

Neo-pan-Arabism: a renewed contract of legitimacy in the Maghreb

Neopanarabismo: un contrato de legitimidad renovado en el Magreb

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Abstract: After various setbacks, the latest being the Arab uprisings of 2011, pan-Arabism has made a return starting in the second decade of the 21st century, but in the shape of neo-pan-Arabism. Thus, neo-pan-Arabism would appear to be the legitimate heir of pan-Arabism. Unlike the former, however, it does not appear to be an ideology, but rather a mere tool of Arab regimes to legitimise their control over their populations. Neo-pan-Arabism, then, seems to be a populist rhetoric, with limited action on the ground and aimed primarily at domestic audiences. The cases of Algeria and Tunisia – two countries outside the traditional pan-Arab nucleus –, presented through the actions and words of their respective leaders, illustrate how regimes are using neo-pan-Arabism for their domestic legitimation.

Key words: pan-Arabism, neo-pan-Arabism, Arab nationalism, populism, Arab League, Maghreb, legitimacy, Algeria, Tunisia

Resumen: Tras varios reveses, siendo el último el de los levantamientos árabes de 2011, el panarabismo ha regresado a partir de la segunda década del siglo XXI, pero en forma de neopanarabismo. Así, el heredero legítimo del panarabismo sería el neopanarabismo; sin embargo, a diferencia del primero, este no se presentaría como una ideología, sino como una mera herramienta de los regímenes árabes para legitimar su dominio sobre sus poblaciones. El neopanarabismo se trataría, entonces, de un discurso populista, con acciones limitadas sobre el terreno, que se dirige sobre todo al consumo doméstico. Los casos de Argelia y Túnez –dos países situados fuera del núcleo panárabe clásico–, presentados a través de las acciones y palabras de sus respectivos dirigentes, muestran cómo el neopanarabismo está siendo utilizado por los regímenes para su legitimación interna.

Palabras clave: panarabismo, neopanarabismo, nacionalismo árabe, populismo, Liga Árabe, Magreb, legitimidad, Argelia, Túnez

Pan-Arabism has died several times, only to be reborn again and again. The most recent of these deaths occurred during the Arab uprisings, when Western powers offered a neoliberal democratic alternative to the seemingly dead models of pan-Arabism and Arab authoritarianism. The reverse result was the rise of a new form of pan-Arabism. Pan-Arabism - with its anti-imperialism, anti-Zionism, pro-Palestinian rhetoric, etc. - in both its old and new forms, is a tool used by political elites to legitimize their rule, a language of commonality spread throughout the Arab world. Its most recent manifestations are in Egypt, with President Abdelfattah el-Sisi, who adopts Nasserite symbols and gestures, and whose media and social media often seek to compare him to Nasser. They are in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab

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Emirates (UAE), and Qatar, where leaders seek to portray themselves not just as Saudi or Emirati or Qatari leaders, but as leaders for the wider region, with a say in places as far away as Libya or Mauritania.

Neo-pan-Arabism is also manifest in the Maghreb, and more specifically in Algeria and Tunisia. The region historically lies beyond the central Arab Mashreq (Egypt, the Levant, and the Gulf), but ties between the two regions remain strong. Indeed, the circulation of ideas and authoritarian practices between the historical Middle East and beyond Egypt and North Africa is stronger than the circulation of goods (trade between the Maghreb and the rest of the Middle East and North Africa - MENA - remains limited). The emergence of neo-pan-Arabism in a region outside the core pan-Arab heartland shows how powerful the model is. Moreover, it is happening in Tunisia, supposedly the most Westernized MENA country, where Western efforts have sought to establish a neoliberal democracy. It is also happening in Algeria, a country that has remained isolated from Arab affairs since the 1990s and whose leadership felt abandoned by its Arab neighbors during the country's years of turmoil.

What is neo-pan-Arabism? How does it differ from traditional pan-Arabism? How is it conceived in Algiers and Tunis? The article begins with an introduction to pan-Arabism, its many deaths, the impact of the Arab uprisings on its existence, and its recent rebirth. It then uses discourse analysis of Arab media to look at Algeria and Tunisia, two examples of Arab states whose leaders have adopted the language of neo-pan-Arabism in the 2020s to forge a new legitimacy contract with their populations.

