

## Arab Christian Nationalist Thinkers and Arab Christian Nationalism in the Levant

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## **Introduction**

Since the last years of the nineteenth century, in the final days of the Ottoman Empire, Arab Christians have been an essential component of nationalist thought in the Arab world. In fact, they have been disproportionately active in the politics and ideological formation of Arab society. Arab Christians have had leadership roles in the pan-Arabist movement, Ba'athism, Syrianism, Palestinian liberation, and other movements. Their foundational work toward defining an inclusive Arabness and initiating a national awakening has had a major impact on Arabs of all faiths.

This paper will first discuss four preeminent Arab Christian nationalist thinkers: Michel Aflaq, a founding member of the Ba'ath Party and a central pan-Arabist leader; Antun Sa'adeh, a Syrian nationalist and believer in the cultural cohesion of Greater Syria; Constantine Zuraiq, another early pan-Arabist thinker; and Dr George Habash, leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and an important figure in Palestinian activism. The philosophies and actions of these nationalist leaders will be analyzed and compared, and then a synthesis will be drawn from the role of each of these figures in the context of their Christian backgrounds about the unique position of Arab Christians in Arab nationalist movements.

The primary question to ask at this juncture is why it is relevant to discuss the role of Arab Christians in Arab nationalism. First of all, their identity as Arabs and their involvement in nationalist thinking call into question considering Islam a fundamental component of Arabism. Second, we might gain a better understanding of why Arab Christians have played such a large part in the formation of Arab nationalisms despite their status as a demographically small minority in the Arab world. Third, analyzing the

role of Arab Christians in these national movements may offer insight into the doctrinal emphasis of these movements on secularism. Finally, these nationalists might teach us about the self-image of Arab Christians as Arabs and their perception of the defining characteristics of Arabness.

## **Michel Aflaq**

Michel Aflaq was born in 1910 in Damascus. His family was Greek Orthodox, middle-class, and had a tradition of nationalist ideology.<sup>1</sup> He studied in Damascus and then went to the Sorbonne in Paris to continue his education, studying history from 1928 to 1932. Among his classmates was his friend Salah al-Din al-Bitar, himself from a Muslim Damascene family, who later joined him in his political activism. After graduating, Aflaq returned to Syria and found employment as a teacher before he and al-Bitar shifted their concentration to the formation of a nationalist movement.

Aflaq's nationalist theoretical work was influenced by the earlier work of Sati' al-Husri, expanding and deepening the concept of the Arab nation and the prospect of its unification.<sup>2</sup> Khaduri calls the key feature of Aflaq's Arab nationalism "Arab spirit striving toward a nationalist goal." He was a foundational pan-Arabist in his definitions of Arabism and his ideals regarding the formation and composition of an inclusive Arab nation-state. In accordance with al-Husri's thinking, Aflaq's definition of the geographical Arab nation included North Africa. This was a departure from previous pan-Arabist thinking, which had limited itself to the Levant and Arabia in scope, if not in theory.

In his definition of the human component of the Arab nation, Aflaq made reference to the 'Arab race' in his writings, but also described his vision of a secular Arab nation comprising all Arab peoples, regardless of their religion or lineage. While recognizing the diverse origins of the Arabs, both genetic and historical, he maintained

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1 Kamel S. Abu Jaber, The Arab Ba'th Socialist Party: History, Ideology, and Organization (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University, 1966) 10.

<sup>2</sup>Elie Chalala, "Arab Nationalism: A Bibliographic Essay," Pan-Arabism and Arab Nationalism: The Continuing Debate, ed. Tawfic E. Farah (Boulder, CO: Westview) 33.

the inclusivity of the 'Arab race' in a post-eugenic model of the Arab nation. Although uncharacteristically Marxist for Aflaq, Cragg argues that Aflaq believed class differences were the root of division and national conflict, not sectarian ones.<sup>3</sup> In any case, Aflaq envisioned a non-racial Arab nation, although through the course of its definition and formation, a new 'Arab race' would emerge. This notion should be understood from a collectivist perspective of national, and even racial, association based on self-identified commonality and shared aspiration, in which the national bond formed between all Arabs would take on dimensions akin to those shared by people who would claim a common racial heritage.

In the early formulation of his theory on the 'Arab race,' many note a marked strain of thinking inspired by fascist and German National Socialist racial thinking, namely in his use of racial rhetoric to foster nationalist action and political unity, as well as the similarities between his state model and that of Nazi Germany.<sup>4</sup> This German strain also comes through in Aflaq's association with the thinking of al-Husri, who was also heavily influenced by German nationalist theory, especially the work of Fichte.<sup>5</sup>

Despite his education in Paris and the impact of German thought on his work, Aflaq firmly rejected Western intervention and imperialism while espousing the importance of a home-grown, essentially Arab nationalism. He co-opted European nationalist thought in his formation of an Arab institution, but felt that the genesis of such an institution must come from the people it is meant to serve. In this way, the key elements borrowed from European thinkers, especially Germans, in Aflaq's thinking

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<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Cragg, The Arab Christian: A History in the Middle East (London: Mowbray, 1991) 162.

<sup>4</sup> Chalala 37.

<sup>5</sup> Bassam Tibi, Arab Nationalism, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 1997) 118.

addressed the composition of a people and the construction of a nation, rather than a specific feature of any European nation or people.

Like al-Husri before them, Aflaq and al-Bitar considered themselves theorists and teachers, and so they acted not in the capacity of politicians, but rather as educators whose primary mission was to inform their countrymen about the relevant historical and political conditions of the country and to convince them of their nationalist view.<sup>6</sup> Aflaq was highly respected for his aloofness from direct political involvement, and his personality took on an incorruptible idealist ethos.<sup>7</sup>

Despite this non-political image, Aflaq founded the Ba'ath Party in 1943 with a group of Syrian students from the Sorbonne “with an enthusiasm for Rosenberg and Hitler.”<sup>8</sup> Through the Ba'ath Party, Aflaq and his followers “sought a synthesis between nationalism and socialism.”<sup>9</sup> After the Second World War and with the growing regional influence of the Soviet Union, the Ba'ath Party took a more leftist position, distancing itself somewhat from any Nazi-influenced postures and aligning itself with a more socialist worldview, although the party maintained a focus on pan-Arabism and a unique ‘Arab Socialism.’<sup>10</sup>

In describing the socialist aspect of his national view, Aflaq made the distinction between the collectivism of the Arab culture as opposed to the individualism he saw characteristic of Western societies. This is an extension of Aflaq's rejection of Western national models within his development of a nationalist theory adapted to Arab society, but it should also be considered in the context of Aflaq's formation of Ba'athist principles

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<sup>6</sup> Tibi 134.

<sup>7</sup> Abu Jaber 10.

<sup>8</sup> Tibi 204.

<sup>9</sup> Tibi 204.

