

PROJECTS OF ARAB UNITY*

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ARAB unity, dead for a thousand years, is fashionable once again, at least for purposes of discussion. Although the Arabs have not been an important people for some time, the question of their unification is given a certain weight through its connection with matters of world import—the incursion of the Soviet Union into the Middle East, the maintenance of British imperial communications, and the American entry into Africa and Asia. All of these considerations have bestowed on the Arabs a rôle which, though a minor one, may nevertheless be played out at the centre of the stage.

Who Are the Arabs?

The word "Arab" is a little ambiguous. That is because Islam, which has only recently become "westernized", or secularized, does not recognize distinction of nations or races as important; it is Islam which constitutes an all-embracing community for its adherents. Since the overwhelming majority of Arabs are Moslem, the western concept of nationality has had to compete with the religious concept of Islam as a locus of crystallization for group feeling. The consequence is that Islam contains a welter of ethnic types which also permeate the Arab world: types ethnically distinct only to the mind of a westerner preoccupied with differences of race and nationality.

It has not been possible for a thousand years and more to speak of an Arab community which is based on any biological similarities. Even at the time the Arabs burst out of their peninsula, they do not appear to have been a physically homogeneous stock; but whatever their unity may have been founded on at that time, the combined effects of Islam and the persistently nomadic movements of Arabs throughout North, Central and East Africa have converted the Arab world into a genuine melting-pot in which all origins are forgotten, or, rather, all origins are granted a more or less fictitious "Arab" character. At present if one were told that a given individual was an Arab, one would not know in advance whether he was coal-black, blond, tall, short. By way of extension, an individual representing any one of a variety of racial stocks would consider himself an Arab, and would be so considered by other "Arabs".

From the point of view of nationalism, the most concrete achievement of the Moslem conquests, initially borne abroad by Bedouin (the original meaning of "Arab"), was the spread

*This article, written while the war was in progress, and held owing to pressure of other material, is now in some details out of date. But its general significance is unaffected and it has seemed best to publish it as first written, with this explanation.
—EDITOR.

of Arabic. The Arabs managed to create a vast cultural unity through their language and literature; the Arab language, at the height of Islam merely the learned language of the Universal Islamic Society, eventually contracted with the political decay of Islam to the confines of populations speaking it as a vernacular: populations in which there existed scarcely more than a few drops of "Arab" blood in the old sense. More than four and a half million square miles in Africa and Asia are solidly Arabic-speaking; the extent of this area is the background for the equivocal character of the word "Arab".

The chief trouble is that the definition which is sought is in reality a metaphysical definition, a definition which is unconsciously desired to fit into some sort of logical scheme. There is no need for such a definition. What is required is clarity in referring to certain living individuals and communities who often are called and often call themselves "Arabs". For most purposes it will be found that the best criterion is language (regardless of whether or not language is invariably a defining quality of nationality), with the exception of certain communities in whose case some other criterion acquires decisive importance, such as the Jews and perhaps some other minorities. It is most reasonable to consider as Arab lands all those regions in which Arabic is the vernacular and Islam the overwhelmingly preponderant religion and pattern of society. This "definition" will comprise the Arabian Peninsula, Iraq, Syria, Palestine (with some obvious qualifications), Trans-Jordan, Egypt, the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan (with the exception of the pagan Negro region in the south), Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco (perhaps debatable, because of the strong Berber population). There are of course border-line cases, as in the Somalilands.

Every physical type is represented in the so-called Arab communities. Some of them are entirely white; some are almost entirely black. The Hijaz is one of the most racially mixed communities on earth, and Mecca has been a city of mulattoes and quadroons, of all racial blends, since the fourteenth century. Since the race question does not exist in its European and American form, racial considerations as such have no weight.

Obstacles to Political Unification:

Accordingly, there is some sort of *de facto* ethnocultural unity among Arabs, or rather, there is enough unity to provide an ethnic foundation of political unity. But of course this is

the crux of the matter. What are the obstacles to a realization of this unity?

The obstacles most commonly mentioned revolve around the lack of cohesion of the Arabs as a people. It is quite rightly maintained that the Arabs lack unity in two respects: on the one hand, there are enormous cultural disparities between various levels of the Arab world in general (such as between the nomad and the cultivator, the fanatic and the free-thinker etc.), and between the ruling cliques of one Arab country and another in particular.