Pan-Arabism: an ideology

“Historically, there have been three competing political identities in the Middle East: Arab nationalism, Islamic nationalism, and nationalist state identity” (Nisbet and Myers, 2011). Arab nationalism, or pan-Arabism, emerged out of imperial chaos. It was the period between the collapse of the plurisecular Ottoman Empire and the encroachment of the ephemeral French and British empires into Arab lands that saw ideas of nationalism, nation-state, and later self-determination spread in the minds of Arab elites. It was also an Arab reaction to Turkish nationalism, which peaked in the late 19th century; the Turks positioned themselves as superior and different from their Arab counterparts in the Ottoman hierarchy.

Begun as an alter ego of Turkish nationalism, pan-Arabism also had to distinguish itself from pan-Islamism, the “natural” thinking that prevailed in a largely Islamic empire. A nineteenth-century Tunisian or Iraqi would not think of himself as an Arab, but as a Muslim (or Christian, or Jew, etc.). Pan-Arabism recognizes that the Arab world is culturally Muslim, but it replaces the concepts of caliphate and Islamic ummah with that of Arab ummah. Its thinkers adopted the terminology of democracy and human rights that prevailed in the 19th and 20th centuries, and therefore the role of the “pan-Arab caliph” who would replace the Ottoman caliph was not discussed; power was theoretically of the people and for the people. But whenever a pan-Arab regime emerged (Egypt, Syria, Libya, Iraq...), the figure of the Zaim, or Caid, took precedence, and this leader would assume sultanistic powers similar to or superior to those of the Ottoman Caliph.

Most of MENA’s anti-colonial figures began their political careers as pan-Arabists. Nationalist leaders from across the region made pilgrimages to Cairo, the newly minted capital of pan-Arabism, where the League of Arab States (LAS) was founded in 1945, rather than to Istanbul, the former Ottoman capital, or Mecca, the eternal capital of Islam. Thus, in 1947, the Committee for the Liberation of the Arab Maghreb was created in Cairo, bringing together Moroccan, Algerian, and Tunisian nationalists.

From a reaction to Turkish nationalism, pan-Arabism evolved into an anti-colonial movement that sought to offer the Arab peoples a better future in a strong, independent, and united nation. After independence, it is written in some Arab constitutions that the culmination of the nation-state is to merge with the other Arab states into one unified entity, and this is the core of classical pan-Arabism. This would be the “fulfillment of the dreams of the Arab peoples.” In the official discourse of most MENA states, there are the “brotherly states,” i.e., those of the LAS, and the “friendly states,” i.e., everyone else.

Moreover, Arab leaders use or have used analogous words and intonations in their speeches. “The danger for Arab governments, then, was that by routinely failing to live up to Arab-inspired rhetoric and promises, they undermined the symbols and norms that they used to support their legitimacy” (Barnett, 1998: 48). Some pursued the dream of Arab unity more than others. They created schools and militias to indoctrinate Arabs with pan-Arabist ideas, and they even used their armies to spread the ideology. But even those who did not share the same goals had to follow the norms.

But as the Western empires began to crumble, the successor states (France, the United Kingdom, Italy, Spain...) forged political and economic ties with their former colonial subjects. Although many Arab nationalists regarded the US and European powers as enemies, all post-colonial MENA states opened and maintained embassies in their old metropolises, establishing regular and close contacts; the largest trading partners of post-colonial Algeria and Libya are France and Italy, respectively, their former colonial masters.

The dichotomy is obvious when we look at economic indicators. As pan-Arab and anti-imperialist as Arab regimes can be, the MENA region is now “the least economically integrated region in the world” (Malpass, 2021). And when narrowed down to the Maghreb, the region stands out as the least integrated in the world, with interregional trade accounting for less than 5 percent of total Maghreb trade (Dauphin et al., 2019). More than half of Algeria’s exports go to the European Union (EU). Similar figures apply to Tunisia. Arab regimes trade with everyone but each other.

As the “imperialist” West became a valued economic (and often political) partner of the newly independent postcolonial states, pan-Arabism needed an enemy, an “oppositional other,” to keep the fire burning. And that enemy was Israel, a colonial state openly racist against Arabs and with a military doctrine at odds with pan-Arabism. “Arab leaders often vented their differences by staking claims to being the primary defenders of Arab rights and interests: anti-Zionism became the showcase cause of pan-Arabism, the vehicle for leaders to show their pan-Arabist credentials, or a way to protect themselves from those possessing them [their populations]... Instances in which Arab leaders deflected internal threats by mobilizing opinion against foreign enemies (e.g. Israel) and constructing external (symbolic) alliances were so frequent that the Middle East of the 1960s is a veritable laboratory for testing the hypothesized link between internal and external conflict” (Lebovic, 2004: 170).

