

How far was pan-Arabism merely a tool
in the hands of domestic elites?

Akhila Kolisetty
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After the 1930s, pan-Arabism emerged as a powerful movement that called for the unity of Arab nations into a single “Arab” state. Although pan-Arabism arose through the interplay of a variety of factors such as a shared historical experience, economic modernization, and a response to colonialism, ultimately pan-Arabism came to be manipulated by domestic elites who used the ideology to bolster their own respective national ends. Pan-Arabism especially began to be used as a pretext for rallying behind the Palestinian cause, mobilizing people for domestic unity in various states, and increasing the power of Nasser’s Egypt. But in the end, since pan-Arabism was used as a tool to assist individual countries rather than to advocate for an Arab state, there was never a sense of real Arab community and the movement failed to sustain itself. This paper will argue that although many other forces led to the development of pan-Arabism, it was largely the product of manipulation and power rivalry of political elites – and this power play ultimately led to the movement’s demise.

Pan-Arabism arose from the powerful cultural force that brought Arab peoples together long before such a movement existed concretely. By the end of the 19th century, a large group of people living in the Middle East and North Africa began to be called Arabs due to a shared linguistic, cultural, historical, and religious past. Arabs were generally those who spoke Arabic, a language that could be understood throughout the region (Owen 2000, p. 65). Moreover, Arabs shared a common historical and cultural legacy stemming from the times of the Arab and Ottoman Empires (65). And finally, the majority of Arabs were Muslims who shared common religious practices, like the pilgrimage to Mecca. This shared historical experience created a sense of Arab unity even before the specific emergence of pan-Arabism. Pan-Arabism is a twentieth century doctrine that developed alongside the breakdown of the Ottoman Empire

and the beginnings of colonialism; the movement insists that the Arab nation must unite to form a single, cohesive Arab state (Ayubi 1995, p. 136). Although unity already existed, political elites in the region began to manipulate this nationalist sentiment into political action and popular mobilization. Still, pan-Arabism always had its roots in shared experience, which did provide a strong foundation for its development.

One explanation for the rise of pan-Arabism is the 'materialist' view, which states that change has largely come about through economic and social development (Owen 2000, p. 65). Although this view takes an extreme stance, it is true that economic modernization led to increased dissemination of information through newspapers, television, films, and foreign travel. Over time, there was also the development of intra-Arab conferences, and of institutions like banks with branches in several countries (67). Nationalism is viewed as the result of the massive transformations caused by industrialization and print capitalism (Jankowski 1997, p. 166). Certainly socioeconomic change allowed for the spread of Arabism and resulted in an increased sense of Arab nationalism that transcended national boundaries.

Another view states that Arab nationalism and pan-Arabism arose as a response to colonialism. For instance, the Palestinian armed struggle against British authorities and Jewish settlers provoked strong Arab sentiment among the people of the region (Kazziha 1990, p. 300). These armed clashes resulted in the anti-British revolt of 1936-39, which enjoyed mounting Arab support (Owen 2000, p. 67). This revolt also contributed to the political consciousness of Arab youth and officers and shaped the attitudes of some Arab governments, creating a heightened sense of Arab nationalism (Kazziha 1990, p. 301). Moreover, in Egypt in 1952-3, the revolutionary leader Nasser mentioned British evacuation from Egypt as the "central concern of

the revolution in its initial phase” and stated that the goal of the revolution was “the liberation of the *watan* from imperialism” (Jankowski 1997, p. 157). Thus, even in Egypt, the drive for independence from Western powers did have a significant impact on fostering Arab nationalism. It is plausible that nationalism within individual states developed as a response to independence movements, but this theory falls short of convincingly explaining the rise of a more widespread Pan-Arab movement.

These two theories do deserve merit, and these factors did play important roles in the rise and spread of pan-Arabism. However, certainly the most powerful factor in institutionalizing pan-Arab ideology has been the power politics of domestic elites, who have manipulated pan-Arabism for their own national ends. Thus, this paper will use John Breuilly’s broad theory of nationalism as a framework to argue that pan-Arabism developed in a very similar manner. Breuilly argues that nationalism is “best understood as an especially appropriate form of political behavior in the context of the modern state and the modern state system,” (Jankowski 1997, p. 166). Thus, the rise of nationalism must be seen in the context of the modern state, the needs of the state, and power politics within and between states. At the same time, pan-Arabism has always competed with individual nationalisms, and has never had advocates who put the pan-Arab movement first. Pan-Arabism has always “lacked a championing class that would find in the creation of a unified Arab state a realization of its own class interests” (Ayubi 1995, p. 145). This paper will now argue that although the most important factor in legitimizing the pan-Arab movement *was* domestic elites, these elites put their individual states *before* the theoretical pan-Arab state, leading to the movement’s failure.

