

The Myth of Iranian–Arab Enmity: A Deconstructive Approach

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Abstract

The paper aims to critically consider the proposition maintaining that the contemporary state of affairs between Iran and the Arab world results from an endemic, deep-rooted enmity between these two peoples with roots in the annals of history. To elucidate its argument, the paper offers a brief review of the major ups and downs in the historical relationship between Iranians and Arabs to see whether animosity or good-neighbourliness has mainly prevailed. Then, seeking to pinpoint the causes of uneasiness in the Iranian-Arab relationship since the 1950s, the focus of the paper turns to the formation of pan-Arab ideology and its strong anti-Iranian elements. Major differences in outlooks, coupled with territorial and diplomatic disagreements, had Nasserite Egypt and especially Ba'athist Iraq embrace these elements and begin implementing them to their full and extreme extent at a time when a monarchical West-leaning regime was in power in Iran. The paper concludes that the uneasiness in Iran-Arab relations during the past five to six decades has been situational and a modern phenomenon, chiefly stemming from specific political circumstances with certain roots in nation-building activities in the concerned countries. Hence, historical and ethno-religious or civilizational roots of this strained relationship are either non-existent or insignificant.

Keywords: Iran-Arabs relationship, Middle East, Pan-Arab ideology, Persian Iran.

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Introduction

The tense relationship between Iranians and Arabs has been a constant fixture of international relations in the Middle East during the past five to six decades. To explain this state of affairs, it is repeatedly argued that this tension is deeply rooted in history. Moreover, ethno-sectarian and civilizational arguments are invoked to provide an explanation for the outbreak of wars, standoffs, controversy and diplomatic ruptures that have strained Iranian-Arab relations since the mid-twentieth century.

Iran and the Arab world are indispensable parts of every equation in the region. The nature of their relations enormously affects regional peace and security as well as the way extra-regional powers approach issues in the Middle East. Hence, it is essential to review the assumptions that may shape the perceptions which influence the approach of regional and global players. The ascribing of contemporary difficulties to historical and ethno-sectarian elements is one of these assumptions that this paper will discuss.

This author posits that historically, there is no sign indicating the existence of any particular intrinsic and deep-rooted animosity between Arabs and Iranians. A brief review of their relationship reveals that the two have mostly co-existed in a rather good-neighborly as opposed to adversarial way throughout history. The onset of a systematic effort aimed at vilifying Persians dates back to the 1920s and is discernible in the theoretical works of early pan-Arab ideologues as one of the components of pan-Arab nationalism. Supporters of pan-Arabism, who seized power in Iraq in the mid-



1950s and held on to it until the collapse of former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, used anti-Iranian rhetoric as one of the driving forces behind their campaigns.

Arab nationalism originated from the Arab enlightenment during and following World War I and was encouraged by Britain, which viewed the aforementioned as required to achieve its geopolitical aims. However, the ideologues of Arab nationalism in the 1920s through to the 1950s, and later Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser and Iraq's Abd al-Karim Qasim, took Arab nationalism to new and uncharted territories. In search of an enemy to define 'one self' against, Arab nationalists were drawn to see in Persian Iran a basis to rely on for mobilizing and energizing the masses in the eastern flank of the Arab world.

Nasserite Egypt, mostly for political reasons, and Iraq, primarily for reasons related to nation-building and the construction of an Iraqi Arab identity as well as geopolitical considerations, tried to define Arab nationalism, *inter alia*, as opposed to 'the Persians' and Iranian nationalism. Most Arab intellectuals who developed and conceptualized Arab nationalism expressed this tendency and leaned towards depicting 'the Persians' in a negative light and adopted an adversarial approach thereto. They were inclined to expand their perception to cover all aspects of Iranian civilization in all ages. This tendency was later advanced to its extreme by Ba'athists in Iraq, who tried to vilify all aspects of Iranian legacy, to which the average Iranian may be emotionally attached to.

I. Myth of Endemic Persian-Arab Enmity

A quick review of the history of interaction between Iran and the Arab world reveals that the frequent misunderstandings as well as animosity and, at times, conflicts and war in the past decades have been recent phenomena. They originated from specific political circumstances, including nation-building activities in the concerned countries that required the adoption of specific policies. Historical



and ethno-religious or civilizational roots of this strained relationship are insignificant. Hence, focusing on this aspect of the relationship to explain the recent and current state of affairs would be misleading. The singling out of Iran and Iranians as an enemy first found expression in the writings and rhetoric of Pan-Arab nationalists such as Sati' al-Husri in the 1920s through the 1950s, and were later operationalized by Nasserite Egypt in the 1960s and taken to its extreme by republican and Ba'athist Iraq from 1958 through 2003.

