

Book Review of Hilal Khashan's *Arabs at the Crossroads: Political Identity and Nationalism* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), *The Arab World Geographer/Le Géographe du monde arabe* 3(2):141-147, 2000.

In the book *Arabs at the Crossroads*, Hilal Khashan, an associate professor of political science at the American University of Beirut, provides a vivid description of Arab political performance since the decline of the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century and the subsequent formal abrogation of the Islamic Caliphate in 1924 amidst rising European colonialism and Zionism. The book is small (149 pages of text) but concise and well written. Despite raising some very controversial issues, Khashan has combined the coolness of scholarship with intellectual rigor and political concern. His dispassionate perspective is refreshing and makes the book unapologetically independent and provocative.

The book consists of nine chapters mostly focused on Arab political experience during the twentieth century. Chapter 1 examines the roots of the identity crisis in the Arab world, especially the ways in which “nineteenth-century reformers disturbed the Arab mind by sowing distrust in the Ottoman empire, without securing a tenable ideological alternative to that religious state and to Islam which it embodied” (page 1). Chapter 2 discusses the birth and the universalization of the European nation-state model of secular nationalism and its many incomplete versions in non-Western cultures, particularly in Muslim countries where “the clash between ethnocentrism and religion seems to resolve itself to the detriment of the former, without the latter emerging as a clear victor” (page 24). While this is a brilliant description of how modern Arab identity seems to swing constantly from Arab nationalism to Islamic identity and back, it stops short of an in-depth theoretical analysis of what constitutes the essence of identity in the Arab world. Believers in the dualistic approaches of “Islam versus Arabism” and “either Arabism or Islam” have preached Islamic identity and Arab nationalism as two opposing principles, one of which is good and the other evil. However, theorizing the issue of identity in the Arab world may require an unequivocal rejection of the dichotomy of Arabism and Islam in favor of restoring and nurturing more synthesis, symbiosis, and synergism between the two. This means that Arab nationalists need to root Arabism in Islam and Arabic rather than in European secularism or pre-Islamic *jahiliya*. It equally requires Islamists to root Islam in Arabism rather than in medieval *shuubiya* or modern Arab phobia. This is a sine qua non condition for addressing the critical issue of an *Arab-Islamic* identity in the Arab World from Lebanon to Comoros and from Mauritania to Bahrain.

Chapter 3 traces the genesis and evolution of Arab nationalism from its beginnings (“nationalism without consciousness”) with Muhammad Ali, the Ottoman viceroy of Egypt (1805-1849), who reformed the country along modern lines and founded a dynasty that ruled it until the mid-20th century. Muhammad Ali’s son Ibrahim Pasha once told an assembly of Western consuls in Egypt that his political agenda includes “the creation of a distinct nationalistic identity for the speakers of Arabic” (page 29). When the European powers (Britain, France and Russia) deprived Muhammad Ali of the fruit of most of his

military victories in Arabia (1811-18), Sudan (1820-22), Greece (1824), and Syria (1831), the pan-Arab drive lost its territorial base and was reduced to “a theoretical exercise by intellectuals of limited political influence” (page 30). These developments led Arab Christians from Syria to articulate the idea of Arab nationalism and to eventually succeed in propagating it among their brethren in the Muslim majority. But Arab nationalism took a new turn of anti-Turkism (“nationalism by default”) when the Young Turk movement “conspicuously practiced an anti-Arab policy” and desperately sought to resolve the Eastern Question by Turkification, including some wild schemes such as “forcing the Arabs of Syria to emigrate” and “transforming Yemen and Iraq into Turkish settlements to facilitate the propagation of the Turkish language that must become the language of religion” (page 33). Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of European colonialism and Zionism after World War I, Arab nationalism became anti-Western (“bitter nationalism”), especially when the Arabs learned about the perfidious Sykes-Picot Agreement of May 1916 shortly after they had witnessed the Balfour Declaration of November 1917. The fact that Sharif Husayn of Mecca had announced his “Arab revolution” supporting Britain in June 1916 (right after the Sykes-Picot Agreement and on the eve of the Balfour Declaration) indicates that he was either a naïve leader or an unconcerned collaborator.

