INTRODUCTION: EXPLAINING REGIONAL ARAB POLITICS

The Conceptual Approach

This book is about regional Arab politics and the conflict with Israel. It examines the interplay between Arab multilateral, collective politics and the individual Arab state through the prism of the Arab-Israeli conflict as the ultimate sphere of interaction between state interests and all-Arab commitments. My main concern is with the impact of this interplay on shaping international rules and institutions prescribed to realize common goals and enhance regional order, i.e., regularized pattern of state behavior.

More specifically, the study is interested in answering the following questions: What was the role of the Arab states system and its collective institutions in regulating inter-state relations and managing the conflict with Israel? How did the Arab-Israeli conflict affect the tension between raison d’état and raison de la nation, that is, between individual state interests and collective Arab obligations? And finally, what were the strategies and means used by the individual Arab actors, states and non-states, to enhance their autonomous capabilities and authority in conjunction with, and at the expense of, other actors and the Arab regional system as a whole?

These questions are validated by the inconsistency between the expected roles and practical behaviors of each of these political institutions. Imbued by the ideal of Arab unity, Arab collective institutions have been expected to enhance Arab regional solidarity and conformity, particularly on issues of common Arab concern, of which the Palestine conflict is most prominent. Practically, however, these institutions were predominantly concerned with procedures protecting the regional multi-sovereign Arab states. On the other hand, collectivism along strictly Arab considerations collides with a central attribute of the state as a distinct political actor in international relations, namely, its claim for exclusive authority over its national decision making. Yet being a member of the regional Arab system also entails opportunities for the state to enlist external moral, political, and economic resources, ultimately
contributing to state formation. Indeed, inter-Arab politics often seem fraught with ambivalent, sometimes contradictory, political behavior. The inter-changeably restrictive-distributive role of the regional Arab system, and the individual states’ inherent quest for further capabilities and autonomous decision making constitute a guiding theme in this study.

Unlike the European state, the Arab state was, and is larger, a juridical rather than empirical phenomenon, whose emergence expressed foreign will rather than a process of state formation from within. Many Arab states thus reached independence while lacking effective institutions, socio-political cohesion, and popular legitimacy. Furthermore, the Arab modern state inherited an extremely complicated social and economic structure marked by nomadic pastoralism, long distance trade, and semi-autonomous primordial groups—tribes, ethnic or religious minorities—concentrated in mountainous or arid areas where the premodern central administration was irregular. These social structures have remained a major obstacle in the process of state formation in the Middle East as a whole, especially with regard to building centralized state capabilities. Moreover, like most of the new states, the political borders of many Arab states were in varying degrees incongruent with their social structure and political or economic orientations. In addition, however, state formation in the Arab world confronted an incomparable problem among Third World states, namely the blurred boundaries between state and collective, supra-state identity inspired by common Arab-Islamic history, culture, and vision. Hence, post-colonial ruling elites in the Arab world had to confront, in addition to Third World conventional agones of state building and social change, constant ideological challenges to their institutional legitimacy from both domestic and regional actors.

State formation in the Arab world was indeed inherently linked to inter-Arab, regional power politics, the origins of which were rooted in the colonial and early independence period. The phenomenon of Arab regional politics represented interrelated processes of state formation, quest for regional hegemony, rapid socio-political changes, and the emergence of Pan-Arab nationalism as a dominant regional discourse. Hence, internal as well as regional competition for power have been increasingly conducted in the name of all-embracing ideals—primarily Pan-Arab nationalism—in disregard of borders and state sovereignty. Pan-Arabism thus became both a curse and an asset for ruling elites, serving their quest for legitimacy and claims for regional power or solidarity and yet entangling them in a costly game of eroding each other’s legitimacy and intensifying domestic and regional instability. Indeed, every actor could speak in the name of the Arab nation though none could claim to be the nation itself, that is, to enforce his hegemony on the Arab region as a whole. Arab regional politics were further intensified by the elasticity and self-

interested interpretation that marked Pan-Arabism as well as the role of institutions established to fulfill its goals.

Although the confusion of nation and state has been the watermark of Arab regional politics, it fluctuated along time and space in close interaction with decolonization, socio-political changes and domestic stability. Under the revolutionary regimes, assertive Arab nationalism, and anti-Western outcry, was elevated to a state religion, reflecting its central role in building their new authority and legitimacy. The result was inter-Arab turbulence and regional disorder through the 1950s and 1960s, typically marking the novelty of these states and their social incoherence. This was particularly evident in the Fertile Crescent, reflecting the weakness of state capabilities, socio-political turbulence, and direct involvement in the Palestine conflict. Indeed, nowhere else in the Arab world was the outcry for supra-state conformity as compelling as in the Fertile Crescent countries which, combined with Egypt’s bold interference and efforts to coerce its all-Arab hegemony, constituted the core of the regional Arab system.

Despite strong centripetal forces advocating Arab collectivism, however, modern inter-Arab relations have been marked by a quest for stable regional order based on equality and mutual recognition among its member states. As the leading agent of social modernization and secularization, the Arab state was bound to contain, if not defeat, supra-state concepts of identity and establish its own space and status. Notwithstanding the absence of a hegemonic power, vast discrepancies among Arab states’ capabilities and social structures, Arab regional politics have undergone a slow transition from one dominated by culture, identity, and symbols, to state-based formal institutions and negotiated order. This transformation was a result of interrelated intra- and extra-state processes: The Arab state’s grown capability to enforce its authority over the society and defy external intrusion, and the Arab regional system’s stipulation of mechanisms—such as balance of power, diplomacy, and interdependence—and formal institutions legitimizing individual states’ power and enhancing inter-Arab coexistence. Struck by growing limits of power and resources as well as by domestic and mutual regional threats, Arab regimes manifested growing willingness to work together within a regional states system based on commonly accepted norms and institutions prescribed to protect actors’ sovereignties, prevent hegemony, and reduce inter-Arab conflicts.

Hence, the gulf between Arab nationalist vision and political reality has become increasingly a character trait of state-society relations in the Arab world, underlain by traditional political cleavages and frustrated hopes for social and economic progress so typical among developing societies. Still, the viability of the Arab state vis-à-vis Pan-Arab nationalism has remained de-
bated, with survey analyses pointing to a gap between elite groups identifying with the state, and the masses, among whom Pan-Arab identity appeared to be strong. This underlines the need for a historical study examining the developing relationships between the Arab state and the supra-state centripetal symbols and ideas.

The comparative literature on Middle East politics has been marked by a dichotomy between regionalist, focusing on the Arab states system, and state-centric, identifying the Arab state as an independent actor. Both approaches refer to the dialectic between Arab collectivism and state particularism as a conflict, disrupting domestic and regional stability. By and large, this conflict has been tackled in the context of state formation, explaining the constraints confronting the legitimation of this process in terms of both state-society relations and external claims for Pan-Arab conformity. The discussion of Arab state formation focused on state-based strategies employed by ruling elites to insulate their societies and defy external ideological challenges to state sovereignty. However, little attention was given to the role of the Arab regional system as an institutional actor shaping inter-state relations and, in fact, playing a role in state formation.

Concluding the European experience of state building, the main attributes of the state have been identified as control over a well-defined territory, centralized government, differentiation from other organizations, and a claim for monopoly of the physical means of coercion within its territory. Yet in addition to these Weberian, state-centric attributes, theorists of state building and international relations also emphasize the international dimensions of state building, namely, the emergence and evolution of an international system of states, acknowledging, and to some extent guaranteeing, each other’s existence as distinct and sovereign within recognized territorial boundaries.

International recognition may depend on the state’s capability to enforce its authority within a given territory and defend it against external challenges. Yet capability is neither a prerequisite for international recognition nor necessarily state-centered. Since most developing states do not possess the ability to defend themselves, the significance of international legitimacy for their sovereignty and territorial integrity is essential. This has been manifested in Africa, where states have “adopted institutional armor” to protect their independence and sovereignty, undertaking self-restrictions on state action externally.

The dimension of international legitimacy is especially complex in the case of Arab states where legitimacy of authority draws on both local constituencies and regional collective acquiescence. If sovereignty means “an ultimate and exclusive political authority within a given territory” to “decide for itself how it will cope with its internal and external problems,” the Arab state suffers from an inherent weakness. Indeed, nowhere else was sovereign policy-making of states challenged by external actors as strongly as in the case of Arab states, facing delegitimation, military threats, and diplomatic sanctions that demonstrated the weakness of the state (dawla) and claim for its deference to the all-Arab nation (ummah). Hence, Arab states’ foreign policy on issues of common Arab concern had been inherently restricted by interactive forces both regional and within society.

Furthermore, one’s assertion of Pan-Arab nationalism could, by virtue of its threats to other actors’ sovereignty, serve as a source of state capability. Still, state power was a significant factor in determining sovereignty in inter-Arab dynamics. Military capability, especially when combined with determination to employ it against adversaries, including Arabs, enabled governments to monopolize violence and enforce control over society. In addition, it could serve as a coercive means to extract economic resources and obtain political influence on the regional level in the name of collective Arab interest. In time, however, given the price of turbulent inter-Arab relations, Arab ruling elites were obliged to seek ways of mutual accommodation.

