

Arab Nationalism and the Question of Palestine in the Post-2011 Era

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ABSTRACT

The aftermath of the Arab Spring has significantly changed the relationship between Arab nationalism and the Palestinian question. Historically, Arab nationalism placed Palestine at the center of its ideological and political discourse, framing resistance against Israel as a unifying cause. However, since 2011, developments such as internal conflicts, state fragmentation, and the rise of sectarian and domestic priorities have weakened this collective focus. The diminished effectiveness of institutions like the Arab League and the normalization of relations between several Arab states and Israel reflect a shift from ideological solidarity to pragmatic state interests. This paper argues that, in the post-2011 era, Arab nationalism has shifted from a cohesive political project to a more scattered and contingent framework, in which the question of Palestine remains important but no longer dominates. By analyzing these changes within broader regional dynamics, the study emphasizes the declining but still relevant role of Arab nationalism in shaping responses to the Palestinian issue in contemporary West Asia.

Key Words : Arab Nationalism, fragmentation, geopolitical Alignment, North Africa, Abraham Accords

Understanding Arab Nationalism and Palestine

Arab nationalism has historically functioned as one of the most powerful ideological frameworks shaping political identity, collective consciousness, and regional politics in West Asia. The intellectual roots of Arab nationalism can be traced to Arabic-speaking populations within a weakening Ottoman Empire. Arab nationalism evolved, much as did other nationalisms in the developing world, out of a reaction to the prospect (and later the reality) of European domination and under the influence of European ideas about nationalism. The emerging ideology, whose core premise was that the Arabs are and have been a nation unified by language and a shared sense of history, but long divided and dominated by outside powers, drew on elements of the Arab and Islamic heritages. It incorporated them into a new narrative of Arab history and pride in the Arab past, disseminated through the press and in novels, poetry, and popular

histories. By the 1920s, Arab nationalism had become the hegemonic ideology of the eastern Arab world, and its influence continued to spread in the succeeding decades. Rooted in a shared sense of linguistic, cultural, and historical unity among Arabic-speaking peoples, Arab nationalism emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a response to the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the encroachment of European imperial powers. Thinkers such as Sati' al-Husri articulated the foundational premise that the Arab world constituted a single nation, bound together by language, culture, and a shared historical experience¹. Adeed Dawisha, an intellectual of Arab Nationalism, predicted that the Great Arab Revolt would gain a respected place as the spark of Arab nationalism, realise Arab independence, and lead the Arabs to seek political unity in a single state under a single government. In addition, in reality, the reasons for starting the revolt have nothing

to do with nationalism.

Dawisha further argues that Arab nationalism, which, he says, was inspired by nineteenth-century German Romantic nationalism, really took root after World War I and not in the nineteenth century, as many believe, and that it blossomed only in the 1950s and 1960s under the charismatic leadership of Egypt's Gamal 'Abd al-Nasir². He traces the ideology's passage from the collapse of the Ottoman Empire through its triumphant ascendancy in the late 1950s with the unification of Egypt and Syria and the nationalist revolution in Iraq, to the mortal blow it received in the 1967 Arab defeat by Israel, and its eventual eclipse. Dawisha criticizes the common failure to distinguish between the broader, cultural phenomenon of "Arabism" and the political, secular desire for a united Arab state that defined Arab nationalism. Sylvia Kedourie, another intellectual of Arab nationalism, argues that Arab nationalism first emerged as a "sort of modern anti-colonial nationalism"³ against the Ottomans, catalysed when imperial administrators in Arab lands began acting less like Ottomans and more like Turks. This intellectual laid the foundation for political mobilization, anti-colonial resistance, and the desire for a united Arab state. Within this broader ideological framework, the question of Palestine became a central and defining issue. The creation of Israel in 1948, along with the displacement of Palestinians, was seen not just as a local territorial dispute but as a collective Arab cause. It represented the failure of Arab political unity and the ongoing colonial intrusion in the region. As a result, Palestine served as both a rallying point and a legitimizing symbol for Arab nationalist regimes and movements. Leaders like Gamal Abdel Nasser successfully rallied mass support by framing the Palestinian struggle as part of the greater effort for Arab unity and resistance to imperialism.