<sup>10</sup> Tibi 208.

in the framework of an 'Arab Socialism,' which he associated apart from Marxism and Leninism.<sup>11</sup> He considered his effort as a necessarily revolutionary movement to cast off the taint of imperialism and foreign intervention and to unite the Arab people who had been unnaturally fragmented by Western powers.<sup>12</sup>

In the early days of the Ba'ath Party, until the late 1950s, Aflaq stressed the immediacy of the party's revolutionary mission and rejected plans for piecemeal constructions of a unified Arab state. He felt that the bonds of Arab unity and the necessity for an Arab nation-state were too pressing for anything but the immediate, revolutionary reformation of the individual Arab countries into a single nation.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, Aflaq's primary conception of his nationalist movement did not emit from a desire to establish a liberal democracy. Rather, his main focus was on combating Western interventionist forces and establishing a centralized Arab national union.<sup>14</sup> However, as he encountered the complicated realities of unification, as in the case of the Syrian union with Egypt in 1958, Aflaq became convinced of the need for more measured progress. His acquiescent support of a federal system of governance for the United Arab Republic was not shared by some Ba'athist hardliners, who demanded nothing less than an 'organic unity' between the two entities.<sup>15</sup>

Aflaq actively supported and engineered Syria's union with Egypt to form the United Arab Republic, maintaining a measure of sovereignty for both provinces. Among the Arab countries, Egypt was foremost in population, military power, cultural influence,

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<sup>11</sup> Tibi 208.

<sup>12</sup> Adeed Dawisha, Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century: From Triumph to Despair (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 2003) 3.

<sup>13</sup> Dawisha 154.

<sup>14</sup> Dawisha 302-303.

<sup>15</sup> Dawisha 194.

and political capital with the popularity of Gamal Abdul Nassir. However, Nassir's rise to power and his foundational ideology were largely regionalist, espousing an Egyptian nationalism rather than an Arab one, namely in opposition to Western interests in Egypt. Even in its dealings with the state of Israel, Egypt's position was based more on domestic and regional interests than pan-Arabist ideals. Courting Egypt, and Nassir specifically, to the cause of Arab unity would be indispensable for the Ba'athists. Thus, despite his regionalist background and his lack of involvement in pan-Arabism, Nassir was made into a powerful symbol of Arab unity, manifested through Egypt's union with Syria.

Although the Ba'ath Party was also established in Iraq, proposals for a union between Syria and Iraq, possibly also including Egypt, fell through in the long run. There was eventually a schism between the Syrian and Iraqi Ba'ath Party factions, after which Aflaq fell out of favor with the Syrian regime and took the side of the Iraqi Ba'athists. He would later die in Baghdad.

One of the most notable tropes in Aflaq's Pan-Arabist theory, as well as in that of like-minded nationalist thinkers, both Muslim and Christian, is his deference to, and invocation of Islam. Aflaq, as in Antun Sa'adeh's Syrian regionalism, maintains the necessity of a rationalist, secular Arab state. However, Aflaq considered Islam to be a fundamental source of Arab heritage and social organization. In his vision of the formation of an Arab identity, he described Islam as a civilizational rather than a religious force. He cites Islam as the drive behind the spread of Arabness, as well as the formative model of its structure.

Aflaq's impetus behind his praise and use of Islam, as well as that of other Arab Christian nationalists, must be considered in the context of the demographic and

hierarchical disadvantage of Arab Christians in the Arab world, of which Aflaq was certainly aware. There were long-standing fears among Arab Christians of the possibility of marginalization or even subordination to the Muslim majority. However, beyond securing themselves a place in the new Arab society, the ideal of a secular, modern Arab nationalism must have appealed to Aflaq and the Arab Christian community partially due to broader concerns about the inclusivity of the hypothetical Arab nation and its potential to attain real, progressive relevance in the modern world.

Aflaq wrote in *To the Memory of the Prophet*, "...Islam is a national culture which [Arab Christians] must assimilate until they understand and love it."<sup>16</sup> His portrayal of Islam was reverent, but regarded it as a part and product of Arabism, rather than a universal confessional truth. By coming to terms with Islam, perhaps the most powerful and evocative facet of Arab culture and society, the Arab Christian could and must, by Aflaq's thinking, activate a deeper, more essential source of Arabness with which they could associate themselves as strongly as their Muslim counterparts. Once embraced in this way, Islam would become a unifying force for all Arab confessional groups.

To reconcile the central place of Islam in Arabism with the ideal of a secular state in his rhetoric, Aflaq asserts that Islam is not necessarily divine revelation, but rather a societal response to the needs of the Arab community at the time of its inception, and "the central cultural denominator of the Arab."<sup>17</sup> By this thinking, Islam defines essential Arabness and is the fundamental manifestation of its values. Islam is thus a perfect tool

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<sup>16</sup> Cragg 161.

<sup>17</sup> Cragg 161.

for organizing Arab nationalism and drawing support from the majority of the Arab population, namely Arab Muslims.

Some traditionalist and conservative Christians were uncomfortable with this kind of close association with Islam from a religious standpoint. Others were wary of doing anything to alter the status quo through secular policies and nationalist revolution which might jeopardize the peaceful and cooperative protected status of Arab Christians as ‘dhimmi’ clients in Muslim lands. Aflaq was even pejoratively referred to as “Muhammad Aflaq” by some of these Christian factions.<sup>18</sup>

Despite his praise of Islam and its societal virtues, Aflaq also drew criticism from some Islamist factions over his secularist stance.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, some fundamentalist Islamists were also uncomfortable with the leadership role of Christians in movements toward Arab unity. This is particularly representative of the sentiment of many Egyptian Islamists in the lead-up to Egypt’s union with Ba’athist Syria, which was heavily influenced by Aflaq.<sup>20</sup>

There are also rumors that Aflaq died a convinced Muslim. Although he was buried in Iraq in the manner honoring a convert to Islam,<sup>21</sup> there is virtually no concrete evidence as to his ever actually converting. However, the mere existence of such a myth suggests the popular memory of Aflaq’s association with, and support for, Islam.

Besides speculation about Aflaq’s motivation as a Christian working to prevent Muslim hegemony, or as an apologist for Islam within the Christian community, his ideology should not be analyzed solely from a religious or sectarian perspective. Aflaq

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<sup>18</sup> Cragg 164.

<sup>19</sup> Dawisha 296.

<sup>20</sup> Dawisha 197.

<sup>21</sup> Tibi 205.

and his followers, of all religious backgrounds, put forth a comprehensive nationalist plan based on the precepts of cultural and political unity. Aflaq and the Ba'ath Party were firm believers in secularism as a just and necessary condition for the creation of a modern nation. Whether it is incidental that Aflaq came from a Christian family, or whether he was influenced early on by the attitudes of the Arab Christian minorities during these times of transition, his conviction in secularism and secular Arab unity holds its own against scrutiny about its viability and ideological consistency in the framework of his national model.

Besides Islam itself, Aflaq also recalled the golden age of the Arabs, namely the rule of the Arab caliphates after the founding of Islam, in order to arouse pride in a classical pan-Arab heritage, as well as to recall a former period of collective Arab might to inspire a renewed interest in Arab unity. In the 1966 founding statement of the Arab Revolutionary Workers Party, a left-wing splinter group of the Syrian Ba'ath Party, it was written that "In Aflaq's ideology progress is a backward step into the past." Aflaq's socialism was rooted in Arab history and culture, and thus in a sense predated Western Marxist conceptions of socialism based on class disparities.

