

# The Arab World and the elusive two-state solution

The Arab World in a geopolitical sense no longer exists; the PLO leadership may have to think of a one-state solution

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Words have meanings that are used and misused. A few weeks ago, someone with evident limitations fulminated against a category of faiths depicted as 'Abrahamic'. Around the same time, the global media gleefully proclaimed the newly minted 'Abraham Accord' to describe a happening of political significance. Both expressions sought to trace it to the proper name, Abraham, a patriarchal entity who flourished in the Second Millennium BCE, is revered by three religions — Judaism, Christianity and Islam — and whose followers today account for a little over 55% of the world's population. Mention is also made alongside of a group of languages as Semitic — principally Arabic, Hebrew, Amharic and Aramaic.

## **Language as fulcrum**

Till the end of World War I, most of the Arabic-speaking lands of West Asia and North Africa were ruled directly or indirectly by the Ottoman Empire. Today, thanks to geopolitical cartography, they constitute the 'Arab World' whose 22 members are members of the UN. The point of commonality is the language.

The seeds of Arab nationalism were sown in the 19th century. The classic work of George Antonius, published in 1938, records the origins: 'It was at a secret gathering of the certain members of the Syrian Scientific Society that the Arab national movement may be said to have uttered its first cry.' A poem by one of its members gave it the battle cry: Arise, ye Arabs, and awake! The poem, viewed as seditious by the Ottoman rulers, did much to foster the national movement in its infancy.

## **A critique**

In 1945 and reportedly on British prompting, the League of Arab States was formed to 'draw closer the relations between member states and co-ordinate their political activities with the aim of realising a close collaboration between them, to safeguard their independence and sovereignty, and to consider in a general way the affairs and interests of the Arab countries'. It has achieved none of its objectives and its hopes have been 'worn down to disillusion and cynicism' emanating from what Bassam Tibi has called 'the duality of words and deeds'.

The critique of mystifications of Arab nationalism was a promise; but the promise of getting light at the end of the tunnel did not bear the expected results. This was attributed by a UNDP Human Development Report many years ago to deficits of knowledge, freedom and empowerment of women. Thus, absence of participatory governance and its institutions, disregard for individual freedoms, and the prevalence of one-person rule resulted in what Abdullah Laroui characterised as 'living in Infra-historical rhythm'. Admittedly, sectional though uneven progress was made, but as the experience of the Arab Uprising of 2011 showed, deep disagreements prevented the emergence of an Arab order and its impact on 'Arab unity'. It was most evident in their responses to regional and global problems.

## **The Palestine issue**

The one problem on which Arab states professed unity of opinion, but not necessarily of approach, related to Palestine and to the demand for a Palestinian state. After multiple resorts to war and popular uprisings, the tenacity of Israel and its American backers forced the Arab states and their international supporters to accept the Camp David and Oslo Accords and finally the Saudi-sponsored 2002 Arab Peace Initiative. It involved a *de facto* recognition of Israel and the latter accepted it with 14 reservations.

The truth behind this Saudi initiative has now been made public in a series of television interviews on Al-Arabiya channel on October 5 by the former Saudi Ambassador to the United States and later intelligence chief, Prince Bandar Bin Sultan. It is candid and revealing and sheds much light on the Saudi suspicion of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) leadership, beginning but not ending with Yasser Arafat.

The ostensible reason for this, according to some Arab-American commentators, is 'perceived threat from Iran, the spread of regional terrorism and the rise of Islamism'. The take-off occasion, according to them, was the conference in Warsaw in February 2019 that was hailed by Israel Prime Minister Netanyahu as 'a breakthrough in Arab-Israeli relations'. This could be seen as a stage in the success of Israel's grand strategy candidly spelt out in Yossi Alpher's 2015 book, *Periphery*, aimed to outflank the hostile core that surrounds it and gain the major political-security goal of countering Arab hostility through relations with alternate regional powers and potential allies. It has been furthered by post-2011 developments in individual Arab countries and the aura bestowed on 'political Islam' or Islamism presented by its protagonists such as Fahmy Howeidly who argued that Arab nationalism is a stage towards greater Islamic unity.

### **Public opinion vs. policy**

Do these failures to jolt the system at the individual-country and regional levels have an impact on perceptions of the Palestinian problem? The Arab Center Washington DC and its *Arab Opinion Index* for 2019-2020 published last week concluded that 79% of the respondents felt 'the Palestinian cause concerns all Arabs and not the Palestinian people alone'. This figure in 2012-2013 was 84%. It is thus difficult not to conclude that opinion at the public/respondent level is not in step with official policy orientation on this question. Does this in any manner further the Palestinian cause, more so because the direction of Israeli policy premised on incremental creation of facts on the ground together with furtherance of practical cooperation with individual Arab countries would inevitably result in *de facto* annexation of most parts of the West Bank even if a formal annexation is deferred?

### **A way out**

The PLO leadership has been left high and dry even if not yet disowned by its own people. Would the new situation propel it to recraft its policies? The promised Two-state solution is nowhere in sight except for some variants of Bantustans. Would it not be better to explore a One-state solution even if involves a South Africa-like apartheid that would sooner or later prick the conscience of world opinion and their governments and allow a Palestinian-Mandela to use Gandhian principles to seek justice?

So the Arab World in a geopolitical sense no longer exists. It will retain its focus on linguistic homogeneity and attendant cultural glory. As for the Palestinians and in the event of hard tactical options being forsaken, they might even explore the creation of a Palestinian point of lamentation, a 'wailing wall', hoping that divine justice would eventually be forthcoming as has been with their Abrahamic cousins.

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