

EDITORIAL FOREWORD

As this *IJMES* special issue on “Relocating Arab Nationalism” is going to press, democracy movements in the Arab world have toppled the old regimes in Tunisia and Egypt; uprisings in Yemen, Bahrain, and Libya are shaking the foundations of their respective governments; and protests in Algeria, Jordan, Iraq, Morocco, and Oman have sent rulers scrambling to respond with some combination of reform and repression that they hope will ensure their survival. The events have had reverberations in Iran, sub-Saharan Africa, and elsewhere; but they have clearly, at least so far, reverberated most strongly from one Arab country to another. This is reflected, among many other ways, in the protesters’ self-conscious borrowing and repetition of chants and slogans, such as *tūnis huwwa al-ḥall* (Tunisia is the solution) and the ubiquitous *al-shaʿb yurīd isqāt al-niẓām* (the people want the fall of the regime).¹ In showing how Arabist symbols, discourses, and identifications can be mobilized for purposes that are not only cultural but also deeply political, even when they do not involve any project to create a Pan-Arab nation-state, the protests sweeping the Arab world have made the recurring themes of this special issue more timely than we had imagined.

At the core of the issue are five research articles, most of which were submitted as a collection to the journal by Peter Wien under former *IJMES* editor Judith E. Tucker. Although they deal with different eras and regions and draw on extremely varied sources, they share certain themes, and each adds a new layer to our understanding of Arab nationalisms in the Middle East and North Africa during the 20th century. As James McDougall notes in his contribution, the aim here is to “suggest ways of moving beyond some of the impasses in which the study of Arab nationalism has sometimes been entrenched.”

One common theme, expanding on other recent studies, is that the authors all reject what Orit Bashkin, in her article, calls the “linearity” of a historical narrative in which a coherent subject named “Arab nationalism” is born, develops, and ultimately either triumphs or dies.² Each article challenges, from a different perspective, the top-down, intellectual-history paradigm, reconceptualizing nationalism as a product that emerges from the interactions between producers and consumers. The study of nationalism is no longer the tracing of “roots,” “origins,” or “genesis”; instead, it focuses on transmission, circulation, popularization, and reception. In line with this approach, the articles are more sensitive than much of the earlier scholarship to the reciprocal relations between the formal and the informal, the official and the nonofficial, the state and civil society.

If the authors are not very interested in locating the intellectual origins of Arab nationalism, neither are they much concerned with its ends, in either sense of the word.

Given the historical “failure” of political Arab nationalism to forge a unified Arab nation–state, a linear, narrowly political analysis can only lead inexorably to the end of Arab nationalism itself and is thus unable to account for the continuing resonance of Arabist discourses, sentiments, and symbols across large parts of the Arab world. The articles in this issue take a more productive and historical approach. They ask how and to what extent Arab national identity is an ongoing element embodied in the historical experiences of Arab societies and cultures and evaluate its proportional weight within a composite of other collective identities, including local–territorial, state oriented, rural, religious, Western assimilative, Berber, and Kurdish.

A second, and related, connecting theme is that each article challenges the conventional dichotomy between patriotic loyalty to a specific territory (*waṭaniyya*) and transterritorial loyalty to an Arab cultural–linguistic unity (*qawmiyya*). Several authors show how both territorial states and various local “patriots” have incorporated Arabism within local–territorial practices, struggles, and agendas. Indeed, McDougall argues that “the hegemonic quality of Arabism has been able to operate so effectively and for so long *because* of its location within particular, ‘local’ (*waṭan*-centered) constructions of nationalism.” Peter Wien similarly shows not only how a form of (anti-Iraqi) Arabist discourse was used by state elites in Syria in 1937 to buttress their *waṭani*-territorial claims to legitimacy but also how easily a domestic crisis, combined with oppositional uses of Arab nationalist symbols, “could tip the balance against the elites regardless of their efforts to control the public sphere in the spirit of a vague Pan-Arabism.” The fluid, hybrid, and always local nature of Arabism in practice is likewise emphasized by Bashkin, who examines how the often violently opposed ideologies of Arab nationalism and Iraqi-territorial nationalism in Qasimite Iraq not only shared many background assumptions but also actively shaped one another through both conflict and dialogue.

