

Chapter 8

The Redefinition of Arabism Through Satellite Channels

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ABSTRACT

This chapter draws on the new forms of Arabism that are produced by transnational Arab media, mainly satellite channels. It will be discussed whether nationalism is a transitory or a permanent phenomenon. The argument advanced here is that nationalism will persist as long as individuals and the political groups use it as an identification or survival mechanism. The distinction between the old form of Arabism which is considered to be a spent force and the new forms of Arabism produced through transnational Arab media are presented. The perspectives of the scholars claiming that communication channels fueled a new form of Arabism are analyzed. The findings regarding role of satellite channels with a particular focus on Al-Jazeera during the Arab Spring in the contagious nature of the protests and in strengthening the Arab public sphere are noted.

INTRODUCTION

It was supposed that nationalism will be on the decline in the wake of the end of the Cold War and the rise of a new, nearly borderless world. There is an apparent paradox of the resurgence of nationalism in the era of globalization. Interest in nationalism in the scholarly literature witnessed a revival in the 1990s. In this literature, it is emphasized that the new world order gave impetus to new forms of nationalism. The worldwide emergence and resurgence of ethnic and nationalist trends strengthen these arguments. Rather than eradicating nationalism, it seems that globalization reconstitutes the discourse and practice of nationalism. Arabism is one of the ideologies which is on the way of revision in theory and practice. This chapter seeks to examine the dynamics of new Arabism and how it is reconstructed by satellite channels in the Arab world. It will be demonstrated how the previous scholarship which perceive Arabism as a response to external intervention and the past colonial rule has been situated in a wider socioeconomic, cultural, and psychological context in the recent decades through the communication channels. A special focus would be given on the role of satellite channels during the protests started in the Middle East at the end of 2010 known as “Arab Spring”.

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The Palestinian issue which united the Arabs under the rubric of pan-Arabism in the 1950s, turned out to be a dividing force at the end of the 1960s, which reached its peak with the disastrous defeat of 1967. Arab defeat against Israel in 1967 war shattered the pan-Arab system. The most important result is that it promoted state sovereignty over Arabism. In a well-known article published in 1979, Fouad Ajami proclaimed the “end of pan-Arabism”. However, the proliferation of satellite channels in the 2000s in the Arab world led some scholars to reconsider “Arabism”. The vehicle of new technology that has been used to spread Western culture has in turn been used to counter it. By using new media, people in the Middle East transmit their messages. Yamani (2002) argues that the globalization process strengthen the sense of pan-Arab community through contributing to the development of a transnational Arab media sphere. She suggests that satellite broadcasts in the Middle East are helping to strengthen the bonds of the imagined Arab community. Some of the scholars argue that satellite television incited a new form of popular Arabism. This is labeled as “New Arabism” by Shibley Telhami, “Arab Public Sphere” by Marc Lynch and “McArabism” by Khalil Rinnawi. These scholars argue that with the establishment of Qatar based satellite channel Al-Jazeera in 1996, “a new Arab street” has emerged challenging the actions of Western governments and giving voice to the problems in the Arab world.

There are some discussions in the literature if the Arab Spring would also be interpreted as a result of this new Arabism (Lynch, 2012; Philips, 2014; Sawani, 2012). The Arab Spring was started in Tunisia at the end of 2010 and through its spillover effect has resulted in the fall of regimes in four countries. The contagious nature of the protests from one Arab country to another suggests the importance of a supra-national Arab identity. In the success of the Arab revolutions, it is evident that satellite channels, mainly Al-Jazeera and the social media networks played a prominent role to transmit the messages given by the protestors to the other parts of the Arab world.

NATIONALISM: A TRANSITORY OR PERMANENT PHENOMENON?

The argument if nationalism is a passing phenomenon or has a transcend character brings us to the debate between the modernists and the critiques of the modernists (perennialists, primordialists, and ethno-symbolists). The core of this debate is related with the nations themselves and the degree to which they are, or are not, products of modernity (Halliday, 2000, p.37).

The modernist approach is associated with such scholars as Ernest Gellner, Benedict Anderson and Eric Hobsbawm. In spite of some important differences between these scholars, they all link nationalism to the rise of the modern state and to industrialization. Gellner associates the age of transition to industrialism with an age of nationalism. For Gellner (1983), nationalism is a product of transformations of industrial society which requires a newly literate society giving legitimacy and meaning to the new state and society produced by industrialization. According to Anderson (2006), the origins of nationalism lie at print capitalism which make the “imagined communities” possible in the minds of its members. According to Hobsbawm (1991), nations and nationalism are “invented traditions” which is a product of social engineering project. According to the modernists, it is nationalism that engenders nations, not the way around. In spite of the differences in their works, all these scholars who are labeled as “modernists” view nationalism something new and modern that came into the picture with the modernization process.

On the other hand, perennialists, primordialists, and ethno-symbolists criticize the modernist paradigm. According to the primordialists (in Smith’s term; perennialists), nations had always existed in every period of history and that many nations existed from time immemorial. Smith who is labeled as

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