Just as the European modern nation-state was a product of prolonged violent intra- and inter-state struggles, so was it a product of routinized relationships between states in peace-time, allied by common institutions. Such cooperation was essential for generating stability and mutuality in inter-Arab relations, representing common interests such as stable regional order—hence, control of societal and non-state actors—and advancement of common goals. Precisely because Arab ruling elites shared both a quest for bolstering their sovereignty and defying threats of non-state actors and supra-state symbolism, it was necessary to create a normative regional order.

Charles Tilly’s “War made the state, and the state made war,” is especially appropriate in the case of those Arab states immediately concerned with the Palestine conflict. The state of war with Israel legitimized claims for sharing or redistribution of “collective Arab resources,” namely oil—crucial, given the poor taxation in most of the Arab states—as well as claims for regional leadership. Prolonged involvement in external military threats such as the state of war with Israel or the Gulf war justified a considerable growth of the armed forces as well as the expenditures for their maintenance and armament. Conditions of war also justified sustaining the military in power, enabling the state to deepen its penetration into society and to repress dissent and rebels. Yet the Palestine conflict, by virtue of its symbolic significance, was also bound to enhance inter-Arab competition, disrupting regional order and mutual recognition. It was in this context that the Arab states sought to regularize their multilateral relations through regional institutions whose all-Arab status lent legitimacy to incremental departure from Arab common obligations toward the Palestine conflict through recurrent redefinition of Arab collective strategy in the conflict with Israel. Indeed, if state sovereignty is
ultimately measured by its capacity to make war and peace, the shifting relationships between Arab states and Israel from war to contractual peace during the period under discussion manifests a triumph of the state over supra-state commitments.

This book presents a systemic scrutiny of more than three decades of Middle East international history, demonstrating the changing patterns of state behavior, primarily on the regional level. My approach is both comparative—discussing real inter-state relations—and region-centered, in terms of the Arab world’s specific commonality of history and culture. The study considers the regional Arab system as an independent causal factor explaining state behavior in international relations. Apart from inter-state relations, this study focuses on collective institutions as the common ground where Arab states’ interests and shared obligations converge to produce collective policies and disagreements on core issues. It is the arena where supra-state allegiances and commitments, reflecting the region’s common Arab-Muslim history, culture, and vision, play an important role in generating both opportunities and constraints for state building. This leads to the assumption that the relation between the regional system and the individual state is complementary, not merely antagonistic, with routinizing impact on state formation and regional order. Focusing on the Arab-Israeli conflict enables me to examine the degree to which Arab states grew stronger in terms of their ability to withstand external supra-state symbolic pressures, to keep their societies at bay from such influences and conduct autonomous foreign policy, particularly on Arab core issues.

THE REGIONAL ARAB SYSTEM

The Systemic Attributes

A study into the international relations of the Arab states requires considering not only their behavior as independent actors but also their continuous, group dynamics and multilateral interactions shaped by both their common Arab-Islamic identity and their distinct interests. Thus, approaching inter-Arab politics as a system is essential for explaining the international behavior of Arab states both as a group and as separate actors, requiring a review of qualitative as well as quantitative themes.

Beginning in the late 1950s, the study of regional systems indicated a widening conviction that the bipolar system approach was inadequate for explaining the whole scope of small states’ international behavior in terms of subordination to global power and resources. Hence, the growing attention to regional and domestic—rather than global—causes shaping the postcolonial politics of Third World states. This trend has been reaffirmed by the renewed interest in the complex relationship between state and society in the process of state formation and the primacy of domestic politics in shaping the foreign policies of developing states. Thus, whereas developed Western states’ national security usually relates to the protection of their independence or political values from external threats, national security in new states is bound up with domestic threats to the regime’s stability, emanating from problems of legitimacy, political integration, and identity. In the Arab case, the artificiality of the colonial entity that distinguished most Arab states, contrasted with the sense of cultural and political unity particularly prevalent among the Fertile Crescent elites. As such, inter-Arab politics have been affected predominantly by domestic and regional causes, limiting manipulation by outside powers of their respective “clients.”

Comparative regional studies have identified basic variables defining a regional system: common cultural, social, and historical bonds, interdependence, geographic proximity, a high level of interaction among the units constituting the system, and a sense of regional identity which tends to increase in
denence, indicating mutual sensitivity and vulnerability to both domestic and foreign policies that might alter the Arab balance of power. The manipulation of militant ideologies in the region's politics has served as a bargaining card or a means of coercion toward rival actors in the name of Arab collectivism. The systemic pattern of Arab commonality and interdependence has often been analogized to an extended family in conflict with an external actor. The familial character of inter-Arab relations has also been manifested in the prevalence of voluntary diplomatic conciliation and mediation efforts by Arab leaders as a mechanism of conflict resolution in inter-state conflicts.\footnote{15}

The AL's foundation in 1945 introduced a "Westphalian order" in the Arab Middle East based on the principle of a decentralized system of equal sovereign states.\footnote{16} Like the Latin American and African systems, the advent of the regional Arab system was marked by a strong call for political unity. Yet the foundation of the AL, like the OAU eighteen years later, indicated a triumph of the approach that favored a regional framework for political and economic cooperation between independent states. This approach drew on the UN Charter's concept of regionalism and was reinforced by the regional organization's commitment to the liberation of other territories still under colonial rule. In both Arab and African cases, the regional organization served a diplomatic need of the member states: to guarantee their sovereignty and territorial integrity from mutual interference in their internal affairs, to resolve conflicts and enhance collective action on common interests.\footnote{17}

The Arab states system epitomized by the AL crumbled in the 1950s, primarily because of domestic instability and struggles for power, representing the weakness of the Arab states, rapid social change, and economic difficulties. The permeability of most Arab states was vehemently demonstrated by Nasser's effective appeals to the masses in the Fertile Crescent in defiance of their governments. Inter-Arab struggles for power assumed a "state of war of all against all" in the name of Pan-Arab nationalism, whose magnitude in Arab political life in the 1950s and 1960s indicated a profound longing for regional unity under a hegemonic political center traditionally anchored in Islam as a "religion and state" (din wa-dawla). Over time, however, these efforts have shown an ever-diminishing ability to seriously endanger the regional status quo.\footnote{18}

The region-based destabilizing conditions were aggravated by the European and American Pioneers' long-standing penetration and competition over geostrategic influence and oil resources. Yet the leading powers, whether in conflict or agreement, were by no means exclusive or dominant in shaping the region's politics. Not were Cold War considerations exclusive in determining their Middle East policies, as demonstrated by the U.S. intervention against Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. Arab ruling elites themselves frequently "imported" Powers' involvement in attempting to counterbalance regional threats. This, in turn, aggravated inter-Arab jealousy, agitation of public anti-Western sentiments, and ideological controversies. Islam's history of confrontation with European civilization, the recent decolonization of Arab states, and Israel's special relations with Western allies—already an unmistakable imprint on the region's troubled politics, nourishing anti-Western sentiments and claims for Arab conformity, and undermining state and regional security.\footnote{19}

Notwithstanding the obstacles facing Arab state building, in the course of the 1970s Arab ruling elites proved more durable and coherent. Political borders and sovereignty became progressively recognized by both domestic and external actors, shaping the regional Arab system as an increasingly "ordered" one. In the absence of real political participation, institutional legitimacy remained limited and stability was secured by coercive means. And yet, the enormous growth of state machinery since the 1960s—reflected in the development of the bureaucracy, armed forces and security agencies, as well as the state's control of economic life—has enhanced the Arab regimes' survivability, governing capability, and political penetration into society. State authority and symbols of power have been internalized through widespread coercion and socialization.\footnote{20}

The decline of Pan-Arabism as a dominant discourse following the 1967 war, coupled with the degradation and internal failure of the radical national Arab regimes, gave way to growing sense of local-national identity and rise of Islamism as a political ideology. Both trends benefited the process of state- and nation-building. Thus, even the Syrian and Iraqi Ba'th regimes, while adhering to their sworn Pan-Arab nationalist rhetoric and institutions, began constructing since the late 1970s particular territorial identities linked to the pre-Islamic era. On the other hand, the territorial state as a legitimate political unit won the overt support of radical Islamic leaders who confine their political and social goals within, rather than out, of the state's boundaries. Although leading Islamists do envision an Islamic commonwealth of sovereign states based on economic and cultural unity, the phenomenon of radical Islam assumes a highly fragmented form along local and personal leadership lines with no common supra-state institutional or spiritual authority.\footnote{21}

\section*{Actors, Core and Periphery}

The Arab world "from the Ocean to the Gulf" covers a huge area with relatively small islands of cultivation and settlement separated by vast barren spaces, which have shaped its political division from time immemorial. The Arab world is divided into five sub-regional systems: The Maghreb (Morocco, Mauritania, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya), the Nile Valley (Egypt and Sudan), the Fertile Crescent (Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine), the Arabian Peninsula (Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, and the
response to non-regional actors' intrusive actions. Whereas the Middle East delineation as well as the applicability of the regional system concept to this region have remained debatable—preference is given to Arab or Islamic definitions—the systemic approach is highly applicable to the group of Arab states.