Thus, each discussion does not deal solely with Arab nationalism but necessarily with a variety of nationalisms, or national identities, that have emerged in the Arab Middle East as well as with the imbrication of these diverse identities with particular local imaginings of Arab-ness. On this level, the discussions collectively deconstruct any conception we might have of a unified, homogeneous Arab nationalism. But in doing so, they do not necessarily lead to the conclusion that Arabism was never anything more than a regionwide collection of local Arab identities. Michael Provence’s article suggests that Arab nationalism, like other nationalisms, does have a genealogy that can be traced, albeit one that is more productively seen as rooted in specific (Ottoman) habits, structures, and practices rather than in imported or otherwise disembodied ideas. McDougall also makes a case for the continued relevance of Arabism as a category, when he asserts that it is precisely “Arabism’s distinctive quality of reaching toward transcending each ‘local’ nationalism” that has allowed it to simultaneously reinforce “local states’ mechanisms of subjection and [provide] spaces for expression elusive to their control.”³

In challenging the *waṭanī*–*qawmī* dichotomy, the authors implicitly question the notion that nationalism is always most insightfully analyzed as the production of an exclusive and essentialist identity. Many scholars have noticed and critiqued the essentializing moves of nationalism, its tendency to construct itself through the construction of multiple others. The articles in this issue take a somewhat different tack. They are arguably less critical of Arab nationalism than many previous studies, and while this tendency may

not be unrelated to their relative neglect of certain themes that have been important in the broader scholarship on nationalism—notably, gender—it may also help to open up aspects of Arab nationalism that have not received sufficient attention. What emerges from the collection as a whole is an understanding of Arabism as both an integral component of heterogeneous local identities *and* a potentially more expansive “dream” or “promise” of the future or of home, even if—perhaps especially if—it is not one that can be realized in the here and now. We hope to see future scholarship that draws on these insights to engage with current debates in the literature on gender and nationalism in the region.

Besides relocating the study of Arab nationalism away from linear and state-oriented approaches, and from critiques of essentialist identities, a final shared theme is that each article looks at what McDougall calls the “affective, individually embodied and expressed” aspects of nationalism as both a “set of symbolic resources” and as a set of lived practices. This aspect of the collection arguably goes beyond recent distinctions between the “political” and “cultural” manifestations of nationalism and between nationalism as a “movement” and an “ideology,” both of which have sometimes been framed as the distinction between “Arab nationalism” and “Arabism.”⁴ The authors not only expand the boundaries of political Arab nationalism far beyond the “increasingly vacuous” discourse of the region’s political elites but even on the level of civil society they also see it as more than a discrete ideology or sociocultural movement that is always in delineable and transparent competition with, or absorption by, other ideologies and sociocultural movements. Instead, they show how, in McDougall’s words, the capacity of Arabism “to create meaning . . . has never been confined either to the dull reproduction of officially sanctioned discourse or its subversive appropriation by Islamism. It has remained capable of expressing belonging and aspiration beyond these predictable parameters, sometimes in surprising ways.”

The one article that does deal in some way with the origins of Arab nationalism, that by Provence, shows how this capacity to express embodied notions of belonging was present from the beginning. Provence charges both nationalist and colonial historiography with “conspiring to erase” the shared genealogy of Arab, Turkish, Iraqi, Syrian, Palestinian, Kurdish, and other nationalisms that emerged in former Ottoman lands, which he argues were all rooted in Ottoman ideas, experiences, habits, and memories. The article reminds us that the rebels who led the armed uprisings and liberation movements throughout the region in the years following World War I—and who, time and again it seems, turn out to be former Ottoman officers and soldiers—“did not view the post-Ottoman revolts as separate movements of national liberation but rather as locally conditioned elements of a single, undifferentiated struggle” against Western imperialism. Rather than locating the origins of Arab nationalism in an urban intellectual movement that emerged, at least in part, in opposition to Turkish nationalism, Provence suggests that both forms of nationalism originated in the shared aspirations and lived experiences of certain former Ottoman subjects, which included but were not limited to the shattering experience of the Great War itself.

The next two articles, by Jonathan Wyrzten and McDougall, take us to what Wyrzten calls “the margins of the Arab West,” specifically, Morocco and Algeria, contexts that can raise different questions from those usually posed by scholars of Arab nationalism in the Mashriq.⁵ Wyrzten’s article begins where much of the current historiography on

