

Exploring the Consolidation of Arab Nationalist
Narratives and Socialist Theory in the Ideologies of
Michel Aflaq and Gamal Abdel Nasser

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Abstract

This essay examines the role of history in the formation of the ideologies of Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt and Michel Aflaq of Syria, two renowned figureheads of the advent of Arab nationalism in the mid-20th century. It focuses on how Nasser's pan-Arab nationalism and Aflaq's Ba'athism understood and addressed the most urgent issues facing the fledgling nation-states of the post-World War II Arab Middle East during a period of great uncertainty and political turmoil. This thesis additionally analyzes each theorist's notion of "socialism" as it pertains to these unique historical and ideological frameworks. Through an analysis of their writings, speeches, and political activities, it illustrates how Nasser and Aflaq's philosophies envisioned socialism as the political embodiment of their Arab nationalist aspirations. It argues that this "Arab socialism" represented a medium through which national and supranational solidarity between Arabs could be cultivated and Western and Zionist influence could be undermined and resisted. It concludes with remarks on how the cases of Nasser and Aflaq can be used to better understand the phenomenon of socialism in the post-colonial Global South.

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Outline of Discussion

This essay is divided into multiple chapters. The first and second chapters outline the histories of Egypt and Syria from the commencement of British and French presence until just prior to the rise of pan-Arab nationalism and Ba'athism to political ascendancy. These chapters highlight the societal problems that were either created or intensified by the British occupation of Egypt and the French mandate over Syria. Chapters 3 and 4 investigate Nasser and Aflaq's comprehensions of the matters described in the previous chapters, including socioeconomic inequality, Western imperialism, and sectarianism, as well as relations with Israel. Moreover, these chapters underscore how Nasser and Aflaq formulated solutions to these endemic problems through a synthesis of socialist theory and Arab nationalist themes of unity. Finally, Chapter 5 summarizes this discussion and concludes the essay by placing Nasser's Egypt and Ba'athist Syria within the context of the greater trend of leftist nationalism in the Third World.

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Chapter 1: Egypt Under British Occupation

i) Fortifying the Cotton Economy (1882-1914)

By the time British forces arrived in Egypt in 1882, conditions in the Ottoman territory had already begun to resemble those of a European colony. The ruling Muhammad Ali dynasty that commenced in 1805 was marked by extensive reforms aimed at modernizing domestic infrastructure and integrating Egypt into the global trade economy. Vast swathes of land were nationalized and allocated to cotton agriculture, Egypt's main cash crop. Land was redistributed in sizeable proportions in the form of grants to friends and family of the ruler and sold to wealthy Egyptians, foreign settlers, and European firms. Large sums of public funding were devoted to mechanizing cotton production processes, and coastal port cities such as Alexandria and Damietta became epicenters of trade with Europe. The ruling dynasty additionally financed massive infrastructural projects, relying heavily upon European labor and capital investment to do so. The most expansive and ambitious of these was the Suez Canal, which quickly became an important shipping route to South and East Asia for European powers.¹

By the 1870's, having squandered much of its revenue on military campaigns, the dynasty found itself crippled under heavy debts to European investors and was eventually forced to cede its shares in the Suez and numerous other properties to its French and British financiers. Resentment from the local population towards Western influence reached a boiling point in 1878 when a military faction led by Ahmad 'Urabi attempted to overthrow the government of Khedive Tewfik. Fearing that the rise of an anti-Western authority in Egypt would endanger the security of their investments, British and French naval forces were dispatched to Alexandria in 1882 to

¹ Hourani, Albert. *A History of the Arab Peoples*: Updated edition. Faber & Faber, 2013, pp. 289.

quell the revolt.² Following a bombardment of the city, the British army instigated an invasion of Egypt and the Sudan, reinstating the Khedive and effectively assuming control of the region.

Although the occupation was purported to be temporary, it ultimately endured until 1956.³

The immense socioeconomic inequality that had already existed in Egypt at this juncture in its history was exacerbated after British occupation. Under the “veiled protectorate”, headed by British diplomat Lord Cromer, emphasis on cotton production continued and expanded. Land that had been mortgaged by the government to the British to pay off debts was purchased by wealthy landowners and businesses, further concentrating its supply into fewer hands. Over forty percent of arable land was in the possession of large owners by the start of World War I, about half of whom were non-Egyptians.⁴ Furthermore, the Cromer administration supervised several infrastructural development projects to facilitate the cotton trade. Modifications were made to the Nile’s irrigation system, including the opening of the Aswan Low Dam in 1902, and networks of canals were constructed to link plantations to water sources. Nominally, these assets belonged to the Egyptian state, but were funded almost exclusively by British capitalists. A banking system was set up by the British to manage the proceeds from the cotton trade, placing the occupiers in firm control of the Egyptian monetary supply.⁵

While the boom in the Egyptian cotton industry brought in a plethora of new wealth, nearly all of it was absorbed by the landed elite, who in turn, proceeded to buy even more plots from small landowners. The price of land went up sharply along with its decreasing availability, making it harder for small farmers to maintain their properties and often forcing them to sell their

² Porter, Andrew. *The Oxford History of the British Empire: The Nineteenth Century. Vol. 3.* Oxford University Press on Demand, 1999, pp. 653-654.

³ Cleveland, William L., and Martin Bunton. *A History of the Modern Middle East.* Hachette UK, 2016, pp. 104.

