



# Arabism – 100 years of solitude

by Florence Gaub

Has the ‘Arab Spring’ turned into an ‘Islamist Winter’? With Ennahda and the Muslim Brothers in power in Tunisia and Egypt respectively, Jabhat al-Nusra leading the Syrian revolution against a Baathist regime, and the constitutionalisation of Islam in Libya, many analysts have reached the conclusion that Islamism finally has its moment in the Arabic world. And yet, underneath the surface lies the return of a force long considered dead: Arabism.

## The original brand

With its official birthday dated June 1913, when Arab delegates met for the first time in Paris to discuss the situation of Arabs in the Ottoman Empire, Arabism became a political force during the First World War. Arab tribes under the command of Hussein Sherif of Mecca fought alongside Great Britain against the Ottoman Empire in return for an independent Arab state (which they never got). The ideology continued to shape regional ambitions for several decades, but reached a dead end 35 years ago. Egypt’s separate peace treaty with Israel proved to be the final nail in the coffin of this once powerful movement.

Arabism’s defining features fluctuated over time, but its main goal remained the unification of Arabic-speaking peoples. Its core message - despite its anti-imperialist, anti-Zionist and occasionally socialist undertones - was, just like the German unification movement of the 19th century, one of modernism, culture, progress, self-determination and independence. At the heart of its ideology stood the conviction that Arabs were one

nation, speaking one language and sharing one destiny. In 1945, the foundation of the League of Arab States institutionalised Arabism as a political force on the newly independent landscape.

But the ideology failed to live up to its own goals: it did not achieve unity, the liberation of Palestine or economic prosperity, ultimately leading to its demise. Egypt, under Nasser one of the driving forces of Arabism (and incidentally home to the Arab League), dropped out of the collective Arab game when it placed national over regional interests in its peace treaty with Israel. Left without an epicentre and catalyst, Arabism disintegrated even further (although both Syria and Iraq were pretenders to the throne).

This development coincided with the birth of Islamism as a political force in Iran in 1979. Similar forces, different in outlook, interests and method but all relying on religion rather than culture as an inspiration emerged in Lebanon with Hizbullah in 1985, Hamas in Palestine in 1987 and ultimately al-Qaeda in 1988. The League of Arab States was left hanging, meeting at summit level barely nine times in 20 years and unable to reach agreements on major crises such as the Iraq war(s). Instead, sub-regional fragmentation manifested itself in the creation of the Gulf Cooperation Council in 1981, the Arab Maghreb Union in 1989 and the short-lived Arab Cooperation Council the same year.

Arabism was practically over; spin-offs such as Baathism and state nationalism, along with Islamism, had replaced it. Arab nations were divided in 22

states, experiencing very little political and economic integration (inter-Arab trade constitutes 8 per cent of total Arab exports) and engaging even less so in the way of military cooperation.

## Arabism 2.0

And then came the 'Arab Spring'. The uprisings spread rapidly from Tunisia to Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria and Bahrain, highlighting not only the emotional connection between Arab nations but also how modern technology has made mass communication across Arab borders possible. The advent of satellite TV in the early 2000s gave rise first to Qatar's Al-Jazeera and then to Dubai's Al-Arabiya, linking a politically fragmented but culturally rather homogenous region in a more vibrant and interactive way than previous pan-Arab news outlets (such as Egypt's 'Voice of the Arabs' radio station of the 50s and 60s). In 2003, a pan-Arab talent show was aired on the Lebanese channel Future TV and became a massive hit from Morocco to Iraq. Social media sites such as Jeeran, Maktoob, ArabFriendz and Kalam Arab emerged later, followed then by Facebook which launched its Arabic version in 2009.

But 'Arabism 2.0' is not just a social phenomenon - it is a political one as well. The Arab League managed to find a common (though not unanimous) position on Libya and called for a no-fly zone. Later that same year, it suspended Syrian membership in the organisation, imposed economic sanctions on the Assad regime, and co-sponsored first Kofi Annan's and later Lakhdar Brahimi's peace missions to Syria with the United Nations.

Yet its revival, and the larger trend which now pits the two competing narratives of Islamism and Arabism against each other, long precedes the unrest of 2011. The implosion of Iraq following the 2003 invasion upset the fragile regional balance, a situation further worsened by the discovery of a potential nuclear weapons programme in Iran the same year. The Arab Gulf states, already wary of their Persian neighbour, began to embark on an internationalisation as well as regionalisation of their security, thereby moving the epicentre of Arabism from Egypt to the Gulf. It is no coincidence that the Arab League embarked on a reform programme in 2004, subsequently meeting once a year at summit level and establishing, in 2006, a Peace and Security Council.

Although geopolitical considerations are at the centre of this antagonism, both Iran and the Gulf states use the events of 2011 to promote their respective narratives. While Iran, the main representative of Islamism, calls the uprisings an 'Islamic Awakening' (which ties into its own revolutionary rhetoric and bridges the

Iranian-Arab gap by emphasising a common religion), the Gulf states continuously stress the Arab rather than Islamic dimension.

## Arabism vs. Islamism?

Both players have also made use of other issues such as the narrative of a Sunni-Shia divide or the Palestinian cause. The latter, quintessentially part of the Arab portfolio, has been dominated by Iran since the breakdown of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. Its support to Hizbullah and Hamas and its non-recognition of Israel stand in stark contrast to the policies of the majority of Arab states today, something that resonates well with parts of the wider Arab public. The visit of the Qatari emir to Gaza in 2012, his support for the Palestinian move to be recognised as an independent state at the United Nations in 2011 as well as his offer to Hamas to set up its headquarters in Doha after its move from Damascus, are all part of an attempt to bring the Palestinian file back into Arab hands.

While both sides use Arabism and Islamism to their own ends, the reality on the ground is, as always, more nuanced. In reality, Islamism and Arabism share a unifying ambition and are, therefore, not mutually exclusive. For a start, Arabism was never as secular as some would like to believe. One of its founding fathers, Michel Aflaq (himself a Christian) thought the connection between the Arab identity and Islam (which he considered a revolutionary movement) so strong that one could not be without the other. For the same reason, purely secular ideologies such as communism never managed to gain much ground in the Arab world. Similarly, Arab Islamism does not exclude an Arab dimension or pan-Arab ambitions - quite the contrary. The Muslim Brotherhood, with branches in several Arab states, pursues a decidedly pan-Arab approach.

This new form of Arabism is therefore not identical with the romantic movement of the mid-20th century. It does not seek full political unification at this point, but still taps into the strong emotional bond and desire for some form of unification that exists between Arab peoples. This bond might not overcome the fundamental antagonism that exists between Arabism's unifying ambitions and Arab state sovereignty, but it still recognises the fact that Arabic has two words for nationalism: one for state nationalism (*wataniya*) and one for Arab nationalism (*qawmiya*), thereby proving that the two concepts are not mutually exclusive. The potential for political union is therefore still there - it just needs to be rethought.

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