The main attribute defining the Arab system is culture. Not only do the Arab states excel in an incomparable intensity of interactions and, except for the Horn of Africa, are geographically contiguous, they are distinguished by relatively comprehensive linguistic and religious homogeneity and a shared sense of common history, identity, and vision. Furthermore, all Arab states incorporated into an exclusively Arab regional organization, the League of Arab States, indicating that Arab identity (\textit{umma}) is a prerequisite for a state to be included in the organization. In macro-social terms, the Arab world constitutes a "trans-national political community"—imagined and abstract as that may be—or a "pan-national regional system" (\textit{niẓam işlimi qawmî}), marked by a strong inclination toward collectivism and conformity, especially when confronting an alien or extra-regional power.

The Arab collective identity is evident in Arab political thought, which tackles the nation as the unit of discourse. As such, it has been identified as "panacean" and non-instrumental, saturated with ideology and cultural symbols. Be it Pan-Arab nationalism, Arab socialism, anti-imperialism, or radical Islamism, a common "canon" of discontested and defiant Arab political language has become prevalent among the urban, educated middle class, underlaid by the socio-political and cultural tensions of a rapidly changing society. This political culture of symbols and ideas, once portrayed as knowing "no half-tones," has made inter-Arab politics often seem as a "zero-sum game." The salience of culture as the mainstay of the regional Arab system is unique especially when compared to the Latin American countries, which also share a sense of common culture and regional identity. Even though the idea of regional unity has been pervasive among Latin American countries, deriving from common colonial history, language, and (Catholic) church, it has never been a trait defining individuals' identity, as Arabism has been for Arabs. Moreover, while the Arabs inherited from Western colonialism the structure of the state and the idea of ethnic nationalism, with the latter challenging the former's legitimacy, most postcolonial Latin American communities developed from the beginning as independent nation-states.

The ethnocentric identity of the Arab peoples is also indicated by the nature of inter-Arab—conflictual as well as cooperative—"transactions," which assume predominantly expressive, rather than practical, form. With the exception of labor migration and official monetary flow from the oil states to non-oil states, trade and capital investment among Arab states have remained strictly limited compared to the scope of their interactions with the international economic system. While this phenomenon prevails among developing countries, inter-Arab economic integration has been much lower than among Latin American countries.

The blurred boundaries between nation and state in the Arab world have obstructed the emergence of the state as an all-embracing authority able to impose exclusive sovereignty, articulate common cultural values for its constituents, and claim their loyalty and obedience. From a Pan-Arab viewpoint, prevalent among the masses, Arab states' boundaries constitute an artificial and temporary partition of the territorial and ethnic contiguity of the Arab homeland. Hence, while ruling elites must defy competitive supra-state Arab and Islamic challenges, they themselves frequently resort to extensive use of Arab and Islamic ideologies to legitimate their authority. Given the close interplay between domestic and regional politics, Arab regimes are obliged to seek legitimacy from other Arab regimes, as well as from their own constituencies.

The degree of intensity to which supra-state ideologies are employed is a function of the regional and domestic needs of a given regime. It reflects an interrelation between the level of state capability and the regional systemic order. Hence, the ability of an Arab state to exercise full sovereignty in domestic or foreign affairs depends on its ability to enforce an exclusive authority over its constituency and contain external Arab-Islamic pressures applied in the name of collective Arab interest. Yet strong states may just as well resort to extensive use of supra-state symbols and values as a means to claim regional leadership or delegitimize rivals. The Arab masses have responded to and rallied around such symbols largely due to the power of protest implied by them, reflecting a collective sense of predicament and wounded Arab national pride.

Arab regimes vary in their ideological strategies and means of attaining legitimacy in accordance with their particular social conditions and political capabilities. Monarchs tend to establish their legitimacy through patrimonial tradition, building tribal or group loyalty, as well as through Islamic legitimacy claiming descendance of the ruler-patron from the Prophet's House. In the oil-rich Arab monarchies wealth constitutes an important source of legitimacy which compensates for a relatively low level of state power and penetration into society. Revolutionary regimes, besieged by myriad socio-economic difficulties and threats to their authority, have adopted popular, modernist discourse compatible with their campaigns against the removed traditional elites and postcolonial foreign influence. These ideologies—Pan-Arabism, anti-imperialism, socialism, and Islamic reformism—assume a messianic and symbolic nature, providing the regime with an instrumental legitimacy for authoritarian and repressive policies.

Inter-Arab politics have assumed a high level of "negative" interdepen-
and the Horn of Africa (Somalia, Djibouti, and Eritrea). Indeed, the political disunity of the Arab world, arising from the geographical, historical, socio-economic, and political differences among its member states, is no less evident than its cultural unity (see appendix A).

The modern Arab states emerged mainly in response to and out of interaction with European imperial power and actual rule, and achieved independence with varying degrees of “stateness,”22 i.e., socio-political integration and state capabilities. The emergence of modern states in the Maghreb and Egypt reflected a history of distinctive communitarian and centralized administration that had already existed or been developed under Ottoman suzerainty. These attributes were a result of relative geographic isolation, early penetration of, and rule by, the European powers, and continuity of the central administration.

In the Fertile Crescent the emergence of modern states was far more complicated due to the markedly varying geography, history, and social structures prevalent in this region. It is characterized by relative contiguity of inhabited areas but with society and territory divided by different religious and ethnic identities; a history of regional economic unity but lack of centralized administration. The division of the region into Mandate territories by the European powers matched none of the earlier Ottoman administrative divisions, and imperial policies further intensified inter-communal tensions and obstructed the emergence of central administration. With the added factor of external threats posed by proximate non-Arab powers (Turkey, Iran, and Israel), Fertile Crescent politics was marked by intensive interplay between domestic and regional politics, a high degree of permeability of the state, and the salience of supra-state revisionist movements.23

In the Arabian peninsula, apart from populated Yemen, states emerged around family power centers and West-protected interests. The aridity, scarcity of population, and tribal tradition that characterize this area determined the weakness of their state capabilities and central administrations, as well as the absence of active political life. State capabilities have thus developed in conjunction with oil wealth and the involvement of Western powers. Underpopulated, enormously oil-rich, and yet extremely vulnerable to domestic as well as external threats to their national security, the Gulf monarchies have also suffered from a negative image among other Arab societies of traditionalism and longstanding economic and political alignment with the West.

Historically, the regional Arab system has evolved around two main conflictual foci—inter-Arab competition for regional hegemony and the Palestine problem. The interplay between them since the interwar period has shaped a concentric regional system, revolving around core actors’ struggle for power as well as cultural issues rooted in the meta-ideological level of shared symbols and beliefs in Arab-Islamic societies. The emergence of a Jewish state in the heart of the Arab homeland and House of Islam (dar al-islam), in conjunction with other regional processes, played a central role in the formation of Pan-Arab nationalism and the crystallization of the Arab regional system. The reference to Israel’s territory as Palestine represents a powerful Arab-Islamic claim for its liberation, underlying the perception that Israel is “in but not of the region.”24 The idea of liberating Palestine has remained pivotal in all Arab political discourses—Arab nationalism, social revolution, and Muslim fundamentalism—as the essence of the ethos of struggle against the foreign invader. This ethos has been primarily manifested in continuous warfare against Israel, passing from the Palestinian revolution to Lebanon’s Shi’i militias, to the Intifada and finally to the Islamic resistance movements. A typical example was Iraq and Iran’s argument during their long war that this war would lead to the liberation of Jerusalem.25

As observed by others, the Arab conflict played an essential role in the emergence of the Arab regional system.26 This role, however, fluctuated in form and intensity, along with intra-state and regional processes, as well as the Powers’ politics. Thus, except for the Suez war of 1956, the Palestine conflict during the 1950s and early 1960s assumed primarily a rhetorical form in Arab politics due to inter-Arab disputes and threats for power. In view of the central role of rhetoric in Arab politics during those years, however, the intensive employment of the Palestine issue in Arab political discourse reflected its high place on the Arab public agenda, hence its cumulative causal effect on the escalation to the 1967 war.

The core Arab area included the two main claimants for hegemony over the Fertile Crescent—Egypt and Iraq—as well as Saudi Arabia, Syria, Transjordan, Lebanon, and Palestine. The definition of this area as a “core” has remained principally unchanged although the regional Arab system has, since then, tripled its number of members. Three interconnected core issues have prevailed in regional Arab politics since the mid-1930s, representing the essence of the Arab collective agenda: national liberation and the quest for Arab unity, the Palestine conflict, and rejection of foreign domination and interference.28

The concentric structure of the Arab regional system reflected a formula that combined power and cultural identity: strong states capable of exercising influence on collective political processes pertaining to all-Arab core issues. The Arab states system, however, has been structurally pluralized, lacking a durable hierarchy or a single hegemonic center despite striking disparities in natural and human resources among its members. The absence of hierarchical structure has underlaid systemic instability, occasioned by rivalries and competition among Arab actors for regional influence and leadership.29

The regional stature of Arab actors was determined mainly by political resources such as a regime’s capabilities, population, economic strength, mil-
tary power, and geostrategic location. Inter-Arab balance could only partly fluctuate to follow changes in leadership, economy, international support, and domestic stability. Thus, Egypt remained the pivotal actor in the Arab regional system, effectively with no single competitor—though intermittently out-weighed by adversary inter-Arab coalitions. Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Syria, each with specific political attributes and links to Arab core issues, have also played leading roles in the regional Arab system, mainly by forming alliances with each other, or with lesser regional powers.

