

REFLECTIONS ON ARAB LEADERSHIP: 1967-1992

Henry Habib*

This article will attempt to explain the influences on leadership patterns in the Arab world. A number of factors may be considered as essential in understanding these patterns. The principal element relates to the leader who is regarded as the primary actor. The personality, charisma, style, as well as the perception with which he is viewed are important considerations in the study of the leader. Public policy in the Arab world is closely linked to the chief policy maker as was clearly illustrated in the cases of both Nasser and Sadat of Egypt. The issue of time is also significant and must not be disregarded. The leader may determine these issues and, conversely, they may influence the leader or even create him. Whatever the case may be, a thorough understanding may only be reached by considering both the leadership and the issues in a temporal framework.

The paramount issues in the decade preceding 1967 were the attempts made by nationalists to bring about Arab unity and the Palestinian conflict dividing Arabs and Israelis. A majority of Arab rulers framed their policies in conjunction with these matters. The Arab leader who best represented Arab concerns was Gamal Abdul Nasser. He was the spokesman par excellence of Arab aspirations and he strongly supported Pan-Arabism. The ideology appeared as a political movement at the turn of the 19th century, but it was not until Nasser came to power in the 1950s that it came to the forefront. Pan-Arabism sought to bring about unity among Arabs from the Atlantic coast of Morocco to Iraq on the Persian Gulf. The Palestinian conflict was viewed in the Pan-Arab context of the 1940s at which time Palestine was considered to be part of the Arab homeland. Arab unity and the Palestinian question were intertwined and such unity was vital for the liberation of Palestine. Pan-Arabism and Palestine became the central focus of Arab preoccupation and these issues were consequently placed on the agenda of the Arab world by Nasser.¹

Nasser's policy became the touchstone by which other leaders, both past and present, would be compared. Nasser personified the Arab vision of one nation stretching from Morocco to Iraq.² Arab leaders have never discussed a detailed

*Of the Political Science Department, Concordia University.

¹T. Ismael, *International Relations of the Contemporary Middle East* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1986) at 51-56.

²This vision was based on recreating an Arab myth of what was once a great Arab Islamic Empire from 632 A.D. to 1258 A.D. This was in fact an Arab version of the Islamic Empire which was later taken over by the Turks. Christian Arabs were responsible for the renaissance of this distinct Arab vision in the late 19th century, later adopted by Muslim intellectuals and eventually by the Baath party and Nasser. See P. Hitti, *History of Syria* (London: MacMillan, 1951); P. Hitti, *History of the Arabs* (London: MacMillan, 1953); and A. Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991).

plan to bring about Arab unity beyond the structures of the League of Arab States created in 1945. There was no set plan when Syria's rulers urged Nasser to take over the leadership for a brief period between 1958-61, and therefore, a union between Egypt and Syria was subsequently aborted.

The death of Gamal Abdul Nasser on 28 September 1970 coincided with the beginning of a decline in Arab commitment to Pan-Arabism and Palestine. Tareq Ismael notes that, in the 1950s and 1960s, policies were framed as long term, strategic, ideological goals including Arab unity, the liberation of Palestine and anti-imperialism.³ In the 1970s and 1980s, however, the triumph of realpolitik over vision, and tactics over strategy, replaced the earlier policies.⁴ The commitment to these values has not disappeared twenty-two years after the death of Nasser, yet it has been weakened by a number of other matters which have preoccupied policy-makers. Integrating forces were affected by these issues permitting the disintegrating forces to gain momentum. The forces of integration were shattered during a twenty year period that began with Iran's 1971 seizure of two Arab islands (Greater and Lesser Tunb and Abu Musa) and ended with the 1991 Gulf War. These and other events caused a gradual erosion of unity forces. Iran's seizure of the islands eventually led to the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-88 which brought about the first open split in Arab ranks. Both Syria and, to a lesser extent Libya, broke ranks with other Arabs by supporting non-Arab Iran during the conflict. The Polisario crisis of 1975 split the Arab countries of Morocco, Algeria and Libya. Both the Lebanese civil war of 1975-90 and the on-going Sudanese civil war widened the rift between Arab nations. In addition to the tension between the two Yemens, Libya and South Yemen supported Ethiopia in defiance of the majority who backed Somalia during the Ogaden War of 1977-78.⁵ Saudi and Iranian support for Oman coincided with the South Yemeni-backed Dhoffar rebellion against Oman. It was the Gulf War of 1991, however, which caused an unparalleled disarray amongst the Arab ranks. Pan-Arabism was given a near fatal blow when Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria and the Gulf states joined forces with the American led coalition against Iraq.