Arabs and Iranians, as two of the most prominent ethnic elements in the Middle East, have been in close contact with each other through millennia. In their history, there have been instances of conflicts and discord, as is the case with almost all neighbors, but good-neighborliness has mostly prevailed. Language, religion, pilgrimage, migration and trade have tied them together throughout history. They managed to generally live in peace with no major clash since the early centuries after the advent of Islam. Enmity was an exception rather than rule in Arab-Iranian relations and they cooperated closely in the development of Islamic culture. In contrast, major recurring wars and conflicts between Shiite Iran and Sunni Ottomans occurred from the early sixteenth to nineteenth centuries and mostly took place on the territory of present-day Iraq, in which most Mesopotamian Arabs, being of Shiite conviction, mostly aligned themselves with Iran.

The relationship between Persians and Arabs, from antiquity to Islam, was rich and continuous and, despite vicissitudes, benefited both sides. Arab tribes helped ancient Persians in their war efforts in Egypt and against the Byzantines. The Persian capital, Ctesiphon, which was located at the gates of Arab territory for many centuries before Islam, allowed closer interaction between Persians and Arabs. Currents of influence in various fields mutually converged and were crystallized more prominently during the Sassanid era. Hence, many Persian names were and are still used by Arabs, both in the pre-and post-Islamic eras, and vice versa.



At the appeal of the King of Yemen, Sassanid ruler Khosrau I (Chosroes I) launched a successful campaign in Yemen to expel the Abyssinians. The relationship between the Persians and the Mundhirite of al-Hirah was so close that the Sassanid Emperor pledged the education of his crown prince Bahramjur, who became very involved with the Arabs and Arabic, to Mundhir (Al-Duri, 1998:20).

A striking example of coexistence is Salman the Persian, a man born with the Persian name Rouzbeh who gained the Prophet's sympathy and collaborated with him in his efforts to spread Islam. Salman and his nation are praised in many narrations attributed to the Prophet and his Household. One famous narration that Ibn Khaldun, the great Arab historian, approvingly refers to in his *Muqaddimah* is: "If scholarship hung suspended in the highest parts of heavens, the Persians would attain it." (Ibn Khaldun, 430) These and many more narrations bear witness to the friendly coexistence between Arabs and Persians.

Following the Arab conquest of Iran, the conquerors, who excelled in poetry, speech, cavalry and arms, failed to grasp the art of governing a vast territory. Hence, they needed Persians, who mastered not only the art of politics and administration based on the vast experience of the Sassanid Empire, but also science, medicine, agriculture etc. The conquerors enforced a governing system based on Persian-inspired principles and character, such as succession based on inheritance. As Ibn Khaldun puts it:

"The Arabs came into contact with that flourishing sedentary culture and exchanged their Bedouin attitude for it... At that time, they considered it a lowly thing to be a scholar, because scholarship is a craft, and political leaders are always contemptuous of the crafts and professions and everything that leads to them. Thus, they left such things to non-Arabs and persons of mixed Arab and non-Arab parentage." (Ibn Khaldun, 430)

The sympathetic references made to Persians by the great Arab



writer, Ibn Khaldun, are a typical example of the approach assumed by Arab and Persian writers towards each other's ethnic groups in the past.

The rebellious Iranian Khorasanis, led by Abu Muslem, played an instrumental role in toppling the Umayyad dynasty, the purely Arab state, and bringing the Abbasids to power. This development allowed Persians to acquire prevalence in the establishment of the new dynasty, demonstrated by the several generations of Barmakids playing roles as viziers and administrators. Later, Persians and Arabs united and cooperated against common enemies, such as the Mongols and Tatars. The Iranian province of Khorasan continued to be instrumental in efforts by al-Ma'mun, who had an Iranian mother and a mostly Iranian army, to prevail over his brother, al-Amin, who had an Arab mother.

The new Abbasid caliphs were quick to move their capital from Syria to Iraq in 762 A.D, meaning that Muslim power became centered in the former Sassanid territories rather than in the eastern Mediterranean countries or the Hejaz. Thus, the Maghrib became more distant and less important. Persians were key players in the Abbasid Caliphate, to the point that some early observers saw the cultural transformation of Islam as a victory for Persian Aryans over Arab Semites (Simons and Benn, pp 154-155). Islam became more cosmopolitan, with Persians streaming into public life. Some Persian families, newly converted to Islam and with a tradition of involvement in state affairs, were appointed as governors and administrators.

Widespread cooperation between Persians and Arabs was prevalent under the Abbasids. Persians participated in government and administration, and a standing Arab-Persian army replaced tribal armies. The institution of Kuttab (secretaries), vastly composed of Iranians, became prominent under the Abbasids and had a significant impact on administration and culture. Public life was dominated by several Iranian families (the Barmakids, the Banu Sahl, and Banu



Tahir), who served as viziers and kuttab. The same kuttab played an important role in translating texts from Persian and transforming the Sassanid heritage. As Abul Aziz al-Duri, the former President of Baghdad University says, "the contribution of peoples of non-Arab origin, especially the Persians, to culture was very substantial...flourishing and enriching Arab-Islamic culture" (Al-Duri, 1998:8).

