Christopher Phillips


Nearly one hundred years have passed since the now-mythic Great Arab Revolt, the British-sponsored uprising of Arabian tribes under the leadership of Mecca’s Sharif Hussein against Ottoman rule during World War I. Historians have long since discredited the notion that the revolt was the expression of a broad-based Arab national movement, or that the Sharif was a selfless and even naive leader whose agenda was divorced from personal, dynastic, and religious considerations. Few would disagree, however, that the revolt inaugurated a century of political life in the Arabic-speaking lands in which the term “Arab” became a meaningful category of collective definition and political action. Indeed, the doctrine of Arab nationalism, which stipulated the existence of an Arab nation since time immemorial and insisted on the establishment of an appropriate political framework to express that nationhood, was elaborated upon and widely disseminated in the decades after World War I.

Even as the idea, and ideal, of one Arab nation achieved hegemonic status throughout the Arabic-speaking regions of the Near East and North Africa, the reality that emerged was a fractious and quarrelsome collection of Arab states and ruling elites. Demonstrating fidelity to Arab ideals was central to the legitimizing formula of the ruling elites of new entities, which often lacked the requisite amount of national and social cohesion. But Arab nationalism was also a stick by which domestic political opponents and regional rivals could beat the regimes. Hence Arab nationalism would both unite and divide, creating a heady but often toxic brew. At its peak, in the “heroic” era of Gamal Abdel Nasser, the revolutionary pan-Arabist vision posed a profound challenge to the existing political and socio-economic order. Ultimately, though, Nasser’s vision came up wanting, with the June 1967 Arab-Israeli War being its Waterloo, and a profound trauma for Nasser’s legions of followers. Ironically, more than four decades later, Egypt is witnessing a wave of nostalgia for Nasser and revived interest in his legacy following Egypt’s “Arab Spring” upheavals.

In 1979, Fouad Ajami’s trenchant analysis in *Foreign Affairs* (1979), his subsequent book, *The Arab Predicament* (1981), and Adeed Dawisha’s *Arab Nationalism in the 20th Century: From Triumph to Despair* (2003), announced the end of Pan-Arabism as a viable political project.1 One that was unable to offer to

---

the long-suffering and cynical Arab publics a solution to their autocratic and corrupt regimes, societal fissures, and unresolved tensions between religious-centered tradition and an increasingly globalized modernity. Nor did it appear to offer them what Nasser had promised, what Henry Kissinger once called the ultimate aphrodisiac: power (and the accompanying prestige and prosperity). The last two decades have made it amply clear that Arab states, both collectively and individually, have become substantially weaker, regionally and globally, vis-à-vis non-Arab regional powers and the international system as a whole, leading to the not unreasonable conclusion that the Arab state system was no longer a “system” but rather an unwieldy collection of entities struggling for individual survival within the broader Middle East region.

To be sure, some scholars, and particularly Arab ones, took issue with Ajami’s suggestion that Pan-Arabism could never come back. And they received a boost for their beliefs from the emergence of a new pan-Arab media, spearheaded by al-Jazeera television, beginning in the mid-1990s, which swiftly replaced state run media as the preferred source of information among the Arabic-speaking public. The al-Jazeera phenomenon, complemented by the spread of social media in recent years, and their role in the Arab Spring uprisings, seemed to reinforce the analysis of Marc Lynch2 and others that a broad Arab identity was making a comeback. Indeed, the fact that successful mass protests in Tunisia could swiftly trigger similar mass actions that cascaded back and forth across North Africa and the Arabic-speaking Middle East suggested that “being Arab” was, after all (or perhaps again becoming), a relevant marker of identity that transcended state boundaries and possessed renewed political significance.

So, after a generation of accumulated evidence pointing to the triumph of raison d’état over raison de la nation, has the wheel been turned back? Can one speak of a resurgent Arabism that transcends existing borders, and promises to help fashion a new regional order?

The answer, according to Christopher Phillips’ Everyday Arab Identity: The Daily Reproduction of the Arab World, is a clear “No.” But that certainly doesn’t meant Arab identity has ceased to exist. Rather, he says, it has taken on a new meaning. To tease out that meaning, his study poses three interrelated

---