power. Jordan could well be next. And the Brotherhood's Palestinian wing (Hamas) already controls Gaza.

What does this mean? That the Arab Spring is a fiction! That the Arab Spring revealed the hidden and if Islamists are to take a hit in countries like Egypt nonetheless they have exhibited massive power. Is this Islamist ascendancy, likely to have preponderance in Arab politics for a generation?

**Collateral Impact of Facebook Youth**

Would it be correct to say that the Arab Spring, serial uprisings that spread east from Tunisia in early 2011 by the hip, secular, tweeting kids of Tahrir Square proved to be no match for the highly organized, widely supported, politically serious Islamists who effortlessly swept them aside in national elections? The Facebook youth groups triggered a revolution and a new era of Islamist vs. nationalists struggle for power. Amid the weakness of secular nationalist, the Muslim Brotherhood rose to pretend that it could solve the problems of Arab stagnation. Thus far they did not provide any tangible and sound alternative to the old system which led to their downfall in Egypt but only at the level of state institutions.

On the other hand it is comprehensible that the fatal defeat of Arab Unity together with events associated with the formation and imminent failure of Arab Nationalism demonstrated the priority of character state nationalism over the pan-Arab concept[[13]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/nationalism-vs-islamism-old-hostility-new-arena" \l "_ftn13" \o "). Only Colonel Qadhafi tried to revive the idea of unification suggesting, in turn, to Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria and Chad the creation of a single state including Libya. But then, no one took it seriously. The idea of “a new giant” uniting the Arab world died along with Nasser.

Again if one may restate that the Arab Spring began as a protest of educated urban youth against the entrenched autocrats, and its motto could be the words “We are tired; we do not believe you; we are not afraid of you. No ideology, no class, nationalist or religious slogans. Freedom to the people; we are all united; But, as it always happens, some people start the revolution while others take over. The pioneers of the revolution were intellectuals but it was the broad masses which became its driving force. They did not need freedom, much less democracy which was unknown to them but justice, dignity and subsistence. That was what the new leaders-Islamists promised and the people followed them.

For decades, the Islamic fundamentalists, that is, advocates of a return to the roots would put forward one idea: all the troubles of the Muslim world occurred because the wicked rulers had departed from the true, pure Islam taught by Prophet Muhammad, a messenger of Allah. These rulers are caught up in corruption, they are arbitrary and tyrannical; they either sell the country to the godless and corrupt West or tried to copy socialist order repugnant to the spirit of Islam. Both are destructive. Islam is the solution was and still is the motto of "Muslim Brotherhood", the oldest (over 90 years old) and most well-known fundamentalist organization. “The Koran is our Constitution, the Allah is our leader!” The core of their ideology is a categorical denial of the principles of secularism. In practice, the Islamists (radical representatives of “political Islam”) both in Egypt and other Arab countries have gained wide popularity due to the fact that they have always helped the poor, opened their own hospitals, schools, created a kind of “mutual aid funds”. People looked upon them as defenders of their interests in contrast to the soulless and corrupt government officials. And it comes as no surprise that the Islamists have won at the very first free elections in Egypt and Tunisia, Morocco, and Kuwait (and even earlier, in 2006, in the Palestinian territories). Indeed, there is no other ideology that can attract the awakened masses. Democratic ideas have been compromised both by the failure to create realistic copies of Western political systems in the first years after independence and associations with the West, oppressor of yesteryears and invaders of today (Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya). The idea of socialism has been discredited as a result of inglorious experience of rule by the left-wing regimes supported by Moscow, which proved to be incapable of solving the pressing problems of the society, eliminating poverty, corruption and tyranny. The ideology of Arabism (nasserism, baathism) has lost its popularity after the failure of attempts at unification and defeat of the nationalist governments in the wars with Israel.

In a situation that lacks alternatives or valid options, it is natural that people of Islamic faith rally under the banner of Islam: it is not only a religion but the core and foundation of an entire civilization. For fourteen centuries the Arab people lived in the “Muslim atmosphere”, under the complete domination of Islamic order. The Quran defined both moral foundations and laws of the society. ”Islamic spirit”, centuries-old Muslim traditions seem to be something more organic but recently lacked adequate approaches and economic solutions for modern Arabs living under the conditions of modernization and Globalization.