The post-2011 period, marked by the Arab Spring, has significantly transformed the concept of Arab nationalism⁴. The uprisings, initially driven by calls for political reform, economic justice, and social dignity, exposed deep structural issues within Arab nations. Instead of fostering renewed unity, these movements led to political division, civil wars, and the resurgence of state-centered interests. In countries such as Syria, Libya, and Yemen, the collapse of the state and ongoing violence have weakened the very foundation of Arab nationalism, particularly stable political communities capable of acting collectively. In this changed context, the relationship between Arab nationalism and the Palestinian question

has grown more complicated. While Palestine continues to hold symbolic and emotional importance throughout the Arab world, its role as the main focus of Arab political mobilization has diminished. Domestic issues, including economic crises, governance problems, and security concerns, have taken priority over transnational ideological commitments. Additionally, the normalization of relations between several Arab states and Israel reflects a pragmatic shift toward national interest-driven foreign policies, further weakening the traditional link between Arab nationalism and the Palestinian cause. At the same time, it would be misleading to suggest that Arab nationalism has entirely disappeared. Instead, it has undergone a process of transformation and reconfiguration. It persists as a cultural and symbolic framework, manifested in shared language, media discourse, and periodic expressions of solidarity during moments of crisis in Palestine.

This paper explores this evolving relationship by placing Arab nationalism within the larger context of regional changes after 2011. It aims to analyze how the division of the Arab world, the rise of state-focused policies, and shifting global alignments have reshaped the role of the Palestinian issue in Arab nationalist discussions. By combining historical analysis with theoretical perspectives, the study deepens understanding of how enduring ideological ideas adapt to changing political realities. Ultimately, understanding Arab nationalism and the Palestinian question in the post-2011 era requires moving beyond simple ideas of decline or survival. Instead, it involves recognizing the fluid and contested nature of identity, ideology, and politics in a region experiencing significant transformation.

Historical Linkages between Arab Nationalism and the Palestinian Cause

The connection between Arab nationalism and the Palestinian cause is deeply rooted in the historical development of the modern Middle East, especially amid colonial influence, territorial changes, and identity formation. From the beginning, Arab nationalism saw Palestine not just as a land dispute but as a symbol representing the collective hopes, grievances, and political future of the Arab world. This relationship gradually evolved through a series of pivotal events that influenced Arab political awareness and regional geopolitics. Its origins trace back to the early 1900s, during the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of Arab nationalist

sentiments. The Arab Revolt was a key moment in shaping Arab political identity, as Arab leaders sought independence from Ottoman rule with the backing of European powers. However, the later reveal of the Sykes–Picot Agreement and the establishment of British and French mandates caused widespread disappointment. These events highlighted the betrayal of Arab ambitions and made Palestine a central symbol of anti-colonial resistance.

The British Mandate in Palestine further deepened this connection. The Balfour Declaration of 1917⁵, which endorsed the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine, was widely seen by Arab nationalists as an extension of colonial control. As Jewish immigration grew and tensions increased, Palestine became a focus for political activism not only for Palestinians but also for Arabs throughout the region. The Palestinian struggle was increasingly portrayed as part of a broader Arab struggle against imperialism and foreign domination. The founding of Israel in 1948 and the subsequent 1948 Arab–Israeli War marked a turning point in strengthening the link between Arab nationalism and the Palestinian cause⁶. The defeat of Arab armies and the displacement of many Palestinians had significant psychological and political effects. For Arab nationalists, losing Palestine was not just a military loss but a symbol of collective failure and division. It supported the view that only through unity and coordinated efforts could the Arab world effectively face external threats.