A social and economic backwardness pervades Arab society as a whole. This is a matter of notoriety. Not only are broad sections of the sedentary population still involved in a tissue of feudal socio-economic relationships, but throughout nearly the whole of the Arab world the problem of nomadism, solved almost everywhere else, retains considerable force. This split among the Arabs into the Desert and the Sown is very ancient; indeed it may be taken as the fundamental element in their history as a people. Since it is impossible to found a modern state on the instability of the nomads and their hostility to culture, any attempt to do so must be preceded by a radical settlement of this question. This might come about either through such a development of the sedentary and urban population as would make it more or less independent of what went on in the interior, or else by eliminating the nomadic population entirely. This has been attempted only in the last few decades, and then only in Saudi Arabia (and, of course, in the Soviet Union), where the means chosen has been settlement on the land, inspired by the religious fanaticism of the Wahabi Puritanical reform movement.

But there is nothing in the nature of nomads as such which makes it difficult to persuade them to settle on the land as farmers; on the contrary, the history of all nomadic groups appears to show a spasmodic struggle to attain the well-being, security and comfort of a rural life and abandon the harshness and uncertainty of the incessant trek. Although Bedouin may sneer at fallahin as low fellows devoid of glamor, still, when the pinch comes, and it always does, they are only too glad to be able to exchange the exhausting rhythm of their own lives for the security of a mud hut.

Nomadism exists only because the technical capacities of the nomads are just sufficient to maintain them in a sort of

precarious equilibrium with the exigencies of their environment. They are stretched out taut from one season to another, barely eking out an existence by shuttling back and forth between grazing grounds, with not enough of a breathing-space possible to recuperate their powers and acquire enough technique for the taming of nature. They are always only just one step ahead of starvation.

Clearly, the only thing that can alter this finely drawn equilibrium would be either a sudden increase in the lushness of the environment, or else an exotically augmented power over nature, which would provide reserves for a community whose accounts at present just barely balance.

Up to the most recent times, that is, until the incursion of Europe, Arab society has scarcely ever escaped this crippling dichotomy. The Desert has always fulfilled a necessary function in the economy of Arab society; it was only during the height of the Islamic State that the rôle of the Bedouin could be almost, though not quite, eclipsed. Since then it has been one of the decisive elements in the pattern of Arab life.

This social and economic backwardness is given a concrete and institutionalized expression in the political life of the whole area. The well-known phenomenon of "leader-politics", the *caudillismo* of Latin-America, is the direct outcome of this stagnation on a low level of economic inter-communication. Where production exists principally to satisfy restricted local needs, where there is no economic interchange on a scope grandiose enough to create a social class as its bearer, each village, townlet, valley, and tribe becomes a microcosm of social activity. This accounts for the myriads of political spokesmen for the Arab world, for the independent dignity of each petty chief and village elder. This is why it has become a *cliché* to speak of the disunity of the Arabs and their incapacity to cooperate with one another.

Of course social patterns among the Arabs are manifold, and the degree of this disunity varies greatly. In some countries, as in Egypt, it has been almost entirely replaced by a bourgeois society with well-defined political groups on a quasi-Western style. In others, such as Syria, it is exacerbated by religious and ethnic schisms. Communities in the Near East and Africa, in order to exist as political units, have generally crystallized around their own local bosses and wise men, shaykhs and 'ulama. This is added to by the existence of the great families,

who themselves constitute political units, which confront other, similar political units and compose a balance or "unbalance" of power around themselves. The clan, family, and clique are the chief factors in the political arena.

The increasing westernization of the region is imposed on this already present fabric, and so these entities find themselves entering modern capitalist life and disintegrating under its impact, amalgamating with others and becoming westernized in varying degrees. In some cases the capital resources of an individual are supplemented by his membership in a large family, so the family as a whole is buttressed capitalistically precisely by its feudal composition. In general, the family hampered the development of the requisite modern *elite*, but once the development was accomplished, it continued existing as substantially the same entity in a strengthened position.

Recent creation of petty national states has provided another locus of concentration for the economic and political forces at work: however, these national states, tardy arrivals in a world dominated by the supra-national, cosmic interests of the Great Powers and subservient to their own backwardness as well as to these Powers, are permitted very little scope for a tendency so familiar to us. It is the infantile character of these states that provides one of the strongest drives for unity in the face of the world, precisely as it is, simultaneously, one of the obstacles to that unity.

In some ways the belatedness of the Arab national states has smoothed the path to national unification. For the fact is that the basic cultural discord prevailing among various strata of Arab society applies with far less force to a unitary Arab political organism than it does to the Arab world as it is now constituted. These cultural differences are found *within* every single Arab country already; they were present during the efflorescence of Islam. Even if one were to regard the nomadic problem as insoluble, it would be no more insoluble for a unitary Arab state than it is for a handful of feeble, split-up dependent units. As a matter of fact, of course, the area of nomadism has been contracting rapidly during the past decades; the West has had its effect even on the Bedouin. The stronghold of Arabia itself has been passing under the spell of Europe. The Bedouin have been enmeshed in a relentless, organic process of settlement on the land, and even if the gap between the Desert and the Sown is never entirely eliminated, it will be infinitely

easier to deal with the complex relations of the Bedouin and the sedentary agriculturists within the framework of a unified government apparatus using similar methods, instead of the haphazard of five or six separate and often incompatible state policies.