⁴ Hourani, 289

⁵ Cleveland and Bunton, 104-105

assets to avoid bankruptcy. This phenomenon, combined with the rapid increase in the overall size of the Egyptian population, translated into a steep growth in the number of landless peasants, thereby driving down the cost of labor exponentially. Many found themselves working for meager compensation on cotton plantations or the estates of the wealthy. Consequently, Egypt under the British essentially morphed into a feudalist colonial society.⁶

ii) **World War I, the Wafd Party, and Independence (1914-1923)**

In 1914, following its declaration of war with the Ottomans, Britain claimed a protectorate over Egypt and the Sudan, instating a new ruling dynasty dubbed the Sultanate of Egypt. The protectorate became the British army's main base for its campaign against the Empire. Over the course of these Sultanate years, the first nationalist sentiments in Egypt started to take shape. Novel themes of social critique and nationalist imagination began to appear in the writings of Arab intellectuals such as Mahmud Taymur, Taha Husayn, and Ahmad Shawqi.⁷

The Wafd Party emerged in late-1918 as the first major nationalist organization in Egypt's history. It was formed by a group of landed Arab noblemen led by Saad Zaghlul, an educated legal professional from a modest background.⁸ Its platform was simple; it demanded a lifting of the protectorate in favor of a constitutional monarchy with a democratically elected legislature.⁹ Within a matter of months, the party attained a significant following among the Egyptian working class and peasantry. In response, the British punctually exiled Zaghlul and the other party leaders to Malta in March of 1919. This move inevitably backfired, as their ousting was received with outrage by the Egyptian population. Strikes and demonstrations were rapidly

⁶ Porter, 659-660

⁷ Hourani, 341-343

⁸ Cleveland and Bunton, 195

⁹ Osman, Tarek, *Egypt on the Brink*, (Yale University Press, 2010), pp. 26.

organized by legal students and professionals in support of the party, shutting down the court system. The laborers and peasantry also rallied in support of Zaghlul. The unrest culminated into a full-fledged revolution which was suppressed by the occupying forces and resulted in over 2200 Egyptian casualties.¹⁰ Hoping to appease the demonstrators, the British allowed the Wafd delegation to travel to the Paris Peace Conference that year. Despite their failure to attain support for the independence cause, the British nonetheless allowed the delegation to return to Egypt to participate in negotiations on the future of the state. After a brief period of deadlock, Britain acknowledged Egyptian independence in 1922, but reserved four key privileges in the new nation's internal affairs:

- “(a) The security of the communications of the British Empire in Egypt;
- (b) The defence of Egypt against all foreign aggression or interference, direct or indirect;
- (c) The protection of foreign interests in Egypt and the protection of minorities;
- (d) The Soudan.”¹¹

Britain was thus able to maintain substantial sway over Egypt's domestic and foreign affairs whilst sustaining its occupation. In 1923, the Egyptian constitution was drafted, which changed the Sultan's title to King and created an Egyptian parliament. The new constitution granted the monarch the ability to dissolve the parliament and appoint and demote the prime minister unilaterally, impeding the power of the legislature.¹²

iii) The Illiberal State (1924-1952)

The Wafd party won an overwhelming majority of seats in the inaugural elections the following year and Zaghlul was chosen as the Kingdom of Egypt's first prime minister. Despite its dominance over the parliament however, Wafd found difficulty in governing the country

¹⁰ Cleveland and Bunton, 195

¹¹ Source: Declaration to Egypt by His Britannic Majesty's Government (February 28, 1922).

¹² Cleveland and Bunton, 197

effectually. British and other foreign oligarchs and corporations continued to hold tremendous influence over the Egyptian economy and resources, including the highly-profitable Suez Canal. This, in turn, allowed them to affect policy-making and elections considerably. Moreover, the interests of the party were regularly at odds with those of the first King Fuad, who was able to assert his authority by collaborating with the British. Fuad, whose reign lasted until his death in 1936, frequently exercised his right to shut down the parliament, which itself was limited in its capacity to produce substantive legislation, given the conditions of the constitution and the occupation. As a result, the parliamentary system was rendered practically ineffective and the state of Egyptian society stayed largely the same as it had been prior to independence.¹³

As the status quo persisted throughout the 1920's and 30's, the Wafd party began to lose favor with Egypt's lower classes. After Zaghloul's death in 1927, many became disenchanted with the party, which still predominantly consisted of members of the landed gentry. One of its principle detractors was its steadfast adherence to European social values, which were perceived as elitist and alien by the peasantry. Secularism, still a rather new concept to a primarily agrarian society, was particular cause for disillusionment among the working classes. Amidst this demand for reform and orthodoxy, the Muslim Brotherhood was founded by Hasan al Banna in 1928. Much like the Wafd movement in the leadup to independence, the organization found appeal among Egyptians across multiple aspects of the stratified society. Banna's philosophy envisioned a modern Egyptian polity, but with the Quran as the guiding ethical code of its legal and social institutions, a message that reverberated with traditionalists and moderates alike. Furthermore, the Brotherhood generated a number of sympathizers through its social and economic programs. It constructed schools, provided food and medical services to impoverished communities, formed

¹³ Cleveland and Bunton, 197

amicable relationships with organized labor, and created cooperative-style business ventures. Unimpeded by political bureaucracy, the Brotherhood could accommodate to the local populations at a level which the state could not.¹⁴

British military activities in Egypt during the Second World War emphatically underscored the illegitimacy of Egyptian sovereignty. Despite the state's desire to remain neutral, Egypt once again became a hub for British forces in the Mediterranean. The Suez, a crucial supply route for the British, was closed off to Axis ships in 1939. Consequently, northern Egypt became subject to Italian and German aggression in 1940 and 1942 respectively. The country's export-oriented economy suffered immensely during the war years, causing widespread shortages and inflation. In addition, the British took measures to ensure its interests would continue to be accounted for by the Egyptian government. After the collapse of another parliament in 1942, then-King Faruq appeared poised to install pro-Axis politician Ali Mahir as head of state. However, after a meeting with British diplomat Miles Lampson, Faruq ultimately decided to form a Wafd government rather than face the threat of deposition by the occupying forces. This proceeding, which became known as the February 4th Incident, not only highlighted the monopolistic power of the British over Egyptian internal affairs, but also severely damaged Wafd's credibility as a genuine nationalist movement.