After 1948, Arab nationalist regimes prioritized the Palestinian issue within their political agendas. Leaders such as Gamal Abdel Nasser elevated Palestine to a core element of pan-Arabism, emphasizing the link between Arab struggles and portraying Palestinian liberation as essential for restoring Arab dignity and sovereignty. During this period, Arab support for Palestine was formalized through regional bodies like the Arab League, which coordinated political and military efforts against Israel. The establishment of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1964 further cemented the connection between Arab nationalism and Palestinian representation⁷. Initially supported by Arab states, the PLO was designed to serve as the voice of the Palestinian people while advancing broader Arab nationalist goals. Nonetheless, this arrangement revealed tensions, as Palestinian leaders sought greater autonomy and independence from Arab state dominance.

Impact of the Arab Spring on Regional Politics

The Arab Spring was a crucial turning point in the political history of West Asia and North Africa, drastically changing regional power dynamics, government structures, and ideological perspectives. Initially sparked by widespread protests for political reform, economic justice, and social dignity, these uprisings quickly evolved into a complex and uneven process of change. While some countries experienced regime changes, others faced prolonged instability, civil wars, and shifting alliances. The impact of these events has been profound, affecting not only individual nations but also broader ideological movements, such as Arab nationalism and its connection to the Palestinian cause. A key and immediate outcome of the Arab Spring was the decline of central state authority in several nations. In countries like Syria, Libya, and Yemen, the uprisings escalated into violent conflicts, leading to state failure and humanitarian crises. These developments destabilized the traditional regional state system, creating power vacuums filled by militias, extremist groups, and outside actors. The diminished sovereignty of these states hampered regional cooperation, weakening the solidarity that historically supported Arab nationalist ideals. In contrast, some states managed to contain or suppress the uprisings, thereby reasserting authoritarian governance. Countries such as Egypt witnessed a brief period of political transition followed by the restoration of strong centralized authority. Similarly, Gulf monarchies, particularly Saudi Arabia, implemented a combination of economic measures and political controls to maintain stability. These varied outcomes highlight the uneven nature of the Arab Spring and its differentiated impact across the region. However, even in relatively stable states, the uprisings exposed underlying structural issues, including economic inequality, youth unemployment, and governance deficits.

The Arab Spring significantly reshaped regional geopolitics by weakening traditional Arab power centers and opening opportunities for external powers like the US, Russia, and Iran to increase their involvement. In Syria, the conflict attracted international attention, with multiple foreign countries supporting different sides. This globalized conflict has complicated efforts to stabilize the region and reduced Arab states' control over their political futures. Additionally, the Arab Spring led to the rise of non-state actors and new ideological movements. Islamist groups, particularly those connected to the Muslim Brotherhood, gained influence in several countries at the

start of the uprisings. Although their impact has varied, their rise marked a move away from the secular, state-centered Arab nationalist ideology. At the same time, sectarian and ethnic identities, especially Sunni–Shia divides and Kurdish autonomy aspirations, became more prominent, challenging the notion of a unified Arab identity and causing regional political fragmentation.

From a socio-political perspective, the Arab Spring introduced new modes of political engagement and participation. The extensive use of social media enabled the rapid dissemination of information and facilitated protest organization. This digital dimension not only transformed how political activism is conducted but also empowered a new generation of citizens who were less influenced by traditional nationalist narratives. These movements primarily focused on domestic issues such as governance, accountability, and economic opportunities rather than transnational concerns such as the Palestinian question. This shift significantly impacts the role of Arab nationalism in contemporary politics. Economically, the uprisings exacerbated existing challenges, resulting in decreased investment, trade disruptions, and increased fiscal pressures. These economic difficulties have compelled governments to prioritize domestic stability and growth over regional involvement. As a result, issues like Palestine, which once occupied a central role in Arab political discourse, have become secondary on many policy agendas.