The loss of Palestine in 1948 radicalized Arab nationalism. The Baathists (who place unity before socialism) in Syria and Iraq and the Nasserists (who place socialism before unity) in Egypt focused on the trinity of imperialism, Zionism, and reactionary Western proxies in the Arab world. However, the 1967 Arab defeat (known as *al-naksa*) at the hand of Israel quickly shifted official concern and public attention to the liberation of the newly occupied territories (Sinai, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights) and effectively ended the Nasser Years (“unconsummated nationalism”) well before Nasser died on September 28, 1970, broken by defeat and frustration. Since then, Arab nationalism has been in a state of “coma.” Like many other conceptual transplants (such as bureaucratic organization and the unilinear approaches to development), Arab nationalism stood on thin conceptual grounds and “failed to enlist uninterrupted grassroots support in Arab societies” (page 42). Arab nationalism was once again reduced to an intellectual exercise often championed by “intellectuals without political decision-making prerogatives, and themselves disunited on tactics and strategy” (page 43). In the meantime, the sense of Arabness (measured by shared characteristics drawn from history, culture, language, a predominant religion, and a legacy of colonialism) did not diminish despite the decline of political movements and despite the fact that most Arabs seem politically disoriented and ideologically at loss since the 1967 *naksa*. During the 1991 Gulf War, Arab publics expressed firm support for Iraq against the forces of the coalition led by the United States. Even in Syria, a member of the coalition, the street belonged to Saddam Husayn throughout the military campaign against Iraq (page 43). Today, Arab nationalism and Islam are perhaps evolving into a new *Arab-Islamic* identity. In 1991, Iraq added the phrase *Allah Akbar* (God is Great) to its national flag, and in 1994 Iraqi engineers completed plans for Saddam Grand Mosque, the largest mosque in the world, to be built in central Baghdad. While this symbolic move may seem nothing but politics as usual, it clearly indicates a new direction.

Chapter 4 explores the issue of “war and peace with Israel,” with emphasis on Arab failure to contain the Jewish state mainly because of inter-Arab factiousness. The initial role of the West in the inception of Zionism and the creation of Israel is somehow downplayed: “The West neither planted the thought of Jewish return to Palestine nor sowed the idea of Zionism; yet Western countries, namely Britain and the United States, made the dream come true” (page 46). However, it could be argued that Zionism was and is still an essentially Western idea that uses the Bible as a title for the land of the Arabs. Bruce Robert Crew completed a recent work (*A Structural Framework for British Geopolitical Perceptions toward Land as Sacred Place: Christian Zionism and the Palestine Question 1917-39*, Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1995) focusing on the emergence of Christian Zionism as a religious-political force in Great Britain and its impact on the formation of the 1917 Balfour Declaration. This idea of *Zionism before the Zionists* emerged strongly during the confrontation between Great Britain and Muhammad Ali’s Egypt in the 1830s. According to a London journal (*The Quarterly Review*, December 1838), Britain appointed a Vice-Consul with residence in Jerusalem and jurisdiction over “the whole country within the ancient limits of the Holy Land.” This policy was explicitly aimed at settling European Jews in the Holy Land, at a time when Britain was also deporting tens of thousands of its convicts to settle Australia. This was some 60 years before Theodor Herzl’s *The Jewish State* and the first Zionist Congress.

The chapter reveals important issues about the conduct of the Arab-Israeli war of 1948 (known as *al-nakba*). For instance, when King Faruq committed the Egyptian army to the 1948 war in Palestine with the contemplation of becoming the Muslim caliph (the post being vacant since the abrogation of the Ottoman empire in 1924), the Hashemite monarchs of Iraq and Jordan, themselves politically and territorially ambitious, thwarted his objectives (page 50). It also shows that Israel spends more on its military than the combined expenditure of the three countries operating the strongest military forces of Egypt, Iraq, and Syria (page 85). The chapter concludes that “the Arab-Israeli conflict is bound to continue in the twenty-first century” (page 61) given Israel’s chronic claustrophobia and the growth of religious extremism within the region as a whole and on both sides of the conflict. I should add that on page 49, there was an omission of part of verse 13 of *surat al-hujurat* (Quran 49:13). The verse should read: “O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise each other). Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things).” While the verse is addressed to mankind in general, it proclaims the manners to be observed by the members of the rapidly-growing and integrating Muslim community. Indeed the spirit of *surat al-hujurat* (Quran 49) and its historical context (Year of Deputations) emphasize equality between humans, encourage unity rather than division within the community, and underline that quarrels are unseemly and should be composed. It is quite misleading to infer, as the chapter does, from this verse an encouragement for division. In fact Islam has historically provided cement for many heterogeneous communities and has often been stronger in

Muslim countries where greater ethnic or tribal divisions exist, as is the case in Iran, Sudan, and Afghanistan.

