

Arab nationalism

Government



How significant was the presence of foreign powers as an influence on the nature and growth of Arab nationalism in the years 1900-2001? During the years 1900-2001 a number of significant interventions occurred which affected the growth and nature of Arab nationalism. Several key pressures considerably influenced a change in the nature of nationalism; including, economic levers, agreements and military presences in the Middle East. Arab nationalism arose out of the fear of the possibility and later the certainty of European or American dominance. The emerging ideology believed all Arabs to be united by both a shared language and history.

Foreign intervention in the Middle East long predated the First World War, dating back to during the 19th century. However, the time in which it had most effect on Arab nationalism in the area stretched from 1914 onwards. During this period many Arabs were resentful of being dominated by outside powers. Therefore, the link between foreign intervention between 1900 and 2001 and the consequent changes to Arab nationalism were very strong. In the years before 1900, nationalism had always been an underlying movement in the Middle East. Martin Kramer demonstrates this view of Arab nationalism; ‘Awake, O Arabs, and arise’.

By selecting this phrase from an Arab poem Kramer shows that the Arab desire for an uprising is trying to be stirred. However, he goes on to voice the opinion of, ‘... many Arabs have suspended their belief in the Arab nation, and now openly doubt whether there is a collective Arab mission’. This has led to a triumph of the nation states, whereby Arabs prefer to be seen as Syrian, Egyptian etc. This was the result of the retreat of Arab nationalism. In

the 19th century, the Ottoman Empire tried to combat the growth of European power and influence.

Borrowing money to develop their infrastructure, and modernise industry. However, modernisation saw them fall even more under the control of the Europeans, who provided loans for the process. Academics like Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Qasim Amin encouraged the reinterpretation of Islamic principles in response to the modern world as a way to break free from the foreign power's colonialism, especially Europe's. Nationalist movements, like the Young Turks of Anatolia, also arose. Secular nationalism was especially strong among non-Muslim communities, which could not fully participate in Islamic nationalist movements. Arab nationalism within individual states was beginning to challenge the authority of the Ottoman Empire. Greece won independence from the Ottomans in 1832, and other Balkan nations began to follow suit. The British decided to enter the region following a public speech by Asquith, he declared, " It is the Ottoman government, and not we, who have rung the death knell of Ottoman dominion not only in Europe but in Asia". The following month an ' attack' was launched against the Ottomans. This was the beginning of British intervention in the Middle East.

After WW1 Europe still regarded the Arabs as a ' subject' race that were ruled by the British. It was also felt that the Arabs should be grateful that they'd been liberated from the Ottoman rule. The sole key figure to believe that Arab self-determination was underestimated was Woodrow Wilson of America. When Britain was to move into Egypt and discover the wealth of the cotton industry, however, the Egyptian Arabs were still in famine,

poverty and were denied the right to take any part in Egyptian legislature. As a result nationalism fermented even further.

Agreements including the Hussein-McMahon correspondence, Sykes-Picot and the San Remo resolution provoked and increased Arab distrust of the Europeans. This view is supported by William L. Cleveland in his book detailing the Middle East. He believed the Hussein-McMahon correspondence showed Hussein as initially having limited or no Arab nationalist qualities. “ He was not an Arab nationalist and did not think in terms of the ideology of Arabism. He was instead an ambitious dynast who used his Islamic status as Sharif... ” Hussein wanted to claim his family’s kingdom and gain sole power.

This was also true of the Arab fighters in the 1916 Arab revolt aided by the British; they wanted gold and weapons much more than Arab independence. Cleveland highlights these points and the fact that the promises made in the correspondence prompted contentment on both sides, as the British wanted to see the fall of the Ottomans and Hussein wanted leadership. However, “ McMahon’s language was so ambiguous and so vague.. [that it has] given rise to conflicting interpretations over whether Palestine was included as part of the future independent Arab state”.

It is for this reason that the Arabs began to distrust Britain. The correspondence was between the British high commissioner, Sir Henry McMahon and descendant of the prophet and Arab leader, Sharif Hussein. For the British it was a useful agreement as they already saw the Ottomans as a threat. However in the long term it caused unrest in the Middle East and widespread distrust of Britain. The agreement is useful in showing the

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unclear language used by the British to avoid either having to give land to the Arabs or create an argument. Deborah J.

Gerner agrees with Cleveland in that secret agreements , caused Britain especially to be viewed negatively by the Arabs; " It is clear from this agreement [Sykes-Picot] that Britain had no intention of fulfilling its commitment to support Arab independence in the Levant at the end of the war, whatever might have been promised in the Hussein-McMahon correspondence. " This was the view many Arab nationalists would have taken. This secondary source offers a late 20th century vantage point of the deal which gives it an extra degree of credibility. From 1900 to 2001, the United States has had global interests in the Middle East, the U. S. as made itself a key foreign power by using its strong diplomatic, economic, and military power in support of its national interests. This was demonstrated in 1919 where under President Woodrow Wilson the League of Nations was formed; it was quick to hand out a series of mandates laying out the colonial boundaries of the Middle East according to the U. S. These boundaries were not ideal for the Middle Eastern inhabitants however, the U. S. managed to maintain a positive reputation throughout World War One. I believe this to be a result of the British-French mistrust created as a result of previous agreements that were not stuck to.