The argument made from the enormous regional distinctions among various Arab communities and the absence of any genuine "national" consciousness in historic times merely exposes the capricious and artificial nature of most of the Arab states set up since the first World War. For while no one would deny that a man from Baghdad and a man from Mosul are Arabs, it is true that each may be more aware of his difference from the other than of their common citizenship in the whimsical and historically illegitimate Iraqi state. The argument from nomadism applies with even greater force here. What is artificial is not the concept of a unitary Arab state, which, regardless of the *material* obstacles to its realization, corresponds at any rate to the awareness of the Arabs of themselves as distinct from Europe, but the atomized states into which the Arabs are at present divided. The regional differences are much more potent between the sections of states already constituted than between the states themselves. Once again, that is, the argument against Arab union which is based on regional differences between Arabs is in reality more forceful when applied to small states than when applied to a larger union.

Minorities:

This is a well-known and basic question in the Near East, of great complexity and the source of much heat. Without venturing on prophecy, all that can be said here is that to the extent that the minorities in the Arab world (particularly prevalent in Syria, Iraq, and perhaps Morocco) are based on religious schism and cultural particularism they are bound to be ironed out with reasonable speed in the relatively near future. The integration of the people as a whole into a western system of government and education, together with the consequently increased contact, will no doubt bring the inevitable harvest of social similarity in its train. The fact is that the differences between the Arabs and the minorities living in their midst are generally exaggerated, not only by the foreign press, but by the Arabs and the minority leaders themselves. To a very large extent the minorities, insofar as they constitute a kink in the social fabric, are anachronisms, and in any case they are not

numerically important enough to form a really serious obstacle to the unification of the Arabs as a whole. It must also be remembered that separatism is the stock-in-trade of the bulk of minority spokesmen, whose voices are the only ones heard abroad; they have a professional interest in schism.

Political Atmosphere and Personal Rivalries:

As a matter of fact, the principal obstacles to Arab unification do not lie in the profound disharmonies outlined above, but in the relatively superficial rivalries among the political elite of Arab society. In the more advanced Arab countries bordering on the Mediterranean this is a function of the character of the "Levantine" upper strata as a whole.

There is a special quality in Arabs who have been educated in a western manner which strikes most observers at once. As an intellectual class they give the impression of being what the Germans call *Luftmengen*,—rootless, feverish people.

The gap between the old and the new in the Arab societies which have felt European influence most thoroughly is so enormous, and the economic backwardness of the overwhelming bulk of the population is so extreme, that a difference in schooling acquires an absolute value as a specifically differentiating characteristic: the people are steeped in such ignorance (at any rate from the point of view of the West, which sets the standards) that education automatically involves elevation to an upper class, regardless of the precise economic status, which may or may not lag behind the social prestige created by education. For this reason there is an unusually high percentage of unemployment among educated people, in a semi-colonial capitalistic economy such as Egypt, which combines a relatively advanced European upper crust and an extremely backward (economically and otherwise) laboring mass: there are few economic occupations for them to be absorbed into. This accounts for the persistent Near Eastern phenomenon of a growing class of these educated *Luftmenschen*, who belong socially to the upper strata, but exist in an economy which is too meagre to have any interstices they might squeeze into by virtue of the education which is their principal economic qualification.

Clearly, the only refuge is in politics. But even here the arena is restricted: the masses are backward intellectually (from the point of view of the elite) as well as economically. They are not receptive to the abstractions of western political thought, which is one of the ornaments of the upstart elite.

Accordingly, even in the political life which is the principal channel left open to these "bottle-necked" intelligentsia, they encounter precisely the same bottle-neck: they are thrown back on themselves, and on those members of the rising generation in the same position. The same gulf which separates the masses economically from the narrow apex of the elite also separates them intellectually: providing no vent for the energies of the intelligentsia and so throwing it back on political activity, it also constrains this political activity into an abnormally shrunken, sterile, and self-stultifying arena. This is largely responsible for the hectic quality, the *melange* of an extreme intransigence of form and poverty of content which is characteristic of intellectual groups in quasi-colonial areas. This instability, added to the personal and party axe-grinding inherent in this intellectual overpopulation, conceals genuine social and political needs in a mist of intrigue, factionalism, and wire-pulling, and impedes the emergence of any programme organically related to actual conditions.