Adversely, geographical distance from the core area of regional Arab politics and involvement in other regional and sub-regional conflict systems—such as the Maghreb, the Gulf, or the Horn of Africa—has often underlain the peripheral role of some Arab actors in the regional Arab system. The centripetal force of the Arab core area explains attempts by peripheral actors to enhance their own prestige by demonstrating active involvement in the Palestinian conflict or in conciliation and mediation efforts between disputing core actors. Hence, for example, Morocco’s consistent efforts to host Arab summit meetings, Libya’s hyper-nationalist policies against Israel and the West, and the Gulf monarchies’ official financial aid to the confrontation states and the PLO.

Issues and actors related to the Arab regional core have thus topped the agenda of collective Arab institutions, primarily Arab summit conferences. With rare exceptions, the Palestine conflict has officially rationalized the convening of Arab summit conferences, even when they were triggered by inter-Arab disputes. Indeed, collective Arab policies have often represented a manipulation of the periphery by strong core actors, employing power and ideological pressures to impose their own priorities and needs on the regional system as a whole. Thus, while all-Arab core issues have prevailed in summit conferences, issues concerning peripheral states had been given superficial treatment and rarely brought up in the collective decision-making process. An effective regional core capable of shaping collective Arab policies and norms, however, depends on alignment between leading actors whose combined weight can direct the system’s decisions.

The relative weight of Arab actors in the system has also been affected by qualitative attributes, namely their prestige as dedicated Arab nationalists and practitioners of hostility to Israel and its Western allies. Such prestige has been instrumental in legitimizing collective deviation from established Arab norms related to Arab regional order and security as well as relations with Israel. Hence, the significance of Syria’s participation in the international coalition against Iraq during the Gulf War derived not from its token—and inactive—force. Rather, it was Syria’s image as a militant nationalist power par excellence and a bitter enemy of Israel that made Syria’s involvement in the war a valuable source of legitimacy for Saudi Arabia and other Gulf monarchies seeking Western protection from Iraq.

Pan-Arabism and State Formation

In the dialectic relationship between Pan-Arab nationalism (qawmiyya) and the Arab multi-state system, the former has virtually been turned against itself. The umbrella of Pan-Arab nationalism has been mobilized by Arab state builders as a source of legitimacy to bolster their political authority and autonomy. Especially among the revolutionary regimes, this “Arab double-standard game” has been pervasive. Political leaders establish their credentials as unserving Arab nationalists only to obtain freedom to exercise statehood (wataniyya). “Qawmiyya thus furnished the rhetoric; Wataniyya, the reality. Not infrequently, however, the rhetoric became a reality . . . aspiration treated as achievement; tended to immobilize the policymaker and frustrate action.”

The magnitude of Pan-Arabism was embedded in its mythical nature and ethos of struggle against the foreign invader, which rendered it a useful instrument of state building on both domestic and regional levels. Pan-Arab rhetoric was used to solicit popular support at home and to discredit Arab rivals as unfaithful to the Arab national cause. This manipulation has been a temporary necessity in the process of state building, when new, often weak and artificial states struggle to acquire internal stability and regional recognition. Even the Palestinian people, self-defined as “the most pan-nationalist (qawmi) of all [Arab] peoples,” were inseparable from this phenomenon. Compelled by regional as well as intra-Palestinian realities, the PLO developed, as of the late 1960s, a dual personality of Pan-Arab revolution and state-like entity.

The inter-Arab game has clearly been one of mixed motives, with both conflicting and harmonious interests underlying situations of interdependence. Competition for power and access to resources has been the predominant feature of modern inter-Arab relations. The quest for regional Arab leadership is designed to enhance position and prestige in the international arena and thereby, given the region’s significance in world politics, maximize chances to obtain foreign material and political support. In this competition, Arab regimes have often utilized political subversion, propaganda, bribe money, violence by surrogate agents, economic pressures, and direct military action—accompanied by ideological justifications related to the Palestine conflict, Western imperialism, and Arab nationalism.

The volatile nature of inter-Arab relations, especially in the 1950s and 1960s, was manifested in the frequent emergence of ad hoc alignments seeking to balance domestic and regional threats. States susceptible to pressure by claimants for regional leadership sought alignment with the latter’s rivals, evoking counter-alignments that kept the regional system off balance. This explains the inconsistency of inter-Arab rivalries and alignments, particularly in the Fertile Crescent where states’ permeability in the face of Nasir’s sym-
bolically loaded appeals to their masses blurred the boundaries between domestic and external pressures. A state's attempt to align with another Arab state may constitute a threat to the object state but, at the same time, appeal to the latter's domestic opposition, thus adding a domestic dimension to the external threat. Extreme sensitivity of Arab actors to any change in the regional balance leads them to perceive newly established inter-Arab alliances as directed against others rather than as implementing the idea of Arab unity. Hence, the inclination of Arab leaders involved in a new inter-Arab alliance is to assure their counterparts that it is not directed against anyone.

The initial pattern of inter-Arab alignment at the AL's foundation clearly indicated the primacy of external threats, reflecting the Hashemite rulers' thrust for regional Arab unity of the Fertile Crescent under their crown. Hence the object states' alignment with Egypt and Saudi Arabia to counterbalance the Hashemite pressures. With the growing political instability of Arab regimes following the 1948 war, coalitions became increasingly motivated by domestic causes, representing new regimes' quest for external recognition and legitimacy.

The post-1967 Arab alignments became more externally oriented, motivated by the growing impact of the conflict with Israel on the region's politics. The priority of retrieving the Arab occupied territories, either through force or diplomacy, became a guiding consideration in the Arab states' alignment behavior, emphasizing the primacy of material resources over ideology. This was even more evident in the essential change of Arab strategy in the conflict with Israel, assuming practical, rather than visionary goals. From the late 1970s through the 1980s, other conflicts—the Western Sahara, the Lebanon and Iraq-Iran wars—as well as growing Soviet threats, accounted for most inter-Arab coalitions. The prevalence of regional conflicts underlined the emergence of coalitions between geographically proximate neighbors regardless of the regime's ideology, in defiance of third-party threats and anticipation of taping financial aid.

If any one state has been central to the regional system, it is Egypt. Indeed, the main theme of inter-Arab politics since 1945 has been Egypt's aspiration for regional leadership and other states' efforts to limit its influence and power. Even when Egypt was officially out of the "Arab fold" (1979–1989), its salience in regional politics was not diminished, given the system's disarray. Egypt assumed this role by virtue of its cultural weight as a center of Islamic and secular higher education, huge human resources, strong statehood, and strategic location. Ambitious states saw Egypt as a competitor; weaker ones feared it might threaten their political independence. Yet, in the case of threat by a non-Arab power to any Arab state, Egypt's strategic weight could hardly be ignored. Nonetheless, the distribution of power and resources in the Arab world gave no single state a decisive advantage or the ability to knock out all its rivals. Even at the apex of Nasir's prestige Egypt failed to assume effective regional hegemony.

Under Nasir's charismatic leadership, however, the margins of interpretation of Arab cultural symbols and beliefs diminished, making compromises and half-solutions impossible and illegitimate. Personifying Egypt's quest for regional hegemony, Nasir played the role of the rebuking prophet, a standard bearer whose choices and interpretations were beyond debate. Nasir's claim for legitimate interference in the internal affairs of other Arab states in the name of Pan-Arab national revolution was tantamount to a state's classic claim on the monopoly of power. Nasir's inter-Arab policy was marked by a sense of national insecurity and frustration arising from Egypt's own limits and those put on it by other Arab states contesting its search for hegemony.

Whatever rhetoric was deployed in the sphere of inter-Arab relations or the conflict with Israel, its mainstay was the consolidation of individual state sovereignty and capabilities available to the ruling elite. The thrust by the strong Arab states for regional power in the name of Pan-Arabism forced the others to develop counter-alliances and economic relations, sometimes with non-regional powers, as a means to deter regional Arab threats and enhance national security. It is indeed ironic that Nasserism, often conceived as the epitome of Pan-Arabism, was a powerful catalyst in accelerating the process of state building in the Arab world, contrary to its proclaimed ideology.

Except for short intervals, Nasir himself was halfhearted in his self-aggrandizement. He was more interested in Egyptian hegemony in the Arab regional system than in merging with the other Arab states. Pan-Arab ideology was a useful myth in Nasir's Arab policy rather than an operating principle. Paradoxically, he was willing to cooperate with monarchist, Western-oriented Arab regimes that were less of an ideological challenge to him, against revolutionaries, when it suited him. Conversely, Nasir's inter-Arab policy became marked by revolutionary Pan-Arab ideology when Egypt's hegemonic position in the region or his own political leadership at home were challenged. The fluctuations in Nasir's inter-Arab policy can best be explained by the ups and downs in his domestic and regional stature. Indeed, Fouad Ajami's description of Nasir's Pan-Arabism as a fusion of idea and policy is hardly supported by historic evidence.