By World War II's conclusion, the faulty character of Egyptian liberalism and autonomy had become apparent to its population. Although the economy had regressed, the war had forced Egypt to become more self-sufficient, boosting the relevance of its labor unions in its politics.¹⁵ The combination of these factors would facilitate the revolutionary changes that would occur in Egypt in the next decade.

¹⁴ Cleveland and Bunton, 200

¹⁵ Cleveland and Bunton, 202-203

Chapter 2: Syria under French Mandate

i) The Arab Revolt and the Partition of the Middle East (1916-1923)

In June 1916, a coalition of Arab militias loyal to Sherif Hussein of Mecca launched a revolt against the forces of the Ottoman Empire. Hussein had secretly been negotiating with British Lieutenant Sir Henry McMahon since the previous summer and had agreed to call for insurrection in exchange for the latter's diplomatic support of the inception of an Arab national entity under his leadership. The parameters of this proposed state were never fully agreed upon. The British consented to Hussein's control of the Arabian Peninsula, Mesopotamia, and most of the Levant, but refused to condone the inclusion of the Syrian coast, as this area had already been claimed by France in the covert Sykes-Picot Agreement. The finality of this issue was eventually postponed until after the war's conclusion; the terms of this correspondence would later become the source of discontent from the Sharif and later generations of Arab nationalists.¹⁶

Hoping to rally the Arabs of the northern provinces around the cause, Hussein publicly denounced the Ottomans as enemies of Islam. Nevertheless, the revolt was only supported by a minority of the Arab population. Most of the Empire's Arabs conceived of themselves as Ottomans and therefore viewed the revolt as an act of treason. Its greatest presence was in the Hejaz but would later see a slight increase in its numbers as battalions under the command of Hussein's son Faisal advanced towards Syria and the likelihood of Ottoman victory grew slimmer.¹⁷ Once Damascus had been won in 1918 and the war had reached its conclusion, Faisal attempted to consolidate the whole of Syria, including Greater Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan under military rule, claiming the land for the promised Arab nation. In March of 1920, a group of delegates from the former provinces of Ottoman Syria declared an independent Arab Kingdom

¹⁶ Cleveland and Bunton, 159-160

¹⁷ Murphy, David. *The Arab Revolt 1916-18: Lawrence Sets Arabia Ablaze*. Osprey Publishing, 2008, pp. 59.

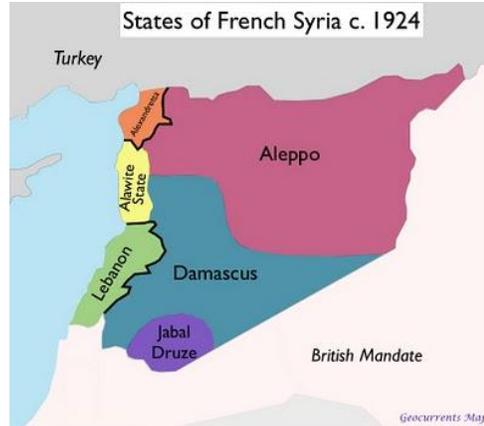
of Syria with Faisal as its leader. The self-entitled Syrian National Congress failed to gain the recognition of the Allied European powers however, as the French refused to relinquish its claim over Syria and Lebanon. In July of that year, Faisal was forced to surrender the short-lived kingdom to the French, who threatened to forcibly depose him otherwise. After swiftly defeating a small resistance force in the Battle of Maysalun, the French army sieged Damascus and imposed a mandate over Syria. Over the next three years, the French would have to persistently utilize its military to quell uprisings across the region.¹⁸ Meanwhile, the British were granted protectorates over Iraq, Transjordan and Palestine by the League of Nations, and the French Mandate for Syria and Lebanon was finalized on September 29th, 1923.¹⁹

ii) The Mandate Period (1923-1946)

The French mandatory administration in Syria and Lebanon was deliberately designed to emphasize the region's religious diversity, thereby hindering the potential for a nationalist uprising of the sort that Egypt was experiencing at the time. Not long after the invasion of 1920, General Henri Gouraud separated the Mandate into six states, with the intent of segregating the various major sects of the Syrian demographic: the Alawite State, Mount Druze, the autonomous Sanjak of Alexandretta (predominately ethnic Turks), Damascus (majority Sunni), Aleppo (also Sunni), and the State of Greater Lebanon, which was largely populated by Maronite Christians.

¹⁸ Antonius, George. *The Arab Awakening: The Story of the Arab National Movement*. Pickle Partners Publishing, 2015, pp. 105-106.

¹⁹ The American Journal of International Law Vol. 17, No. 3, Supplement: Official Documents (July, 1923), pp. 177-182.



Source: <https://www.globalresearch.ca/france-seeking-old-mandate-in-syria/5479893>

Unlike the other communities in Syria, the majority of Maronites welcomed the arrival of the French. Having spent centuries under Islamic rule, many of them held nationalist aspirations of their own and were encouraged by the creation of Greater Lebanon. From 1924-1930, the French introduced a political union of Damascus and Aleppo called the State of Syria, marginalizing the Druze and Alawite sects and cementing the predominance of a Sunni nobility in the mandate's political and economic domains.²⁰

Contrary to the British Mandates of the Middle East, France took a rather direct approach to the governance of Syria. Although locally-represented municipal, regional, and statewide administrations were put into place, French emissaries were installed at each level with the capacity to override any course of action. Naturally, this discouraged middle-class Syrians from political participation, and local politics devolved into a competition for status between indigenous elites.²¹ To further stifle nationalist momentum, the French encouraged the underprivileged minority groups to pursue upward mobility through careers in the Syrian Legion, a locally recruited military force founded by the occupiers in 1920. Over the course of the 1920's

²⁰ Cleveland and Bunton, 218

²¹ Cleveland and Bunton, 222

and 30's, the French established and staffed multiple military training facilities. The most prestigious of these was the Homs Military Academy, which was attended by several individuals who would become prominent figures in national politics after independence, including members of the al-Assad and al-Atassi families. Because the wealthy Sunni mercantile families generally refrained from sending their sons to military service, the Legion was largely comprised of Alawites, Druze, and Christians. This insured the French against the possibility of a nationalist initiative by the Syrian Sunnis and would have significant repercussions for the country after the mandate ended in 1946.²²