Arabism in Morocco leaves off: with the struggle between colonial administrators and urban Arabophone nationalist elites over French attempts to delineate a Berber ethnic and legal identity in Morocco in contrast to an urban Arab identity. Much of the article does not deal directly with Arab nationalism; rather, it looks at how rural Berber communities managed state- and nation-building processes, drawing on a unique collection of Tamazight (Berber) oral poetry gathered in the Atlas Mountains “to illuminate the multiple levels on which their sense of group identity was negotiated.” In doing so, however, it opens up important dimensions of the better known struggle between French administrators and Arabophone nationalists in the cities (which, after all, often centered on the question of rural Berber identity). Wyrzten shows both how an “illiterate, transhumant population had the capacity to imagine a broad community at a national level” and how Islam, not language or ethnicity, served as the primary category through which this community was imagined as French colonial forces advanced toward the mountains. Yet group identity was continually “negotiated and reimagined” under rapidly changing political and socioeconomic conditions after the completion of pacification in 1934. In the end, the French colonial policy of separating Arabs and Berbers was “totally unviable due to processes the French themselves had set in motion,” including several that inadvertently fostered the spread of Arabization.

McDougall’s article on Algeria elaborates on a point suggested in Wyrzten’s analysis: that scholarly assumption of the inauthenticity of Arab identity in the Maghrib may posit an underlying Berber identity “just as essentialist, reductive, and ahistorical as the official narrative of Arab/Islamic ‘authenticity’ it seeks to supplant.” This tendency also happens to echo the French colonial notion that Arabo-Islamic culture in the Maghrib was a superficial imposition on “native” culture, a narrative that once nourished the “wildly mistaken” belief that the Front de Liberation Nationale was a puppet of Jamal ‘Abd al-Nasir with no real grounding in Algerian society. In a somewhat similar if more theoretical vein, scholarly assessments of the illusory nature of Arab identity in Algeria are unable to account for the “continuing salience of Arabism” today as a “set of symbolic resources” that operate “beyond (or below) the impositions on, and disposessions of, ordinary Algerians by state authorities and state-sanctioned ideology.” McDougall shows how the experience of exile—not only to metropolitan France but also to other parts of the Arab world, especially Tunisia—had a decisive impact on shaping the Arabist sensibilities of young Algerians in the late colonial period. But this does not prove the falsity of Arabism in Algeria; rather, it helps to “specify the ways in which it has been ‘made true,’” including the ways in which Arab space, culture, and sovereignty have been imagined by Algerians as a “promise of home dreamed in exile.”

The last pair of articles, by Wien and Bashkin, returns us to the Mashriqi “center” of Arab nationalism, or at least of its predominant scholarship. Wien’s microhistory of the events of a few days in Damascus in 1937 provides a thick narrative of an important theme raised in McDougall’s article, namely, what the latter calls the “constitutive aporia at the heart of Arabism”: the gap between its claims of identity and unity and the political uses to which these have been put by both state and nonstate actors. Wien examines the January 1937 funeral in Damascus of former Iraqi prime minister Yasin al-Hashimi, and the events of the ensuing week, “as a case study of the fault lines of interwar Arab nationalism.” In the context of Iraqi–Syrian discord, faltering treaty negotiations with France, and the recent ascension to political power of the Syrian National Bloc, the

construction of al-Hashimi in the Syrian and other non-Iraqi Arabic press as an Arab nationalist hero “created a meaningful Pan-Arab community for a period of time.” Wien shows how this construction had very different meanings for the different participants in and observers of al-Hashimi’s elaborate funeral procession from Beirut to Damascus and his subsequent burial in the latter city. Just as important, it proved incapable of maintaining even its symbolic coherence in the face of the mass street demonstrations that swept through Damascus in the days between the procession and the burial, in response to worsening economic and political conditions in the city and the final trigger of the Alexandretta crisis. The coincidental convergence of the protests with al-Hashimi’s funeral and burial not only provides a dramatic illustration of how diverse actors could draw on Arabism as a set of discursive and practical resources for very different ends but also reveals the “tenuous” nature of elite “hegemony over the symbolic representation of the nation–state.”