Chapter 5 analyzes the plight of development in the Arab world, pointing out that “failure was the common denominator that doomed the fervent activities of state builders (such as Muhammad Ali), religious reformers (such as Abdu and al-Afghani), and the assortment of Levantine Arab nationalists” (page 62). The army officers’ approach to modernization in Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Algeria, and Libya was a “mission impossible,” while the conservative states’ approach within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Morocco was a “vener of modernization.” Both approaches did not achieve the desired results. This failure is largely due to the overall “maladjustment of Arab political systems to the requirements of modernity” (page 63). Nasser outlined the six objectives of the 1952 revolution (which was a part of a broader movement in the Third World): (1) eliminating imperialism and its agents, (2) eliminating feudalism, (3) eliminating monopoly and capitalist control of the political system, (4) instituting social justice, (5) building a strong national army, and (6) introducing sound democracy. His political reforms introduced the single-party system as an instrument of governing while his economic reforms led to import-substitution industrialization as well as the confiscation of huge lots of lands from the aristocracy and their redistribution in the form of several-acre parcels to landless peasants. Many of these development projects collapsed not because of lack of sincerity or commitment, but because of other factors such as war and foreign competition (page 71).

The six members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman) are “rentier states” (not productive states), deriving most of their material resources from oil, and depending almost entirely on an expatriate workforce (page 74). The recent reduction in the number of expatriates in the GCC states does not mean that the slogans of Saudization, Kuwaitization, Qatarization, and Bahrainization are successful and that nationals are taking over the vacated posts; it simply indicates that fewer projects are under way (page 77). Economic development projects focused on massive infrastructural expansion that included the construction of highways, airports, harbors, power and water desalination plants, warehouses, schools, hospitals, a modern bureaucratic structure, and the extension of comprehensive social welfare services. Some experts have questioned the economic soundness of some of these projects. In 1990 the wheat crop in Saudi Arabia yielded more than four million tons, exceeding domestic requirements by at least three times, leading critics to point out that exporting wheat (at subsidized prices) from Saudi Arabia is no more sensible than exporting water because 6000 liters of water are needed to produce fodder crops for cattle to yield one liter of milk. Most Saudi farm owners employ foreign agricultural engineers from Egypt and Pakistan as well as peasants from Bangladesh, thus limiting the role of the Saudis to the entrepreneurial aspect while reinforcing the elements of cultural traditions that shun manual work, the backbone of economic production (page 75). In addition, elite obsession with the maintenance of traditional political legitimacy in a threateningly changing regional environment has contributed to greater resistance to cultural change as exemplified in the Saudi third development plan which made clear that the pursuit of

modernity should occur “without altering the existing values of society” (page 76). Fluctuations of oil prices, poor planning, and lack of strategic foresight have also contributed to deficit spending, reaching up to 15% of GDP in Saudi Arabia. While this model of development encourages private sector activities (thanks to heavy government subsidies), there is little evidence that those activities will be able to survive on their own according to conventional market transactions (page 78).

Both models of development have also failed to transform Arab societies in the direction of genuine democracy. The typical model of “sticky democracy” in the Arab world remains Sadat’s open-door economic policy and “nominally competitive parliamentary elections” that have continued to take place in Egypt on a regular basis since 1976. In many cases, the legislative elections amounted to a popular technique that can revitalize aging authoritarian systems without jeopardizing the political tenure of rulers. For example, official figures show that Mubarek’s bid for a third presidential term in 1993 had received endorsement of 439 of Egypt’s 448-member People’s Assembly, while a national referendum approved his nomination by more than 96 percent of the valid votes cast in an unusually high 84 percent turnout. When Mubarek’s third term approaches its end, he did not hesitate to amend the constitution to allow indefinite terms in office, a political maneuver that had so far inspired Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali (not Salih Bin Ali as in the text) to follow his example (page 81). Even the conservative states of the GCC had paid lip service to the model of “sticky democracy” as soon as the dust of the Gulf War settled. In a symbolic gesture to the Saudis, King Fahd declared on March 1, 1992, the establishment of *majlis al-Shura* (consultative council) whose sixty appointed members did not convene until two years later in a closed session (page 82).