Political life in the undeveloped hinterlands of the Near East is more "personal"; the royal dynasties of the Arabian Peninsula provide a convenient locus of concentration for political activity. Compared to the greater density of intellectual life in Egypt and Syria, the rivalries of the Arab monarchs have a certain simplicity. The Wahhabi regime of Abd-al-Aziz ibn Abd-ar-Rahman Aal Faysal Aal Sa'ud, more commonly known as Ibn Sa'ud, has a long tradition of hostility to two ruling houses: the Hashimite dynasties of Iraq and Trans-Jordan, and the Zaydi dynasty of the Imam Yahya in Yemen.

The enmity of Sa'ud and the House of Hashim dates back to the quarrel between King Husayn, the original British protégé and patron of the Arab Revolt in the World War, for the control of the Hijaz and the Holy Places of Islam. Husayn was backed by the British till his own crotchety temperament, political incapacity and material feebleness made them abandon him to the military power which Ibn Sa'ud had created through his own acumen and daring. Ibn Sa'ud having accomplished the unthinkable, and cemented the Bedouin tribes of Central Arabia together with a combination of Muslim piety and ruthless police power, seized control of the Hijaz in 1925, and was recognized by the British the same year. Husayn fled to an ignominious exile in Crete, leaving his son Abdullah in power in Trans-Jordan (as a British puppet), and his son Faysal as King of

Iraq (likewise "advised" by the British). Abdullah remains, cynical and easy-going as ever, while the power of Faysal's nine-year-old grandson is exercised by a Regent. The feud is old, but has given signs of relenting lately, in reports of some semi-affectionate exchanges between Abdullah and Ibn Sa'ud. Ibn Sa'ud is temperamentally and otherwise incapable of submitting to any other Arab power. Abdullah could be given importance only through a combination with other Arabs or with a foreign power. If Sa'ud dies (he is in his middle sixties, and reputedly ill) it is impossible to say whether the power of the Wahhabi dynasty, as a dynasty, will survive. The Crown Prince, Sa'ud, resembles his father in appearance, apparently not in temperament. Some of his other sons (he has more than a hundred) seem to have political ambitions, partly pro-Axis. Abdullah's son also is said to be pro-Axis.

It is difficult to envisage Sa'ud participating in any ordinary Arab federation, though it is conceivable that he be elected as the titular head of some such federation, if the hatred of the Wahhabis in other Muslim groups subsides or is neutralized by the youthful idolizers of Ibn Sa'ud as a man. Presumably the nine-year-old King of Iraq has no settled opinions on these matters: the attitude of the reigning group in Iraq is unresolved.

The Imam Yahya, of the Yemen, is a very old man: the attitude of his sons towards major political questions is uncertain, though the Crown Prince, Sayf-al-Islam Husayn, seems pious and even, if we judge from his delight at the reception given him in Japan in 1938, pro-Axis also. After the Saudi-Yemenite war in 1934 a "treaty of Arab brotherhood" was signed between Sa'ud and Yahya, no doubt sincere enough, for although there is no prospect of a genuine amalgamation between the Wahhabi dynasty in Arabia and the Zaydi dynasty of the Yemen, still their interests do not at present clash.

A factor that may eventually play a rôle in inter-Arab affairs is the policy of the Egyptian dynasty; of King Faruq, who, aside from being an out-and-out Axis sympathizer, is said to harbor extensive ambitions concerning the Arabs as a whole. Egypt is certainly the wealthiest and most influential of the Arab countries; this naturally strengthens the dynasty. However, its position is weakened somewhat by being in the centre of complex and multitudinous forces, both domestic and foreign, in distinction from the relative isolation of Ibn Sa'ud or the Imam Yahya.

The Egyptian position is complicated by the fact that the Premier, Mustafa an-Nahas Pasha, seems to have realized that Arab unification has become timely enough to be exploited as a domestic political issue, and is trying to present himself as one of its protagonists. Since he has never been known as a pan-Arab in any sense, this is really an attempt to step into the limelight generated by the labours of other Arab nationalists, including some of his contemporary Egyptian opponents. Here we see foreshadowed the seeds of possible friction between Iraq, Egypt, and Syria: the vital difference is that this friction will be generated within the framework of an Arab unification which everyone agrees to in principle. For there can be no doubt of the imminence of some elaborate scheme for the welding together of at least some states in the Near East: too many astute political operators seem to have decided to play the same card. Anthony Eden's speech of last February indicates that the British Foreign Office considers Arab unification a plausible gambit; the Axis also considers it worth ranting about.

These straws all seem blown by the same wind: the constellation of forces now appears to be such that Arab union of one kind or another has become the focus of political probabilities for the whole of the Near East and even North Africa. The question now is only: Who is going to father the child?