In August, 1971, the Syrian regime sentenced Aflaq to death, though he was not in Syria at that time. He was residing in Iraq, where he spent the rest of his life, having sided with the Ba'athist regime there. His soured relationship with the Ba'athist Party of his home country reflects the story of pan-Arabism itself. The nationalist ideology espoused by Aflaq had failed repeatedly to deliver military victory against Israel, to foster a union with Egypt, or to overcome internal divisions and international hostility. The approach had not worked, and so people shifted their strategies: to Islamism, regionalism,

cooperation with the West, and so on. Pan-Arabism was cast aside as an ineffective endeavor and unfilled promise, and Aflaq along with it.

## **Antun Sa'adeh**

Antun Sa'adeh was born into a Greek Orthodox family in the Lebanese village of Shuwair in 1904. Sa'adeh's father left Lebanon and travelled to São Paulo, Brazil sometime before the onset of the First World War in search of new opportunities. It was expected that Antun would eventually follow his father, which he did in 1920, remaining in Brazil until 1929 when he moved back to Lebanon, which was under French Mandate at the time. While living in Brazil, he had worked on the Brazilian Arabic language literary magazine *al-Majallah*, and had become very interested in German nationalist thought.<sup>22</sup> He also must have learned German during his time in Brazil, because upon returning to Lebanon, Sa'adeh gave private German lessons around the American University of Beirut.

In Beirut he formed the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (in French, *Parti Populaire Syrien*) with a number of students sometime prior to the end of 1932. This organization functioned under the radar of the French Mandatory government until being exposed in 1935. For his role in the Party's radical politics, he was imprisoned for a year for 'subversive activities.' After his release, he continued to lead the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) covertly.

Sa'adeh was a key figure in the expansion of Syrian regional nationalism, which was based on the precepts of the common heritage and cultural cohesion of the people of Greater Syria. This notion was opposed to pan-Arabist nationalism, and Sa'adeh actively rejected pan-Arabism and the belief in the existence of a single Arab people. His nationalist vision saw a unified Levant bringing together all 'Syrians,' the inhabitants of the region who he felt possessed a unified national culture and interest. In this way, his

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<sup>22</sup> Tibi 191.

regional nationalist conceptions have been compared to Egyptian nationalism, the driving force behind Egypt's rise to regional prominence and the original core of Nassirism.<sup>23</sup>

In 1938, Sa'adeh published "The Development of Nations," which served as an initial iteration of his theory of nationalism and national construction. His central criteria for a Syrian nation-state centered on the community, geographic contiguity, and spatial cohesion. This proximity, according to Sa'adeh, is what fostered the historical unity and cultural association of Greater Syria. He defined a nation as "a group of people who share a common life..." but made no claim to the necessity of a common religion or language, though he says that the commonality of those can subsequently augment national cohesion.<sup>24</sup> He explained the historical development of a Syrian people as a unique convergence of historical ethnicities, cultures, and religions. He also stressed continuous geographic proximity and interaction as foundational to the definition of Greater Syria. The Syrian people, and thus Syrian culture, were a result of the amalgamation of the various peoples who occupied the region throughout history, including Hittites, Canaanites, Aramaeans, and others.

In defining the Syrian population this way, he purposefully omitted the Arabs as a foundational influence. Sa'adeh mentioned the role of the Arab Empire in shaping Greater Syria and accounted for Islam and the Arabic language in Syria as lasting borrowings.<sup>25</sup> Although this group was certainly the most influential to modern Syria in terms of language, religion, and culture, he had firmly argued against language and religion as foundational components of a nation, which justified not including the Arabs

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<sup>23</sup> Tibi 191.

<sup>24</sup> Nassif Nassar, "Sa'adeh and the Concept of Regional Nationalism," Antun Sa'adeh: The Man, His Thought, ed. Adel Beshara (Reading, UK: Ithaca, 2007) 27-28.

<sup>25</sup> Robert D. Sethian, "Sa'adeh and Syrian Nationalism," Antun Sa'adeh: The Man, His Thought, ed. Adel Beshara (Reading, UK: Ithaca, 2007) 83-84.

in his list of progenitors. Sa'adeh had to make a point to repudiate any essential Arabness in the Syrian population in order to make the case for a distinct Syrian nation. However, by taking these steps to explicitly deny the Arabness of Syria, Sa'adeh was forced to make several exceptions to his own theory of national formation by ignoring the long and indelible Arab presence of Syria.

Besides the theoretical points laid out in this work, other writings of his at this time also made mention of two other significant images. First, in some minor writings, he pictured himself as a fascist leader of Greater Syria in the future, after the German National Socialist model, imagining himself 'the Fuehrer of the Syrian nation.' His party organization indeed resembled Nazism: he demanded allegiance to the party, to himself as the party's leader, and to the party's ideals.<sup>26</sup> His rallying of youth elements and the cult of personality he built around himself are also reminiscent of Hitler. These techniques did achieve a limited popularity for a time, as they made the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) appear to be a proactive movement for change, ready to mobilize and fight to implement that change, especially in winning independence from the French Mandate.<sup>27</sup>

Secondly, he laid out his early conceptualization of the cultural, historical, and future national boundaries of Greater Syria. This included the whole of the Levant, including Jordan, as a finite geographic unit, physically separated from surrounding regions and thus culturally autonomous. Later, his definition of Greater Syria was extended to include the Sinai, Cyprus, and even Iraq. His concept of nationalism stressed the importance of an organic bond between the land and its people in forming a

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<sup>26</sup> Tibi 195.

<sup>27</sup> Robert D. Seale, The Struggle for Syria: A Study of Post-War Arab Politics 1945-1958 (London: Oxford University, 1965) 67.

homeland.<sup>28</sup> In this way, geography defined the homeland, which in turn defined the nation.

His central theory of Syrian nationalism implicitly rejected the notion of Arab cultural and national unity. He proposed a strictly regional Syrian historical continuity and cultural coherence. In rejecting the fundamental, unifying nature of certain features of Arabness, such as the Arabic language and the cultural, if not religious, centrality of Islam, Sa'adeh was able to break off his 'Syrianism' from pan-Arabism.<sup>29</sup>

However, while pan-Arabists opposed his localist stance, certain Lebanese separatist elements, especially Maronites, considered him to be too broad in his nationalist approach, which would impose a union between Syria and Lebanon.<sup>30</sup> This put his party in the middle of the nationalist spectrum, creating conflict with both extremes. This tenuous position may have contributed to the ultimate collapse of Sa'adeh's scheme. As Ba'athist pan-Arabism grew in power and popularity in Syria, and the government of Lebanon, independent since the end of the French Mandate, firmly enforced a separatist position, Sa'adeh's constituency was significantly diminished. Additionally, Sa'adeh's elaborate and esoteric theories on the history and national formation of Greater Syria were less attractive than other nationalist interpretations. Seale argues that the SSNP's greatest strength was in its fascist organizational popularity.<sup>31</sup> Thus, without a committed constituency to fuel a fascist structure, and without an intellectual base in support of Sa'adeh's theories, the SSNP was doomed to fizzle out.