Having expended a great deal of lives and finances to extinguish the incredibly violent Great Syrian revolt of 1925-27, the French understood that they needed to provide some roadmap for autonomy to the Syrians or risk future conflict. In 1928, a group of Syrian aristocrats formed a pro-independence coalition called the National Bloc, which became the main political representative in negotiations with the French. In 1930, the Bloc signed a constitution drafted by the French which superseded the state system with the Republic of Syria, a democratic entity which expanded the entire mandate, apart from Greater Lebanon. While this finally gave the population some leverage in national politics, much like the Egyptian parliament, the Syrian legislature was restricted by the terms of the new constitution that set limits on the breadth of policies that it could create and gave the French absolute veto power over all decisions. In 1936, it appeared that the independence process had begun when both parties agreed in principle to the Franco-Syrian Treaty of Independence. Progress never yielded though, as political turmoil in France caused by the outbreak of World War II halted negotiations. Three years later, the constitution was suspended, the states of Alawite and Mount

²² Farouk-Alli, Aslam. "Sectarianism in Alawi Syria: Exploring the Paradoxes of Politics and Religion." *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 34.3 (2014): 207-226.

Druze were redrawn, and Alexandretta (now called the Hatay State) was subsumed by the Republic of Turkey.²³ It was not until 1945, after numerous violent confrontations with the local populations of both Syria and Lebanon and British diplomatic intervention, that the French finally agreed to terminate their mandate. The last French troops left Syria the following year.²⁴

iii) Independence and the Chaotic Republic (1946-1958)

The first twelve years of independent Syria were characterized by internal volatility and frequent regime changes. Deprivation of self-governance during the French mandate had left Syrian society with frail public institutions, and years of internal division under the state system had catalyzed sectarianism, leaving the population without a shared notion of national identity. Democratic governance in the new nation did not last long; three separate military coups occurred in the year 1949 alone, followed by a fourth in 1954. It was clear that the Syrian armed forces represented the only facet of society capable of instilling any kind of political order. The support of the military would prove to be a critical factor in the eventual rise of Ba'athism.

Chapter 3: Gamal Abdel Nasser and pan-Arab Nationalism

i) Background and Rise to Power

Gamal Abdel Nasser was born in 1918 in Alexandria to working-class Egyptian parents. He took an interest in nationalism and the history of European imperial activity in the Middle East from an early age. As a student he was politically active and participated in protests against British occupation. During his young adulthood, he read many books on prominent nationalists and militant strongmen including Napoleon, Alexander the Great, and Mustafa Kemal, as well as

²³ Hourani, 330-331

²⁴ Cleveland and Bunton, 230

numerous historical texts on British campaigns in the Eastern Mediterranean. He was also an admirer of Egyptian nationalists from the previous generation like Ahmad Shawqi.²⁵

After completing his schooling, Nasser pursued a career in the Egyptian Armed Forces, through which he formed key relationships with other nationalists, including Abdel Hakim Amer and Anwar al-Sadat. The three of them would eventually ascend to the rank of officer and began to collude the formation of a group of dissident military leaders. Following their service in the Arab-Israeli War of 1948, they founded the Association of Free Officers, a secret organization of Egyptian officers led by Nasser with the goal of overthrowing the monarchy and expelling the British from the country. The Arabs' rather swift defeat in the war attracted several new members to the Free Officers, including decorated general and eventual group public figurehead Mohamed Naguib. In 1952, the Free Officers instigated a successful coup, ousting King Farouq and appointing Naguib President of Egypt. Disputes between the movement, renamed the Revolutionary Command Council upon its seizure of power, and Naguib led to the latter's forced resignation and placement under house arrest in 1954. Nasser took his place as chairman of the RCC and succeeded him as President two years later, a position he held until his death in 1970.²⁶

ii) **On the Mutual Struggle of Arabs**

The most fundamental assumption of Nasserist thought is the understanding that "Arabs", a concept which encompasses all Arabic-speaking peoples of the Middle East and North Africa, make up a single people. Nasser constructs this view based on three key unifying elements: a shared historical experience, the centrality of Islam in the Arab world, and the geographic

²⁵ "The Books Gamal Abdel Nasser Used to Read, 1. During his Secondary School Years". Bibliotheca Alexandrina. Retrieved 2 April 2018.

²⁶ Aburish, Said K. *Nasser: The Last Arab*. Macmillan, 2004.

contiguity of the Arab states.²⁷ The motif of a mutual “Arab destiny” is prevalent in his 1954 manifesto *Egypt’s Liberation: The Philosophy of the Revolution*. In it, he calls on Egyptians to recognize that their civic duties reside not only within Egyptian borders and among Egyptians, but also among the entirety of the Arab community:

“If anybody tells me that place for [Egyptians] means this capital where we live, I differ with him. And if anyone tells me that place for [Egyptians] means the political boundaries of our country, I also differ... gone are the days in which barbed wire served as demarcation lines, separating and isolating countries from one another. No country can escape looking beyond its boundaries to find the source of the currents which influence it...”²⁸

In this passage, Nasser stresses that the political well-being of Egypt is intimately and inseparably tied to the well-being of its Arab neighbors. His view is that the social and political problems plaguing Egypt in the mid-20th century are mirrored in the other Arab nations, and thus it would be inadequate for Egyptians to adopt an introspective attitude towards them.