Chapter 6 focuses on the “trauma in the Gulf,” especially Iraq’s eight-year war with Iran (1980-88) and the U.S.-led war against Iraq following the latter’s invasion of Kuwait on August 2, 1990. These destructive wars reveal not only profound inter-Arab divisions but also the decay of the Arab order of states. The breakout of the Iranian revolution undermined stability in the region and precipitated the Iran-Iraq War in September 1980. In the beginning, Iraq tried hard to be on Iran’s good side. But Iran’s Islamist leaders were determined to export the Islamic revolution, especially to Iraq where the politically underrepresented and economically disadvantaged Shii majority was expected to topple the “infidel” Bathists (page 94). They were wrong. The Iraqis assumed that Iran would quickly give in, while the U.S. would take quick measures to stop the war. They too were wrong and the war went on for eight years. Conservative figures place Iraq’s losses at 420,000 casualties and at least \$120 billion. Iran’s indeterminable toll is believed to be substantially greater (page 96). At the end of the war, Iraq faced new challenges: difficult financial problems, a social tragedy of phenomenal proportions, Saudi discreet antipathy, Kuwaiti condescension, Israeli watchfulness, and US dryness in dealing with the Iraqi leadership (page 99). Kuwait, the weakest link in the chain, adopted an unaccommodating policy toward Iraq and showed “a great deal of arrogance and little sensibility” when it increased its actual oil production to exceed its quota (1,037,000 b/d) by 70 percent (page 100). In the meantime, Israel started a massive political and media campaign against Iraq’s military

buildup, while the US found in the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait an ideal starting game for the new world order it was contemplating as the Soviet Union began to die out. The war was brutal and devastating for Iraq. Even Zbigniew Brzezinski, former U.S. National Security Adviser condemned the "... intensity of the air assault, the demolition of the life-support environment and the callous massacre of retreating troops" (page 108). The war for Kuwait was a real trauma that destroyed the last vestiges of Arab solidarity, reintroduced direct Western intervention in Arab affairs, allowed the United States to establish a permanent military presence in the Gulf, and gave a tremendous boost to militant Islam.

Chapter 7 presents the rise of political Islam and the growth of Islamists as essentially symptoms of repression, economic crises, unresolved identity crisis, and defeat in war with Israel and the West. The combination of these factors discredited Arab ruling elites as well as the concept of pan-Arabism. The concept of jihad is discussed as a fundamental principle of the Islamists' creed and a central element of Islamic teachings since "it calls for constant confrontation with perceived infidels, oppressor, and evil doers" (page 113). Selected verses of the Quran were cited to illustrate the idea of "constant confrontation" while other verses illustrating peaceful relations were not cited. For example, verse 60 of *surat al-anfal* (Quran 8:60) was cited since it incites Muslims to fight their enemy and arm themselves with the best weapons, whereas (the next) verse 61 of *surat al-anfal* (Quran 8:61), which equally urges Muslims to incline towards peace whenever the enemy inclines towards peace, was omitted (page 113). Such an omission can reinforce Western fixation on Islamic-inspired violence and terrorism as stemming from Quran rather than from the three reasons listed in the chapter: geographic proximity to Europe, Islamist rhetoric, and Western hostility. Recent figures demonstrate once again that perceptions and facts are incongruent in this area. According to a US government report on terrorism authored by the National Commission on Terrorism and released in June 2000, out of 179 anti-US terrorist attacks in 1999, only 11 took place in the Middle East (as opposed to 96 in Latin America, 30 in Western Europe, 16 in Africa, 6 in Asia, and 1 in North America).

Although the Islamists have often been depicted as a symptom, a side effect, and a reaction to failures and Western arrogance, I think they represent a more serious and complex phenomenon. First, the Islamists are inspired by the existence of an important historical and political Islamic model or blue print, which includes: an Islamic state (*Al-Khilafa Al-Islamiya*), a Muslim community (*Al-Umma Al-Islamiya*), and an Islamic constitution (*Al-Sharia Al-Islamiya*). The Islamists believe that the restoration of a new political system based on this model is both feasible and desirable in the light of the failure of secular nationalism, Western capitalism, and Soviet Marxism to bring about radical solutions to the many problems facing Muslim societies today. In this regard, their re-Islamization movement could be viewed as a response to the systematic de-Islamization and de-Arabization policy inaugurated by Moustapha Kamal (Ataturk) in the 1920s. Second, the Islamists are (ironically) inspired by the success and power accumulated by Jewish fundamentalism in the Middle East since the end of World War II. Israel is the only religious state in the region whose legitimacy is exclusively based on religious stories and tales. It is founded on Jewish fundamentalism of restoring an alleged Old Testament order in Palestine.

