What Is Arab Nationalism?

Arab Nationalism is the consciousness of the Arabs of their complete social existence, a consciousness which is internal and not merely external objective knowledge, so that the image of the Arab community as a spiritual and living complex is ever-present to their conscience. Every Arab must feel with an instinctive compulsion the strong existing connections and ties, in such a way that the community is transferred for him from the externality of life to the internality of the soul.

I do not intend this definition to be restrictive, for nationality, as I have already pointed out, may be defined linguistically or legally or according to its visible results only, without reference to the existence of any pure feeling. But this approximate definition makes two things clear. (1) In nationalism it is necessary for every individual to feel that he is not separate from his community, either in fact or emotionally, and that it is constantly present to his imagination even when he is far from his fatherland and alone. This is also the way of holding it dear and of loyally striving in all that concerns its welfare, though this will not be accomplished until we know how to make of the soul of every Arab something like the camera obscura, a photographic apparatus which will register the shadows of the objects set before it in a clear and stable likeness. (2) It is necessary for nationalism to predominate in the individual in such a manner that it becomes his sole guide, as if it were a compulsive instinct. This compulsive state is the national guarantee which will paralyze the other tendencies, should they attempt to find an outlet, and

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the desires of the intellect should they stir into expression. In this way nationalism is transformed into something which possesses the imaginative power of religion; nay, it becomes a religion with all that the word connotes and entails. Then the people will feel that it is homogeneous and one and that it has a fundamental natural right to freedom and independence.

The factors that contribute to the creation of national feeling are as follows:

**Language**, which greatly enhances a people’s (*sha’b*) consciousness of its unity. Language works toward creating the national link in two ways. (1) It is a means of communication which enables the people to exchange ideas, so that the tendencies and feelings of its members become akin one to another, serving thus as a powerful link which makes the nation (*umma*) share in sorrows and hopes, enables it to preserve its past and its glories and to record its social, political, and literary history so that the coming generations may be acquainted with it, and also guides the nation toward a future hidden in the womb of time. (2) Language is a national custom which cements amicable relations among all members of the people, so that they feel as though they were one family. For it often happens that if someone hears another language being spoken he feels the speaker to be alien to him, and he might even go so far as to hate him because he is foreign, both to his ears and to his heart.

This influence of language in creating a unified homogeneous nation may be scientifically explained by the fact that language is an instrument for the dissemination of thoughts and feelings. A man hears an idea being expressed, and finding it agreeable embraces it; or else a man hears a sad mourner and has a certain melancholy feeling. This dissemination of thought and feeling only language can effect. The society in which only one language is prevalent must, of necessity, be stamped with its peculiar imprint, and its members must be refined anew in its furnace. For language, as I believe, consists of thoughts and feelings expressed in vocables which you may read or hear, thereby becoming attracted to them, because it is also the history of the thoughts and the emotions which have touched our ancestors with their currents, and have then come down to us, and because it is an instrument for the dissemination of thoughts and feelings. The
duty of nationalists who are imbued with a burning and true belief is to persuade society by all possible means to free itself from all languages except the one which it is desirable to impose, attachment to which must be fanatical. The fanaticism we mean is the deepest and most violent it is possible to conceive. In such a fanaticism we must mingle hate and contempt for anyone who does not speak that national language, which we hold sacred and venerate as a high ideal. The mystical must enter into everything with which we seek to inspire all hearts. To succeed in a nationalist sense, therefore, we must seek aid from mystical inspiration.

It would be apposite here to quote in illustration a story recounted by Rention [?] in his book, *The Unrest of the Near East*, when discussing Zionism. He said: “Toward 1860 there was a young Jewish student in the small town of Lushki, in Russia. His name was Eliezer; he finished his studies in Paris in 1877 and heard Gambetta speak, at a time when republican principles in France were undergoing a variety of changes. When this student heard Renan speak at the Sorbonne on the greatness of the Hebrew language, he fell wholeheartedly in love with that language, and it came to occupy a sacred place in his heart. He then started to call for the return to Hebrew among the Jews, and to preach the necessity of imposing it in the household and of fanatical attachment to it in society. He became an author and called himself Ben Yehuda; he looked with contempt on those Jews who, to start with, met his call with mockery. At last, he came to an agreement with a young Polish nobleman who, like himself, was burning for the same ideal, and they published two newspapers called *Glory* and *Hope*. Baron Edmond Rothschild also helped him afterward until he made a reality of his preaching and imposed the language as he wished. It was as a result of this that the Jews began to think of resurrecting their golden dream and even, like Theodore Herzl, the author of the Zionist national gospel, to carry out propaganda for the fatherland seriously, persistently, and eagerly.”