Despite these challenges, the Arab Spring also generated a renewed sense of political consciousness and agency among Arab populations. It demonstrated the capacity of ordinary citizens to challenge entrenched power structures and demand change. While the outcomes have often fallen short of initial expectations, the uprisings have left a lasting imprint on the region's political culture. They have reshaped the relationship between state and society, fostering greater awareness of rights, responsibilities, and the possibilities of collective action.

Fragmentation and Decline of Pan-Arab Solidarity

Since 2011, West Asian politics has experienced significant fragmentation within the Arab world, marking a decline in pan-Arab solidarity, a key aspect of Arab nationalism. Historically, Arab nationalism centered on a collective Arab identity that transcended borders and political disputes. This unity was reinforced by common language, culture, and shared political issues, notably the

Palestinian cause. Nevertheless, the Arab Spring has substantially diminished this sense of cohesion, resulting in a more fragmented, state-centered regional landscape.

Civil conflicts in numerous Arab countries have significantly contributed to regional fragmentation. Countries like Syria, Libya, and Yemen have experienced prolonged instability characterized by internal divisions, foreign involvement, and humanitarian crises. These disputes have undermined state institutions and prevented effective regional cooperation. Instead of fostering unity, they have exposed underlying political, sectarian, and ideological splits within the Arab world. Additionally, the rise of subnational and ethnic identities has further complicated the regional scene. The push for Kurdish autonomy in parts of Syria and Iraq underscores the growing prominence of alternative identity groups that challenge the concept of a unified Arab nation. Tribal ties, regional loyalties, and local power dynamics have become increasingly important, particularly where state control has diminished.

Another key aspect of fragmentation is the divergence of state interests and foreign policy goals. In the post-Arab Spring era, Arab states have increasingly taken practical, interest-based approaches to regional and international relations. This change is clear in the normalization of ties between some Arab countries and Israel, a move that would have been unthinkable during the height of pan-Arab nationalism. Such decisions reflect a shift in national priorities, in which economic, security, and strategic factors outweigh ideological commitments to Arab unity or to collective causes such as Palestine. The weakening of regional institutions has also contributed to the decline of pan-Arab solidarity. Organizations like the Arab League, created to promote cooperation and collective decision-making among Arab countries, have struggled to respond effectively to regional crises⁸. Internal disagreements among member states, along with a lack of enforcement powers, have limited their capacity to mediate conflicts or coordinate collective actions. As a result, these institutions have lost much of their political relevance, further weakening the idea of Arab unity.

Economic disparities and rivalries among Arab nations have shaped the current fragmented landscape. Wealthy Gulf states like Saudi Arabia have adopted independent foreign policies to boost their regional influence, often at the cost of collective Arab efforts. Conversely, poorer countries have prioritized domestic issues, limiting their participation in wider regional affairs.

This divergence in economic interests has strengthened state-centered policies and undermined pan-Arab cooperation. The diminishing unity among Arab states has significant consequences for Palestine. Historically, Palestine has been a rallying point that has unified diverse factions and encouraged collective action. Today, however, support for Palestine is more inconsistent and selective. Although popular opinion in many Arab countries still supports the Palestinian cause, government policies tend to focus on national priorities rather than ideological solidarity. Despite this decline, it is important to recognize that pan-Arab solidarity has not entirely disappeared. It continues to exist in symbolic and cultural forms, particularly through shared media narratives, public discourse, and moments of collective outrage or empathy in response to crises. For example, escalations in the Palestinian territories often trigger widespread expressions of solidarity across the Arab world, demonstrating the enduring emotional resonance of Arab identity.