Nasir's inter-Arab policy was marked by a contradiction between his quest for regional hegemony in the name of Pan-Arab nationalist revolution—which, apparently, was more appealing to the masses in the Fertile Crescent than in Egypt itself—and his responsibility as a head of state. Nasir's ambivalence toward Pan-Arab unity was evident in his initial reluctance regarding Syria's urge for a merger with Egypt and his recognizing Kuwait's independence and right to be a member of the AL in the summer of 1961, a few months before Syria's secession from the UAR. Whether or not Nasir was motivated
by the need to contain Iraq's irredentist claim on Kuwait, he effectively supported the creation of another Arab state by British imperialism. When the UAR broke up a few months later, Nasir did not object to the resumption of secessionist Syria's membership in the AL, though he symbolically preserved the UAR as Egypt's name. Nasir also accounted for Arab recognition of an institutionalized "Palestinian entity," in the form of the PLO.44 Nasir's revolutionary inter-Arab policy was above all geared to secure regional Arab conformity under Egyptian hegemony, rather than to radically alter the regional order itself. Thus, in late 1963, when his inter-Arab aggressive policy reached a deadlock, with Syria threatening to entangle Egypt in an undesirable war against Israel, Nasir opted to return to a "Westphalian" Arab regional order. To support the shift, besides bringing the AL back in, Nasir revived the forum of all Arab heads of state as an overall authority entrusted with supervising the new Arab regional order. Yet a shift from collectivism to state sovereignty necessitated a parallel process of "normalization" of the conflict with Israel, which had become subject to collective Arab strategy for a joint action on the Palestinian issue. That Egypt led this trend is explained by both its high military stake in the conflict and its national capabilities, strategic weight, and self-image as the leading Arab power.

**Arab Summit Conferences: Roles and Processes**

Beginning in January 1964, Arab summity heralded a new era in regional Arab politics. Nasir's messianic and revolutionary Pan-Arabism, inciting the Arab masses against their governments, was replaced by a growing inter-Arab dialogue conducted on a state-to-state level. The shifting nature of inter-Arab relations, from the politics of symbols and beliefs to a "negotiated order," reflected recognition of the detrimental gulf between revisionist visions and political realities, and the need to control this contradiction. The transformation—albeit fragile and reversible at its start—was determined by the state system's obligation to face its limited resources and capabilities.

The prestigious forum of all heads of Arab states inherited the AL's primary role as an institutional expression of the regional states system in which every member was equal regardless of its capabilities or political philosophy. The single most important factor that led to the institutionalization of summity after 1964 was the steady pressure from the core Arab states—primarily Egypt—to support their policies in the conflict with Israel. The impact of the new Arab regional order had been apparent in Arab intellectuals' interpretation of Pan-Arab nationalism in terms of solidarity and cooperation rather than of political unity.45

The summit conference served as a mechanism of collective moral authority assigned the task of bridging the contradictions between Pan-Arab nationalism and realpolitik through reinterpretation of raison d'etat. In the absence of an overall Arab authority, policy making on all-Arab core issues that deviated from Islamic and Pan-Arab national commitments needed legitimation by a supra-state forum representing the whole Arab national community, that is, of all Arab states. Unanimity of opinion in this forum served as a modern secular version of medieval Islam's principle of consensus (ijma'), one of the four bases (usul) of Islamic religious legislation by virtue of collective acceptance of norms and regulations by the Muslim community (ummah).46 Arab summits followed the AL's rule that only unanimous decisions committed the member states. With the exception of Cairo (1990) and two summit breakdowns (Rabat 1969; Fez 1981), all Arab summits closed with statements emphasizing a united position.

By virtue of representing the collective Arab will, the summit could legitimize deviation from hitherto sacrosanct core Arab norms and values and diminish their potential use by militant state and non-state actors for claiming all-Arab conformity. Whereas no Arab summit was needed to confirm the ethos of war against Israel, this forum was repeatedly called to legitimize the post-1967 efforts of the confrontation states to retrieve their occupied territories through diplomatic means. Arab summits thus played an essential role in the process of state building by legitimizing the gradual departure of individual Arab regimes from supra-state commitments. That the Arab summit conducted this process while handling the Palestine conflict, the core issue of Arab-Muslim collectivism, lent it credibility and moral legitimacy. The longevity of the Arab summit institution through more than three decades underlines its significant role in shaping a "normal" regional system of sovereign states (see appendix B).

The quest for inter-Arab unanimity was often criticized as both an artificial attempt to satisfy Pan-Arab ideological imperatives and a major obstacle to collective Arab action. Yet attempts to replace unanimity by a majority vote were rebuffed by either assertive states, primarily Syria, or oil monarchies adamant about preventing imposition of external limitations on their national policies. Even unanimous decisions, however, did not prevent member states from ignoring them if they so chose. In the absence of collective procedural coercion of decisions, summit resolutions were only as powerful as the core states' interest in their implementation and the perceived material and political losses consequent to their violation.

To be sure, Arab regimes differed in their practical commitments to collective Arab regional procedures and decisions. For weak states such as the Gulf monarchies and Jordan, Arab collective institutions constituted a shield against strong militantly regimes threatening their sovereignty. Conversely, militant regimes tended to capitalize on their reputed militancy and Pan-Arab nationalist rhetoric to exhort conformity or disregard collective decisions incompatible with their individual interests. The dichotomy between the two
groups is shown by the consistent high-ranking representation and attendance of the Gulf monarchies, Jordan, and Morocco at Arab summits, as opposed to the frequency with which radical regimes such as Syria, Libya, Algeria, and Iraq have boycotted the Arab summits (see appendix C). Similarly, whereas summits’ decisions on financial aid to the confrontation states and the PLO were widely acted on by the Gulf monarchies, militant oil producers—Libya, Algeria, and, except in 1979–80, Iraq—for the most part reneged on their financial commitments.

The decision to convene Arab summits was largely determined by core actors’ needs, defined in the context of the Palestine conflict. Various Arab regimes tended to use inter-Arab tension or events related to the Palestine conflict as a pretext to call for a summit meeting, yet its actual convening depended on the consent of the core Arab states. Arab summits attracted regional and international attention, hence the competition to host them and the prestige bestowed on the regimes actively involved in their procedures. Many summit conferences could convene only after “purifying the Arab atmosphere” or following lengthy negotiations over the agenda, which sometimes involved power struggles, threats, and boycotts by militant regimes. Discontented actors boycotted the summit or delegated lesser figures than their heads of state. What determined the summit’s effectiveness, however, was the level of agreement among core actors representing military and economic capabilities in the context of the conflict.

Much of any summit’s outcome was the product of behind-the-scenes meetings in which disputing leaders were conciliated and financial bargaining was conducted. Indeed, summits involved financial opportunities as well as political stakes such as unfavorable collective proclamations—not insignificant, given the highly expressive nature of inter-Arab relations. In order to close with a demonstration of consensus, financial incentives would sometimes be offered by Gulf monarchies to bring reluctant regimes into line.

As in the case of Western summity, Arab leaders attended summits in order to gain wider legitimacy for their current policies, not to discuss changing those policies. Yet Arab summits were concerned with images more than with the practical, result-oriented diplomacy that has characterized Western summity. The Arab meetings represented “heroic” diplomacy, focusing on Pan-Arab attitudes and principles of foreign policy rather than on practical economic or social matters. This emphasis on issues over policy may explain the relatively poor record of the AL as well as the summit conferences in playing an effective role in resolving inter-state conflicts and unifying Arab capabilities toward effective collective action.

Arab summits lacked bureaucratic attributes, but were effectively facilitated by the AL’s apparatus, whose prestige and practical role diminished as summits became the ultimate inter-Arab forum. The AL’s offices were needed mainly for convening the heads of state; inter-Arab diplomatic discourse was left to the individual sovereign regimes. The absence of bureaucratization of the summit suited the Arab regimes’ authoritarian natures and their corresponding objections to an inter-Arab central authority that might erode their own individual sovereignty. It has also been consistent with the perception of foreign policy as the exclusive privilege of heads of state.49

Inter-Arab Financial Aid

Although economic interdependence is fundamental for economic progress, a low level of economic interrelationship prevails among developing countries, as opposed to their high level of dependence on the world economy for imported technologies and monetary flow. This phenomenon may derive from structurally similar economies and a lack of economic diversity within the developing countries, but more often it reflects an economic policy motivated by paramount considerations of national sovereignty.50 In the Arab case, in addition to similar structural economic bases, politics plays a primary inhibiting role in inter-Arab economic relations, in conjunction with regional inter-Arab dynamics.51 Paradoxically, it appears that Pan-Arab nationalism impeded the numerous official efforts to establish economic integration among Arab states, because it threatened the exclusive control, particularly of oil states, over their economic resources.