Therefore the US seemed more trustworthy and was viewed as a valuable ally. In the years between the wars Arab nationalist opposition towards foreign intervention continued to grow. By 1952, Gamal Abdal Nasser had led a coup against the Egyptian king and was named president of Egypt. He ended official British influence and became a truly symbolic leader for all

Arabs. He tried to unite Egypt and Syria into a single United Arab Republic, but this attempt lasted for only a few years. It was clear Nasser saw foreign powers such as Britain as intervening trouble makers this is demonstrated by his clear dis-like of the Baghdad pact of 1955. Nasser saw the Baghdad Pact... as an instrument of Western intervention and he feared that Jordan, Lebanon and Syria might also be convinced to join'. In order to conquer this threat from the west Nasser utilised the power of radio to broadcast to millions of Arabs all over the world. This was perhaps the start of a worldwide effort for Arabs to unite, therefore, Egypt's opposition to the western intervention in the Middle East was a main contributor to the growth of Arab Nationalism in the 1950s.

Nasser's personal international prestige grew immensely and by the end of 1955 he was seen as the leader of the Arab world. This was important as the Arabs now had a firm identity and leader to follow, incomparable to the 'Are we Arabs one big lie?' question voiced in Kramer's book. Between 1955 and 1958 key events occurred which furthered the growth of Arab nationalism. Firstly, the Czech arms deal of September 1955; Nasser had agreed to buy arms from the Czech government, including Soviet aircraft and tanks.

Once again Nasser was showing his independent power and this created a worry for the West, however, the worry was not without cause as on hearing the military news Arabs all over the world began to rejoice in their Arab-ness and the conquering of the foreign powers. Similar joy followed in 1956 with the Suez crisis, Britain and France were severely humiliated at having failed to regain control of the Suez Canal. Even though the canal had been

withdrawn from as a result of the U. S. withdrawing their support, the Arab world saw this as a victory against Western powers.

As a result of long years of Western dominance, a small victory such as maintaining the Suez Canal led to widespread Arab nationalism. In the 1940s the U. S. began to involve itself more thoroughly in Middle Eastern politics. This was in order to protect its national interests, the most important being the fight against communism, namely the Soviets during the Cold War. Guaranteeing a secure supply of oil, and ensuring that no single power dominated the region were big priorities for the U. S. More recently, fighting terrorism was made a priority especially after 9/11 in 2001. The U.

S. has supported leaders and governments it considered to be stable allies, like the Saudi royal family, Israel, and Egyptian governments, since Anwar Sadat was elected in 1970. A good example of the U. S. hindering the growth of Arab Nationalism whilst protecting self interests was in 1953 when anxious about growing Soviet influence in Iran during the Cold War, the U. S. toppled the regime of Iran's elected prime minister Mossadeq, who intended to nationalise the Iranian oil industry. The U. S. backed a coup against Mossadeq and forced the election of the young Reza, Shah of Iran.

America had demonstrated its control over the region and whilst this could have created anger and a sense of nationalism, it was not to fully rise until 1979. The new prime minister enforced many western policies throughout his reign and was head of a very oppressive government. 1979 led to an Islamic revolution against the Shah's regime and put a new kind of Islamic state into power governed by Islamic jurists and scholars. The popular hatred

of the Shah also created hatred of his American supporters, and the revolution's anti-American passion led to the raid of the U. S.

Embassy in Tehran, where 53 hostages were held for more than a year. This is a prime example of how a foreign power created a violent change in the nature of Arab Nationalism, an earlier example of this can also be shown from the Palestinian refugee problem up until 1949, this was the result of an energetic Zionist effort that began before the turn of the century. Such historians as Ben Gurion supported this..... Israel was intended to be a national home for Jews, both spiritually, historically and physically. Nearly 75, 000 Jews fleeing persecution from Nazi Germany, found refuge there.

But its creation came at a heavy price. In addition to the many Jews who died struggling to create the new state, many Arabs were killed and hundreds of thousands of Arabs were either displaced by Jewish settlers or became unwilling citizens of Israel and voluntarily left the region. The U. S. under President Truman were firmly in support of the new Jewish homeland and this was confirmed when American airplanes were seen as essential to the Israeli victory in the 1967 Six-Day War that placed Israel against Arab powers.

And when the Yom Kippur War in 1973 again threatened the Jewish state, a massive U. S. airlift of war material was crucial to Israel's survival in the conflict. Up until this event the U. S. had been seen to be extremely forward in trying to gain peace between Israel and its Arab neighbours, key achievements included the 1978 Camp David meeting that negotiated peace between Egypt and Israel and the 1993 Oslo peace agreements that

established a framework for negotiating peace between the Israelis and Palestinians started the process for achieving a Palestinian state peacefully.

However some Arab critics claim the superpower had not done all that it can to bring about peace in the region. Especially as much of the U. S. support to Israel was in the form of military equipment and the U. S. economy and jobs were devoted to continually upgrading the Israeli army. Some Palestinians argue that the U. S. was too committed in its support for Israel to make unbiased decisions and was unwilling to pressure the Israelis to negotiate peace, interested only in fuelling the rivals.