Role of the Arab League and Institutional Weakness

The Arab League has been a key institution in representing Arab nationalism, especially in relation to Palestine. Founded in 1945, it was designed to promote political alignment, economic collaboration, and collective security among Arab countries. Its goal was also to present a united Arab stance on major regional issues, with Palestine at the forefront. However, since 2011, its influence has waned due to internal splits, structural challenges, and the growing fragmentation within the Arab world. Historically, the League played a crucial role in shaping Arab responses to Israel's founding and subsequent Palestinian developments. It coordinated diplomatic and military efforts during conflicts and supported Palestinian institutions, such as the PLO. Through various resolutions and summits, the League aimed to keep Palestine central in Arab politics. Despite its limited impact, it served as a framework for Arab solidarity.

Since the Arab Spring, the Arab League has struggled to adjust to rapidly changing regional dynamics. The uprisings revealed big political and ideological differences among member states, which have hindered the organization's ability to develop coherent and unified responses to crises. In conflicts such as those in Syria, Libya, and Yemen, the League has largely been

ineffective at mediating disputes or facilitating resolution. Member states often pursue independent policies, supporting different factions and worsening regional divisions. A significant limitation of the Arab League is its institutional structure. The organization operates on consensus, making decision-making slow and frequently producing the lowest common denominator outcomes. Furthermore, the principle of state sovereignty, which the League strongly upholds, limits its capacity to intervene in the internal affairs of member states. This has been especially problematic in situations involving civil conflict or humanitarian crises, where decisive and coordinated action is needed. As a result, the League's role is often limited to issuing statements rather than taking concrete measures.

The divergence of national interests among member states has further diminished the League's effectiveness. In today's regional landscape, Arab countries increasingly focus on their own security, economic growth, and geopolitical goals rather than collective commitments. This shift is evident in the normalization of relations between several Arab nations and Israel, indicating a move from ideological loyalty to Palestine towards pragmatic cooperation. Such changes highlight the limits of the Arab League's capacity to enforce collective decisions or sustain a unified position on key issues. Regarding the Palestinian cause, the League's role has evolved as regional priorities have changed. Although it still officially supports Palestinian rights and advocates for a two-state solution, its influence has weakened. The growing independence of Palestinian groups and shifting alliances among Arab states have reduced the League's central role in guiding outcomes. Moreover, the fragmentation across the Arab world has made it increasingly difficult to present a united front on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.⁹ Despite these challenges, it would be inaccurate to dismiss the Arab League entirely. The organization remains an important symbolic and diplomatic forum, providing a space for dialogue and coordination among Arab states. It also plays a role in maintaining the visibility of the Palestinian issue on the international stage, even if its practical impact is limited.

Conclusion

Since 2011, Arab nationalism's stance on the Palestinian question has undergone a significant shift, influenced by political splits, evolving national priorities, and shifting regional dynamics. Historically, Arab

nationalism served as a cohesive ideology that placed Palestine at the heart of its political and moral ambitions. Yet, the aftermath of the Arab Spring has transformed this relationship, impacting both the scope and significance of Arab nationalist discourse in West Asia today. A prominent feature of this new phase is a move away from collective ideological dedication toward more pragmatic, state-centric strategies. This shift is notably evident in the normalization of relations between several Arab nations and Israel, particularly through the Abraham Accords. These agreements represent a departure from traditional Arab nationalist policies, which linked normalization with Israel to resolving the Palestinian cause. Instead, they reflect a prioritization of strategic, economic, and security interests.

Arab nationalism continues to serve as a cultural and symbolic framework based on shared language, media discourse, and historical memory. The Palestinian cause, in particular, holds emotional and moral significance for many Arab populations, often acting as a reference point during crises. Since 2011, Arab nationalism has shifted from a unified and mobilizing ideology to a more fragmented and flexible one. Although the Palestinian issue remains significant, it no longer occupies the central and unifying role it once had in Arab politics. Instead, it now exists within a complex mix of competing priorities, identities, and interests. Nevertheless, its symbolic importance remains strong, maintaining its role in the region's political and cultural landscape. Understanding this evolving relationship is essential to analyzing the future of both Arab nationalism and the Palestinian struggle in a

Middle East that is becoming more multipolar and contested.

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