

Lahouari Addi. *Radical Arab Nationalism and Political Islam.* Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2017. 288 pp. \$34.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-62616-450-5.

Reviewed by Katerina Dalacoura

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Commissioned by Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

Lahouari Addi, professor at the Institut d'études politiques at the University of Lyon and a research fellow at the Centre de recherche en anthropologie sociale et culturelle in Oran, Algeria, has written an insightful and wide-ranging analysis of the ideologies of Arab nationalism and Islamism. The book brings to bear the author's weight of knowledge of the history of the Arab world and offers a distinctive (if not necessarily original) interpretation of its politics up to the present day. Addi examines Arab nationalism and Islamism in chronological sequence in the book's two parts while also recognizing that they are also synchronic phenomena. He is profoundly critical of both, seeing them as "anchored in the histories and cultures of societies aspiring to modernity" (p. 1). He treats them, in equal measure, as symptoms of the deeper sociological and political pathologies that afflict the Arab world. Problems of writing style reduce the strength and coherence of the book's argument but the main ideas do in the end shine through and offer a valuable perspective on contemporary Arab politics.

Addi's critique of Arab nationalism is trenchant and, in the opinion of this reviewer, spot on. He describes it as "a simplistic political philosophy reducible to a moral Manicheism that knows nothing of the cultural foundations of modernity or the sociological complexity of Arab societies

and their contradictions" (p. 5). The first three chapters of the book (part 1) explore its emergence, development, limitations, and decline. Addi situates Arab nationalism within a broad definition of nationalism and in the context of the emergence of multiple forms of nationalism in the Middle East region: for example, he describes Wahhabism as "proto-nationalism" because of its "ethnocentric appeal to re-Arabize Islam, after its appropriation by Turks, Persians, Asians, and the Berbers who have supposedly disfigured it" (p. 20). He labels, somewhat controversially, the nationalism of Egypt until the time of President Gamal Abdel Nasser as "liberal" nationalism and argues that the *ulema* (scholars) of al-Nahda (the Awakening), who advocated since the late nineteenth century a reconciliation of nationalism with Islam but rejected secularization, "succeeded in containing Wahhabism" but "also rolled back the modernist project of liberal nationalists" (pp. 30-31).

Addi tracks the Arab anti-imperialist struggle, particularly after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1918, and offers pointers for its changing significance. He argues that in the 1920s, Arab nationalist thought moved away from the liberal ideals of France and Britain "to espouse a culturalist populism that was closer to that of Germany" (p. 38). Populism is at the core of Addi's critique of

radical Arab nationalism. For instance, he argues that Nasser “transformed Egyptian nationalism into Pan-Arabism” (p. 41) but, by the 1970s, it “had lost its battle both with the [conservative Arab] monarchies and with the West” (p. 43).

Chapter 2 tracks the economic failures of Arab nationalism mainly because of “the nature of state power in which the executive branch could not tolerate the autonomy of the legislative and judiciary branches” (p. 45). Idealizing “the people” and de-politicizing society to strengthen its unity and cohesion caused the opposite effect. The suppression of civil society and the take-over of the economy by the state, for the purpose of overhauling the contradictions of capitalism, led to “waste, bad management, predation, and corruption” (p. 49). The military, which took over power in a number of Arab states with nationalist objectives, failed to bring about political and socioeconomic revolutionary change. The problem was compounded by the fact that the Arab bourgeoisies had no liberal or democratic inclinations.

Addi emphasizes the importance of “culture,” which he seems to interpret, in this context and somewhat confusingly, as “ideas.” He argues against a crude materialism which, in his view, afflicted the proponents of the radical Arab nationalist project who believed that “the modification of material structures would automatically imply a rebirth of the past culture that the current state of ignorance had supposedly obscured” (p. 73). He is scathing toward Muslim theology, which he claims remained unchanging and sclerotic, an issue that connects his analysis of Arab nationalism with that of Islamism.

Addi locates the causes of the emergence of Islamism—examined in the three chapters of part 2—in the failures of Arab nationalism, in that it fueled discontent among “ordinary working people and in the recently impoverished middle classes” who turned to Islamism (p. 96). Islamism is not the expression of a religious revival but “a sociocultural and political/ideological movement

... an historical phenomenon—and not an eternal cultural essence” that has become “a vector of political protest against authoritarian rule of radical Arab nationalism” (p. 123).