Not only does Nasser advocate for Egypt to play a proactive role in this ‘Arab circle’, but also a leading one. His conviction is grounded in his interpretation of history, which was molded by his appreciation for strong and charismatic leaders:

“The pages of history are full of heroes who created for themselves roles of glorious valor which they played at decisive moments... it seems to me that within the Arab circle there is a role, wandering aimlessly in search of a hero...this role...has at last settled down...near the borders of our country and is beckoning us to move, to take up its lines, to put on its costume, since no one else is qualified to play it”.²⁹

In the last line of this passage from *Egypt’s Liberation*, Nasser points out the unique and advantageous position that his country found itself in following the Revolution of 1952. Believing it to be the only Arab nation to have fully rid itself of imperialism, Nasser was convinced of Egypt’s responsibility to take initiative in the mutual struggle of Arabs.

²⁷ Nasser, Gamal Abdel. *Egypt's Liberation the Philosophy of the Revolution*. (1955), pp. 88-89.

²⁸ Nasser, 84

²⁹ Nasser, 87-88

Nasser's pan-Arabist outlook was incredibly formative throughout his tenure as President, as Egypt did indeed emerge as an Arab cultural and political leader in many ways. Nasser pushed for and spearheaded regional collaboration in a number of political platforms, including pressing for the creation of a joint security policy through the Arab League, organizing military retaliation against Israel in the Six-Day War of 1967, and serving as the first and only head of the United Arab Republic, a merger between Egypt and Syria that lasted from 1958 to 1961. In addition, Nasser made the promotion of Arab nationalist causes a high priority of his regime. He provided extensive logistic and military aid to the Arab nationalist Yemen Arab Republic during the North Yemen Civil War and lobbied for independence movements in the French-occupied Maghreb.³⁰ He also sent hundreds of Egyptian academics to other Arab countries, with the intent of encouraging nationalist political activism among the youth.³¹ Finally, Nasser made frequent appearances on Egyptian public radio, which broadcast across the Arab world, through which he would preach his message of transnational Arab solidarity.³²

iii) On Western Imperialism and Zionism

Nasser was highly critical of Western imperialism in the Arab world, which he considered to be the root cause of injustice in the region. In *Egypt's Liberation*, he again defends this claim through his analysis of history, highlighting the events of the 1948 Arab-Israeli War as evidence of the ubiquity of the imperialist threat to the Arab circle³³. He argues that, because the

³⁰ Podeh, Elie, and Onn Winckler. *Rethinking Nasserism: Revolution and Historical Memory in Modern Egypt*. University Press of Florida, 2004.

³¹ Tsourapas, Gerasimos. "Nasser's Educators and Agitators across al-Watan al-'Arabi: Tracing the Foreign Policy Importance of Egyptian Regional Migration, 1952-1967." *British Journal of Middle eastern studies* 43.3 (2016): 324-341.

³² Aburish, 135-136

³³ Nasser, 98

experience of imperialism is one that is shared by the whole of the Arab circle, it is therefore imperative that all Arab nations confront this threat in unison:

“...imperialism is the great force that is imposing a murderous, invisible siege upon the whole region...when all these truths had impressed themselves upon me, I began to realize the need for a common struggle...so long as the region is one region, sharing the same conditions and problems, and the same future (and...the same enemy)...why do we scatter our efforts?”³⁴

Nasser’s calls for Arab unity are motivated in large part by what he sees as an urgent need for resistance. His conception of the “shared destiny” of the Arab world emphasizes this urgency. The ‘menace’ of imperialism can not be confronted by one country alone as the affliction of one Arab nation will inevitably affect the entire Arab community.

Furthermore, Nasser argues that the discordant impact of imperialism on Arab unity is not a circumstantial development, but the result of a deliberate effort of the imperial powers to divide the Arab people. He backs this assertion by pointing out the reactions of the West to the attempts of Egypt and other Arab nations to distance themselves from its influence and attain self-sufficiency. For example, in a 1957 interview with the London Times, when asked about his thoughts on the Eisenhower Doctrine, an American foreign policy initiative which sought to inhibit the spread of communism to the Middle East by promising developmental assistance, Nasser replied by questioning the legitimacy of US goals in the region:

“We look to the American policy [as being] in connection with nationalism in the Middle East. Because we feel that what is dominating in the Middle East now is nationalism, not communism. There is no spread of communism in the Middle East after the [Egyptian] revolution”.³⁵

Nasser was a vehement anti-communist, and organized crackdowns on communist groups in Egypt in the mid-1950’s, and on Syrian groups after the formation of the United Arab Republic.

³⁴ Nasser, 103

³⁵ Iconic. “Gamal Abdel Nasser talking about the bad relations between Great Britain and Egypt”. Online video clip. *Youtube*, 8 December 2010. Web. 4 April 2018.

He thereby discredits American foreign policy in the Middle East as a disguised campaign to undermine Arab nationalism and refused to accept US aid during his Presidency. Nasser thus understood imperialism as both an obstacle to Arab unity and a reason for the necessity of Arab unity at once.

Although his primary concern was the emancipation of the Arab world, Nasser also believed that Egyptian responsibility extended to the rest of the African continent. He articulates this internationalist conviction in the following passage from *Egypt's Liberation*:

“...the white man, representing various European nations, is again trying to re-divide the map of Africa. We shall not, in any circumstance, be able to stand idly by...in the false belief that it will not affect or concern us. I will continue to dream of the day when I will find in Cairo a great African institute dedicated to...sharing with others from all over the world the work of advancing the welfare of the peoples of this continent”³⁶

Nasser's developing world solidarity was reflected in his joining with India and Yugoslavia to establish the Non-Aligned Movement in 1956 and his government's support for independence movements in South Africa and other sub-Saharan African colonies.