Along with anti-Zionism, Arab regimes have created a fetishization of the Palestinian issue. The use of slogans related to Palestine and the Palestinian question is common in the speeches of Arab leaders, whether during inter-Arab meetings or in purely domestic settings. Pro-Palestinian and anti-Zionist

rhetoric is thus central to Arab political discourse as a tool of both domestic and regional legitimacy.

Pan-Arabism is thus rooted in ideological debates and theorizations, as well as the struggle against colonialism. When the MENA states were established, many of their young regimes adopted pan-Arabism as an official ideology (e.g. Nasser's Egypt). But even nationalist regimes used pan-Arabism in their official rhetoric because of its popular appeal. Tunisia and Jordan, two regimes jealous of their autonomy, had aspects of Arab nationalism in their constitutions. Thus, while these regimes, whether pan-Arabist or nationalist, were never able to forge a sustainable union among themselves, they did create an imaginary idea, spread through education and the media: the imaginary idea of an Arab nation - the Arab ummah - that was once united and needs to be reunited. Therefore, even if a regime's actual policy is state-centric and not pan-Arabist, it is hard to imagine an Arab leader openly and for any sustained period opposing pan-Arabism.

Because of this notion, the Arab states of MENA largely share the same political culture (Halliday, 2005:

40). Their leaders adhere to the LAS, under which they nominally coordinate their policies. They adhere to a set of norms and principles, and they have a kind of obligation to promote common Arab interests. Their political, diplomatic, and security establishments are suspicious of Western countries, and any rapprochement with the West should therefore be tempered; the argument being that former colonial masters are today's neo-colonial powers (Barnett, 1998: 85). This does not mean that contacts are forbidden; on the contrary, anti-terrorist cooperation is solid, and economic and military ties are strong. But an Arab leader is expected to defend Arab causes and refrain from exaggerating his closeness to the West.

This political culture transcends colonial divisions - because it persists in former British colonies as well as in former French and Ottoman ones - because it applies to Morocco, a nation that was never under Ottoman rule, as well as to the former Ottoman provinces. It is as prevalent in older nation-states like Egypt, Tunisia, or Morocco as it is in newer inventions like Iraq, Lebanon, or Libya. In his *Dialogues in Arab Politics*, Michael Barnett defined pan-Arabism as a legitimizing tool for Arab regimes. He described Arab politics as "a series of dialogues among Arab states about the desired regional order - the ongoing debate among Arab states about the norms of Arab politics and the relationship of these norms to their Arab identities" (Barnett, 1998: 5). For him, words are more important than weapons in Arab politics (*ibid.*, 10). And, as economic indicators show, words are also more important than trade.

Pan-Arabism, therefore, is rooted in ideological debates and theorizations, as well as the fight against colonialism. When MENA states were built, many of their young regimes adopted Pan-Arabism as the official ideology (example: Nasser's Egypt).

The many deaths of pan-Arabism

The death of pan-Arabism has been declared several times, as is usual for ideologies. We count three notable deaths: when Nasser's Egypt was defeated in 1967, when Saddam's Iraq was diminished in 1991, and when Assad's Syria descended into civil war in 2011. Each time disaster struck, Arab (and non-Arab) thinkers would write countless obituaries of pan-Arabism. Others would be more circumspect. Others would rather say that pan-Arabism is only stronger after the turmoil and that the future is bright.

One such obituary is that of Fouad Ajami, who in 1978, as normalization was creeping between Egypt and Israel, wrote an article entitled "The End of Pan-Arabism" (Ajami, 1978). Ajami presented six factors to explain the decline

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of pan-Arabism. About a decade later, writing in the liberal 1990s, Michael Barnett declared that the system of Arab states had ended. "Certain core issues - the Arab-Israeli conflict, autonomy from the West, and unity among Arab states - that express Arab political identity,

that help define the interests of the Arab state and the legitimate means of pursuing those interests," were no longer, he said (Barnett, 1998: 215). By then, the Cold War was over and pan-Arab regimes and non-state actors had lost a strong ally: the USSR. The most bellicose pan-Arab power, that of Saddam Hussein, was destroyed in 1991. His alter ego, the pan-Arab regime of Hafez al-Assad, played a subordinate role as the wind changed. As for the third major hub of pan-Arabism, Muammar Gaddafi's Libya, it was under international sanctions, besieged in a large but desert republic disconnected from the Arab core. The Barcelona Process, launched in 1995, showed a new Arab world less prone to conflict and more conciliatory toward the United States, Europe, and even Israel.