Since language is the essential pillar on which a stable national edifice is erected, we must attend to its welfare by different educational, scientific, artistic, and literary means. The vitality of the common ideal derives from the vitality of the language, and the love of the people for the language derives from the ability
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of that language to express the most hidden intimations, the most inarticulate instincts, and the most tumultuous feelings as they rage within their hearts. Our intoxication with our language results from the fact that it reflects the exact picture of our various feelings and emotions.

This is what, of old, endeared the Arabic language to the ancestors, for in it they found everything they could desire. In order to make it a language full of life, expressing all the feelings that it should express, we must labor to make it so that it can become matter fit for thought, art, literature, and emotion. In order to attain this aim the Arabs must bestow their care on linguistic collections and encyclopedias. I have indicated many ways of perfecting the language in the book Introduction to the Study of the Language of the Arabs.

Interest. Interest, when it is fused with ideals and hopes, is a powerful factor making for the unity of groups. It is always one of the causes of a union or a social grouping, because it is based on natural selfishness, without which man would not have roused himself to strive for anything.

Those who hold the materialist theory of history have attempted to explain all the actions of man by means of material interests. They have been able to prove that if religions are analyzed minutely they are found to safeguard particular interests which adopt this or that form of religion. If a group finds the safeguard of its interests in Christianity, it will become fanatical because it seeks to preserve its material interests, insistently and selfishly. In this sense, a group, and its interests, are found in Islam and in every religion.

Since interests are common within the great Arab fatherland, the religions which in the past were adopted to safeguard interests have now no function except as regards morals and behavior. Union, in spite of diversity of religious belief, is imposed by common interests within the common fatherland. In any event, what objection is there to our having one national creed and various religions, that is, various moral philosophies?

The Geographical Environment. This factor is effective in two ways. (1) Climate has a great influence over mentality and temperament; uniformity of climate usually creates in people
mutual and temperamental similarity and conduces to peaceable
ness and mutual understanding. (2) The nation is totally or
partly encompassed by natural barriers. In modern times, rapid
communications have abolished the importance of some of the
barriers. Nationalists have considered, however, that the nation
has to exist in a defined environment which enables its members
to live in full intercourse, because lack of relations between
fellow countrymen creates estrangement and unfriendliness. In
spite of the ease with which people can cover vast distances in
modern times, we still find moral estrangement among the
different groups who live in far-flung countries like Russia, Brazil,
the United States; this is because of the great distances which
separate one part of the nation from another, and this frequently
results in differences in customs which greatly militate against
a nation’s consciousness of its unity.

If we try to isolate the effects of natural barriers on the unity
of the nation and its feeling of independence we will find that
barriers have no essential value except when they are accompanied
by a difference of climate. It is therefore possible to replace
natural proximity by artificial proximity by means of fast trans-
port. If natural barriers had by themselves any essential impor-
tance they would have continued to exist, no matter how power-
ful other factors might have been. What is important is the
geographical environment as a whole, the relationship between
nation, climate, and soil. Because the geographical environment
of the Arabs is extensive and the barriers between the Arab
nations are such as will be abolished by rapid communications
in the modern age, we must (1) Link all Arab areas by means
of a communications network which guarantees rapid movement
and replaces natural proximity by artificial; (2) Encourage travel
and tourism for individuals and groups, because travel diminishes
differences, especially if they are group differences. I will go so
far as to say that travel ought to be made an educational, peda-
gogical, and national duty.

Ancestry. There is no doubt that the tie of blood is the oldest
tie within the human group, and the most far-reaching in the
history of man. Men became differentiated according to it, in
ancient times, and on it were founded their international rela-
tions. But the course of evolution occasioned a change in the
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cess of state authority which reduced the importance of this tie; for whereas the state used to be characterized by its authority over persons, afterward its most important characteristic came to be its authority over territory. This transition was of great importance in endowing nationality with social significance.

But in spite of this evolution in the authority of the state, in spite of the fact that there is no pure race in the world, owing to the intermingling of races by means of migrations, intermarriage, and international movements, and in spite of the fact that the modern state is somewhat easygoing in naturalization matters, we nevertheless see that the tie of blood is still important, up to a point, as a factor enabling a people to feel its unity. The idea of blood kinship is a factor in uniting the hearts of a people and harmonizing its inclinations, and the similarity of bodily shapes and formations induced by blood kinship facilitates the idea of a common ancestry.

