The Arab *nahdha* began during the reign of Muhammad ʿAli in Egypt and expanded from there to *Bilad al-Sham*. Its characteristics became more apparent during the second half of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth. It was strongly influenced by events in bourgeois Europe and the socio-economic changes taking place within Arab society, especially the gradual move from state control of land to the development of private property in land, which was accompanied by the spread of capitalism and new notions of ownership and investment.

Beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century, a new ideology with two main branches came into existence, competing with the dominant Sufi philosophy: this was the ideology of the *nahdha* or enlightenment and of bourgeois alienation. This new ideology was divided into two main trends, Islamic renewal, and liberal secularism. Other trends emerged, ranging between Salafism and liberalism, nationalism and Islamism, as well as other trends occupying the middle ground between Salafism and various varieties of secularism.

With the rise of the national and patriotic movements in the 1950s and their concerns with ideas of social justice and socialist principles, it was thought that the age of the *nahdha* had come to an end, that it had achieved its objectives with the fulfillment of the aims of the independence movements and the rise of the modern nation-state.

It was also thought that the concerns of the *nahdha* did not go beyond the literary and scientific sphere, as can be seen in an article in *al-Majmuʿa al-ʿArabi* published in Damascus in 1924. However, its long-term objectives were not so limited, but included a number of social, intellectual and political goals which had significant influence in the Arab world at the time.

The main principles of the *nahdha* as enumerated by its various leaders were as follows:
- Eradicating illiteracy and ignorance, and attaining scientific knowledge
- Learning from and catching up with Western industry and technology
- Taking and applying positive lessons from Western society
- The liberation of women
- Purifying religion of beliefs and customs that have nothing to do with religion
- Calling for the universal application of rationality and logic
- Fighting oppression in all its forms
- Calling for democracy
- Demanding human rights and equality for all religions and sects
- Fighting tribalism, sectarianism, regionalism, and anything that might lead to divisions within the community (umma) or the nation
- Calling for an Islamic League (as had been suggested by al-Afghani and Rashid Rida)
- Calling for Arab nationalism and Arab unity
- Establishing a modern nation state governed by the rule of law
- Secularism (a demand of one of the two wings of the nahdha). In this case secularism did not meant the rejection of religion (as some people wanted) but was part of the basic principles of the movement calling for equality and civic rights. The Syrian national movement embodied the core principles of secularism in its struggle against the French mandate with its slogan ‘religion is for God and the nation is for all.’

It was not easy for the pioneers of the nahdha to spread their ideas in a political, social, and intellectual environment where their ideas had little resonance. The Syrian historian Muhammad Kurd ‘Ali summarises the situation: ‘people are secretive about three matters: their money, their opinions and their religion (dhahabihi wa dhahâbihi wa madhhabâhihi).’ The enlightened Shaykh Muhammad Bahjat al-Baytar described in one sentence his grandfather’s era (1253–1335 A.H) when people ascribed great importance to futile things, and believed in legends and nonsense: ‘It was an era when people clung to the past, and took things as they were without questioning whether they were right or wrong.’ This was only natural within such an intellectually stunted

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