The extreme disparity of oil wealth and economic constraints among Arab states has been a constant source of inter-Arab tension because, from a Pan-Arab viewpoint, oil is an all-Arab resource.52 At the same time, major oil pipelines from Iraq and the Gulf to the Mediterranean and the Red Sea created a high level of economic interdependence between oil-producing and transit states, exposing the former to the latter’s blackmail and punishment in instances of conflict.53 In modern Arab history, needy actors have suggested that oil-rich states allocate a permanent percentage of their oil revenues to collective economic development or military buildup. Radical confrontation actors (Syria and the PLO), as well as radical oil producers (Libya and Iraq), repeatedly called for the use of oil as a political weapon in the conflict with Israel, mostly by applying an oil embargo against its Western allies. Yet these calls for economic warfare have been largely a subterfuge for inducing direct aid from Gulf oil monarchies, which have often been blackmailed into contributing their capital. Although these wealthy monarchies have been loath to place their own resources at the disposal of collective Arab strategies or economic development projects, they have often exchanged wealth for security.54

Although inter-Arab aid was presented as an expression of Pan-Arab solidarity, the patterns of financial flow and foreign aid illustrate that the assistance was equally inspired by realpolitik considerations.55 Confrontation states and the PLO have typically received financial aid mainly from the Gulf...
monarchies—whose high surplus capital has diametrically opposed their
vulnerable security and incapability to protect themselves—rather than from mili-
tant oil states (Iraq, Libya, and Algeria). Radical oil states have been less
susceptible to blackmailing pressures from the confrontation states, and not
just because their surplus funds were limited. Given their assertive natures and
militant attitudes toward Israel and the West, these regimes have been more
immune from external threats to their legitimacy or national security. Hence,
they have often justified their reluctance to extend financial aid by alleging that
the Arab confrontation states have not been militant enough toward Israel.

A conspicuous example of the oil producers’ behavior on inter-Arab
financial aid was the 1978 Baghdad summit’s decision to grant $100 million a
year for ten years to the Palestinians in the occupied territories. Saudi Arabia,
Kuwait, Qatar, and UAE were to contribute 62 percent of the total aid, with the
rest divided among Iraq, Libya, and Algeria. In practice, the monarchies’ share
in the total aid of $378.3 million for the years 1979–84 was 91.7 percent, due to
the failure of the radicals to implement their full commitments. As of 1981,
only the Gulf monarchies, Saudi Arabia in particular, continued to contribute.55

For the Gulf oil “rentier” monarchies, regional and national security
were primary concerns which they endeavored to promote through massive use
of the one resource they had in abundance: capital. Financial aid thus became a
major instrument of foreign policy, extended to Arab and non-Arab developing
states to mitigate poor-rich tensions, and contributed to international financial
institutions. The Gulf monarchies used their financial wealth to promote
regional stability, curtail political radicalism, and resolve inter-Arab conflicts.
Hence, their official financial undertakings toward the Arab confrontation
states and the PLO, made at Arab summit conferences, were aimed not to
finance the conflict with Israel but to bolster the donors’ legitimacy and
national security vis-à-vis jealous neighbors.56

The dynamics and scope of inter-Arab foreign aid had a direct impact on
Arab strategic capabilities in the conflict with Israel. Yet oil wealth also played
an important role in the growth of state machinery and capabilities, as well as
in the development of a normative Arab states system. Especially for oil-poor
states, oil has been a significant source of state revenue through direct foreign
aid funds or labor migrants’ remittances, substantiating their behavior as
“semi-rentier” states. Following the 1967 war, the growing economic needs of
the confrontation states converged with the Gulf oil monarchies’ rising wealth
and international influence, laying the bases for a new normative order in the
Arab regional system based on shared interests and cooperation between needy and wealthy Arab states.

The centrality of the Gulf monarchies’ official aid was overwhelming in
the Arab arena as well as on the world-wide level, especially following the
1973 war. From 1973 to 1981, Arab oil producers accounted for more than 95
percent of OPEC’s total foreign aid to developing countries, of which the Gulf
monarchies’ share was 82.6 percent. More than 85 percent of this Arab foreign
aid was channeled bilaterally, from one government to another, a pattern that
continued through the 1980s. The rest was channeled primarily through Arab
state funds and multilateral financial institutions. A third channel of assistance
was through international institutions, such as the World Bank, the IMF, and
the UN’s Development Fund. These channels served the donors’ interest in
demonstrating support for Third World countries and attaining influence with
international monetary institutions.57

In the first half of the 1980s, OPEC’s total oil export earnings fell by 50
percent, from $261.2 billion in 1981 to $131.5 billion in 1985. As a result, the
Gulf countries’ earnings declined by 66 percent during this period, exacer-
ating their account deficits. Confronted with a widening imbalance-of-payments,
OPEC donors progressively reduced their aid programs through the first half of
the 1980s by more than 50 percent, from $9.7 billion to $3.9 billion. The trend
was especially conspicuous in the small oil states, resulting in a relative in-
crease of Saudi Arabia’s and Kuwait’s share of total OPEC members’ foreign
aid from 79 percent in 1980 to 91 percent in 1985. Qatar for example, ceased
assistance to previous recipients, such as Morocco, Syria, Sudan, and Jordan.
At the same time, the UAE’s foreign aid declined by 1985 to one-fifth of its $1
billion volume in 1980. Even then, foreign aid by the Gulf monarchies was still
higher compared to the developed countries in terms of aid-oil revenues ratio,
comprising an average of 7.2 percent in 1984–85.58

Arab foreign aid reached its zenith in 1975–1978, representing the large
balance-of-payments surpluses of the Gulf monarchies. Between 1973 and
1981, the rate of OPEC members’ foreign aid amounted to more than 17
percent of their total surplus, 53 percent of the aid was given in grants, and 80
percent was in the form of budget and balance-of-payments support, with only
a minuscule proportion in the form of project finance. Arab oil states’ invest-
ment in the Arab world was, until the mid-1980s, less than 5 percent of their
total foreign investments. The major part of the oil-rich surplus was invested in
Western banks.59

Until the early 1980s, most Arab foreign aid had been given to the
confrontation states—Egypt, Syria, and Jordan—and the PLO. Other Arab
states, including Morocco and those with low per capita income levels—
Yemen, Sudan, Somalia and Mauritania—also received bilateral financial aid.
The third group of beneficiaries were non-Arab Muslim states, foremost of
which was Pakistan. African states comprised another group of recipients. In
the years 1974–78, Egypt was the main recipient of Arab aid, 40 percent,
Syria received 15 percent, and Jordan 7 percent. The confrontation actors’ total
share of Arab foreign aid remained relatively unchanged after Egypt ceased to
receive official aid following its peace agreement with Israel in 1979. This meant a substantial increase in aid to Syria (30 percent), Jordan (21 percent), and the Palestinians (11.4 percent). But beginning in the early 1980s, Iraq, bogged down in a war with Iran, became the recipient of an unprecedented scope of Saudi and Kuwaiti aid.

For more than two decades, Arab financial aid related to the conflict with Israel was a cornerstone of the Arab states system. Collective commitments of Arab oil producers for multi-annual aid to the confrontation states and the PLO were pivotal in Arab summit conferences from the advent of the forum in 1964, highlighting the growing role of the Gulf monarchies’ capital in regulating regional inter-Arab relations. The collective form of financial aid came to an end in 1987, indicating the declining priority of the conflict with Israel on the Arab agenda against the backdrop of a lengthy war in the Gulf and disputed inter-Arab relations, which overburdened the oil economies. Even during its zenith, however, Arab financial aid for the confrontation with Israel was far below the recipients’ needs and was divided into installments so as to ensure the contributors’ effective control over funds. As a result, it became a constant source of bitterness in inter-Arab relations.

The donors preferred setting the scope and terms of aid to the confrontation states on a collective basis, sanctioned by summit resolutions and demonstrating their share in the common Arab effort for Palestine. Had the aid been given on a bilateral basis, it might have cost the contributors more, though the Gulf monarchies also responded to the requests of needy Arab governments for economic aid, particularly Egypt before it concluded its peace treaty with Israel. Besides direct financial aid assigned for military purposes, the Gulf monarchies also contributed to Egypt through various channels (loans, deposits, investments) for civil economic development. And yet, between 1967 and 1978 the total financial aid from these states to Egypt was only $17 billion.

An important non-governmental aspect of inter-Arab economic links was labor migration from poor to oil-rich countries. With the explosion of oil prices in the 1970s, oil states embarked on ambitious development projects, boosting the demand for imported labor, especially to the underpopulated Gulf states and Libya. Arab labor migration was estimated at 1.3 million workers for the mid-1970s, increasing markedly in the early 1980s following the doubling of oil prices in 1979. In the mid-1980s, Arab labor migration was estimated at 4 million, placing the overall number of Arab workers who had ever worked abroad at 12–21 million—mostly Egyptians, Yemenites, Jordanians, and Palestinians.

The magnitude of the Arab labor migration introduced social and political tension into the host countries that did not exist in the case of non-Arab workers. The tension originated from the receiving states’ fears that Arab migrants would seek to establish residence and subsequently claim citizenship and an equal share of the oil states’ wealth. Thus, in addition to being prevented from conducting independent private business and obtaining citizenship or permanent residential rights, Arab migrant workers were also subjected to threats of mass expulsion at times of political conflict between the exporting and receiving states.

Migrant workers’ remittances became a primary source of foreign exchange for the sending countries, by far larger than the oil states’ official aid. Yet the large-scale labor migration to the oil states exacerbated shortages of professional workers in the labor-exporting countries. Given the already poor social and economic conditions in the countries of origin, the bulk of migrant workers’ wages from abroad were spent on private consumption rather than production-oriented investment. This led to increased inflation, higher external debt, and intensified socio-economic tensions.

The Dialectic of the Palestine Conflict

The Palestine conflict was an essential instrument of Arab systemic processes epitomized by its primary role in Arab summit conferences. Its intensive employment by Arab regimes served as a stopgap, legitimacy-rich mechanism to compensate for their poor legitimacy at home, inter-state divisions, and failure to materialize the masses’ social and economic expectations. The common Arab commitment to the cause of Palestine reflected both a substitute for the unattained vision of Pan-Arab unity and a continuation of the Arab struggle for national liberation from Western domination.