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<sup>28</sup> Nassar 23-24.

<sup>29</sup> Tibi 193.

<sup>30</sup> Tibi 195.

<sup>31</sup> Seale 67.

Sa'adeh, like many pan-Arabist thinkers such as Aflaq and al-Husri, firmly supported secularism in his nationalist philosophy. His Syrianism denied that links of language and religion were necessary bonds of a nation, and so religion played no part in his national definition. He was also strongly opposed to the sectarianism present in Syria and Lebanon, which he saw as unnecessarily divisive.

As a Christian, Sa'adeh drew some of the same criticism and suspicion for his leadership role in a Muslim country as Aflaq did, despite their fundamentally different philosophies. Egyptian Islamist Kamal al-Din Husayn expressed the same distrust in Sa'adeh's motives as he did in Aflaq's.<sup>32</sup> The fact that these two were viewed similarly by at least some Islamist elements is a natural result of the fundamental ideology of Islamism at the time, reserving leadership roles and national direction for confessionalist Muslims and maintaining the 'dhimmi' protected client status of the Christians present in Muslim lands.

In 1949, Sa'adeh was convicted of 'conspiring against Lebanon' for his treasonous plot of armed rebellion against the current government and the revolutionary formation of a state of Greater Syria through union with Syria. He escaped to Damascus after the Lebanese government called for his arrest. Since he had been operating in the interests of the Syrian regime, he was at first protected there. However, after a short time the Syrian government extradited him to Lebanon, presumably for diplomatic expediency. He was promptly executed in Lebanon. The Syrian Social Nationalist Party continued operations, gaining in popularity as a result Sa'adeh's death, which was seen by many as martyrdom for his cause. In the early 1950s, the SSNP was a major challenger to the Ba'ath Party in Syria. However, in time the party lost influence in

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<sup>32</sup> Dawisha 197.

Syrian politics, giving way to pan-Arabist nationalism, which was made even more popular by Nassir's cooperation with the Syrian Ba'ath Party.

Michel Aflaq himself described Sa'adeh's movement as follows: "...an odd mixture of modernism, of scientism, with something extremely old, even archeological; with a resurrection of the local past and grudges a thousand years old. Among the many movements of Arab rebirth, this was one which aborted and lost itself in an unhealthy romanticism, due perhaps to the fact that Sa'adeh's mind was directed towards the past."

Al-Husri too took issue with most of Sa'adeh's policies, and remarked on his arrogance. However, after meeting with him in 1948, he did praise Sa'adeh's commitment and effective organizational skills. Although al-Husri did not approve of Sa'adeh's use of propaganda, he also admitted to its effectiveness at mobilizing elements of the Syrian public.<sup>33</sup> All in all, al-Husri viewed Sa'adeh as a major opponent and considered his Syrianism to pose a legitimate threat to the pan-Arabist agenda, which also had its epicenter in Syria. At the height of the SSNP in the 1930s and 40s, in the time when Syria was still under French Mandate and before pan-Arabism had become a dominant ideological force in the region with the rise of the Syrian Ba'ath Party and later its association with Nassir, Sa'adeh's regionalism was still a viable alternative for Greater Syria. However, in the long run Sa'adeh's complicated Syrianism did not have the staying power of pan-Arabism or the real-world political support of the individual Arab states.

Sa'adeh's daughter, Prof. Sofia Sa'adeh, writes that her father was a dedicated advocate of democratic ideals who championed civil rights and the value of diversity in

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<sup>33</sup> Tibi 196-197.

his national scheme.<sup>34</sup> It is true that he fought for independence from the Western Mandates and espoused a modern secular polity. However, his fascist ideology remains controversial and still draws considerable criticism to his memory. Although his daughter argues that he opposed autocratic tyranny in his commitment to reform and unity, his methodology would have placed him in the position of a dictatorial ruler. His party organization borrowed many traits from widely deplored European fascism, namely the Nazi party and Mussolini's National Fascist Party. Sa'adeh demanded unquestioning loyalty to himself and the SSNP, and utilized propaganda to draw support, especially attracting agitated youth.

Sa'adeh's theory of the composition of the Syrian nation is also questionable. He relied heavily on geographic determiners in his definition of Greater Syria. Although proximity could understandably correlate to cultural cohesion, claiming it as a formational force in the genesis of a nation seems artificial, as it disregards the importance of a conscious social bond between members of a society. Two groups living side by side may very well consider themselves in enmity and make an active effort to differentiate themselves from each other. Sa'adeh seems to overlook this possibility.

His theory also deliberately underplays the Arab influence on Greater Syria, counting its two most substantial contributions, language and religion, among factors not essential to the composition of a nation. Although it would appear that the region's Arab history played just as much a part in its formation as the other peoples he refers to, Sa'adeh is obliged to discount it in order to make the case for a Syrian identity distinct from a pan-Arab one. This inconsistency may help explain the fact that his movement

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<sup>34</sup> Sofia A. Sa'adeh, "Sa'adeh and National Democracy," *Antun Sa'adeh: The Man, His Thought*, ed. Adel Beshara (Reading, UK: Ithaca, 2007) 534.

seems to have found most of its support through its active call for reform, rather than through its ideological soundness.

Sa'adeh's martyrdom energized his base of support, but the SSNP would never gain as much popularity and political clout as pan-Arabist parties did at their apogee prior to the 1967 War with Israel. However, in competing with this other articulation of nationalism, it is interesting to note the similarities in the origins of the founders of the two movements. Both Aflaq and Sa'adeh came from middle-class, Greek Orthodox, Damascene families. Both were influenced by European nationalist thought yet actively opposed European intervention in the region. Most interestingly, Sa'adeh, like Aflaq, called for a secular nation, which would be culturally and politically inclusive of its constituents. In this way, their national visions would ignore confessional membership, as well as racial background, in favor of identification with a new, higher entity: the Arab nation in Aflaq's case, and the Syrian nation in Sa'adeh's. It appears that the similar personal histories of these two thinkers, as members of a Christian minority coming of age in an era of political transition and uncertain allegiances and divisions, played a part in their common profession of a secular ideal.

## Constantine Zuraiq

The life and work of Constantine Zuraiq resemble in many ways those of Michel Aflaq. However, Zuraiq's contribution to pan-Arabist thinking is essential to an understanding of the movement. Zuraiq, himself a Christian, provides very interesting insight into the role of Islam in pan-Arabist nationalism and especially the Arab Christian's relation to Islam and to Arabism as a whole.

Zuraiq came from a Syrian Greek Orthodox family and was an educator and historian by profession. He was considered a more moderate voice of the pan-Arabist movement, but shared many of Aflaq's core beliefs, such as the unified cultural integrity of the Arab people, the ultimate goal of unity in an Arab nation-state spanning from the Maghreb to Iraq, and the necessity of a secular government in this new nation.