Nasser viewed the Israeli state as an offshoot of Western imperial powers; to him Zionism and imperialism were synonymous. He publicly spoke on the topic of Israel on many occasions. In one speech, he described how Israel was created by the West in order to enforce its domination over the Middle East after the Arab states' independence:

“Israel, who [the West] planted among the Arab nation is nothing but the head bridge for imperialism, waiting for the right opportunity to attack us and destroy Arab nationalism and unity”.³⁷

It is worth noting that Nasser refers to the whole of the Arab world as one “Arab nation”. He deliberately invokes the image of a foreign entity in the midst of a larger Arab homeland, rather

³⁶ Nasser, 110-111

³⁷ SawtakTV. “Gamal Abdel Nasser-[English Subtitles]- Part4”. Online video clip. *Youtube*, 11 May 2010. Web. 4 April 2018.

than simply 'Palestine', because it accentuates the geographic discontinuity caused by Israel's inception, as well as the religious, political, and cultural rift that it has created. He likens the state to a 'head bridge' to exemplify the West's ability to disrupt cooperation between the Arabs by bolstering Israel and Zionism. Hence, with regards to the question of Israel, Nasser is again adamant that only united Arab action is capable of prevailing. In a speech following his 1965 reelection, Nasser utilizes the idea of unified struggle in his depiction of forthcoming confrontation with Israel over Palestine:

“Our path to Palestine will not be covered with a red carpet or with yellow sand. Our path to Palestine will be covered with blood... In order that we may liberate Palestine, the Arab nation must unite, the Arab armies must unite, and a unified plan of action must be established”.³⁸

For Nasser therefore, conflict with Israel is part of the Arabs' overarching political and ideological battle against the West.

iv) On Socialism

A series of elaborate socialist reforms and policies were passed during the Revolutionary Command Council's eighteen-year rule over Egypt. In 1952, not long after the Free Officers' coup d'état, the new Egyptian regime imposed land reforms aimed at alleviating the extreme disparity in ownership that had existed since at least the Muhammad Ali dynasty. The reforms were enacted via Law Number 178, which along with setting caps on individual land ownership, placed regulations on land pricing, mandated a minimum wage for agricultural workers, and facilitated the reallocation of excess land to the peasantry. The move was received favorably among Egypt's labor unions and working classes.³⁹

³⁸ Karsh, Efraim. *Islamic Imperialism: A History*. Yale University Press, 2013, pp. 162.

³⁹ Abdel-Malek, Anwār. *Egypt*, Military Society. Vintage Books, 1968.

Nasser's ideological rationale for wealth and land redistribution was ingrained in a similar theme of liberation from oppression that characterized his anti-imperialism. He considered the feudalistic material conditions of Egypt prior to 1952 to be abhorrent and sought to reorganize the economy in a more equitable way. Nasser summarizes his view of socialism as an ideology dedicated to the preservation of working peoples' fundamental rights and the eradication of greed in the following excerpt from a public address:

“The farmer, socialism gives him his rights. Opportunities, socialism gives it to everyone. Healthcare, socialism provides. Feudalism, socialism abolishes...and transforms society from one of owners and slaves to a free society...Socialism is to give a person his humanity and...rights in life...Socialism is when everyone works for the sake of the dear society”.⁴⁰

Nasser's conception of socialism is founded in his desire to encourage the progression of Egyptian society. The notion of a people working on behalf of a greater good reverberates his ideal of unity in the name of overcoming adversity. Moreover, in this excerpt, Nasser makes clear that socialism is about more than changing material conditions; it is a means through which the nature of society can transition from factional and conflict-prone to cohesive and free. Egypt from 1882-1952 was marked by sectarian, racial, and socioeconomic stratification. Through socialism, Nasser was confident that he could foster a sense of fraternity and patriotism among Egyptians, and in doing so, develop a modern national polity.

Nasser was undeterred by the popular Islamist contention that socialism contradicts the teachings of the Quran. In the same he speech, he discredits these challenges by equating the leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood and other traditionalist dissenting groups to the country's rich. He argues that these individuals wish to preserve the status quo not because of their religious convictions, but because they are beneficiaries of the exploitation of workers.

⁴⁰ Der Untermensch. “Jamal Abdel Nasser defines Socialism in his own words”. Online video clip. *Youtube*, 7 July 2016. 4 April 2018.

Lastly, Nasser's socialism was used as a tool to weaken Western economic power in Egypt. Perhaps his most popular act as President was his nationalization of the Suez Canal in defiance of Britain, France, and Israel. In his July 1956 speech announcing the nationalization of the Suez, Nasser incorporates the socialist idea of capitalist exploitation of labor to accentuate the extent to which he believes Egypt has been deprived by European control of the canal:

“Egypt undertook to supply labor to dig the Canal by corvée of which 120,000 died without getting paid ... This Canal is an Egyptian canal... Britain has forcibly grabbed our rights, our 44% of its shares... We shall not let imperialists or exploiters dominate us. We shall not let history repeat itself once more. We have gone forward to build a strong Egypt. We go forward towards political and economic independence...”⁴¹

Nasser was convinced that genuine autonomy from the West must include a secession of the Egyptian economy from dependence on Western capital. His government's decision to take possession of this and all other foreign properties in the country was emblematic of socialism as a form of resistance to imperialism.

Chapter 4: Michel Aflaq and Ba'athism

i) Background

Michel Aflaq was born in Damascus in 1905 to Greek Orthodox Christian parents who made a living as grain merchants. After completing his baccalaureate, he travelled to Paris to study philosophy at Sorbonne. While there, he developed an interest in Marxist theory, as well as continental philosophers Friedrich Hegel and Henri Bergson.⁴² Aflaq returned to Syria in 1932 and joined the Syrian Communist Party. After several years of involvement with the party, Aflaq eventually abandoned communist politics after the failure of Franco-Syrian independence negotiations. Aside from having significant ideological differences with the communists, he was

⁴¹ “Nasser, Gamal Abdel. “Speech announcing the nationalization of the Suez Canal Company.”, 26 July 1956. Alexandria. Public Address.