Historical Persian tolerance, exemplified in King Cyrus's open-mindedness towards vanquished peoples, was met with a degree of tolerance from the Arab end. The Zoroastrians were recognized as one of "the Peoples of the Book" and Iranian customs such as Nowruz, the feast of spring, was tolerated. Intermarriage soon played an important role, to the point that whoever was not of a Persian parent was married to a Persian woman. Moreover, the Arab element lost priority in many fields and was balanced by the Iranian element under the Abbasids. While the Arabs transferred their religion and in some cases their language, they did not resist all Persian customs and traditions.

Iranians were instrumental in developing *Fiqh*, Islamic jurisprudence, *Hadith*, traditions of the Prophet and his Household, and *tafsir*, exegesis or interpretation. It is notable that they also excelled in grammar and syntax of the Arabic language and in Arabic literature. As Ibn Khaldun puts it, "the founder of grammar was *Sibawayha* and, after him, *al-Farisi* and *aḏ-Zajjaj*. All of them were of non-Arab (Persian) descent... they invented the rules of (grammar) and made it into a discipline (in its own right) for later (generations to use)". He continues, "most of the Hadith scholars who preserved traditions for the Muslims were also Persians, or Persian in language and upbringing." He goes on to write that "all scholars who worked with the science of the principles of jurisprudence were Persians. The same applies to the speculative theologians and to most Qur'an commentators. Only Persians engaged in the task of preserving knowledge and writing systematic scholarly works" (Ibn Khaldun,



429).

Following the emergence of the Safavids in Iran in the 16th century, rivalry between the Persian and Ottomans Empires in the region was a major feature of regional developments until World War I. Throughout four centuries, strong and ambitious Shahs and Sultans launched military operations against each other, in which the Arabs did not play any active role, although their lands and those of the Kurds were the principal battle grounds.

Finally, Iran remained by and large within its historical boundaries and the Ottoman State disappeared. Following the establishment of modern Turkey, the two countries immediately delineated and demarcated their common borders and opened a new chapter of a relationship brim full of friendliness to the point that the only foreign trip Reza Shah embarked upon was to Istanbul, to visit Ata Turk. While Iraq was not an active party to the rivalry between the two empires during the preceding centuries, the Iran-Iraq relationship took a different course.

During the Ottoman era, the number of Arabs who chose to reside in Iran grew considerably because of the hostile Ottoman policy towards Arabs. Conversely, many Iranians immigrated to present-day Iraq and the Arab littoral of the Persian Gulf. Despite the limitations stemming from the prevalent cloudy ambiance, a major portion of people residing on either side of the Persian Gulf today are still bilingual, speaking both Arabic and Persian.

Following the emergence of modern Arab states, up to the rise of pan-Arab nationalism, Iranians and Arabs enjoyed a friendly relationship.

Iran, supporting the Arabs, stood with the thirteen states that voted against the partition of Palestine as sought by the Jews and the then superpowers. Dr. Mohammad Mossadegh, the popular Iranian prime minister, was the source of Nasser's inspiration (Wakim, 1987:157). Lebanon, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, the then only independent Arab countries, in solidarity with Iran, backed Tehran's



complaint to the Security Council in March 1946 over the Soviets' refusal to evacuate part of Iran's territory at the end of World War II. As to the Palestinian question, the Arab cause par excellence, Iran has always been supportive of "the right of self-determination for the Palestinians," in one way before the Islamic Revolution and in another way thereafter.

There was a mutual supportiveness of Iranian and Arab nationalism in the brief span of time between the coup against the monarchy in Egypt (1952) and the coup against Mossadegh in Iran (1953). This preceded the "Tehran-Cairo strategic alliance" in the 1970s, which followed the cold war in Iran-Egypt relations in the second half of the 1950s and the 1960s; all indicating the lack of inherent dissention between the national aspirations of the Arabs and the Iranians. Iran supported the Egyptian nationalization of the Suez Canal Company and denounced the 1956 invasion of Egypt by Britain, France, and Israel.

Although the assumption of 'endemic Arab-Iranian enmity' cannot stand up to any academic scrutiny, the historic Iran-Arab relationship has not been fully without friction. Obviously, the Iranians and Arabs, like any other neighbors, at times, have gone through wars, rebellions, alignments and realignments. The case of retaliatory action by Shapur II (A.D. 309 or 310-79) against Arabs who had crossed the Persian Gulf and raided Iran's interior is notable. Later, the long Iranian struggle against the Arab military conquest and occupation in the seventh and eighth centuries A.D., which was aimed at regaining and securing independence, was the origin of a series of battles. These wars bred ill-feelings whose traces can be found sporadically in passages in some fringe classical or modern works.

Frictions between modern Iran and Arab states in relation to concrete interests and concerns grew after the beginning of their nation-building processes. The Arab world's exploitation of Iran's difficulties with the British caused some bitterness in Iran: the



annulment of the Anglo-Iranian Oil agreement in 1950 and the virtual stoppage of oil exports from Iran for about two years provided an opportunity to some in the Arab world to promote their own interests. Kuwait and Saudi Arabia increased their production to fill the gap left by Iran and established themselves as the most important oil exporters in the region, thus severely hurting the feelings of the Iranians who were engaged in a hard fight with the British (Marlowe, 1964:23).

