

*Peter Wien, guest editor*

## PREFACE: RELOCATING ARAB NATIONALISM

“Relocating Arab Nationalism” locates various representations of nationalism in the Arab world in new and hitherto neglected contexts. The project was first conceived in a conversation among some of the contributing authors about the validity of nationalism as a research topic in a seemingly postnationalist period in the Middle East. This conversation turned into a panel at the 2007 MESA conference in Montreal as an attempt to contribute to a further shift of perspective in the study of Arab nationalism away from the realm of theory and politics toward that of cultural history.<sup>1</sup> The articles in this volume therefore trace the contours of multiple imaginary Pan-Arab spaces between the Atlantic Ocean and the Tigris river, inquiring into the movements of people, terms, and ideas between physical locations and in time. The space is imagined but experienced; the people who moved in it were sometimes excited about its promises and sometimes disappointed about its corruption and containment. Such experiences are the focal points of the articles. They ask whether and in what ways a virtual Pan-Arab community transcending the borders of nation–states ever existed. They also present the multitude of national narratives that were at work—and more often than not in conflict—inside the boundaries of nation–states. The authors do not see Arab nationalism as first and foremost a political agenda of unification and cooperation but rather focus on the roots, establishment, and evolution of imaginative, symbolic, or “lived” ties between people(s) who claimed to belong to an Arab national community, or tried to claim space for dissident minorities through counterhegemonic narratives. Case studies from Algerian, Moroccan, Syro-Palestinian, and Iraqi contexts from the interwar to the postindependence periods investigate the ways these ties of community were established beyond the rhetoric of textbooks and political speeches.

“Relocating Arab Nationalism” is about shifting boundaries—between elites and the populace, between the Ottoman and Mandate eras, between ethnicities and ideological commitments. It also further shifts the dominant source base from the colonial archive to local archives and libraries in Arabic. The result is a view of Pan-Arabism as a conglomerate of sometimes contradictory and sometimes complementary nationalisms that take different forms in different Arab lands and that are deeply rooted in local contexts and in personal experience.

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Many scholars of the Middle East and North Africa presuppose that Arab nationalism has largely been a construct in the minds of ambitious politicians and intellectuals, exploited to mobilize groups or populations of the newly founded Arab states for either state-centered or personal interests. As a “mere” ideology, Arab nationalism indeed served the political leaders in many countries as a way to discipline societies and divert attention from the parochial activities of cliques whose primary concern was to remain in power. But beyond the obvious shortcomings of Arab leaders and ideologists—and without simply reformulating the arguments of George Antonius—it remains to be shown how, and to what extent, the ideas and practices of nationalism became, and perhaps remain, meaningful for ordinary people in the Arab world. Taken together, the studies in the present volume suggest that analysis of nationalism’s meaning in specific locales reveals a great deal about its wider historical significance. Rather than lamenting the self-defeating, or even illusory, nature of Arabism, we suggest a more subtle appreciation of the ways in which both Arab nationalism and alternative narratives of minorities in Arab societies have been used by different people to shape and empower self-expression, as well as by the ideological apparatuses of authoritarian states to limit and neutralize it.

Based on original research in Middle Eastern and North African archives, supplemented by Western archives and libraries, and of course building on a growing body of wider literature<sup>2</sup> including earlier work by the authors, the following articles present nationalisms in the Arab world as viewed by a wide range of social actors, ranging from back-row intellectuals, middle-class professionals, and junior Islamic scholars to military men, poets, and political activists—many of them belonging to the so-called *effendiyya*. Thus, the authors take into account that various forms of nationalism have been and continue to be for many in the Arab world one of several crucial components in the definition of their identities. As a collective effort, these articles present a spectrum of nationalisms in the Arab world ranging from parochial visions of a society dominated by local elites to populist and transnational visions of a sovereign and just people’s community.

#### NOTES

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<sup>1</sup>The authors thank Christoph Schumann for his insightful and inspiring discussion of four of the papers.

<sup>2</sup>Notably, James L. Gelvin, *Divided Loyalties: Nationalism and Mass Politics in Syria at the Close of Empire* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1998); Christoph Schumann, *Radikalnationalismus in Syrien und Libanon: Politische Sozialisation und Elitenbildung 1930–1958* (Hamburg, Germany: Deutsches Orient-Institut, 2001); Heather J. Sharkey, *Living with Colonialism: Nationalism and Culture in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2003); Beth Baron, *Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender and Politics* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2005); Lisa Pollard, *Nurturing the Nation: The Family Politics of Modernizing, Colonizing and Liberating Egypt (1805/1923)* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2005); Eric Davis, *Memories of State: Politics, History and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, Calif.: University of California Press, 2005); Keith D. Watenpaugh, *Being Modern in the Middle East: Revolution, Colonialism, Nationalism, and the Arab Middle Class* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006); and Laleh Khalili, *Heroes and Martyrs of Palestine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).