The 2000s brought another batch of setbacks for pan-Arabism, which looked more and more irrelevant. The most successful attacks against global imperialism were not the work of pan-Arab groups, but of Islamist ones. Gone were the days of Palestinian guerrillas hijacking planes and targeting American and European interests; it was now al-Qaeda and violent pan-Islamism that took the lead. So when American forces entered Baghdad, the effective resistance came from Islamist forces rather than pan-Arab ones. Meanwhile, Qaddafi abandoned his nuclear program and accelerated normalization with Western powers. Bashar al-Assad, Hafez's son, was pushed out of Lebanon; it was the de facto end of

the last Arab union, that of Syria and Lebanon - more an occupation than a union, but a showroom for Syria's pan-Arab reach. Assad himself multiplied the openings to the West. In the first decade of the 21st century, the new century in the MENA region seemed anything but pan-Arab.

The Arab Uprisings and the Western quest for a neoliberal Arabism

The Arab uprisings of 2011 looked like the final nail in the coffin of pan-Arabism. Syria was the prime example. The last bastion of pan-Arabism, still clutching the slogans of the 1960s and claiming to host regional organizations that would take over the mantle of Arab politics in the future, faced imminent collapse. But unlike in previous decades, when threatened Arab regimes sparked mass protests across the Arab world, few Arab citizens seemed to care about Assad's fate or to be willing to die for him.

In Libya, the Jamahiriyya collapsed under the rockets of a local guerrilla supported by NATO. The "Guide" himself, a disciple of Nasser and a fixture of Arab politics for decades, died in front of the cameras. Instead of causing consternation, his death was largely laughed off by the Arab masses (Sawani, 2020). A similar fate befell the Palestinian question. Its staid leadership did not appeal to the younger generation of Arabs; it was older bureaucrats who replaced the handsome revolutionary figures of the past century, using outdated slogans and methods. Moreover, in the midst of the turmoil in the region, the plague of the Palestinians seemed less unique. Blood was everywhere, war was everywhere. Advocates of normalization thought the decade of the 2010s was theirs. Israeli leaders felt the moment was ripe for further advances, not only against the Palestinian Authority, but also against Hezbollah, Syria, and Iran.

And the lethargy was not confined to the state level. There are several pan-Arab institutions and organizations working in the Arab world to promote Arab unity. The LAS remains the largest of them all, with its various wings (the Council of Arab Ministers of the Interior, the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization, etc.). Then there are several mechanisms and entities established in Syria or Lebanon, such as the state-controlled Supra-National Baath Command in Damascus or the independent Center for Arab Unity Studies (CAUS) in Beirut (Mermier, 2016; Hafez, 2017). But as the wave of uprisings intensified, these institutions proved unable to keep up. Their offerings were almost nonexistent. Organizers of the CAUS's Arab National

Congress (ANC) claim that “the ANC narrative was a major factor in the resurgence of Arab nationalism” (Hafez, 2017). But in reality, how many Arab protesters have heard of the CAUS resolutions? The Arab masses revolted, and no pan-Arab structure could provide a framework for their movement.

Meanwhile, American and European organizations stepped in to provide an alternative. The Open Society Institute/Foundations, the National Democratic Institute, the International Republican Institute, the various EU initiatives, to name a few, established branches and sent countless delegations to the MENA countries to train local NGOs, empower youth, observe elections, advise the emerging political class, etc.

The objective of Western countries and organizations was subtle. Unlike the USSR during the Cold War, for example, which advocated the establishment of communist regimes and societies; unlike pan-Arabism, with its stated goal of establishing a unified Arab supra-state, these organizations advocated the creation of an open society, a liberal democracy, or, in other words, an Arab world in the image of the neoliberal West, detached from pan-Arab ideology, economically open, and friendly to Europe and the United States. The type of regimes that have been established or are in the process of being established in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Syria, and Yemen have taken European liberal democracy as a model; they have not adopted any pan-Arab model.

Western countries followed their own playbook in the former Soviet space when they tried to transform the former Soviet states into neoliberal democracies. This worked in the countries directly bordering Europe, but it backfired in the case of Russia. Many Russians resented this neoliberal advance, and when President Vladimir Putin brought back the old nationalism with new gloves, they followed him. Something similar is happening in the Arab world.