These events manifested the near collapse of Arab solidarity and its ensuing corollary, the liberation of Palestine. Nonetheless, for a brief period Sadat attempted to take the mantle of Pan-Arabism after Nasser's death. He was doomed to failure without Nasser's charisma, style and authority.⁶ King Feisal of Saudi Arabia followed in Nasser's footsteps and briefly succeeded in restoring the

³*Supra*, note 1 at 37.

⁴*Ibid.* at 37.

⁵In 1981 the Aden Pact was signed between Ethiopia, South Yemen and Libya linking their activities, *ibid.* at 61.

⁶*Ibid.* at 56-57.

unifying forces in 1973. Indeed, the Arabs were euphoric with Feisal because he represented many of the traditional Arab values: the King echoed the masses in their opinions regarding Jerusalem⁷ and Arab unity. Feisal's Pan-Islamic credentials as custodian of the Holy Places in Mecca and Medina were successfully utilized to convene the first Islamic Conference in 1969. The King's assassination on 25 March 1975 signalled the re-emergence of the disintegrating forces with the onset of the Lebanese civil war and the Polissario crisis. Sadat of Egypt, Assad of Syria, Saddam Hussein of Iraq and later Mubarak emerged as the new Arab leaders in the 1970s. These leaders did not initiate the revolutions that toppled earlier regimes and, consequently, had to adjust to the new forces and realities.

In the 1970s, Sadat eventually stepped out of Nasser's shadow and established his own vision. He drastically transformed Egypt's public policy, both at home and on the international level. His "Egypt First Policy", Infitah (opening) Economic Policy and his plan for peace with Israel were drastic departures from his predecessor's strategy. Sadat, however, was not the only leader to gain the public's confidence in the 1970s. Assad also inspired hope in Syria after more than twenty years of continuous instability fuelled by a dozen coups.⁸ Saddam Hussein typifies the rise to power of a strong man in the period between 1968-79.

These men, with the exception of Sadat who was replaced by Mubarak in 1981, dominated the political scene from the 1970s to the early part of the 1990s. All of the leaders possessed a military background, but they could not equal the "founding father" syndrome, charisma and popular following of Nasser. They were cognizant of the fact that a revolution would not necessarily accomplish their dreams and aspirations. As witnesses of failed revolutions, they quickly lost the earlier idealism of revolutionary fervour. In Ismael's view, they were pragmatists who moved from a rigid ideological basis to a flexible, short-term, issue-oriented foundation marked by the absence of ideological affinities.⁹

In a succinct analysis of these events, Ismael defines the factors that brought about this profound change. He describes a mood of pessimism vis-à-vis Arab goals and aspirations. The massive Arab defeat in June 1967 was the source of penetrating disillusionment and scepticism, especially with regard to pursuing such goals as Arab unity.¹⁰ The political and psychological impact created by the oil wealth of the 1970s and 1980s is also explored by Ismael. Emphasis, Ismael explains, is placed on managerial and technocratic decision-making, which involves a corresponding shift of emphasis away from "leadership" (in its broadest sense)

⁷"Next time I pray in Jerusalem" was a remark he made on several occasions.

⁸T. Petran, *Syria* (London: Ernest Benn, 1972) at 128-258.

⁹*Supra*, note 1 at 37.