**Global Pressures**

Bound by a globalized world, Islamists are in for difficult times. The disappointment of the people will result in total disruption of their claims of effective governance. The extremist Islamism will clearly be unable to ensure the normal development of society, to carry out modernization, attract foreign investments etc. From this point of view the moderate Islamism has many more chances. It will have to incorporate Arab nationalism in its local, national version; it will be difficult because Islamism is in principle hostile to nationalism, it recognizes only one nation, a Muslim one. Apparently, a certain symbiosis will have to be achieved, so that, alongside with very pious masses, the rapidly growing new medium strata of the population could receive their share in the changing society. If the Islamists continue to represent only the most disadvantaged, impoverished people, ignoring the interests of educated and dynamic middle class, it will all come to nothing.

The ideology of the middle class is not so much Islamism as nationalism and, as already mentioned, not pan-Arab, “unifying”, but local. However, while “pan-Arabism” is a thing of the past there remains such a powerful force as Arab solidarity which in times of serious international conflicts becomes a part of Islamic solidarity. The United States and most of the major powers have been unable to develop a clear national policy about the Arab Spring largely because no one yet fully comprehends what’s happening in the Middle East[[14]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/nationalism-vs-islamism-old-hostility-new-arena" \l "_ftn14" \o ").

The term, “Arab Spring” is itself misleading. The changes over the past 20 months have produced a fundamental transformation of the region – but not in the way most outside observers anticipated. They reflect the replacement of the dominant Arab national identity by a more Islamic identity though the latter did not trigger the recent popular revolutions.

This change has been evolving for more than 40 years and did not begin in January 2011 with the demonstrations across the Middle East[[15]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/nationalism-vs-islamism-old-hostility-new-arena" \l "_ftn15" \o ").

The Middle East today is less Arab and more Muslim. It was clear from the start of last year’s protests that the successor governments would be less Arab nationalist and secular, and more Islamic. The widespread use of “Arab Spring” helped conceal this reality. The term brought to mind the changes that had swept through Eastern Europe with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Numerous, but inaccurate, parallels were drawn between the Eastern Bloc and the Middle East. These false premises were reinforced by the tens if not hundreds of thousands bright, young, articulate, Western-oriented, media-savvy demonstrators who rose against oppressive Arab nationalist governments but not nationalism per se. Despite the attention given to them, these youthful demonstrators never represented more than a small minority of the population.

The fabric of  Middle Eastern society has fundamentally changed. Being Muslim has priority on being Arab in a global identifying factor. The consequences are profound. Minorities, which had prospered by emphasizing their common Arab identity, now face a very worrisome future. Schismatic Muslim sects: Shiaa, Druze, Alawites and others who tolerated nationalism are unlikely to fare well under fanatic Sunni Muslim dominated governments. Secularists are also likely to suffer.

Understanding the persistent determination of the supporters of the Assad government in Syria, for example, is impossible unless you factor in the fear that minorities and secularists have of a Sunni Muslim government. The Iraq experience reinforces these minority fears. If one asks Christians, Turkmen or other minorities whether they are better off today or under Saddam Hussein’s despotic regime, many may say that as awful as Hussein was, minorities were better off before.

For example, the Christian population of Iraq today is less than half of what it was when the U.S. invaded. Many prosperous Christian Iraqis fled the nation during the years of brutal Arab sectarian violence. The challenge to Washington intelligence analysts and policymakers will be to understand and develop policies that address the new realities. Muslim-dominated governments are not innately hostile to the secular United States. But Washington has to understand the need to protect minorities f it is to promote U.S. national interests.

**Retreat to Primordial Identities**

Oddly, the Arab Spring defused the understanding of democracy. The new Arab elite are more reluctant now than ever in positively responding to calls for democracies.  In the process, Arab masses’ aspirations are continually encountering setbacks. The disappointment of the Arab masses with their past and new political elite, and in association with the old oppressive Arab nationalists, is one reason why some are shifting their loyalty to religion, in progression, posing a challenge to the established order. Religious circles have always been an alternative source of authority and assistance for impoverished families who find it difficult to identify with their rulers. Some Arabs find it very humiliating to be back facing the outside world with no identity.

Here, in this misfit between Arab nationalism expectation and the reality imposed by the ruling elite, lies the cause of the violence that Arabs have done to themselves. Put at its simplest, they have had the possibility of defining themselves as one people in one great nation, as heirs of a great tradition, and as subjects of egalitarian rule. On the contrary they have been unable to place their various identities in any consistent or agreed order of priority.