The end of the Arab Uprisings and the birth of neo-pan-Arabism

Pan-Arabism has indeed had many deaths, but it has also had many rebirths, and theories about the end of pan-Arabism have often been disproved or proven wrong. Already in the period between 2010 and 2012, a series of opinion polls in several Arab countries concluded that “82% of the respondents confirmed that they consider the Arab peoples closer to them than any other group. Europe, for example, was seen as having ties with Arabs by only 7% of respondents, and non-Arab Muslim nations by only 4%” (Sawani, 2012).

It is true that many young Arab activists are Westernized individuals who dress, tweet, write, and even speak like Europeans (Tufekci, 2017). But contrary to the assumptions of many Western diplomats and observers, deep within society, Arabs feel more Arab than democratic or global citizens. They knew they were neither European nor American, but they considered themselves Arab. And just as many Russians resented European and American interference in their internal affairs after 1991, which they saw as a humiliation, so too did many Arabs. The building of neoliberal Arab states was happening on the surface, but behind the thin line, anger was building. Consequently, the MENA regimes that emerged from the turmoil of the Arab uprisings understood that their legitimacy rested on a rehabilitated pan-Arab narrative.

Pan-Arabism therefore lives on, but in a renewed form; it is neo-pan-Arabism. This new thinking has much in common with its earlier version. It comes with claims about the unity of the Arab world, and it still uses the same institutional mechanisms, such as the LAS. Palestine is central to its message, and Zionism and imperialism are its declared enemies. It is also a populist way of doing politics and a tool to legitimize existing regimes - or to consolidate their legitimacy.

Pan-Arabism, therefore, lives on, but in a renewed form; it is Neo Pan-Arabism. It is a populist way of doing politics, and a tool to legitimize existing regimes – or to consolidate their legitimacy. One of the main characteristics of Neo Pan-Arabism is that it is not an ideology.

One of the main characteristics of neo-pan-Arabism is that it is not an ideology. Not a single Arab leader thinks about uniting all Arab states. Arab leaders are normatively pan-Arabist, but in reality they are state-centric. It is more about how they present themselves, not what they do. Moreover, neo-pan-Arabism does not have strong financial tools, and Arab banks and monetary funds are investment agencies whose political goal is not pan-Arab unity but the interests of their leading states. When these states put pressure on another Arab state, they do so to get something in return, financially, not to establish military bases or force a union. And unlike the proponents of classical pan-Arabism, neo-pan-Arab regimes are largely economically neoliberal: they are transactional in their business dealings, not ideological. Much like the neo-Sovietism of Russia under Putin, these regimes have adopted the trappings of pan-Arabism, but have retained the neoliberal economic model of their immediate predecessors.

Among the peculiarities of neo-pan-Arabism on the international stage is the renunciation of arming anti-Western militant groups. A simple comparison with the myriad organizations supported by Nasser or Gaddafi during the Cold War can show the difference. Thus, the most threatening statement against

Israel made by Algerian President Abdelmajid Tebboune during the Arab League summit in Algiers in 2022 was about supporting the Palestinian issue in the United Nations. And unlike classical pan-Arabism, which allied itself with leftist groups around the world, neo-pan-Arabism is not part of the global leftist movement. Its practitioners have ties to the European far right, and many of them prefer Donald Trump to Joe Biden (The Associated Press, 2017).

Ironically, the proponents of neo-pan-Arabism, both at the state and elite levels, portrayed the Arab uprisings as an anti-Arab conspiracy, even though it was an organic grassroots movement that took place across the Arab world and whose protagonists used unified slogans and tools across the region. Most state-controlled media and elite circles around the regimes portrayed the movement as an Islamist, even Zionist, conspiracy against Arabs and Arabism. To combat the Arab uprisings, the Arab regimes used the slogans of pan-Arabism. LAS discussions about the future of joint Arab work or Arab regional security accelerated, and Arab regimes supported each other. They also adopted similar narratives and coordinated their actions, such as the anti-terrorism quartet formed by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and Bahrain against Qatar. When Egypt and the UAE withdrew their ambassadors from Tunisia in 2013 and Qatar in 2014, they mentioned the deviation of the latter two countries from the Arab path.

The examples of Algeria and Tunisia, two countries located outside the traditional centers of pan-Arabism but where pan-Arab sentiments remain high among the population, are an important showcase of neo-pan-Arabism. An analysis of the discourse of their leaders, as opposed to their actions, reveals a strong process of legitimation based on neo-pan-Arabism.