Finally, Bashkin’s article argues that Arab nationalism in Iraq was transformed under the rule of ‘Abd al-Karim Qasim (1958–63), in part through its competition and “hybridization” with currently hegemonic forms of Iraqi-territorial nationalism, even while Iraqi nationalists learned to integrate Arabist elements into their own discursive repertoire. In their efforts to forge a territorially defined coalition against the popular Iraqi communist movement, Arabists in Qasimite Iraq shaped their nationalist imaginations to the “specificities of the Iraqi milieu,” which meant cultivating “the notion that Arab nationalism did not entail an ethnic origin” and largely avoiding the “sectarian, anti-Shi‘i and anti-Kurdish notions that colored Ba‘thist discourse in later years.” At the same time, Bashkin shows how the Iraqi-nationalist communists and the Arab-nationalist Ba‘thists—who, as is well known, were bitter and often violent enemies through most of Qasim’s reign and beyond—drew on certain shared “cultural idioms,” thus destabilizing “a typology that assumes each ideological camp subscribed to a rigidly defined set of well-known historical narratives.” The most powerful of these shared idioms were related to the twin processes of the Cold War and the global movements of decolonization or “Third Worldism.” In bringing a greater awareness of this global context to bear on the two agonistic and well-known strands of nationalism in Qasimite Iraq, Bashkin further upsets linear historical interpretations of Arab nationalism—which, in spite of various antilinear scholarly critiques in recent years, still often assume that the movement in the 1960s was already past its prime and about to enter its death throes in the 1967 war, before being finally supplanted by Islamism. The notion of an “aging” Pan-Arabism, Bashkin suggests, remains a conceptual stumbling block to understanding important changes in the discourses and sensibilities of Iraqi Arab nationalists during the height of the Cold War and the heyday of Third Worldism.

The *IJMES* Roundtable for this issue, organized by Nathan Citino, expands on the Cold War context that itself worked to “relocate” Arab nationalism in various ways after World War II, as Bashkin shows. The four contributors look at recent shifts in the historiography of the Cold War on a global level and some of the ways those shifts might affect our understanding of regional Middle East and North Africa histories. One recurring theme is the complex relationship between the Cold War and local movements of nationalism and decolonization; another is the importance of both competing and overlapping Cold War idioms of development and modernization in shaping the postwar Middle East and the larger area that became known as the “Third World” during this pivotal era. Citino

notes how attention to these themes is bringing previously disparate scholarly subfields into conversation with one another, as the “study of the global conflict between U.S. and Soviet templates for modernization meets the historiography on modernity in the Middle East.” Paul Chamberlin, Jeffrey James Byrnes, and Guy Laron all explore implications of Cold War scholarship for certain understandings of Middle East exceptionalism and of area studies itself as a coherent framework. Laron also points to new possibilities for conducting research on these questions through his discussion of untapped source material in Cold War archives, especially in eastern Europe, much of which is in the process of being digitalized and made available online.

Gender is a somewhat neglected theme in this special issue. We are therefore pleased to publish a short essay by Noga Efrati in the Notes and Comments section that engages with a contribution to this same section of *IJMES* in 2009 by Michael Eppel and with the larger scholarly debate over the term *effendiyya*. Efrati looks at the disconnect between the masculine connotations of the word and the historical realities of women’s participation in the same sociopolitical movements and generational identifications that it is meant to evoke. While Efrati does not propose a semantic solution to the problem, we hope that the essay, along with the other contributions to this issue, helps to encourage new productive engagements with gender and Arab nationalisms in the 20th century.

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NOTES

¹For one comparison of the 2011 protests with earlier Pan-Arab movements, see Lamis Adoni, “The Resurrection of Pan-Arabism,” <http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/opinion/2011/02/201121115231647934.html> (accessed 28 February 2011).

²For discussions of other recent scholarship criticizing the “origins” framework, see James L. Gelvin, “Pensée 1: ‘Arab Nationalism’ Meets Social Theory,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 41 (2009): 10–12; and Youssef M. Choueiri, “Pensée 2: Theorizing Arab Nationalism,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 41 (2009): 13–15. On the framework’s persistence, especially in the literature on Middle East politics and international relations, see Fred H. Lawson, “Pensée 4: Out with the Old, In with the New,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 41 (2009): 19–21.

³For an argument that the category is “pretty much useless,” see Lawson, “Pensée 4,” 20.

⁴See Gelvin, “Pensée 1”; and Fred Halliday, “Pensée 3: The Modernity of the Arabs,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 41 (2009): 16–18. In this foreword, we have more or less followed the practice of using “Arab nationalism” to refer to the political movement for national unification, which Arab intellectuals describe as *al-waḥda al-‘arabiyya* or *al-jamī‘a al-‘arabiyya*, and “Arabism” to describe more cultural forms of identification, roughly corresponding to the Arabic word *al-‘urūba*. The authors of the articles use both terms as well as “Pan-Arabism” (often in the political sense we have defined as “Arab nationalism”). But the terms are not used entirely consistently throughout the issue, reflecting the authors’ different methodological approaches and theoretical concerns as well as their efforts to call into question the notion of a strict boundary between the political and the cultural.

⁵See also Amal N. Ghazal, “The Other Frontiers of Arab Nationalism: Ibadis, Berbers, and the Arabist-Salafi Press in the Interwar Period,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 42 (2010): 105–22.