**Negating State-Ownership**

The Arab Spring is ostensibly a violent reaction to the Arab regimes when the latter were witnessing the emergence of a new form of state-ownership. On the one hand, Libya's Muammar Qadhafi has codified this in his regime's official ideological tract (The Green Book), where he writes that the nation is a big tribe, which is to say, big family. A family has no need of separation of powers, or any other institutional restraint on official conduct. On the other hand, Arab presidents and kings handle over the instruments of the state to their children, thus preparing them to become heir to the state[[16]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/nationalism-vs-islamism-old-hostility-new-arena" \l "_ftn16" \o ").

In light of this trend, corruption is assuming a new meaning. It is not anymore an abuse of power; it is power's distinctive sign. During the strenuous effort that the leaders are exerting to have the support of their administration, the latter is free to manipulate the public affairs. It has become justifiable and reasonable that the power and prestige of a civil servant are measured by his capacity to use his office as a mean for prosperity. This is not a matter of a few greedy bureaucrats; it is the expression of a power relationship created by the political reality of power abuse around which the state is built[[17]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/nationalism-vs-islamism-old-hostility-new-arena" \l "_ftn17" \o ").

This is another formula of explaining why Arab regimes have used violence to stay in power and thus preventing their communities from becoming nations, and another rationalization for the Arab Spring. There exists a basic political failure, and this resides in their incapacity to bring peace to the political arena. In many cases, as history of the Arab world has manifested, they offspring opponents who resemble them in their nature. If and when such opponents triumph, the political arena will still be ruled by violence. Radical Arab nationalist were able to take office through military coup-d’etat, they were not able to set the track to build the Arab nation, for their ideology is built upon indictment and exclusion. Like the leaders of the regimes they overthrown, they are nationalists, but they never brought to the community civil peace, which is something quite different from imposed submission, incorrectly, under the banner of nationalism.[[18]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/nationalism-vs-islamism-old-hostility-new-arena" \l "_ftn18" \o ")

Why is this happening? Why is monarchy, which we are told is the main opponent of Arab nationalism has managed to sustain itself? Why this monarchy restoration is taking place in the shadow of Arab spring, Arab nationalism and Islamism?[[19]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/nationalism-vs-islamism-old-hostility-new-arena" \l "_ftn19" \o ")

Some argue that this new incarnation of monarchy in the Arab world is a compromise to the suffering of secular nationalism at the hands of a growing tendency towards religious and confessional fundamentalism. Other explanation asserts that the miserable record of the socialist regimes, which wasted their oil revenues and relied on the static and untrustworthy Soviet Union, as oppose to the Gulf monarchies that have enjoyed high standards of living, based on their oil reserves and the support of Western powers. It is said that the Iraqi monarchy, in its 40-year existence, has hanged four Arab nationalists, four communists and four Kurds. The Iraqi Ba'ath regime has disposed more of its opponents on a single day.

In reality, of course, the above explanations are not convincing. The fact remains that the legitimacy of Arab nationalist and socialist republics is based on the symbolized leader who derives his might from the armed forces and secret police. What holds an Arab leader in power is a mixture of brutality and entrenched rank not nationalistic commands and ordain.

**Civil Society and Citizenship as Alternative**

In most of the Arab states, a nationalist ideology emerged as a product and reaction to colonial domination. National-liberation movements were generated that first won the independence struggle and then organized themselves into central powers, acting as autonomous states taking pride in their new identity. These states continued their development totally reliant on economic and technological trends that began under colonialism, perpetuating the formal methods of Western-style administration as well as the physical attributes of modernity. Yet most of the Arab states have had difficult relations with their own societies. They were unable to make power impersonal or discipline the influence of clientelist politics. This is another way of saying that Arab central powers have proved unable to promote a social contract wherein an Arab political individual could feel he is a shareholder in the affairs of the state.

The stumbling block is the challenge of institutionalizing political equality vs. established powers. Political inequalities, in Arab power centers claiming progressiveness, are at the core of their characteristics almost identical to the traditional power centers. In fact, it is not enough for the Arab individual to be from this or that tribe, region, or religious band in order for him to enjoy a privileged status. The experience in these power centers so far is that, in order to be politically superior, you have to belong to the army, or more precisely, to the upper ranks of the officer corps or a member in the royal family. Arab armies used nationalist ideology, with its penchant for rank ordering, to reproduce traditional society's unequal political structure ultimately alienating the majority of people from public life. In exploiting Arab nationalism, progressive Arab armies unified the state, but at the cost of profound political inequality. Exposed to the official motto of egalitarianism and speeches about equal opportunities, people are irritated by this null and void discourse. Hence, the dissatisfaction and frustration have created supporters of the Islamists campaigners, who promise to make all believers politically and economically equal. This is potentially very dangerous in the Arab east where the population structure is composed of many segregated minority groups. Islamic political-confessional solidarity will trigger the same in other confessional groups.