Algeria

When pan-Arabism is invoked, the epicenters of Egypt, Iraq and Syria, or Libya, usually come to mind. However, Algeria is another country that has played an important role in the spread of pan-Arab ideas and has historically portrayed itself as a sovereign stronghold confronting imperialism and defending Arab causes. It has also provided aid and refuge to several Arab (and African) independence movements. It was in Algiers, for example, that the Palestinians declared their independence in 1988.

But Algeria went through a decade of civil war in the 1990s, followed by a difficult national reconstruction and democratic opening in the 2000s, which led to authoritarian consolidation and then isolationism. Then, in 2019, came the Hirak, a youth-led movement that used slogans like those of the Arab

uprisings of the early 2010s and was seen as a late continuation of those same Arab uprisings. For local and international observers, this was a moment of change: Algeria was finally entering the era of democracy (Zoubir, 2019). Western governments and NGOs stepped up their activities in the country, hiring analysts and program officers and increasing their funding to Algerian NGOs. Similar to what happened elsewhere in the early stages of the Arab uprisings, a liberal democratic project began to see the light of day. But it did not last, and when Covid struck, the Algerian leadership was able to strike back by closing public space and spreading conspiracy theories against its opponents. The deep state returned vengefully, not unlike Russia under Putin. The current repression of Algerian democracy activists is the most severe in decades.

And this “new” Algeria had revamped many elements of its past. In early 2022, Algeria hosted meetings between the main Palestinian factions: Fatah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad (Arabi 21, 2022). The leadership of these groups made frequent trips to Algiers to discuss among themselves in coordination with the Algerian leadership. At the end of the year, they signed a document purporting to end their divisions (but with little effect on the ground). At the end of the event, President Tebboune spoke briefly to link the reconciliation agreement to the 1988 declaration of independence, which took place in the same room (Al Araby, 2022a). By sharing the stage with the representatives of the main Palestinian factions, Tebboune appeared as the classic Arab zaim who would write his name in the Palestinian hall of fame. And because of the prevalence of the Palestinian cause in the minds of many Arabs, he was subsequently propelled to the center stage of Arab politics after having been ignored by the Arab masses.

The Algerian track came as a surprise to many, as Algeria has been largely absent from Arab affairs in recent decades. However, it coincided with a major regional event: the Abraham Accords, signed in December 2020, in which Morocco normalized its relations with Israel. For Algerian leaders, the Moroccan-Israeli agreement is a direct threat to their country. The two countries are competing for hegemony in the Maghreb and the Sahel. But while Algeria was preoccupied with its internal problems between the 1990s and the 2010s, Morocco consolidated its domestic stability, built a strong economic system, and developed a large network of partners throughout West Africa. Morocco also relies on strong lobbying contracts and public relations links that portray it as one of the most successful economies on the African continent. In addition, after signing the Abraham Accords, Morocco received global recognition for its occupation of Western Sahara, which Algeria saw as a red line.

Algeria is rich in natural resources. However, it is a large country (the largest in Africa) with a large and growing population and an economy based largely

on energy revenues. The future looks bleak, with no economic renewal, multiple pressures on its borders, and internal political instability. Morocco's actions therefore looked like an existential threat. The message conveyed by the Algerian leadership is that Algeria's economic problems are not the sole responsibility of the political and military leadership, but also, and perhaps more importantly, the result of a foreign conspiracy involving the Arabs' arch-enemy, Israel. Algeria therefore positions itself as a player at the forefront of the struggle against Israel. For example, in August 2023, the deputy speaker of the Algerian parliament told the Russian news agency Sputnik - a popular media outlet among Arab youth - that "Algeria stands firm against Israel, even if it stands alone" (Sputnik Arabic, 2023).

But this "confrontation" is not taking place outside Algeria's borders. In other words, we do not see Algeria joining Iran and Syria in arming Hezbollah or staging attacks against Israel. We do not see the tit-for-tat that exists between Iran and Israel being replicated in the case of Algeria. The "confrontation" is essentially taking place in the Algerian media and social media, and is aimed primarily at the Algerian and Moroccan publics. For example, in the summer of 2023, a video of Israeli President Isaac Herzog speaking about judicial reforms in Israel was shared thousands of times on Algerian and Arab social media. The reason: his speech was accompanied by misleading fake subtitles in which he said he was worried about the danger Algeria posed to his country (France Press, 2023). The story was quickly debunked by fact-checkers, but after it had achieved its goal. Such stories emerge regularly and then spread through social media, which are close to Algerian security or official sources and have a wide reach. The Algerian public, like all other Arab publics, remains culturally pan-Arab; cuddling it with the Zionist conspiracy is a good entertainer.