⁴² Roberts, David. *The Ba'ath and the Creation of Modern Syria (RLE Syria)*. Routledge, 2013, pp. 15-17.

critical of the party's approving stance towards progressive French Prime Minister Leon Blum and his decision to delay the independence process.⁴³ Aflaq went on to co-create his own political party called *Ihya al-Arabi* or "the Arab Revival" with fellow nationalist and Sorbonne alumnus Salah al-Din Bitar. The party's philosophy consisted of a consolidation of Arab nationalism, anti-imperialism, and socialist leanings. It would later merge with Zaki al-Arsuzi's Arab Ba'ath Movement and officially became the Arab Ba'ath Party in 1947.⁴⁴

The party experienced a growth in membership following Syria's loss in the Arab-Israeli War of 1948. Aflaq and Bitar were dissatisfied with each of the brief regimes that came to power in the early years of Syrian independence, publishing censorious articles on them in the party newsletter *Al Ba'ath*. In 1952, then-president Adib al-Shishakli declared one-party rule in Syria, forcing the Ba'athist leaders to take refuge in Lebanon to avoid arrest. It was during this time that Aflaq and Bitar convened with Akram al-Hawrani of the Arab Socialist Party. They agreed to amalgamate their parties to form the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party, and collaborated with other facets of the Syrian left to organize the eventual overthrow of Shishakli in 1954. Having reestablished their presence in Syria, Aflaq was subsequently chosen as party leader.⁴⁵

During Syria's brief stint as part of the United Arab Republic, Aflaq was forced to disband the Ba'ath party. The dissolution of the union created a rift in the party, which became more of a disjointed coalition of Nasserist converts, Ba'athists, and unaffiliated Arab nationalists. By the early 1960's, Ba'athism had become a prominent ideology among the high-ranking officers of the Syrian military. Taking matters into their own hands, the party's Military Committee managed to seize control of Syria in the March 8 Revolution of 1963, making Ba'athism the

⁴³ Ali, Tariq. *The Clash of Fundamentalisms: Crusades, Jihads and Modernity*. Verso, 2003.

⁴⁴ Roberts, 18-19

⁴⁵ Olson, Robert W. *The Ba'ath and Syria, 1947 to 1982: The Evolution of Ideology, Party, and State, from the French Mandate to the Era of Hafiz Al-Asad*. Vol. 1. Kingston Press, 1982.

official state ideology. Disputes between the Committee and the party's civilian-wing, headed by Aflaq, led to the latter's forced resignation in 1965, followed by his exile from Syria in 1966. In 1968 he was elected Secretary General of the Iraqi branch of the Ba'ath Party, a position he retained until his death in 1989.⁴⁶

ii) On Arab Nationalism

Aflaq's Arab nationalism is rooted in his assumption that unity is necessary to bring about the *ba'ath* (Arabic for "rebirth") of Arab flourishing. His writings display a firm belief in the greatness of the Arabs that can only be fully realized through their unification. As such, Arab nationalism forms the cornerstone of Aflaq's philosophy from which all its other tenets emanate. He viewed all other political endeavors in Syria and the wider region as secondary to the cruciality of pan-Arab union. Aflaq addresses his frustration with Syrian political elites for their disenchantment with the cause of unity and their prioritizing of other objectives in this excerpt from an article published in *Al Ba'ath*:

"It is now the Arabs who quarrel among themselves over unity and federation, republic and democracy, freedom and sovereignty...We must be above such disputes, which have no connection with the real issue of nationalism, even though they are named after it and take on Arabic terms and nomenclatures derived from nationalist aims".⁴⁷

Aflaq discredits the nationalist character of groups like the National Bloc because they fail to grasp the vitality of Arab unity, which he asserts is the 'real issue of nationalism'. The importance Aflaq places on Arab nationalism partially explicates his decision to abandon the Syrian Communist Party in the late 1930's, as he considered their support for continued French occupation to be an egregious violation of his principles.

⁴⁶ Roberts, 82-95

⁴⁷ Aflaq, Michel. "Our Task Is to Struggle to Safeguard the Aims of the Arabs." *Al Ba'ath*, 29 Dec. 1949.

Although Aflaq was a Christian, he believed very strongly in the intellectual supremacy of Islam and its centrality to Arab national identity. In 1943, he gave a speech at the University of Damascus on Islam's pivotal role in cultivating Arabism entitled *In Memory of the Arab Prophet*. In it, Aflaq cites the prophet Muhammad as the forefather of the Arab nation and traces the birth of Arab identity to the early period of Islamic imperial rule in the Middle East and North Africa. Aflaq's perceives of Islam as being transcendent of spiritual parameters. He argues that on a more fundamental level, Islam represents an articulation of Arab pride and fraternity:

“Islam...is to the Arabs...the clearest expression of their universal feeling and their view of life...of the unity of their personality in which word, feeling, thought, mediation, action, soul, and destiny, are all integrated and work in harmony together”.⁴⁸

To him, it is the most compelling evidence of the nationalist fervor of the Arab people.

Furthermore, Aflaq espouses a nostalgia for the Islamic imperial age, as it demonstrated a united Arab world's potential for great achievement and prosperity:

“We should not forget that Arab culture in the past...could not have been realized had it not been for [the Islamic conquest] ...it was the spiritual yeast, the psychological and moral treasure which permitted the Arabs to expand, spread, and intermingle with various nations who were in a luxurious cultural milieu. In spite of the latter they were able to retain their capacity for creativity and inventiveness”⁴⁹

Aflaq refers to the Islamic conquest to emphasize the need for struggle in order for the Arabs to reclaim their former glory. Hence by the term ‘Arab rebirth’, Aflaq implies that the original ‘birth’ occurred during the Islamic dominion.

Aflaq saw revolution as necessary for the Arabs to achieve ‘rebirth’ but did not foresee the masses taking up an active part. In an essay published after the 1954 coup, Aflaq posited that a successful revolution required the unambiguous devotion of its actors:

“A serious party of overthrow does not rely on amateurishness...This party has either to be horn out of irresistible feeling...of a vital and invincible necessity which urges the

⁴⁸ Aflaq, Michel. “In Memory of the Arab Prophet.” University of Damascus, 5 April 1943. Lecture.