This, however, was of primarily ideological significance, linked to statesociety relations and representing an essential component of Arab nationalist rhetoric. Practically, the Arab commitment to Palestine meant a head-on collision with Israel, for which most Arab states were both reluctant and unprepared prior to the 1967 war. Articulating total hostility to Israel was a useful pretext to justify the compulsive style of Pan-Arab conformity, often defined as a prerequisite for the liberation of Palestine. It was precisely this empty formula that the Palestinian Resistance (PIJ) came to alter, by suggesting armed struggle against Israel as a means to realize Arab unity.

With the loss of Arab territories to Israel in 1967, Israel could no more be tackled as a nonentity—"the so-called" (al-maz‘ama). In fact, the war results turned Israel into a tacitly recognized actor in regional politics with growing influence over inter-Arab alignment. Clearly, the 1967 war marked the beginning of a shift in the conflict’s essence: from the issue of Israel’s legitimacy to the question of its boundaries. In other words, the conflict began to turn away from "paradigmatic," that is, cultural, religious, and ideological, to a
“normal” political—and thus more manageable—dispute. This became possible when Arab states could relate to the conflict with Israel as states rather than as representatives of a supra-state nation or religion.68

The 1970s witnessed the fruition of historical processes of state formation, dialectically linked to structural and normative changes in the regional Arab system. Accounting for this change were, mainly, the post-1973 war oil boom and U.S.-mediated Arab-Israeli diplomacy. Earlier, the “Arab Cold War” was necessary to bury the idea of Arab political unity and internalize the notion of separate Arab states. After the 1967 war, the thrust to retrieve particular occupied Arab territories from Israel brought the Arab states into a growing clash with Arab conformity on the Palestine conflict. The diplomatic process and state-owned oil wealth provided core Arab states with varying degrees of opportunities and constraints regarding collective vs. individual action in the conflict with Israel, enhancing their sense of raison d’état. The oil boom also indicated the emergence of a new regional center of Arab power comprised of Saudi Arabia and other Gulf monarchies, eroding the centrality of the Palestine conflict and its immediately involved Arab actors.69

The 1980s witnessed increasing disintegration of the regional Arab system, indicating further decline of the Arab-Israeli conflict as a core issue. Whereas Egypt’s peace treaty with Israel practically eliminated the Arab military option, the Iraq-Iran war and Shi’i revolution in Iran shifted the Gulf Arab states’ concern as well as a substantial segment of their financial resources away from the Palestinian conflict arena. Furthermore, growing threats to states’ security by regional disputes and socio-economic constraints underlaid the Arab world’s return to geographic sub-regions. This was manifested by the emergence of separate cooperation councils to meet the needs of specific states, marking further growth of Arab states’ autonomy and departure from obligatory Pan-Arab conformity.70

Israel’s peace treaty with Egypt and Syria’s alliance with Iran against Iraq attested more than anything to the erosion of the “[Pan-JArab national security” (al-a’imn qawmi al-arabi) concept, an outcry for Arab conformity against the foreigner.71 This concept finally went bankrupt in the Kuwait crisis when major Arab actors participated in the international coalition against Iraq. The October 1991 Madrid conference and consequent peace process witnessed the further decline of previously core attributes of regional Arab politics, indicated by the PLO’s and Jordan’s autonomous diplomatic efforts, which led to the Oslo agreement and peace agreement, respectively, with Israel, despite Syrian discontent.72

A commonly accepted observation is that inter-Arab disputes in which the Palestine issue was used as a whip against rivals helped boost the Palestine issue, whereas intervals of accord led to its marginalization.73 Inter-Arab competition indeed underlaid the PLO’s foundation in 1964. It sometimes has benefitted the PLO, but has also accounted for some of its worst disasters—as indicated by the Kuwait crisis—just as short periods of accord among core Arab actors have resulted in Palestinian gains. On the whole, Arab regimes—with varying degrees of cynicism—treated the PLO and its cause as pawns in their persistent struggle for legitimacy and power, summit resolutions and Arab nationalist principles notwithstanding. Palestinians term their problem in the context of Arab politics as “‘Uthman’s Tunic” (gamis ‘uthman), pointing to the employment of the blood-soiled tunic of the assassinated ‘Uthman ibn ‘Af’an, the third Caliph, by his relative Mu’awiya, ostensibly to vindicate the murder but in fact to serve his own ambitions for succession.74

The Arab states’ attitude toward the PLO and its national cause during the period under discussion reflects the historical development of regional Arab order. State fragility and regional struggle for power underlay the emergence of militant Palestinian nationalism, whose revolutionary approach and social bases in the Arab states soon became a threat to the Arab social and political order. This, in turn, obliged the Arab states to undertake separate and collective measures—tacitly cooperating with Israel—to contain the PLO’s revolutionary threat or eliminate its autonomous violent capabilities. Following the 1967 war the Arab states system’s main impact on the Palestinian issue was the persistent effort to tame the PR’s revolutionary activity and reshape its strategy toward statehood over part of Palestine. By encouraging its institutionalization and acknowledging it as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, the Arab states virtually associated the PLO with international procedures and constraints, as well as with the Arabs’ limited capabilities. The process was motivated both by the PLO’s growing prestige and political capabilities, and by the Arab states’ jealousy for their own sovereignty and regime security. As a national structure, controlling resources, political institutions, military power, media, and international relations, the PLO became a full—albeit non-territorial—actor in the Arab region’s political web. In an attempt to impose its own needs and political agenda on Arab regimes the PLO often appealed directly to popular sentiments and opposition groups, further alienating Arab regimes.75 The PR’s military presence and vehement interference in Jordan’s and Lebanon’s domestic affairs were viewed with ambivalence by most Arab regimes, which explains the eruption of armed conflicts between the state and the revolution.

The PLO’s relationship with the Arab states from its foundation to the Oslo accord was marked by increasing antagonism. The PLO strove for full Arab political backing for its national struggle, yet insisting on the principle of “independence of the Palestinian decisionmaking” (islahatiyat al-qatar al-nilastini), which tended to exacerbate under pressure by assertive Arab regimes—Syria in particular—to subordinate it to their own individual inter-
The Decline of the Arab-Israeli Conflict

The PLO's self-proclaimed standing as the Arab world's standard bearer by virtue of the identity between its national cause and Arab nationalism was exorbitantly frustrated by the Arab states' individual priorities and strict protection of their individual sovereignty. Hence, the PLO's lament that Arab regimes betrayed its cause: "the territorial [state] (iqlimi) defeated the pan-national (gwami)" and "regime security superseded Pan-Arab national security."76

The depth of the schism between the PLO and Arab regimes has been indicated by the former's shrinking opportunities in the Arab countries since the early 1970s. The result was a growing thrust for self-reliance and territorialization—increasingly focusing on the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip—culminating in the eruption of the Intifada in December 1987.77 The prolonged Intifada—and the Arab states' passivity—underlined the return of the Arab-Israeli conflict to its initial pattern as a local inter-communal strife within historic Palestine. In retrospect, the "Palestination of the Arab-Israeli conflict" culminated a continuous disengagement of the Arab states from the Palestinian cause, beginning in the mid-1960s.78 It is primarily against this backdrop that the PLO concluded its agreement with Israel—indeed, independently and in disregard of other Arab parties concerned—on mutual recognition and the beginning of a PLO-led interim self-government in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The EMERGENCE OF A REGIONAL CONFLICT SYSTEM

The Origins of the Arab Regional System

The Arab regional system emerged during the inter-war period, based on common identity and competition among ruling elites, revolving around presentation and the status quo. It was shaped by a wide array of processes: colonial rule, modernization and social change, state formation and power politics. This era witnessed the creation of new Arab political entities by British and French imperialism on the wreckage of the Ottoman Empire. At the same time a Pan-Arab nationalist ideology arose, gained acceptance from a growing body of opinion among these new entities, and evolved to a dominant force in domestic as well as regional politics.

Nationalism among Arab societies emerged mainly in response to a sense of crisis caused by the West's overwhelming military, technological, and political power, which seemed a menace to traditional social and cultural values. Nationalism was especially attractive to the educated classes because it appeared to be associated with the West, which represented power and efficacy. Borrowing its philosophical concepts, its views of history, and its vision of society from European sources, Arab nationalism essentially reflected a personal, class, or communal sense of disorientation concerning the existing social and political structures. For modern elites located on the front line of social change and Western culture, this disorientation motivated an intensive search for a new theoretical framework with which they could respond to political problems.