The Shah's reassertion of Iran's old claim to Bahrain in 1957 and the Iranian move to establish sovereignty over three Persian Gulf islands in 1971 that Iran considers part of its territory - seized by Britain in the early nineteenth century and claimed for its Arab protégés - created tension and provided pan-Arab nationalists with fodder to strain Iran-Arab relations. At the time, Iran demonstrated a considerable capacity for reconciliation in the case of Bahrain and continental shelves. It easily agreed to shelve its claim to Bahrain, which it had pursued for more than 170 years against Britain which was Bahrain's protecting power. The Persian Gulf naming dispute is yet another big source of friction between Iran and the Arabs. Here, an Iranian grass-root movement lies at the origin of the resistance against the active push by Arab governments to change the name of the stretch of water, which separates the Iranian plateau from the Arabian Peninsula. This is currently the major issue that breeds ill feelings between the two peoples.

II. The Role of Pan-Arab Ideology

An aggressive approach towards the Iranians or 'Persians' was clearly on the agenda of those who aimed at working out an Arab identity in general, and an Iraqi Arab identity in particular. In this respect, the teachings of schools of Arab nationalism and pan-Arabism as the ones led by Sati' al-Husri, Sami Shawkat, Darwish al-Miqdadi, Michel Aflaq etc, and the way their views were put to action, are notable.

The development of national education and the diffusion of a



state ideology of national identity were among the means that all Middle Eastern states, including new emerging Arab states, used in the years following World War I to achieve national coherence. To this end, they tried to recuperate the past and identify what distinguished their own people or 'nation' from others. While some of these states, such as Iraq, expanded their efforts to form an ideology of antagonism towards their neighbors, others, like Iran, limited themselves to strengthen their coherence by putting emphasis on what distinguished them from others.

The Iraqis, in their process to build the Iraqi state, put in place an educational program that drew heavily on the writings of Arab nationalist Sati' al-Husri. Al-Husri, dubbed the “intellectual prophet of Arab nationalism” (Dawisha, 2005:49), is known as the primary ideologue of Arab nationalism and one of the fathers of pan-Arabism. He was an ideologue, educator, prolific author, lecturer and confidant of King Faisal. He was less concerned about borders than ethnic identity, and attached the greatest importance to a common language and a common history as the basis of nation formation and nationalism. As he put it, “the language is the soul and the life of the nation, but history is its memory and its consciousness.” For him, the history of the Arab nation was the history of the Arabs, not of Islam; Islam’s role in history was to spread Arabism, to help preserve the Arab identity of the Arabs, which began in pre-Islamic Arabia and spread with the Islamic conquest (Simon, 1997:90).

Stressing the importance of language and culture, for Husri, the ultimate goal was to create a Great Arab State consisting of Arabic speaking peoples. Thus, Arabic-speaking peoples, whether Muslims or not, could be incorporated in the Arab Nation, whereas non-Arab Muslims, primarily Iranians, could not be members of the same community. It is said that his thoughts had wide implications and that his writings ‘had a considerable impact on political developments in the Middle East’(Choueiri, 2000:101). Al-Husri also argued against the possibility of Muslim unity, emphasizing more desirable and



attainable Arab unity (Holliday, 1996:33).

Through his writings and lectures in Iraq and in other Arab countries, al-Husri gave the concept of ‘Arab nationalism’ intellectual coherence and sophistication. And as a chief architect of modern Iraq’s education system, he could spread his views into the mainstream Iraqi and, to some extent, other Arab educational system and mass media. For him, the main purpose of the education system that he was building was to disseminate Arab nationalist ideas and sentiment into the consciousness of future Arab generations.

From al-Husri’s thinking followed his approach to building Iraqi education, which included facilitating the arrival of Palestinian, Syrian and Egyptian educators on the one hand, and excluding Iranians and Iraqis of Iranian origin on the other. Given the presence of a strong Iranian community in Iraq at the time and their old-age interaction with Iraqi Shiites, this approach was not inconsequential and did not go unchallenged.

As “not just a formulator of ideas”; but as “an unbending, almost autocratic, missionary, and enforcer of the ‘only correct ideology,’” as well, al-Husri “once fired an Iraqi Shiite poet, M. M. al-Jawahiri, from his teaching job for singing the praises of an Iranian summer resort, an endeavor which al-Husri considered to be shu’ubi (roughly anti-Arab).” Heated exchanges between al-Jawahiri and al-Husri that followed the incident shed more light on al-Husri’s thinking (Dawisha, 2005:72). In one of his writing, he offers a description of a campaign he waged against a school in a Shiite neighborhood whose headmaster was an ex-Ottoman officer who “placed his hatred of the Arabs in the service of the Iranian state...” by, among other things, applying a uniform similar to that used in Iran (Makiya, 1989:155). Anti-Iranian thinking is also apparent in al-Husri’s writings. Of special interest is one of al-Husri’s works entitled “Iranian teachers who caused us (Arabs) big problems” (Makiya, 1989:153-54). His activities also included a struggle against Persian schools. Al-Husri wrote fictional stories that focused on the



suspicious influence of Iran on the Arabs as well. The stories do not only overemphasize the unique national characteristics of the Arabs, but also identify Persia as the great enemy of the Arab people (Holliday, 1996:12).