In the late 1930s, Zuraiq published *National Consciousness*, which praised Nazi Germany for its nationalist achievements. Although also influenced by Western, including American, democratic ideals, this work has been criticized for its fascist leaning.<sup>35</sup> Prior to the manifestations of German racist aggression during the Second World War, Zuraiq was intrigued by the successful organization of the German state along nationalist lines which promoted central adherence and outward-looking pride. However, from the beginning he saw Arab nationalism as a unifying movement, not in opposition to any other ethnicity or nation, but meant to eliminate religious and racial divisions among the Arabs.

Like Aflaq, Zuraiq espoused the deference to, and centrality of, Islam in pan-Arabist thinking. Cultural knowledge of the origin and teachings of Islam, in Zuraiq's

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<sup>35</sup> In'am Raad, "Union in Life: Sa'adeh's Notion of the Socio-Economic Cycle," Antun Sa'adeh: The Man, His Thought, ed. Adel Beshara (Reading, UK: Ithaca, 2007) 58.

view, would provide the Arabs with a blueprint for a successful nation. Zuraiq once wrote that it was "...the duty of every Arab, regardless of his religious faith, to study Islam."<sup>36</sup> Knowledge of Islam would inform the Arab student of an essential Arabism predating invasion and occupation by the West and the influence of foreign cultures on the Arab world. In this way, the new Arab nation would possess a patent authenticity, tailor-made to traditional Arab culture and setting it apart from Western models of the nation-state. This was crucial in the context of general dissatisfaction with foreign intervention at the time in the form of the European Mandates and Zionist settlement.

However, he felt that pan-Arabism superseded confessionalism and assimilated Islam within its teachings. Zuraiq asserted that "Muhammad was the supreme architect of Arab consciousness."<sup>37</sup> Like Aflaq, Zuraiq saw Islam as a specifically Arab societal invention, and felt that it could be used to fuel a nationalist movement and shape a strong Arab identity. In this way, Islam was a vehicle for Arab nationalism. Just as the birth of Islam had initiated the spread of Arab civilization with the Arab armies, so in the modern day, Islam could similarly ignite the sentiment of the necessity of Arab unity.

It could be said that Zuraiq supported a cultural, social Islam as the backbone of an Arab nation, insofar as this 'secularized Islam' would fuel a nationalist spirit. He wrote that "Arab nationalists should fall back on sources of their religion and derive from it inspiration and spiritual guidance."<sup>38</sup> The Islamist position views Islam as the core foundation of any political or societal organization vis-à-vis its ultimate religious truth and universal centrality. In Zuraiq's view, on the other hand, Islam is seen as a subtext to Arab social organization. It both inspires and serves Arab consciousness, and also

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<sup>36</sup> Cragg 154.

<sup>37</sup> Cragg 154.

<sup>38</sup> Chalala 38.

informs identity. However, in the process of its secularization and application to a modern pan-Arabist nationalism, Islam is stripped of its transcendent universality.

This would certainly offend Islamists and pious Muslim confessionalists, but this was a sensible mode of thought from the Arab Christian standpoint. Without negating the vitality of Islamic virtue, this thinking freed Arab identity from a Muslim religious monopoly. Zuraiq's Arab secularism did not deny Islam, but in fact embraced it and opened Arab society to Arab Christian contribution and participation. Zuraiq, as well as Aflaq and Sa'adeh, was perhaps naturally predisposed to the notion of his own inclusion in the Arab nation as a Christian, but beyond that, he required secularism to justify his own leadership within the societal milieu. Dismantling the exclusivity of Islam in Arab identity allowed for the full participation of Christian leaders in the nationalist endeavor. The assertion that Arabness goes deeper than religion neatly legitimized the inclusion in the Arab nation of all the indigenous communities who attested to the pan-Arabist ideal. This was essential to Zuraiq's position within the movement.

Zuraiq also approved of the client status of Christians within Islam.<sup>39</sup> Taking this position was imperative to fostering a cooperative and non-oppositional environment for both religious communities. The congenial institution of 'dhimmi' status for Arab Christians aligned the history of Muslim hegemony with the sentiment of mutual belonging and long-standing cooperation. Establishing this kind of historical posture of solidarity and goodwill, regardless of its veracity, was necessary for moving beyond confessionalism and creating a modern state in which members of any religion who profess an Arab identity can have a stake.

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<sup>39</sup> Chalala 39.

Even before the 1967 War with Israel, Zuraiq recognized the critical challenge posed by the previous defeats of the Arab armies to the Arab nationalist resolve.<sup>40</sup> His concern proved to be valid after Israel was victorious in 1967 and again in 1973. The repeated losses of the Arab forces eventually contributed to the populace losing faith in pan-Arabism as an effective governing ideal. Zuraiq was correct in his assessment of the effect of defeat on ideological determination and national morale. Tactical speculation as to the relative strength of the Israeli military aside, Zuraiq was right in recognizing military defeat as a major threat to commitment to the nationalist cause. However, he and others were resolute in their confidence in the Arab coalition under the directing principles of Arab unity.

Zuraiq was a key player in the formation of pan-Arab nationalism. His thinking influenced Syrian politics and Arab politics as a whole. His moderation and openness to other viewpoints, including those of the West, also mitigated some of the hard-line tendencies of certain elements in the pan-Arabist movement, especially among the Ba'athists. These traits reflect his status as a Christian in the Arab nationalist movement.

Christians had in a unique role in the Middle East during the nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries. They were often favored clients of the Western imperialist powers, who trusted them as intermediaries and dragomans in their affairs in the region. This, along with an often middle-class technocratic societal station, gave them access to education in Western schools or in the West itself. Additionally, the ecclesiastical hierarchy of most Arab churches was based in the West: in Greece for the Greek Orthodox, Rome for the Roman Catholics, and Britain and the US for many Protestant denominations. This subverted the Christian communities to Western religious leadership

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<sup>40</sup> Abu Jaber 29.

and brought them into more contact with foreign interests. All this provided many Arab Christians with broader exposure to Western political thinking and liberal ideals.

This is the vantage point that Constantine Zuraiq had while he was forming his nationalist philosophy. He was a thinker poised between two worlds but firmly rooted in his Arab identity. He was an idealist as well as a pragmatist in many manners, which lent the pan-Arabist movement a useful perspective.

## **George Habash**

Dr. George Habash came from a Palestinian Greek Orthodox family in Lod. During the 1948 formation of the state of Israel, he fled western Palestine and became a refugee in Lebanon. He studied medicine at the American University of Beirut and subsequently moved to Amman to practice. Soon thereafter, he concentrated his time fully on Palestinian nationalist activism.

In his work in the Palestinian nationalist movement, Habash presents an interesting perspective. Although he began his activist career as a pan-Arabist Nassirist, he is unlike Aflaq and Zuraiq in that his nationalist efforts eventually turned solely to the Palestinian cause. The immediate concerns of this movement were Palestinian liberation and consolidation into a legitimate state, rather than broader Arab unity.