The critique of Islamism is also trenchant. Islamism “puts forward a utopia that is bound to perish after electoral victories that will reveal the depth of the gap between reality and the enchanted discourse of protest” (p. 123). Addi maintains that a modern state can only be built on individual freedom and the problem is that Islamism rejects this. Islamist thought is simplistic and fails to grasp the sociological complexities of the modern state and the modern condition, trusting, for example, that “if pious men were allowed to wield power in the name of God, they would run the state for the common good” (p. 185). Addi’s appraisal of the role sharia plays in Islamist world-views is particularly incisive: “It is as if, according to sharia, everyone is more or less in the right; and this is actually the case because sharia is based on a *concept* of justice, and everyone is free to form her own idea of what that justice might entail” (p. 205). He also offers a hard-hitting critique of Sayyid Qutb and Abul A’la Mawdudi, the ideological fathers of Islamist ideology, before discussing post-Islamism, which he sees as representing a shift towards democracy and “the abandonment of ideological naivety” (p. 163).

The problem with Islamist approaches to democracy, discussed in chapter 5, is not Islam but socioeconomic conditions and factors in the Arab world: “it is not Islam that runs counter to democracy in Arab countries but the social imbalances and inequalities that nurture populist utopia and violence” (p. 182). The poor know that democracy is linked to the free market—and they know they have no purchasing power—and this is why they prefer an authoritarian regime. Arab societies are “struggling to reconcile a utopian identity with a dream of modernity” (p. 217), an issue which underpins the failures of both Arab nationalism and Islamism.

The book carries a clear and unequivocal message that only democracy, personal freedoms, accountability, and the rule of law will address the malaise in Arab politics, of which both Arab nationalism and Islamism are symptoms. For Addi, “nationalist ideology has always—and in all places—divided rather than united people” (p. 101) but “in the wake of the profound social changes that have destroyed the old communities, there is simply no alternative to the rule of law” (p. 117). When it comes to Islamism, Addi argues, in the book’s last sentence, the “medieval interpretation of Islam” stands in opposition to the cosmopolitan nature of Muslims (p. 253).

The book’s argument is underpinned by a robust anti-culturalism and universalism. They infuse the author’s entire analysis and become clear in more specific instances, which are particularly telling. For example, pointing out the universal validity of the maxim “no taxation without representation,” Addi writes that “the notion of interest is a universal one and not exclusive to any particular culture” (pp. 94-95). He debunks the idea that democracy is consistent only with Western culture and points out that “barbarity is not exclusively Christian or Muslim” but is “part of mankind’s nature” (p. 98).

Addi’s analysis recognizes the particularities of Arab histories but also draws comparisons between these histories and Europe’s, acknowledging similarities as well as differences while eschewing a crude Eurocentrism. Naturally, he acknowledges the need for asserting sovereignty against European colonial imposition but maintains that, following independence, the Arab world should have pursued the development of freedom and democracy internally. The association between democracy and European imperialism is the problem here. Islamists, like Arab nationalists, reduce European civilization to imperialist domination. They demonize the West, thereby obscuring “its contributions to world civilization, especially at the political level” (p. 252). It is

revealing that the book makes little mention of Israel as a factor or a cause of Arab problems.

Addi’s book may not deliver original arguments but reiterates a historical and sociological approach which needs to be aired and debated in a moment when the 2011 Arab uprisings have brought issues surrounding radical Arab nationalism and Islamism back to the forefront. Addi makes some direct comments on the current situation. He points out that, in the short period the Muslim Brotherhood governed Egypt in 2012-13, they “severely disappointed a good part of their supporters” but that their overthrow “saved the Islamist utopia which will continue to flourish in the dreams of millions of Egyptian electors who will be more than ever convinced that the forces of evil will stop at nothing to prevent the victory of Islam” (pp. 244-45). The return of the military to Egyptian politics and in particular the figure of Abdel Fatah Al-Sisi have resurrected the specter of Gamal Abdul Nasser in a way that shows—at least to this reviewer—that Egyptian society has not yet addressed the failures of that period with honesty and realism.

It is somewhat disappointing that the book’s style is rambling and verbose. The structuring and organization of many of its paragraphs has not been well thought through and the reader is sometimes lost in long digressions. The reason for this may be that the book originated in teaching materials, but this could have been addressed during the publication process. Last but not least, the connections between the first and second parts of the book, in other words, between the critiques of Arab nationalism and Islamism, are mentioned at various points but are mostly implied and not brought out for the reader in a systematic way. One hopes that these problems will not dissuade readers from appreciating the book’s considerable value in terms of its core argument.

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