Many other pan-Arab nationalists, like Darwish al-Miqdadi, stress the importance of language in defining a nation. The Arab-Semitic homeland has been, according to al-Miqdadi, occupied by Semitic-speaking people from the beginning of history and surrounded by hostile Aryans on both sides. From the West came a series of Aryans, starting with Alexander the Great to the British. However, a greater Aryan threat to the Arabs was to their east - the Persians - who, according to al-Miqdadi, had a long history of aggression towards Arab lands, seeking vengeance against Arabs for the loss of their glory, and who humiliated Arabs on a number of occasions and corrupted their culture (Abdi:219).

An analysis of history textbooks designed for use in schools in Palestine, Syria, and Iraq in the 1930s and 40s reveals the parameters of pan-Arab nationalism. These textbooks, prepared by several renowned pan-Arabists including al-Miqdadi, portray the Arab homeland as a natural geographical unit, consisting of the "Arab Island" – of which 'the head' was the Fertile Crescent, 'the heart' central Arabia, and 'the extremities' the Arabian coastlands from the Gulf of Aqaba to the Persian Gulf (Moaddel, 2005:165).

In these textbooks, the Persians were commonly portrayed as having been filled with hatred of the Arabs and a fanatical desire for revenge for the loss of their sovereignty and glory. Persian influence was also blamed for the corruption of the position of women, the family as well as Arab culture and society. In a play by al-Miqdadi featured in the same schoolbooks, titled *Between the Two Jabiliyya*, Persian and Romano-Byzantine imperialists were portrayed as occupiers of Arab lands, bringing trade routes under their control and the Arabs' happiness to an end. Al-Miqdadi argued that the Arabs' dangerous enemy had been one: the Aryans – that is, the Persians in



the east and the Greeks, Romans, and Franks in the west (Moaddel, 2005:166).

Sami Shawkat was another pan-Arab ideologue who stirred up hatred against Persians and tried to turn pan-Arabism into the highest Arab value. He was a noted educator in the 1930s whose thinking influenced the Ba'ath Party. He, among others, strongly advocated assimilating the Kurds into Arab nationalism. He believed that “every nation seeking revival must use all possible means to merge every minority living on its soil into its nationalism” (Bengio, 1998:110).

Another central defining issue that made pan-Arab nationalists and thinkers nervous about Iran was the predominance of Shiite Islam in Iran and the high-level status of their coreligionists in some Arab countries, including their majority status in Iraq and Bahrain. The great difficulty they always experienced in assimilating Shiites into the “Iraqi State” naturally undermined the efforts of the country’s dominant Sunni establishment to propagate the ideas of Arab nationalism. A great majority of Arab Shiites tended to view Arab nationalism as “a Sunni project designed to reduce the Shiites to an insignificant minority in an expanded Sunni Arab domain” (Dawisha, 2005:91). The Iraqi Sunni establishment always suspected Arab Shiites of feeling closer to Iran than other Arabs. A book published in 1933, in which the Iraqi Shiite population was equated with the Sassanid Persians and Iraqi Shiite teachers accused of being more loyal to Iran, stirred up widespread protests, including attacks on security forces. Such events were commonplace in Iraq in the 1930s (Dawisha, 2005:49). The identity-building efforts by the dominant Iraqi Sunni Arab minority faced the same difficulties with regard to assimilating the Kurdish population.

Moreover, it is not uncommon for such pan-Arab attitudes to be expressed as attacks on Iran's cultural identity through its cultural heritage. In some cases, pan-Arab ideologues’ thinking and actions expanded over time and covered a wide-range of issues and areas, including attempts to Arabize Iran’s civilizational legacy and Persian



contributions on the world stage. The efforts included attempts to label Persian writers/scientists as Arabs and take credit of works done by other nations. This proprietary attitude on the part of some Arabs towards Islamic heritage and those prominent figures that developed it is another source of resentment for Iranians. The following observation by Sir Richard Nelson Frye encapsulates the crisis in Arab attitudes towards Iranians:

"Arabs no longer understand the role of Iran and the Persian language in the formation of Islamic culture. Perhaps they wish to forget the past, but in so doing they remove the bases of their own spiritual, moral and cultural being...without the heritage of the past and a healthy respect for it...there is little chance for stability and proper growth" (Frye, 1989:236).

In their own minds, al-Husri and others were combating foreign influences among the Arabs, and as the Iranian community was one of the most vocal in Iraq, it attracted al-Husri's hostile approach. This thinking later developed under the Ba'athists into the particular pan-Arab fascination with the idea of "the enemy from within", leading to waves of expulsions of Iraqis of Iranian descent from Iraq. The Ba'athists played an important role in laying down a basis for anti-Iranian thinking in the Arab world, in general, and in Iraq, in particular, and trained a generation of Iraqis who brought the issue to its extreme.