However, Habash is also unlike Sa'adeh, who espoused Syrian regional unity. Sa'adeh believed in the existence of a Syrian people, defined by their unique history in the context of geographical Greater Syria. He firmly rejected the notion of an Arab people and nation, as he felt that the Syrians fully constituted an independent people, and that the Arab influences on that people were non-essential in the formation of the nation. Habash did ultimately shift to a more local view of the nation, but he did not share Sa'adeh's views on the unique heritage of 'Syrians' and their non-association with the Arab people. Habash continued to believe that the Palestinians were Arabs. Although he recognized the unique history and political situation of the Palestinians as different from any other Arab group in the context of the Palestinian national crisis, he never refuted their Arabness, but rather abandoned hope in the effectiveness of Arab national unity and concentrated on the individual plight of the Palestinian people.

There are two main factors that influenced his move to a more local nationalist stance which differentiate him from any of these other nationalist thinkers. First, unlike Aflaq, Zuraiq, and Sa'adeh, who were all Syrians, Habash was a Palestinian dealing with the immediate personal and ideological concerns of displacement, occupation, and statelessness. Syrian independence was not in question after the Mandates. Rather, the form and range of inclusiveness this independence would take was the major point of contention. For a Palestinian such as Habash, the end of the British Mandate in Transjordan put the Palestinian people in a position where their national self-determination, regardless of the form it would take, was seriously and indeterminately threatened.

The second factor that differentiates Habash from Aflaq, Zuraiq, and Sa'adeh is the fact that much of his activity occurred after the 1967 War with Israel and the subsequent occupation of Gaza and the West Bank. His nationalist thinking changed significantly after the Arab defeat and the loss of faith in the tenets of pan-Arabism. Habash's nationalist outlook was essentially reshaped to account for direct foreign occupation and the lack of an organized state structure, both of which were no longer the case in Syria.

As a medical student in Beirut in the early 1950s, Habash founded the Arab Nationalist Movement (ANM) with other students from the American University in 1951. After leaving Beirut and practicing medicine for a while in Amman, Habash again became active with the AMN. The AMN was closely linked to the ideologies of Nassirism and Nassir's position of leadership in the Arab world. Dawisha argues that the ANM considered itself a grassroots activist movement for Nassirism. They never swayed

in their support of Nassir, for better or worse, and so were active until the 1960s, when Nassirist enthusiasm began to wane.<sup>41</sup> Nassir's popular resistance to the West and the state of Israel made him an attractive ideological leader for militant Palestinian nationalists. However, at this point Habash still subscribed to the promise of pan-Arabism in delivering the Palestinians from displacement.

After his involvement with Nassirism, Habash became involved with several organizations for Palestinian liberation. In 1967, he formed the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) from several of these groups and became its leader. During the 1970s, the PFLP was involved in plotting and executing several lethal terrorist attacks, notably airplane hijackings. A 1970 hijacking in Jordan sparked the Jordanian Civil War. Until then, Habash and the PFLP had operated out of Amman, but they moved to Damascus after the tension in Jordan exploded in the aftermath of the 1970 incident.<sup>42</sup> Later on, Habash and the PFLP were also behind an assassination attempt on the life of King Hussein of Jordan.

Habash was initially in support of a Marxist revolutionary ideology.<sup>43</sup> In the case of the Palestinian liberation movement, popular revolt was especially relevant. However, as tensions began to rise between factions within the PFLP, Habash came to lead the more moderate branch, with the Marxist contingent breaking off to form the Popular Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PDFLP), led by Nayef Hawatmah. This more moderate stance meant that Habash and his PFLP core were willing to cooperate with a wider range of Arab nationalist organizations, which lent them increased military and financial support. Kadi argues that Habash's moderation was meant to avoid

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<sup>41</sup> Dawisha 156.

<sup>42</sup> Dawisha 156n.

<sup>43</sup> Claude Lorieux, *Chrétiens d'Orient en terres d'islam* (Paris: Perrin, 2001) 206.

distancing the PFLP from the powerful Palestinian 'petite bourgeoisie.' Though he remained committed, at least in his rhetoric, to the cause of the working class, this position put him at odds with the hard-line Marxist element within the PFLP which went on to form the PDFLP.<sup>44</sup>

Ajami argues that the Palestinian nationalist movements, especially those led by Arafat and Habash, were the first to react against pan-Arabism after the massive Arab defeat against Israel in 1967, which, in his view, marked the effective end of Nassirism and pan-Arabism.<sup>45</sup> In light of the fact that Palestinians were the group foremost devastated by this defeat and the subsequent occupation of Gaza and the West Bank, it is understandable that Palestinian factions would be the first to become disillusioned with promise of Arab nationalist unity.

Just as Aflaq and Sa'adeh had attracted criticism for their Christian backgrounds from some Muslim factions in the Arab world, so too did Iraqi colonel Abd al-Salam Aref express his disdain for Habash's leading role in the ANM in 1963.<sup>46</sup> Aref, like the ANM, was a supporter of Nassir and his politics, but harbored a bias to Sunni Muslim superiority.

As a Christian, Habash's central role in the Palestinian nationalist liberation movement is an important indicator of the nature of the Palestinian position in the Arab-Israeli conflict. The creation of the state of Israel had displaced and disenfranchised both Christian and Muslim Palestinians, who viewed the influx of Western Zionist settlers as a

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<sup>44</sup> Leila S. Kadi, Basic Political Documents of the Armed Palestinian Resistance Movement (Beirut: Palestine Liberation Organization Research Center) 31-32.

<sup>45</sup> Hassan Nafaa, "Arab Nationalism: A Response to Ajami's Thesis on the 'End of Pan-Arabism'," Pan-Arabism and Arab Nationalism: The Continuing Debate, ed. Tawfic E. Farah (Boulder, CO: Westview) 138.

<sup>46</sup> Dawisha 294-295n.

continuation of European imperialism. At its core, Palestinians did not view the dispute over the country as a simply confessional clash between Judaism and Islam. Rather, they saw the appropriation of lands and the consolidation of political power in Zionist hands as a foreign cultural and political intrusion against an indigenous people. That a Palestinian Christian would lead a major party of resistance helped to frame the conflict according to this reality as it was understood by Palestinians.

Habash's leadership of the PFLP is also important in light of his utilization of violent terrorist tactics after 1967. As a Christian, Habash's role in these attacks suggests a source of violent aggression apart from Islamic fundamentalism. Although terrorism is today often associated with fundamentalist Islamist movements, in the Palestinian case, these same tactics had their origin in a secular, leftist organization led by a Christian. Habash and the PFLP turned to terrorism out of frustration with the failure of conventional military resistance and the belief in the justified use of guerilla tactics in armed Marxist revolt.

George Habash is an important figure in Arab nationalist movements generally and Palestinian liberation specifically due to his organizational and notional contributions. His commitment to the Palestinian cause as an Arab Christian indicates a cultural and political understanding of Palestinian Arab identity apart from an Islamic one. His role differed from that of other Arab Christian nationalist thinkers, but he too played a crucial part in the history of Arab and Palestinian nationalist movements.