First of all, Gamal Abdul Nasser was the powerful leader of Egypt's revolutionary regime starting in 1952. Nasser's interest in pan-Arabism stemmed from the roots of a shared historical and cultural tradition: his early Arab consciousness originated in the "echoes of sentiment" that made him so "angry for this land which [he] never saw" (Kazziha 1990, p. 301). Nasser felt a strong attachment to the Palestinian cause and felt that the Palestinian struggle was his own. At the peak of 'Nasserism' in 1954, he declared that the goal of Egypt's revolutionary government was to ensure that Arabs form a united nation (Jankowski 1997, p. 153). But though Nasser asserted both a narrower Egyptian and broader Arabic allegiance, in practice he clearly prioritized Egypt. He first identified with Egyptian nationalism as a member of the Young Egypt movement and through participation in demonstrations in the 1930s; his identification with the Arab nation only emerged later on (151). His attachment to Egypt also had deep emotional resonance, while his Arab nationalism was primarily intellectual (Jankowski 2002, p. 28-29). This demonstrates how pan-Arabism always had its roots in a shared historical experience, but that it was eventually manipulated into a greater movement for action by political elites.

Soon, Nasser began to manipulate pan-Arabism in order to best benefit Egypt. One example is the Baghdad Pact, an alliance between pro-Western regional states, Great Britain, and Iraq, which Nasser vehemently opposed. However, Egyptian opposition was prompted mainly by Nasser's concern that this alliance would isolate Egypt within Arab politics, rather than by the abstract notion of Arab unity (Jankowski 1997, p. 160). Nasser was simply trying to defend Egypt and improve his country's regional position. He also placed first in his foreign policy Egypt's need for a strong military and political capacity (161). Nasser's Egyptian patriotism culminated in 1956, when he nationalized the Suez Canal. Here, Nasser felt that in

order for Egypt to be truly independent, the state had to rid itself of all foreign influence; this decision certainly had no echoes of Pan-Arab sentiment, but was purely based on Egyptian patriotism. In addition, when Nasser was approached by Syrian Prime Minister Sabri al-Asali regarding a union between Egypt and Syria in 1957, Nasser was initially highly reluctant to agree because he thought it would impose a financial burden upon Egypt (164). When there were no clear benefits for Egypt, Nasser became reluctant to pursue his previously stated Pan-Arab goals. He only agreed after much pleading on the part of Syria, and due to the country's extreme political instability. Moreover, Nasser stated that "Arab liberation would 'aid Egypt' in its own struggle for national independence" (161). Here, Nasser admitted to adopting pan-Arab rhetoric as a foreign policy tool aimed at maintaining Egyptian independence, rather than the genuine desire to form an Arab state. Thus, it is evident that in all these situations, Nasser used a pretext of pan-Arabism as a tool to promote Egypt's agenda. Jankowski sums it up well by stating that "the form of Arab nationalism manifested by Nasser....perceived Egyptian involvement in Arab politics largely in terms of the furtherance of Egyptian purposes" (165). And since Nasser always put Egypt first, pan-Arabism lost out and was never allowed to reach its full potential.

Secondly, Palestinian elites manipulated the idea of pan-Arab nationalism in order to garner support for their cause, rather than to work towards establishing an Arab state. In 1948, Arab armies were defeated in the Palestine war. Since then, Palestinian elites engaged in a movement advocating for a Palestinian state, and they used pan-Arab rhetoric to gain the support of many Arab states for their cause. From the late 1960s to about 1967, the Palestinian issue began to separate from the wider pan-Arab movement. Before the 1960s, the Palestinian