III. The Role of Nasserism and Ba'athism

Pan-Arab nationalist thinkers and ideologues played a significant role in creating and propagating ill feelings towards the Persians, thus fostering the agendas of Arab governments that, in turn, used ideologies to energize their populations. They laid the foundation for Nasserism and Ba'athism which, compelled by nation-building exigencies, took pan-Arabist ideologies to their extreme, thus simultaneously sowing the seeds of antagonism towards the West and Iranians among some sections of the Arab population.



Ba'athist ideologues and political leaders went further than al-Husri and other like-minded thinkers, trying to deeply embed the concept surrounding “the enemy from within” in the Arab psyche and popular mainstream and making Arabs, especially Shiite Arabs, believe that Iranians are the "enemy of the Arabs." The article "Us and Our Enemies" by Michel Aflaq, the ideological founder of Ba'athism, is an example which extols the virtues of ‘us’ alongside an outpouring of vitriolic hate directed at ‘our’ enemies (Makiya, 1989:219). He was of the view that “[t]he existence of a real, live enemy imparts vitality to our doctrine and makes our blood circulate” (Bengio, 1998:125).

From the basic proposition of pan-Arabism, it flowed that the unified Arab State would be created by a supreme act of will, by a revolt that would shatter the artificial frontiers and discard the selfish local leaders that imprisoned the Arabs. Soon, Nasser, following his role in the Suez Crisis of 1956, found himself in this role. And so did the leaders of the rising Ba'ath movement, who shared power with Iraqi nationalists following the 1958 coup in Iraq, later monopolizing power briefly in 1963 and then for 35 years after 1968. The Ba'athists had their own vision of the way to implement the task, and in their eyes, Nasser fell far short of the clear vision and the ruthlessness that they thought was indispensable for achieving the objective.

The Nasserites were less ideologically bent on antagonism against Iran and rather reacted against some political developments such as the de-facto recognition of Israel by Iran in July 1960. Meanwhile, the Ba'athists, mostly trained in the educational system structured by al-Husri and others, fought an ideological war against Iran which was strongly fed by Iraq's geopolitical predicaments. They reinforced pan-Arabist views and ideas via ideology and implemented them to their extreme and full, official and racist, culmination. They mastered efforts to advance the myth purporting the existence of a perennial conflict between Persians and Arabs. Their efforts to build an Arab national identity included a systematic attempt to invent strict



boundaries between the 'Arab self' and the 'Iranian others', whom they aimed to demonize.

For the Ba'athists, pan-Arab ideology was laced with anti-Persian racism, just as their interpretation of Iraq's international role, and of the character of Iraqi society, rested on the pursuit of anti-Persian themes. The major themes which the anti-Iranian propaganda that the Ba'ath Party and the Iraqi government discourse revolved around could be summarized as follows: a. Referring to Iranians as 'Persians' and to Iran as 'Persia' with a view to stressing the 'racial' composition of the country and portraying 'Persians' as oppressing minorities within their borders and being aggressive towards their neighbors; b. Accusing Iranians of being possessed by a destructive mentality, *aqliyya takhrībīyya*, a racial attribute, throughout history; c. Highlighting racial and linguistic differences between Iranians and Arabs as well as emphasizing the 'cultural' and 'racial' inferiority of the 'Persian race' by calling them 'ajam', an inferior people subservient to Arabs within Islam, and standard bearers of *shu'ubiyya*, those who hate Arab; d. Portraying the Iranians as *Majusi* Persians, or fire worshippers, both derogatory terms for Zoroastrians; e. Claiming the existence of an intrinsic hostility on the part of Iranians towards Arabs, which was the central argument of Ba'ath party-sponsored poems, books pamphlets etc.

Ba'athists resorted to widespread historicizing attempts to prove the above points and demonstrate the myth of seemingly endemic Persian-Arab enmity and the challenge of the Persians since ancient times. Iraqi Ba'athists described "Iranians as Mongols, Tatars, or barbarians" in greater detail. The 'Persian Character' was described as aggressive, domineering, prone to war, and bloodthirsty. Persians, and in particular their rulers, were fanatics and likely to engage in the 'collective killing' of thousands of people. Iraq must at all times keep one eye open to the east, 'where the treacherous, the heretical, and the bloodthirsty are found.' The Iranians would 'cut off the breasts of Iraqi women unless their sons fought' to protect them' (Adid-



Moghaddam, 2008:91).

As a part of “the war of names”, the Ba'athists always referred to Iran as ‘Persia’, having no regard for the fact that Iran has always been Iran for the Iranians and all peoples in the region, and even Reza Shah, a nationalist, asked Europeans in 1935 to call his country Iran, and not Persia. The Ba'athists aimed to highlight the Persians’ ‘racial character’ and depict it as expansionist towards minorities within Iran and neighboring nations. Except for a few periods when Iraqi Ba'athists sought a thaw in relations with Iran, i.e. immediately before and after their invasion of Kuwait, they referred to Iranians by many other names too. In thousands of documents from Iraqi intelligence, confiscated by the Kurds and later posted on the Internet, the Iranians are systematically referred to as “the Zionist Persians”, *al-adu al-Ajami* (Ajam enemy) and *majus* (Adid-Moghaddam, 2008:214). During the Iran-Iraq war, Iraqi propaganda made much of the claim that Ayatollah Khomeini was a *majus*, a derogatory term for Zoroastrians.