⁴⁹ Aflaq, Michel. “The Party of Radical Change.” Al Baath, Feb. 1949.

vanguards of our nation to sacrifice and suffering in order to rescue the nation from the danger of death and annihilation, or be...a deceit for the people which demands its support”.⁵⁰

Alfaq’s conception of revolution was apparently inspired by Leninist thought, a testament to his time spent as a member of the SCP. He envisioned a dedicated vanguard party claiming power on behalf of the public and withholding it over a period of sociopolitical transition.

iii) On Western Imperialism and Zionism

Aflaq considered imperialism and Zionism to be the most daunting impediments to his Arab nationalist aspirations. In general, his views were very similar to those of Gamal Abdel Nasser. He was convinced that imperialist powers sought to weaken the Arab nationalist cause, as they perceived it to be a threat to their control of the Middle East and North Africa. He was also adamant regarding the vitality of Arab unity in combatting imperialism, as only the combined effort of all Arab nations could endure. One notable contrast from Nasser’s position is a lack of emphasis on militarism. Aflaq took a more realist approach to his stance on Arab relations with the West and Israel. Though he did not dispute the inevitability of war, he did push for restraint among Arab militaries, advocating for a more concerted focus on resistance through increased integration. He reasoned that without first consolidating the Arab nation and allowing it to realize its full economic and political potential, there could be little hope for victory:

“War is mobilization and organization of existing forces, and our available forces are not yet at the level of imperialist forces. Therefore, we have to support our war by revolution in order to release the latent potential of our people and to continually nourish war with this inexhaustible fountainhead which is the struggle of eighty million Arabs living on a soil full of riches and who have military and strategic qualities which are hardly possessed by any other country”⁵¹

⁵⁰ Aflaq, Michel. “Our Party does not Accept the Exploitation of the Actual Reality.” Al Baath, 9 April, 1954.

⁵¹ Aflaq, Michel. “Our Battle with Imperialism is Inevitable.” Al Baath, 24 August, 1956.

iv) On “Arab Socialism”

Aflaq’s writings from the early years of the Ba’ath party underscore many of his ideological deviations from conventional Marxist philosophy. These mainly stemmed from contrasting sociological analyses. Aflaq’s views on Syrian and Arab social problems were more substantially shaped by specific historical, cultural, and spiritual context than by materialist reasoning. His zealous Arab nationalism also contradicts Marxist thought. While the latter conceives of nationalism as a medium for manipulation of the proletarian class by bourgeois elites, Aflaq interpreted nationalism as both a necessary and desirable component of a harmonious society, especially in the Arab setting. In addition, although Aflaq was both a nationalist and a socialist, he was careful to distinguish the Ba’ath movement from the European variant of nationalist socialism. He rejected the fascist tenets of superiority espoused by Nazism, which he dismissed as a reprehensible ideology.⁵²

To Aflaq, socialism was a means to the end of ‘Arab rebirth’ rather than an ideal in and of itself. He coined the term ‘Arab socialism’ to suggest that it serves as a device for the more pertinent Ba’athist objective of Arab nationalism. Aflaq understood that the conditions of Syria and the Arab world were too dysfunctional to facilitate this renaissance, and thus saw socialism as a way to provoke revolutionary change. He believed that through the reorganization of material relations, socialism could ensure stability at the individual and national level, which would induce the latent intellectual potential residing among the Arab people:

“The national interest, the survival of the nation and its progress along with the developed nations as well as its steadfastness in the race among nations all depend on the realization of socialism, that is, allowing every Arab, without distinction or discrimination to become a tangibly productive entity and not an illusion”.⁵³

⁵² Olson, 11-13

⁵³ Aflaq, Michel. “In Socialism is the Survival of the Arab Nation and its Progress.” *Al Baath*, 7 Oct. 1950.

Aflaq additionally wished to reduce the sway of economic elites over Syrian affairs. Not only did he consider their repression of the working classes to be a hinderance on their capacity to reach a revolutionary degree of consciousness, but he perceived of the nobility's complacency as being directly tied to their political ineptitude. In other words, Aflaq was not necessarily in favor of a classless Arab national society, but rather one in which all of its strata would be contributing to the cause of unity. The encouragement of social justice and through socialism was thereby a way to incorporate the interests of elites in a way that was conducive to an independent Arab national polity.⁵⁴

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The political philosophies of Nasser and Aflaq are very much a reflection of the historical realities of the post-World War II Arab world. They each saw in the Arab societies a disjointed, corrupt, and socioeconomically stratified amalgamation of individuals, and sought to reorganize and reedify their populations through the Arab nationalist narrative of transnational brotherhood and the pursuit of social justice via socialist programs. They believed that the ideal of Arab nationalism necessitated a mutual struggle against the factors standing in its way, the most powerful of which was Western imperialist and Zionist obstruction. Undoubtedly, their experiences during the first half of the 20th century, the height of European power in the Middle East, informed this perspective enormously. The fact that their ideologies resonated so profoundly with the Arab masses speaks to the impact of the imperial reign and the perception of continued Western influence after independence.

In a more general sense, Nasser and Aflaq are symbolic of a monumental phenomenon in developing world political thought that emerged after the second World War. Countless political

⁵⁴ Aflaq, Michel. "In Socialism is the Survival of the Arab Nation and its Progress." *Al Baath*, 7 Oct. 1950.

ideologues and regimes in the Global South evaluated the problems facing their societies in similar fashions and prescribed solutions that incorporated themes of regional and internationalist solidarity, socialist reformism, and resistance to the influence of the Global North. These ideas can be found in the philosophies and policies of prominent Global South thinkers and political leaders like Fidel Castro of Cuba, Jacobo Arbenz of Guatemala, Juan Peron of Argentina, Jawaharlal Nehru of India, Julius Neyerere of Tanzania, Mohammad Mosadegh of Iran and numerous others. This thesis demonstrates the importance for future scholarship on non-Western political philosophy to acknowledge the structural repercussions of imperial history on ideological trends in the Global South.

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