If we examine the circumstances of some modern states such as America or Belgium, which are mixtures of different kin-groups so complex that it is very difficult to judge which constitutes the majority, we will see that they have agreed to impose the most powerful kin-group of those composing the state, and to glory in it as do the English kin-group in Great Britain, a state which consists of Celts, Normans, English, and Welsh. Common ancestry has been, and still is, a factor that makes the nation feel its unity. We in the Arab fatherland have a number of groups descended from one ancestry, and since the Arab group is the most important, we must then make it a foundation of the state and glory in it.

However, the lesser kin-groups in the Arab whole to which we allude are not so important as those found in other national wholes; further, they are to be found in certain areas only, such as geographical Syria, all other areas being considered purely Arab. Add to this that the majority in Syria itself is Arab, and the Arab race has succeeded in imposing its habits, customs, mentality, and language over other races whose relation to their ancestors is now as remote as that of humanity to Adam.

It is biologically established without doubt that racial characteristics do not subsist in the same form over a long period of time, but undergo essential variations. How much greater these variations would be, then, if these characteristics fell under the
influence of a powerful current engulfing them in its violent tide. However this may be, it remains true that the characteristics of those other races have fallen into obscurity, and only the characteristics of the Arab race still subsist and are vital. It is therefore mere mental confusion to disregard reality in favor of sophistries and misleading errors. No doubt, to discuss the details of the minor races [in the Arab fatherland] may lead to the creation of racial personalities in different regions.

This would confront us with one of two conclusions: either the importance of ancestry is abolished within the mixed nationality, or the Arab ancestry, in all its manifestations, which still lives in its descendants is imposed over all. Otherwise, the dead are resurrected at the expense of the living, the minority at the expense of the majority, and the other races are given dominance, although the Arab race is, in fact, the dominant one by virtue of its warm vitality and its movement, not by virtue of ancient statues and remains. This would be to act illogically.

History. This factor is of great importance in creating a unified and concentrated feeling, because it is the register of the events, good or bad, which have happened to the nation in succession. When a group go back to their history, their feelings and ideas go back to certain fixed points. The common rejoicings and common sorrows of the past constitute the memories of a common life to which everybody returns unified in thought and feeling; they also preserve the customs of the nation, its aims, and its ideals.

Since the different groups in the Arab fatherland have been involved with one another from ancient times, they have one common history. Every group is involved with every other, so much so that it is impossible to write a regional history of the Arab countries. The history of Syria is involved with that of Iraq, the history of Hijaz with Egypt's, and these with all the totality of the Arab regions. It must be understood that historical unity is not sundered or weakened by the quarrels or rivalries which may have taken place, for there is no nation which has not experienced such quarrels and rivalries among its different groups. Witness Prussia, which was involved in quarrels with other German principalities; in spite of this, German unity has not disintegrated. What is important in history are the general
forces; as for private quarrels, these may even occur between two members of the same family. This compels us to correct the writing of history which still expresses many animosities productive of unconscious hatreds, especially among the young.

Customs. Similarity of customs results, of course, from racial, historical, and geographical unity; and there is no doubt that the very fact of your seeing somebody behaving in the same way as you do will bring you nearer to him. Agreement in customs is the result of agreement in thought, inclination, feeling, and emotion. Language is considered a national custom, [in this instance] a custom purely Arab. The national edifice cannot be erected without these units, for they coöperate in order to bring about a strong national link which does not flag or weaken. Nationalist thinkers have been accustomed to give them equal importance, although customs are unequal in their effects and their results. To me, the most important is the [unity of] geographical environment, followed by mutual interests, then by common language. The others merely fortify the effects of these. A nationality may be brought forth which has neither a history nor qualities, but it cannot be brought forth without an environment (geographical); this may be seen in the Jewish nation (umma) in which the different factors and causes have coöperated to make it into a nation with a particular nationality (umma dhat qaumiyya), but it was not destined to be one.

It has been agreed to define nationalism as an emotion and a feeling far removed from intellectual causation. The member of the nation loves the fatherland because he loves it; if he loves it for some other reason, then the love will also disappear if the reason disappears. The Arab, then, loves his fatherland and its different regions with a pure love because it is a fatherland; he loves it without any ulterior considerations.