From time to time, the Algerian media publishes a story about an Israeli plot. An Israeli team was allegedly arrested during the Hirak. Israel was allegedly involved in the devastating forest fires of 2021 (Al Jazeera, 2021). Israel is accused of supporting the separatist Movement for the Self-Determination of Kabylie (MAK). There was even a story about an Israeli submarine approaching Algerian shores, allegedly from Morocco, pursued by the Algerian navy, that made headlines in Algeria (Lionel, 2022). However, few people outside Algeria have heard of these events, and there has been no follow-up action (no retaliation, as is usually the case between Iran and Israel). The confrontation is mainly for local consumption and for Algerians to feel that their country is the victim of a Zionist conspiracy and the defender of Arabism.

Abdelmajid Tebboune, the Algerian president, regularly gives lengthy interviews to Algerian and Arab media. The regularity of his media appearances in the Arab media is new; it is not common for Algerian heads of state to do

so. He speaks about both Algerian and Arab affairs. He is always critical of Morocco, but he also gives his opinion on other Arab countries such as Tunisia (Middle East Monitor, 2023), Libya (Lahiani, 2022), or Palestine, to name a few, and he offers his mediation and advice. The image he conveys is not of an inward-looking Algerian president, but of a pan-Arab leader at the center of Arab affairs.

In November 2022, Algeria hosted the 31st Arab League summit, which also coincided with the 60th anniversary of its independence. The summit came after a decade of Algerian isolationism, political instability, and uncertainty. Algeria seemed to be reconnecting with its Arab environment and taking center stage. The message coming from Algiers was that it is a strong Arab country, self-confident. And its president speaks on behalf of all Arabs: “Our Arab region has enormous human, natural and financial capacities that qualify the region to be active as a global economic power,” Tebboune said in the summit’s opening speech. “Arab currencies are equivalent to the reserves of Europe or the major Asian or American economic groups” (Al Araby, 2022b).

During the summit, the Algerian leadership sent the following message to the Algerian people: Algeria’s independence and the union of all Arabs are linked; Algeria is at the center of pan-Arabism, supporting the Palestinians and fighting Israel when other countries abandoned the struggle, and it will advance the Arab cause. Opposing the regime through HIRAK-like movements is tantamount to betraying the Arab cause and giving the enemies of Arabism a chance to win. By emphasizing their Arabism, the Algerian leaders strengthen their internal legitimacy.

Tunisia

In the case of Tunisia, pan-Arabism has always existed, but unlike Algeria, it was never part of the official rhetoric. As a postcolonial state, the country was built against the hegemonic nature of pan-Arabism. In the 1950s and 1960s, Tunisia’s Bourguiba had several confrontations with pan-Arab leaders such as Egypt’s Nasser and Jordan’s King Hussein, Algeria’s President Houari Boumediene, and Libya’s Gaddafi. Pan-Arab activists were persecuted and their parties banned. But Tunisian leaders never completely renounced pan-Arabism, continuing to mention the Palestinian question and using broader Arab slogans in their speeches. Tunisia even hosted the headquarters of the LAS in the 1980s after Egypt normalized relations with Israel, and it almost sided with Saddam Hussein after his invasion of Kuwait in 1991. But overall it remained in the Western camp.

The pro-Western stance continued after the Arab uprisings, when official Tunisia adopted the institutions of liberal democracy and almost turned its back on the LAS and Arab institutions. During the decade of the 2010s, Tunisia became a model often praised by European and American officials, whose visits to the country and interventions in Tunisian affairs became frequent. These visitors said they were helping Tunisia out of a difficult situation and wanted to transform it into a Westernized liberal democracy. Tunisia was the example that had to succeed. For many Tunisians, however, this was perceived as unwanted interference.

During the 2019 presidential campaign, Kais Saied said that normalization with Israel was a form of treason. His main rival, Nabil Karoui, signed a contract with a Canada-based lobbyist who had previously worked in Israeli intelligence (Schaffer, 2020). Saied was perceived as an ardent sovereigntist who would stop foreign interference and someone who speaks Arabic and uses pan-Arab jargon, while Karoui was part of the elite who ran the country as an open, pro-Western state, who speaks Arabic with French words and whose lifestyle is more Western than Arab. There are many reasons for Saied's victory over Karoui, but sovereigntism, pan-Arabism, and relations with Israel played an important role.