Another derogatory term for Shiites and Persians, though not exclusively for them, was *shu'ubiyya*, derived from *shu'ub* (singular, *shu'ubi*). It originally connoted tribes who had historically campaigned to deny Arab superiority and claim equality for all different Muslim ethnic groups. This term was used by the Ba'ath Party to attack the enemies of the Arabs, whether real or imaginary, foreign or domestic, Arab or non-Arab. Accused of hating Arabs, Iranians were described as the standard-bearers of *shu'ubiyya* and forming the vanguard of the ‘waves of *shu'ubiyya*’, whenever they ‘strike the Muslims so as to harm Islam’ (Bengio, 1998:142).

Ba'athist racism was sometimes breathtaking in its crudity. For example, in 1981, Dar al-Hurriyya, the government publishing house, widely circulated a pamphlet whose title can be translated as ‘*Three Whom God Should Not Have Created: Persians, Jews and Flies.*’ The author was Khairallah Tulfah, former Governor of Baghdad, and foster-father, uncle, and father-in-law of Saddam Hussein. Persians, Tulfah



wrote, are “animals God created in the shape of humans.” Jews are a “mixture of the dirt and leftovers of diverse peoples,” and flies are a trifling creation “whom we do not understand God’s purpose in creating.” (Makiya, 1989:17) Equally incredible is that “...Saddam’s government offered ‘pure Iraqis’ married to anyone with Iranian blood a \$2500 reward for divorcing him or her” (Aburish, 2000:123).

By historicizing and invoking history to explain contemporary attitudes, the Ba’athists tried to project their conflict with Iran back to the reign of the Persian king, Cyrus, and bestow a historical depth to contemporary disputes and present them as a result of an endemic and deeply-rooted Arab-Persian enmity. In doing so, the Ba’athists hoped to mobilize Arab public opinion on their side. The ‘Persian black hatred’ against the Arabs, was said to have existed for 2,500 years, from Cyrus to Ayatollah Khomeini. It was repeatedly said that from the Achaemenids to Ayatollah Khomeini, the Persians had plunged a knife “into the back of the Arabs whenever their guard was down. They have stolen from the Arabs whenever there was an opportunity; they fought the Ottomans to conquer Arab lands, befriended the British and are collaborating with the Americans to stab the Arabs in the back” (Bengio, 1998:141-42).

Cyrus was cursed for releasing the Jews deported to Babylonia by king Nebuchadnezzar in the sixth century B.C. In the same vein, the Iran-Iraq war was presented as Saddam’s Qadisiyyah, referring to the first major battle in which invading Arab forces defeated Iranian Sassanid troops in 637 A.D., representing a systematic attempt to portray Saddam in a comparable historic role against the Persians. The imagery of the battle of Qadisiyyah and the conquest of Iran by Arab armies were also invoked by Saddam and other Arabs as a mobilizing symbol in the war against Iran.

The ‘Persians perpetual hostility towards the Arabs’ was ‘documented’ in a book published shortly before the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war. It was entitled *Ta’rich al-Higd al-Farsi ala al-Arab* (the History of Persian Hatred of the Arabs). The same topic was



serialized at the end of the war in the al-Qadisiyyah newspaper under the heading '*Judhur al-ada al-Farsi li-al-Ummah al-Arabiyya*', (The roots of Persian hostility towards the Arab nation.) The series had been prepared by the Iraqi army and found environmental, geographical and geopolitical reasons for this hatred but kept stressing the 'Persian destructive mentally' (*aqliyya takhribiyya*) as the underlying cause (Bengio, 1998:142).

To depict modern Iranians as the descendants of the Mongols, the Ba'athists warned Iraqis and the Arabs of a 'yellow storm', *asifa safra*, trying to evoke the most traumatic event in Arab history: the Mongol conquest of Baghdad and the destruction of Iraq in 1258, depicting themselves as soldiers 'defending Iraq against the new 'Hulagu Khan' and Iraqis as the guardians of the eastern Arab gateway (Bengio, 1998:142).

Content analysis of schoolbooks published between 1992-94 in Ba'athist Iraq, and to a lesser extent in some other Arab countries, has also made clear that the image of 'the others' in these books were more or less subjected to the needs and demands of political and ideological interests.

The image of Iranians (Persians) in Iraqi schoolbooks was clear cut, arguing that it has not underwent any change since the dawn of history. In these books, 'the Iranian is always that mean racist Persian who conspires against the Arab Nation, its unity and its language, as well as the Islamic-Arabic civilization since the era of the Orthodox Caliphs until Saddam's 'glorious Qadisiyyah'. Each time the Persians are mentioned in the textbooks, they are the invaders, and absolute evil that has to be deterred. In these textbooks, all the problems of Muslims and Arabs, including sectarian conflicts and unrest as well as attempts to undermine their civilization, are ultimately the product of Persian conspiracies (Atrissi:155). According to the content analysis, it is interesting to note that in Iraqi schoolbooks under Saddam, only quick references were made to the invasion of Kuwait and Zionism, and "apart from the reference that [Zionist] occupied Palestine is part



of the Arab world, there is no incitement like the one against the Persians or Iran in general" (Atrissi:164). The image of Iranians in schoolbooks in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Morocco, is also not painted in a positive light as is the case in other Islamic countries. At best, they remain neutral about Iran (Atrissi:191).