## Arab Christians and Islam

The early development of nationalist sentiments among Arab Christians began under the Ottoman Empire in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Under the Ottomans, Arab Christians were doubly disenfranchised: Arabs were excluded from positions of power in favor of Turks, and Christians were relegated to separate millets in keeping with their 'dhimmi' treatment under the Ottoman caliphate.

During this period and after the dismantlement of the Ottoman Empire in the First World War, Arab Christians were often favored by European powers hoping to do business or exert influence in the Ottoman-controlled Arab lands. Thus, Arab Christians often had more access to Western education and interaction with liberal European ideas, and they were also more open to Western thought. Tibi argues that at this point, the West served as a model of national reform, and many Arab Christians were very much influenced by European nationalist movements.<sup>47</sup> Only after direct European intervention in the region, i.e. the British and French Mandates, was the West rejected and resisted, and these same nationalist sentiments were turned on the European imperialist powers.

The favoritism displayed by European imperialist powers in the region toward various Arab Christian sects placed Arab Christians under suspicion for collaboration among some Muslim elements. In this way, Christians went from societal marginalization under the Ottoman caliphate to favored cliency under European rule.<sup>48</sup> This kind of sectarian partiality fueled divisions in the French Mandate in Syria and Lebanon and contributed to Lebanese separatism.<sup>49</sup> This made a clear reorganization of essential

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<sup>47</sup> Tibi 116.

<sup>48</sup> Cragg 123.

<sup>49</sup> Stephen Hemsley Longrigg, Syria and Lebanon Under French Mandate (London: Oxford University, 1958) 91-92.

Arabism and the profession of their belonging very important objectives in Arab Christian circles.

European notions of nationhood, empire, the nation-state, and modernization were all exogenous imports to the Arab world. The European imperial powers had imposed their own divisions and forms of governance and citizenship through the League of Nations Mandates in the Levant following the First World War, and through colonial intervention in North Africa and Egypt. Prior to these direct encounters to Western domination, European hegemony had already been exercised economically, diplomatically, and through missionaries on the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire. Though the Ottomans were supposed to be the rightful inheritors and upholders of the Islamic caliphate, years of decline, European influence and coercion, and finally, military defeat before and during the First World War had demonstrated the supremacy of these European institutions and enabled their infiltration into Arab lands.

Tibi argues that the Arab Christian emphasis on secularism in their iterations of nationalism came as a result of their political and societal alienation in the Ottoman state as a result of their relegation to separate millets within the empire.<sup>50</sup> In this way, Arabism itself was a path to self-realization. Identifying themselves as Arabs, just as their Muslim neighbors, the formation of an Arab nation would be just as open to them because they would have an equal right to membership in an Arab society. However, to ensure a cultural, ethnic interpretation of Arabness rather than a religious one, the notion of secularism would have to be central while defining the Arab nation.

Secular Nationalism was developed by Arab Christian nationalist thinkers as an alternative to foreign subjugation, whether it be through the Ottoman Empire or European

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<sup>50</sup> Tibi 163.

Mandates, but also as a modernist alternative to sectarian partitioning and unilateral Islamist domination. It is fitting that this secular, unifying nationalist idea comes from a religious minority who could perhaps better appreciate the threat of sectarianism to national unity, extending inclusion into the Arab nation to non-Sunni Arab Muslims, Druze, Jews, and others. As was the case among Iraqi Shi'ah, some felt that entering into a united Arab nation would make certain groups minorities in the broader Sunni Muslim Arab world, whereas they formed a more substantial minority or even a majority regionally.<sup>51</sup> Sustaining a secular state provided a solution to this concern by eliminating the divergence of sectarian interests in a unified state.

Islam appears as a central feature in many of the philosophies of the Arab Christian nationalist thinkers discussed above. Being an original Arab institution, Islam offered an ideal alternative to Western models of societal structure. Despite their differing individual national theories and goals, they utilized Islam in their rhetoric as a vehicle of their nationalist agendas. Cragg makes the case that Islam, as an inherently political, universalist force, could have subsumed Arab Christians within it as 'dhimmi' clients, even in an Arabism not purely defined by Islamic confessionality.<sup>52</sup> By integrating a 'secularized Islam' into their own nationalist philosophies, Arab Christians were able to mitigate the risk of reverting to a subordinate role under Islam.

Beyond this deference to the religion of the politically and numerically dominant majority, Islam represented to Arab Christians an essential and authentic mode of Arabness. In the thinking of these Arab Christian nationalists, Islam is an indigenous and custom-made Arab creation. In fact, by reflecting the cultural and social structure of Arab

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<sup>51</sup> Dawisha 295.

<sup>52</sup> Cragg 279.

society and explicitly addressing its setbacks, Islam was seen as perhaps the perfect, most universal product of Arabness, defining it and the Arab nation.

Muslim leaders differed in their response to the secular message of the Arab Christian nationalists. As previously stated, Aflaq, Zuraiq, Sa'adeh, and Habash all worked with Muslims in their organizations and generally did not draw any distinctions. In 1918, King Faysal had made secularist decrees in search of support for his regime, recruiting Christians into his administration, proclaiming Arab unity across religions, stating "The Arabs were Arabs before Moses, Christ and Muhamad," and even that Muhammad was "an Arab before being a prophet."<sup>53</sup>

However, not all Muslims were comfortable with increased national power in the hands of Christians. Many Islamist elements mistrusted any Arab Christian leadership. The Islamist movement in Egypt began gaining strength in the 1920s and supported Muslim unity before any other consideration.<sup>54</sup> Even a contingent of the Iraqi regime as voiced by Abd al-Salam Aref was predisposed to reserving power for Sunni Muslims. Many in the Saudi leadership considered the Saudi Arabia to be the center of true Arabness, and rejected outside claims, especially from Christians, to defining Arab unity, seeing only pan-Islamism as the next level in unification.<sup>55</sup>

Secularism did not only stem from confessional motivations in the Christian minority, but also from a generally non-religious strain of thought. The modernist desire for a state governed without religious considerations was a key feature of the new model for the Arab world. It was also necessary for the lasting unity of the Arab people of

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<sup>53</sup> Dawisha 42.

<sup>54</sup> Dawisha 101.

<sup>55</sup> Dawisha 189 (from Ghazi A. Alghosaiibi's *The 1962 Revolution in Yemen and its Impact on the Foreign Policy of the UAR and Saudi Arabia* 272).

different faiths. Foremost, secularism enabled the ideal of an inclusive Arabism, in which everyone with a stake in Arab society would also have a stake in the Arab state.