As president, Saied delivers speeches in classical Arabic. He speaks mostly about Tunisia, but it is common for him to speak about broader Arab affairs, addressing Arabs in a language they understand. In particular, he often uses the term "Arab Umma" when referring to Arab peoples, a term that comes from the pan-Arab lexicon. French political scientist and leading Tunisia expert Michel Camau calls him a pan-Arabist (Le Monde, 2022).

Saied often speaks about foreign conspiracies aiming to divide the nation. During the 2023 Arab League summit, he addressed the Arab leaders saying that "the first priority (...) is to protect our [Arab] countries, because there are those who plan for their collapse (...) We welcome the return of Syria (...) to the Arab League after the conspiracy to divide it was foiled (...) And we have the same hope for an end to hostilities in Sudan, which they [the Western powers] divided into two in 2010; we do not want a third or fourth Sudan after this tragic war (...) And among our priorities (...) there is culture: without quality culture and education... and the spread of the values of tolerance, coexistence, and national pride, we cannot fortify our societies against those who want to divide them, the same ones who plan to divide our countries" (Watania Replay, 2023).

Saied is also quite vocal about supporting the Palestinians, a question he mentions in speeches both in Tunisia and abroad. Famously, during a presidential debate preceding his 2019 election, when asked about his

thoughts regarding normalization with Israel, he said unequivocally: “It is high treason!” (Al Chourouk, 2019), something he repeated several times since. Pro-Saied media and social media, therefore, often amplify his supposed confrontation with Israel, going as far as claiming that “he brought the war inside Israel” (Ajroudi, 2023). And while the President does not mention Israel explicitly, people close to him – and his myriad supporters on social media – often see Zionist conspiracies targeting his persona and his political project.

At the Algiers Summit in 2022, Saied gave an impassioned speech on the need for Arab unity and criticized local and foreign obstacles to Arab integration. “As an Arab nation, we expect [the establishment of] a common Arab economic system,” he told the audience (Sky News Arabia, 2022). His speech was in line with previous ones he has given in Tunisia and abroad, almost contradicting Tunisian leaders who preceded him, who used to emphasize democratization and partnership with the West.

And as in Algeria, this anti-Zionism and pro-Palestinian activism is mostly for the local public. Thus, when Tunisia was a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (2020-2021), it hardly took up the Palestinian cause. During its tenure, there was no groundbreaking motion to condemn Israeli policies. Moreover, the Ghriba pilgrimage, a Jewish celebration that Tunisia hosts every year and during which several Israeli citizens visit the country, continued as usual. There was even a scandal in Tunisia in May 2023 when it became known that Israeli tourists were in the country after an attack on the pilgrims (BBC News, 2023).

The atmosphere that characterizes the Tunisian political discourse under Kais Saied is reminiscent of the one that prevailed in Nasser’s Egypt (or that prevails in Sisi’s Egypt today). But overall, the official narrative is that the struggle is taking place, and at moments it sounds as if Tunisia is on an anti-imperialist crusade. Mirroring the Algerian case, many of those who oppose the regime are treated as traitors not only to the country but to the broader Arab cause. In the pro-regime media and on social media, opposition groups are often accused of collaborating with the West or Israel.

But the main lines of Tunisia’s foreign policy remain unchanged: the country remains close to the West and cautious about deepening its relations with the “East” (i.e. China and Russia). The leadership’s professed neo-pan-Arabism seems as superficial as that of its Algerian counterparts: of little substance abroad and mostly directed at the local population. As Tunisia struggles with economic hardship and political instability, neo-pan-Arabism comes to save the regime and bolster its legitimacy.

Conclusion

Pronounced dead several times, pan-Arabism continues to resurface. The latest version of this mindset, however, is not a political project, but merely a tool of legitimation. The ultimate goal of neo-pan-Arabism is not the unity of all Arabs, but the survival of individual regimes. neo-pan-Arab regimes therefore forge alliances with right-wing and left-wing groups alike, without any solid ideological glue. They refrain from global revolutionary action and keep transactional affairs going. Perhaps the only thing they all agree on is a common security alliance, stopping foreign-Western intervention in their internal politics, and crushing internal dissent.

In our two case studies of Algeria and Tunisia, we have tried to show how the two regimes instrumentalize neo-pan-Arabism to strengthen their internal support and thus maintain their legitimacy. Through the media and social media, they magnify their role in Arab affairs and try to play a central position. And while their discourse is revolutionary, they continue to operate within the traditional foreign policy norms of their respective countries, focusing more on their national interests than on any supra-organization.

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