IV. Iran's Approach

While new emerging Arab states carved out of the Ottoman Empire following World War I were involved in an arduous nation-building process, Iran was busy forging a fresh national homogeneity. The Pahlavi dynasty, too, attempted to use newly-developed national education systems, state media and national conscription, among other things, to diffuse a state ideology of national identity with a view to consolidate national coherence. To this end, the distinguishing of Iranians from 'others' was a key aim of the Iranian government.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that, contrary to pan-Arabism, Iranian nationalism mainly predicated itself on frontiers rather than ethnic or lingual identity. Another attribute that distinguishes Iranian nationalism from pan-Arabism was the fact that the latter advanced on the path of forming an ideology of antagonism. Whereas the Iranians, whether officially or unofficially, essentially sought to distinguish themselves from their neighbors, including the Arabs, by glorifying pre-Islamic and Islamic Iranian kingship and culture. Iran also tried to do the aforementioned by reviving the Persian language and ridding it of Arabic and Turkish words, abiding reverence for Ferdowsi, Hafez and Saadi's poetic traditions of Persian culture, maintaining the solar calendar and Nowrouz festivities, promoting changes in symbolism, vocabulary and personal names, as well as identify Iran as 'Aryan', distinct from Semitic culture and peoples. All of this was in parallel with the secular trend unleashed by the constitutional revolution. What Iran was trying to mainstream during its national-identity-building period was to establish and prove



'itself' rather than trying to deny or denigrate 'others'.

Resorting to racial slurs to demean its rival nations was never a prevailing trend in Iran and remained limited to fringe groups and elements. As an example, it should be noted that no negative image is depicted of Arabs, as an ethnic group, in Iranian schoolbooks, be it before or after the Islamic Revolution. Quite to the contrary, the schoolbooks aim to strengthen ties between Iranians and Arabs. Arabic is taught after the elementary level and before university. The work of some great Arab writers and poets are reproduced in schoolbooks. After the Islamic Revolution, they no longer attempt to whip up nationalist sentiments, referring to ancient Iran as the ideal lost city. Under monarchical Iran too, negative remarks related only to the Arab conquest with no attempt to generalize and extend it to periods preceding or following the Arab occupation (Haddad Adel: 145-51).

At the same time, there were fringe Iranian nationalist movements since the late nineteenth century that disparaged the Iranian traditional culture, which included certain religious practices associated with Arabic mores and portrayed as a source of Iran's backwardness. This trend cannot be labeled as an anti-Arab one, as the harsh judgments Iranian pass on the long-term effects of Alexander's, Genghis's or Timur's invasions of Iran can't be regarded as proof of hostility against modern-day peoples or regions those invasions originated from.

The emphasis on Iranian identity before the Islamic Revolution was abandoned thereafter in favor of an Islamic, laden with Arab, character. The leaders of the Islamic Revolution began to de-emphasize pre-Islamic Persian revivalism and aimed to re-Islamize the country, which required the welcoming of Arab elements.



Conclusion

The assumption that there is such a thing as 'endemic Iranian–Arab enmity' cannot withstand serious academic scrutiny. Compared to many other neighbours, Iranians and Arabs have coexisted rather peacefully than clashed manically throughout history and good-neighbourliness has far outweighed frictions in their relations. The misgivings and uneasiness that have clouded the relationship between them since the mid-1950s can be for the most part understood in relation to regional and global politics and political developments within the concerned countries. Mostly, in this period, the major currents in the Arab world and key Arab countries on the one hand and Iran on the other were not on the same side of regional and international alignments. Differences in ideologies and political outlooks, coupled with geopolitical predicaments and territorial disputes, gave rise to chronic frictions between their governing elites.

Pan-Arab ideologues, frantically preoccupied with laying the groundwork for building a pan-Arab nation, left no stone unturned in falsely presenting Iranians as ethno-religious and civilizational enemies which Arabs need to close ranks against. They did whatever was in their power to historicize and conceptualize enmity between Iranians and Arabs, paving the way for the Ba'athists to harshly reinforce their concepts and put them to work. Saddam's eight-year war on Iran was the culmination of what the pan-Arab ideologues put together and the Ba'athists attempted to carry out.

Now that the Arab Spring has removed parts of the obstacles, the elites of the two sides can discuss the fundamental issues of mutual concern and interest more freely, more directly and less through the West's lenses. It will take lots of direct encounters and numerous exchanges of visits among shapers of public opinion to help wipe out the legacy that ideologies have and continue to sediment since the mid-1950s, leading to strained bilateral ties between Iranians and Arabs.

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