struggle had been simply one part of the wider struggle for Arab unity. But over time, a distinction between the push for a Palestinian state and for a general Arab state became more clearly defined. Palestinians began moving away from participating in the Ba'th party – a pan-Arab movement aimed at unifying all Arab countries into one state (Ayubi 1995, p. 142). Instead, they increasingly began to join Fatah and other Palestine-focused organizations (Kazziha 1990, p. 311). This increased Palestinian nationalism led to the formation of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1964 (326). The greatest success of the PLO was in “the ability of its leadership to create among its people a keen sense of commitment to its own national cause” (326). The PLO encouraged national solidarity and identity within the Palestinian community. Over time, the Palestinian cause led to the abandonment of a wider Arab nationalism in favor of Palestinian nationalism. This is a clear example of how the goals of pan-Arabism were again abandoned in favor of domestic nationalism. Power rivalries between countries led to the final downfall of pan-Arabism, which never enjoyed the support it needed to push for an Arab state.

Another aspect of the Palestinian issue was the extent to which many other states took advantage of the Palestinian cause and the consequent Pan-Arabic sentiment it evoked in order to enhance their own positions. The defeat of the Arab armies in the Palestine war of 1948 angered Arabs across the region, and became considered an insult to the Arab community. Generally, the issue of Palestine inspired much sympathy among Arab people throughout the region (Kazziha 1990, p. 311). The mobilization of people on the side of their Palestinian neighbors and against Israel became a rallying point for internal solidarity in many Arab societies: it was utilized by Arab regimes and political groups to achieve consensus, and was

invoked by leaders during times of internal crises to increase the internal unity of societies. The issue of Palestine helped to increase the domestic credibility of certain Arab regimes that were legitimized by their commitment to the Palestinian cause. This pan-Arab sentiment helped “minimize the influence of the elements of dissension” within each society (303). For instance, although Saudi Arabia was not as great a proponent of pan-Arabism as Egypt, even Saudi elites managed to manipulate Pan-Arab sentiment for their own ends. The Saudis supported Palestine because it enhanced the Saudi image among the Arabs, and it also provided them with the domestic support of their own people, which was necessary at the time to help maintain internal unity (310). A more general example is that of the participation of a Moroccan unit in combat on the Syrian front. That became one of King Hassan’s most popular acts after he gained power, demonstrating the power of utilizing pan-Arabism to increase popular support (311). Thus, elites from various countries used the Palestinian cause and Pan-Arab ideology to promote national unity and mobilize popular support.

Ultimately, the manipulation of pan-Arabism by domestic elites had the effect of increasing inter-state conflict, which eventually derailed pan-Arabism. Conflict emerged between the ‘reactionary’ and the ‘progressive’ regimes. The Arab world began to split between two types of regimes: those who championed radical change and those who wanted to maintain the status quo. Nasser’s Egypt and Syria took the former view and saw themselves as champions of the Palestinian cause, while Saudi Arabia saw Palestine as their 2nd priority, instead prioritizing moderation and caution. As the Israeli military threat against the Arab states increased, the more radical regimes – especially Egypt – developed close relationships with the Soviet Union. Then, the United States threw its support behind Saudi Arabia in an effort to

counter Nasser's growing power (Kazziha 1990, p. 305). These superpower alliances reinforced preexisting political divisions, resulting in increasing disunity and signaling the beginning of the end of pan-Arabism. Moreover, certain countries gained more power, which created an imbalance in relations among the Arab states. The unity between Syria and Egypt in February 1958 into the United Arab Republic and the subsequent collapse of the Hashemite monarchy in Iraq only served to further enhance Nasser's power (303). Other countries, like Saudi Arabia, felt threatened by Egypt's growing power in the Arab world. The drive for an Arab state fell behind as Arab states became increasingly entrenched in inter-state rivalry and power struggles – the result of each country's manipulation of pan-Arabism for its own benefit. Ultimately, there was no one left to actually advocate for an Arab state, leading to the downfall of the pan-Arab movement.

This paper has argued that first, the roots of pan-Arabism lie in a shared historical, cultural and linguistic experience; however, over time, political elites took this common sentiment and manipulated it to benefit their individual states. Since the elites prioritized the well being of their states rather than the push for a true Arab state, pan-Arabism never enjoyed the support it needed and therefore was never able to reach its full potential. Pan-Arabism has allowed for the development of a cultural community that has been utilized for political purposes, but it has never significantly changed the structure of state sovereignty. All in all, although there are alternative explanations, pan-Arabism was largely a tool in the hands of domestic elites – but this fact ultimately led to its downfall.

Works Cited

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