In all Arab power centers the army and the military in mufti have failed politically. They were not able to bridge the gap of political inequality, and now they feel it is too late and too dangerous with the rising confessional political solidarity to promote civilian elites that could take over the mission of national integration. Civilian officials are necessary, of course, naked military dictatorship would look bad, but they have always been nonentities who tremble before the Ministry of Defense and are being employed as pawns[[20]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/nationalism-vs-islamism-old-hostility-new-arena" \l "_ftn20" \o "). The main problem concerning the state and hence the nation in the Arab world is to convince the generals or the military in mufti that managing public affairs and leading the state are outside their competence. Just like communist parties positioned themselves as the vanguards of the interest of the proletariats, Arab military establishments see themselves as vanguards of nationalism[[21]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/nationalism-vs-islamism-old-hostility-new-arena" \l "_ftn21" \o ").

With a political atmosphere as such emanating from the Arab Spring and despite the recently proclaimed political pluralism, no real state-protected opposition is to be found anywhere in the Arab world. Opposition parties, the backbone of any open system, must clear numerous obstacles in order to obtain tax exemption and the right to collect and spend. Licensing procedures are strict and legal controls burdensome. Opposition party members are often refused passports for travel abroad. Recently, even in Arab states claiming relative liberalism, controls have grown tighter. Human rights activists are regarded as a less favorite opposition and have become targets of particularly heavy-handed harassment.

However, to be truth speaking to the facts, there exist new trends in the general picture of the last few years. On the whole, there is more violence in as much as targeting groups is concerned. This is if we are to recall the state-security campaigns after the Arab Spring. Nonetheless, State security has never ceased to be the ruling elite obsession. The Arab state, today, feels besieged in economics, politics, and defense matters alike. The incumbents after the Arab Spring feel that they are losing economic and social control. They hold on tight to the security instruments of the government; which are by no means insubstantial. They are ready to fight vigorously to preserve their hold over them. Now more than ever, the state-security apparatus has become the ultimate guarantee of the regime's survival. This is true not only in countries where there has been no political emancipation, such as Iraq, Sudan, and Libya, but, in such countries as the Gulf States where a deceptive freedom was introduced; and also in countries where free will was, partially, introduced with the best intentions, such as Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia.

The effects of mass education, economic modernization, urbanization, the communications revolution, the rise of the middle class power that was introduced by Arab nationalism should not be underestimated. One could even argue, plausibly, that Islamic rigorous procedure will change into a modern one by the work of Arab nationalism. An amalgamation of Arab nationalism with Islam that preaches the rule of law and the concept of consultation might perhaps lend itself to the employment of open-minded elections and institutionalized equality.

Another dimension that is worth indicating is the subsisting of the old diverse political-cultural and ethnic groupings in the Arab world and specifically in the Arab east. These semi-autonomous groups have been organized around guilds, mosques, religious endowments, and provincial affiliation, and have contained, ceaselessly, elements of self-identification, and bred habits of fear from one another, and lacked mutual trust and uniformed procedures. Left to live and develop, these groups and their norms could become a force favoring the creation of mini states at their size. Arab nationalism, as a secular ideology and a unifying structural factor, has a superior potential far more important than Islam in allowing these groups to agree to harmony under the umbrella of the state.

**Conclusion**

The dream that lingered from the 1950's, as groups of Arab elite and intellectuals assume they could gain higher international rank and power through nationalism and Arab unity, has departed. But nostalgia for that remains unyielding, and it is reinforced by the fear of the rising strength of Islamic movements on the one hand and not having an alternative identity on the other. One of the most striking judgments about the study of Arab nationalism should rest on the view of how the diverse Arab societies would have looked like if Arab nationalism did not thrive to change the previous historical course of these societies. Arab nationalism provided the framework within which new moral values and humanistic-philosophical concepts were introduced to the Arab world. Although short of achieving Arab assimilation and unity, Arab nationalism, notwithstanding, fetched an amalgamation of all political ideologies and trends from the extreme right to the extreme left thus introducing to the Arab population a rich mosaic assortment of values, political images and convictions previously negated. Arab nationalism entertained all political disparities from authoritarianism, Marxist socialism, neo-liberalism, state capitalism, to conservatism, fascism, and recently monarchical trends in republican political settings. May be it is time to embrace a new conceptualization and start calling for civil society as an alternative to Nationalism and Islamism.