¹⁰*Ibid.* at 38.

towards "incrementalism".¹¹ Both Saddam and Assad subordinated the Pan-Arab themes of the Baath party to advance their own particularist regional and personal power. Saddam utilized these Pan-Arab themes during the 1990-91 Gulf crisis because they were convenient. Yet the Iraqi leader is equally likely to abandon those same themes if they prove inconvenient, as he illustrated by dropping his Palestinian card while negotiating with the Soviets prior to the outbreak of war.

The veteran of the Arab leaders, Hussein bin Talal of Jordan, is unique because he alone survived the temporal framework and its conflicts. He has been in power since 1952, amounting to an uninterrupted four decades of service to his people and nation. He has given Jordan the stability and continuity needed for growth in a volatile and explosive region of the world as no other leader has done. Limited resources and financial weakness, however, often handicap his Pan-Arab leadership role. Nevertheless, the historic role of the Hashemite family cannot be altogether ignored in the future of Mid-East politics, particularly in the resolution of the Palestinian problem.

The man who could have succeeded Nasser was King Feisal of Saudi Arabia. He had the power base, the history, the petro-dollars and all of the suitable political and religious credentials to lead the Arab world. The King's assassination in 1975 resulted in the crowning of his ineffective brother, Khaled. He was only a nominal ruler, but was succeeded in 1982 by Fahd who now reigns on behalf of the Saudi family. There is a collective leadership among the Saudis today. Other Arab leaders including Qathafi of Libya, King Hassan of Morocco and the leaders of Yemen, Tunisia and Algeria have a peripheral influence over Arab affairs. Qathafi, who described himself in 1969 as the spiritual son of Nasser, never measured up to him and was inconsequential as a result.

As we move further into the 1990s, the once significant issues of the 1950s and 1960s fade in intensity. The Gulf War of 1991 has seriously undermined many of the early hopes of Arab unity and their corollary, the liberation of Palestine. These issues have not disappeared, but other concerns have replaced them. Palestine, which was the central focus of Arab leaders for more than four decades, has gradually moved from a priority concern of the Arab states to one of secondary importance. The near collapse after the 1991 Gulf War of Arab solidarity and consequently Pan-Arabism demanded a concerted effort for their renewal. Since the October 1991 Madrid conference, the Americans and their allies have attempted to initiate a limited peace accord between Israel and Syria, which would then be followed by Lebanon and possibly Jordan. This would terminate the Arab-Israeli conflict, but not the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which may be transformed into a new type of struggle.

¹¹*Ibid.* at 38.

In a recent speech, President Assad of Syria captured the present mood when he said: "There is a strong feeling among Arabs, a spiritual feeling, that we are all a single nation of people But it will take a long time to convert that spiritual feeling into a material reality ... perhaps not in my lifetime, for there are still too many differences between one Arab state and the next" ¹² Yet it is also believed that Arab nationalism did not end, as some scholars insist, but was transformed into a Sunni Arab movement, thus losing its universalistic integrationist and assimilationist character of the 1950s and 1960s. ¹³ The Arab people continue to cherish unity, but its actualization must await the removal of incalculable differences that keep the Arab governments, though not necessarily the Arab people, apart. The decline of Arab integrationist forces, however, has allowed the appearance of Pan-Islamic movements, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s. If the respective Arab governments fail to set aside their differences, they will have to reckon with a formidable Pan-Islamic challenge. The Palestinian question will become an Islamic problem and hence acquire an Islamic, rather than a nationalist character, with all of the ensuing implications. Arab failures may cause us to examine patterns in Islamic leadership in twenty-five years. Islamic fundamentalist groups such as the Hizbullah in Lebanon, the Hamas in the occupied territories of the West Bank and Gaza, and the Islamic groups in Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt and Sudan are gradually taking a more fundamental role in the ever changing politics of the Middle East. Unless, and until, a new Arab leader in the mould of Gamal Abdul Nasser or even King Feisal of Saudi Arabia quickly emerges, the Pan-Arab vision and the centrality of the Palestinian issue in Arab politics will dissipate and be replaced by an Islamic concept of the future.

¹²A television address of President Assad at Damascus, Syria, January 1992.

¹³"Arab Nationalism and Change" *Al-Sharq* (10 January 1992) at 4.