Israel's success and regional hegemony (thanks to Western support) will continue to inspire fundamentalism in general and Islamism in particular. Third, the Islamists are also encouraged by the extreme weakness of Middle Eastern states in the aftermath of their *denationalization* following over a decade of intensive structural adjustment programs amidst the forceful process of globalization. For example, the political systems in the six states of the Gulf Cooperation Council can no longer continue without direct American military protection. By the same token, the Algerian and Egyptian governments cannot contain their opposition without strong economic and diplomatic support from France and the U.S., respectively. But if the Islamists continue to ignore Arabism, as Arab nationalists had ignored Islam, their project will be dashed on the *Arab-Islamic* identity.

Chapter 8 focuses on the diagnosis of the grave symptoms of "the Arab impasse" by pointing to the impact of continuous defeats and ideological debacles as well as the systematic trend of finding solace in the past. The Arab impasse is rooted in the failure to modernize, a failure that has opened the door to the forceful comeback of traditions (mostly religiosity and rural life style) in most Arab countries since the late 1960s (page 127). The Arab impasse is exacerbated by the idea of the state as a private enterprise, a characteristic of Arab conservative states, which had spread to other countries such as Egypt, Lebanon, Tunisia, Iraq, Syria, and Algeria (page 127). Arab statesmen continue to overlook the importance of political transformation, an attitude that resulted in identity crisis, a society at war with itself, intellectual stagnation, and a constant search for a peace of mind in the sanctuary of past glory (page 128). Chapter 9 proposes an agenda of basic steps that Arab elites and publics must endorse if they truly aspire to break the vicious circle of the current impasse and face the challenges of the twenty-first century. These steps include the need to (1) understand the West, (2) believe in the myth of Arab nationalism, (3) define and pursue realistic objectives, (4) nurture respect for authority, and (5) realize the inevitability of political representation.

The book represents an important contribution to the post-Cold War and post-Gulf War debates on the impasse facing Arab states and publics. I am using it as one of four required textbooks in a seminar on the Middle East, and I highly recommend it for university libraries. One of its principal (and perhaps most controversial) theses is that *Arabs' refusal to disengage themselves from those elements of their past that are incompatible with the Western-defined requirements of the modern age has necessarily doomed Arab prospects for development*. Khashan came to this provocative conclusion after a fearless scrutiny of the rise and fall of Arab nationalism, the growth of Islamic revival movements, the overall poor political and economic performance of Arab ruling elites, the connivance of Arab publics, and the persistent problem of national identity, be it pan-Arab, pan-Islamic, or territorial. While Khashan had made a brilliant political analysis of the current impasse in the Arab world, his argument could have been much more persuasive had he provided a deeper theoretical ground for the issues of development failure, democracy, and identity. First, he could have easily placed Arab failure into the context of the 500-year old failures throughout the ex-colonial world. Western modernization was essentially based on the conquest and appropriation of non-European natural resources and labor for several

centuries. This means that anything short of changing the fundamentals of the north-south relations will always be another failure. Second, Khashan's critique of democracy in the Arab world brings to mind Fukuyama's defeatist vision of the *end of history*. I think any genuine political reform must begin by rethinking democracy beyond the idea of representation and the formal technique of multiparty politics and elections, where the focus is often on the freedom of expression rather than the expression of freedom. It was once said that the greatest threat to democracy is the notion that we have already achieved it. Third, the question of identity needs to be viewed as a social characteristic that cannot (and perhaps should not) be easily given or taken away. Islam has always been and will continue to be the starting point for reforms and reformers in the Arab world, while Arabism cannot simply be ignored. Ironically, Arabs' refusal to disengage themselves from the past and accept Western domination could well provide the corner stone of any genuine *nahda* (renaissance) rather than be the cause of the current backwardness. After all, Western Renaissance of the 14th, 15th, and 16th centuries began by a *rediscovery* (not a rejection) of the Roman and Greek past.

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