The experience of Arab nationalism has been in an almost continuous misfortune. The promise of allowing people to participate in the decision-making of the state and government culminated in dictatorship instead. Arabs everywhere have had to endure half a century now of regional inter-Arab cold and active wars, civil wars, corruption and waste, the miniaturization of the large Arab society, and the degradation of human relationships and customs.

The outstanding expectations built around Arab nationalism and the shortcoming of its achievements raises the doubt of having been better without it. I would like to stress that since the fall of Baghdad to the Mongols in the 13th century the destiny of the Arab world has been controlled by others, and Arab nationalism changed this long-term reality. Despite its all faultfinding that has been scrutinized by the literature of Islamist and Western scholars, Arab nationalism was and still is an inevitable historical development that is bound to thump the Arab world. Arab nationalism has placed a precept, short at times, that Arabs should handle the affairs and well being of all Arabs. Unfortunately, it has never been utilized as an engine that could bring about better opportunities and positive contributions.

Notwithstanding, Islamists, also, are mystified by the present situation. The Islamist reappearance is thought to be a contribution to the well being of all Muslims including those of the Arab world who most need revitalization. Islamist groups are becoming weary of the patient and peaceful dating of occasion, and begin to fear that they are losing a race with sneaking secularization. They turn to violence in hopes of seizing power quickly. But what you quickly gain you quickly loose. Ultimately the best rest in the values of equalities as construed in civil society approaches.

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[[3]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/nationalism-vs-islamism-old-hostility-new-arena" \l "_ftnref3" \o ")- Yaroslav Trofimov is an award-winning author and journalist. He has been a foreign correspondent for The Wall Street Journal since 1999, covering the Middle East, Africa and, recently South and Southeast Asia.

[[4]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/nationalism-vs-islamism-old-hostility-new-arena" \l "_ftnref4" \o ")- The New York Times in 2012 announced that Education editor Jodi Rudoren has been named Jerusalem bureau chief. Bronner will become the legal affairs reporter at the National desk.

[[5]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/nationalism-vs-islamism-old-hostility-new-arena" \l "_ftnref5" \o ")-  For more information about problems facing nationalism see Ernest Haas (1997), “Nationalism, Liberalism, and Progress: The Rise and Decline of Nationalism”,  (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press).

[[6]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/nationalism-vs-islamism-old-hostility-new-arena" \l "_ftnref6" \o ")-  For more information about this subject, see, Ernst Haas (1997), “Nationalism, Liberalism, and Progress: The Rise and Decline of Nationalism”,  (Ithaca, NY: Cornel University Press).

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**القومية بمواجهة التشدد الإسلامي: عداوة قديمة على حلبة جديدة**

على المرء أن يعترف بأن تعامل الأدب المكتوب مع العالم العربي ومع الدور التاريخي للحركات القومية والإسلامية في المنطقة واسع.  
ومن الصعب التوصل إلى كتابة مقالات موجزة يمكن أن تختصر جوهر هذا التاريخ الطويل والمؤلم.  
وقد عرفت القومية والدين علاقة معقدة في العالم الغربي والحركات الإسلامية والقومية في العالم العربي نسخة مطابقة للتاريخ الدموي الطويل الذي سلك مساره المعقد الخاص.  
أي تحليل غير موضوعي ومجرد من الطابع الأيديولوجي للقومية العربية بمواجهة الحركات الإسلامية يأتي في الوقت المناسب تماماً عند هذا المفصل الدقيق للشؤون الدولية والإقليمية السريعة التغيّر. وقد قدّم العالم العربي مؤخراً ميولاً أيديولوجية وسياسية متنوعة ومن الصعب جداً توضيحها كلها في مقال واحد.  
الهدف هنا هو ربط الصورة الأكثر شمولاً بالميول البارزة أي القومية العربية الشاملة للدول العربية وقومية الدول العربية المنعزلة والإسلام السياسي.

- See more at: https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/nationalism-vs-islamism-old-hostility-new-arena#sthash.LKX5U5dJ.dpuf