## Arab Christians as Arabs and Christians

Arab Christians writers were prominent progenitors of Arab nationalist thought during the last decades of the Ottoman Empire. Because of their religious differences, Dawisha argues that Arab Christians had a stronger sense of “ethnic separateness” from the Turks than many Arab Muslims.<sup>56</sup>

The Arabic language played an important role in pan-Arabist notions of defining the Arab nation, as al-Husri put forth.<sup>57</sup> This was particularly important for Arab Christians. Though they were excluded from understandings of Arabness or of national unity emanating from Islam, they had equal, if not greater, access to Arabic literary language through their educational opportunities and exposure to non-religious literature. Longrigg cites the growth of a Christian scholarly movement which by 1890 had begun a renaissance of Arab culture and language, and which began to push in the direction of Arabism.<sup>58</sup> This linguistic acumen would serve Arab Christians well in asserting their Arabness and rallying support for their brand of Arabism.<sup>59</sup>

Cragg accounts for the prominence of Arab Christians in early Arabist movements during the waning days of the Ottoman Empire by asserting that they had much to gain in a post-Ottoman political and societal reorganization. Recognizing that the status quo of the Ottoman Empire was coming to an end, an independent Arab nation would offer the opportunity of direct involvement to Arab Christians, who had been marginalized under the Ottoman caliphate as ‘dhimmi’ clients.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Dawisha 18.

<sup>57</sup> Tibi 147.

<sup>58</sup> Longrigg 26.

<sup>59</sup> Cragg 144.

<sup>60</sup> Cragg 10.

The majority of Arab Christians who espoused an Arab national identity did so because they consciously considered themselves Arabs. That is to say, ulterior considerations such as assuring state representation as a minority group, protecting their social status in an Islamic society, and implementing Western secular ideals may have informed their political opinions, but Arab Christians did associate with both their Christian and Arab identities.

They felt that their Christianity was a mode of Arabness. Many could trace their family's origin to old Arab tribes. They spoke Arabic, even in church. They participated fully in the cultural, social, and political life of the ambient Arab milieu. Though many had significant interaction with Western institutions and cultures, most of these pan-Arabist Christians fostered no claim to a dual belonging to both the Arab and European cultures; they too felt the foreignness of Western claims to their land and heritage. Evidence of this includes numerous disputes with the European ecclesiastical hierarchies about autochthonous control of the Arab churches. They cast their fortunes within Arab society, and wanted to participate in the future direction of Arab civilization.

Even those who did not identify themselves as Arabs, as with Sa'adeh and his followers, did not dissociate themselves from their non-Christian countrymen. Sa'adeh felt that he was as Syrian as a Syrian Muslim, and that they both shared a place in the unique national heritage of Greater Syria. Populations and societies had simply been too integrated and syncretous for too long for one confessional group to claim a completely separate origin from the others. Even in the case of the Maronite separatists, their claim to a distinct Lebanese ethnic heritage apart from that of the Arabs had to be extended to

the indigenous non-Muslim residents of Lebanon, as confession alone was not enough to divide the people ethnically.

Regardless of their nationalist opinion, Arab Christians established their allegiances on the basis of their undeniable bond to their countries. In so doing, they made a claim to an indigenous heritage shared equally by Arab Muslims, Druze, Jews, and others. Their religious affiliation did not override their cultural identity, and thus they did not see themselves as outsiders in the Arab nationalist endeavor.

## **The Arab World after Arabism**

Tibi attributes the growth and ascendancy of “political Islam” to the Arab defeat to Israel in the 1967 War and the subsequent occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. He asserts that pan-Arabist nationalism was seen as having failed in its promises of unity, liberation, and strength.<sup>61</sup> After two prior losses to Israel and now the humiliating defeat of the Arab armies in 1967, the leaders of the Arab nationalist parties and their rhetoric had not delivered the countries who had supported them. Attempts at unity had crumbled, cooperation between nations had proven fruitless, and the combined Arab militaries had been unable to defeat the single state of Israel. Arab nationalism had not worked, and so people sought a new ideology. Rejecting the secularist and socialist ideologies of this failed Arab nationalism, people turned to a greater and broader force: Islam.

For a downtrodden and defeated people, Islam provided the promise of ultimate deliverance and victory. This plausibly explains why Islamism grew in prominence in the Arab world during this time. Identities shifted to center around the historically powerful Muslim ‘ummah,’ by which Arab Muslims aligned themselves in their worldview not only with other Arabs as such, in a cohesive cultural and societal bloc, but rather with the world’s Muslims, of numerous ethnicities and nationalities. In this framework, national boundaries and political allegiances are secondary to association with the greater Muslim community.

The place of the Arab Christian in the midst of this shift is uncertain. Many Christians have left the Middle East to settle in the West, leaving those who remain an even smaller minority. Many Arab Christians, and many Arab Muslims, have embraced a local nationalism associated with their respective Arab state. However, along with most

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<sup>61</sup> Tibi 19.

Arab Muslims, they have not abandoned their Arab identity. Aspirations for a greater project of Arab unity or a massive political reformation seem unrealistic now. The political future of the Middle East seems to be crystallizing in the form of the individual nation-state, and most Arabs, Christians included, are adapting to this reality.

In terms of concerns over the continued Islamicization of the region's politics, the Arab Christian reaction has been tentative. As stated before, many Arab Christians have emigrated to the West, whether for economic opportunity, increased security, or the desire to live in a more liberal society. For those who remain, history would suggest that an Islamist regime would be tolerant of an Arab Christian minority, though they may revert to the status of clients of the Islamic society. Even given current trends, predicting future conditions is tenuous at best, but the Arab Christian population of the Middle East will remain an extant component of Arab society for the time being.

## Conclusion

In discussing these leaders, their contributions, and the implications of Christian involvement in Arab nationalist movements, we have gained an important insight into the region as a whole. We have seen how these thinkers shaped their definition of national identity on the basis of cultural belonging and historical heritage rather than religious affiliation, allowing themselves and other non-Muslims to have a stake in their national society. The disproportionately large participation of Christians in these Arab nationalist endeavors has been accounted for through consideration of the status of Arab Christians before the fall of the Ottoman Empire and their motivation behind forming an inclusive and modern Arab consciousness. The emphasis these Arab Christian leaders placed on secularism has been elucidated by the obvious advantage of a secular state to a religious minority, but also in terms of their influence by Western ideals and their desire to create a comprehensive national society. Finally, we have shed some light on how Arab Christians view themselves as Arabs and view their position in Arab society by looking at their historical treatment under various regimes and their association with the non-religious aspects of Arabness.

Dawisha references an image from Egyptian journalist Fahmi Huwaydi describing the participants of a 1994 conference in Beirut on Arab nationalism and unity which provides a poignant metaphor for the current state of pan-Arabism:

[T]he conferees appeared to represent an extinct tribe using strange words.... Most of them had grey hair and stooping backs. Some needed canes to help them walk. Some had hearing aids and shaking hands..., and others had difficulty getting words out.”<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Dawisha 280.

Many of the Arab Christian nationalist thinker of the era of nationalist formation are gone now, having died or retired, their commitment to their causes having failed in realizing their visions of nationhood. Likewise, a large portion of the Arab Christian population has left the Middle East and so they face ever greater marginalization as a demographic minority. However, the role of Arab Christians in the past has demonstrated their close association with the region and its people. They had a large part in shaping the Arab world, and despite the failures of their projects and the regression of their developments, their legacy is one of solidarity and progress.

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