The concept of nationalism also represented a general trend of cultural and Islamic renaissance (nadhia) across the Arab world, which assumed different forms and contents as well as varying degrees of localism. Arab nationalist theorists described the confrontation with European imperialism in absolute terms: as one between civilizations and as a struggle of destinies. The painful reality of inferiority and wounded pride drove Arab intellectuals to call on the Arab-Muslim empire's glorious past as proof that the Arabs' current decline was not essential and that they could regain their lost political and
cultural grandeur. While secular Arab nationalism adopted the cultural-linguistic model of Italian and German types of nationalism, Islamic revivalism (salafiyah)—calling for a return to ancestral moral values, social justice, and unity of the community of believers (ummah)—was directed toward the solidification of a civil society in the face of corrupting foreign influence.2

Between the two world wars, the Arabs struggled for national liberation from British and French colonial rule, and in Palestine against a Zionist movement which Arab nationalists perceived as an extension of European imperialism. Those years also witnessed rapid social changes as a result of modernization, which, increasingly affecting the political realm and reshaping collective identities, culminated in the ascendency of Arab nationalism. Based on ethnicity—the people's common linguistic, cultural, and historical bonds—rather than on a defined territory, Arab nationalism was primarily concerned with politics of independence and power, culminating in the ideal of Pan-Arab unity. Under colonial rule, it developed into a romantic, populist, and compulsive ideology, strongly upheld by the emerging middle class.

The idea of Pan-Arab unity was rooted in the perceptions of social elites in the Fertile Crescent, who shared a common Ottoman legacy and for whom the region's political, economic, and cultural unity was a vivid experience. Yet what turned local proto-nationalist movements into a driving political-cultural force in Arab societies was the dialectic of struggle for national liberation, a growing need of newly established rulers for legitimacy, and a quest for regional hegemony. Foremost in this respect were Iraq's Hashemite nationalists, whose desire for independence from foreign domination coalesced with their aspiration for leadership of a regional unity. The Iraqi monarchy adopted an official policy of forging Arab nationalist doctrine and spreading it among the literate younger generation through the state school system. Syrian and Palestinian teachers, recruited and employed in key positions, contributed to spreading these ideas in Iraq and in neighboring Arab countries as well.3

Notwithstanding their secular-liberal background, Arab national ideologists embarked on an intensive effort to coopt Islamic terminology, symbols, and history as a component of Arab national identity (uruba) and discourse. The marketing value of such a combination in a predominantly Muslim society, whose political notions had been hitherto governed solely by religious terms, was obvious. Arab nationalism's overriding concern with deflecting foreign domination was compatible with Islamic doctrine and part and parcel of Islam's modern resurgence. The cooptation of Islam into Arab nationalism proved to be a powerful rallying theme among the newly urbanized masses, whose migration into the cities contributed to the process of modernization and state-building. For these masses, the notions of political identity were primarily rooted in Islamic symbols and beliefs, and they shared a strong emotional alienation with regard to foreign influence. Indeed, the nationalization of the masses brought about the Islamization of nationalism, which explains the relative ease of the later shifting of the dominant discourse to Islamism.4

Spreading education, media, and communication helped bringing the masses into the political process, eroding the Westernized ruling elite's position and questioning the relevance of its liberal approach. Soon enough, radical Arab nationalists began to identify the ruling elite with the dominating foreign powers, thereby merging national liberation with a reshaping of society on a just basis explained in both Islamic and socialist terms. By the mid-1930s, Arab nationalism had become a radicalizing force in the Fertile Crescent and Egypt's domestic politics, effectively employed by opposition groups to mobilize political support and challenge the ruling elites.5

The twin processes of politicization and nationalization of the masses turned politics into the art of stirring public sentiment through Arab-Islamic rallying myths and symbols as means to mobilize political power and motivate action. The concept of Pan-Arab nationalism thus became part of an obligatory political ideology in urban Arab societies—a focus of collective political identity interwoven with the struggle against Western domination. Indeed, whereas in its earlier stages Arab nationalism, especially in Egypt, had been a reflection of cultural flourishing and European liberal nationalism, it turned, under the impact of Syrian and Iraqi nationalists, into a reflection of European totalitarian nationalism in the inter-war period.6

The arbitrary shaping of the post-Ottoman Middle East by the European powers notwithstanding, the new political entities were, by and large, based on long-lived political centers and social elites. Differences in systems of foreign rule and progress toward representative institutions and independence all reinforced and formalized the colonial-based division of the Arab Middle East. Once independence was achieved, political elites confronted a myriad of socioeconomic and political problems and came under growing domestic pressures from opposition movements. This resulted in the official adoption of Arab nationalism as an instrumental rhetoric for domestic and regional political purposes regardless of rulers' practices aimed to reinforce their sovereignty. Typically, for actors aspiring after regional hegemony, narrowly based nationalism was rejected as harmful provincialism (tajlimiyah). The continued struggle for the national liberation of European-dominated Arab territories was to be a necessary process in pursuit of realization of yearned-for Arab unity.7

Pan-Arabism was thus a constant challenge to the state, serving regional actors' threats for hegemony as well as domestic opposition groups' claims for redistribution of power. Particularly in the Fertile Crescent, the new Arab entities suffered from a lack of the basic requirements of statehood: institutional inadequacy; lack of distinctive political and territorial identity, and of a
well-trained bureaucracy; a highly fragmented population along ethno-religious as well as socio-economic lines; and scarcity of economic resources. In addition, their newly established boundaries cried out for adjustment.8

The foundations of the regional Arab system were laid by the Powers’ division of the Fertile Crescent, the varied processes of state formation conducted in each of the new entities under foreign domination, and a growing sense of common Arab identity among the educated elites. Already in the late-1930s, relations among the Arab rulers in the Fertile Crescent and Egypt were marked by conflicts emanating from dynastic rivalries and competition for regional hegemony. Indeed, the regional Arab system was shaped primarily by conflicting interests between revisionist and status quo powers.

Even before independence, the Hashemite rulers in Iraq and Transjordan competed for control of Syria, which they both viewed as the core of a unified Arab kingdom they sought to lead. Whereas the Iraqi Hashemite aspirations were defined in terms of a “Fertile Crescent Unity,” Amir ‘Abdallah of Transjordan advocated the idea of “Greater Syria” (ṣūrah al-kubra)—loosely defined by the historic term bilad al-sham, including Lebanon, Palestine, Transjordan, Syria, and Hijaz.9 The Hashemite aspirations were viewed as a threat by their old enemy Ibn Sa’ud who, in 1925, had captured Hijaz from the Hashemite King Husain Ibn ‘Ali (father of King Faisal of Iraq and Amir ‘Abdallah) and, later, founded the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. For the next three decades, relations between Ibn Sa’ud and his northern Hashemite neighbors were marked by inactive hostility evolving around border disputes and competition for regional leadership. Concerned about Hashemite dreams to restore their reign over Hijaz, Ibn Sa’ud’s regional policy aimed to block any change in the regional status quo that favored the Hashemite rulers. The Saudi throne thus became a natural ally of the nationalist movements in Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine, which largely rejected the Hashemites’ ambitions, preferring independence over any unity plan.

The intensifying Arab-Zionist conflict in Palestine also became an indivisible part of the competition for regional unity and the efforts to mobilize British support to this effect. Recognizing the growing constraints faced by Britain’s policy in Palestine, both Hashemite rulers offered British and Zionist policymakers package deal programs of regional unity that would rid the Mandate power of its Palestine burden, partially meet Zionist needs by offering them widened autonomy, and alleviate the Arab-Palestinians’ fear of Jewish domination. Although the Hashemites’ programs were unacceptable to either the Zionists or the Arab Palestinians, they remained on the regional agendas through the early 1950s, feeding inter-Arab suspicions and tensions. The common interest of the House of Sa’ud and the political elites of Damascus, Beirut, and Jerusalem was the mainstay of an anti-Hassanite coalition which Egypt actively joined in the mid-1940s.9 This pattern of inter-Arab relations remained basically unchanged through the fall of Iraq’s Hashemite regime in 1958.

The formation of modern Lebanon as a French mandate in 1921 entailed the annexation of predominantly Muslim territories and the city of Beirut to the autonomous, overwhelmingly Maronite Christian, area of Mount Lebanon. Under the rule of its French protector, the Maronite Christian community enhanced its position as the dominant social group in Lebanon, with the factional system later institutionalized as the main determining factor of the division of power. However, the fine demographic balance between Christians and Muslims within “Greater Lebanon” planted the seeds of the civil war that broke out in 1975. The establishment of modern Lebanon placed a significant imprint upon the future relationship between Syria and Lebanon.11

From a Syrian nationalist viewpoint, the Muslim-inhabited territories annexed to Lebanon were an integral part of Syria, traditionally linked to Damascus administratively, socially, and economically. They also provided the shortest and most convenient route to the Mediterranean. Regardless of who held power in Damascus, the loss of these territories has never been fully accepted and even though Lebanon’s independence was recognized by Damascus, it remained conditional on the former’s response to Syrian needs. Their proximity and the common commercial, financial, and transit interests developed under French rule made it all the more natural for independent Syria to perceive Lebanon as its vital sphere of influence. Particularly difficult for Syria was to sustain the Maronite community’s independent economic policies and Western-oriented political and cultural separatism from Arab nationalism. Practically, the relations between the two states took the form of Syrian patronage often expressed in the use of coercive interference in Lebanon’s domestic and foreign affairs, and collaboration with Lebanese opposition groups. A salient expression of this relationship has been the fact that Syria and Lebanon have never maintained diplomatic relations.12

Egypt’s involvement in the sphere of regional Arab politics began relatively late, motivated by political and strategic, rather than ideological considerations. In spite of its Arabic-speaking population, it was not until the late 1930s that it became recognized by Fertile Crescent ruling elites as an Arab country. The political distance of Egypt from other Arab countries stemmed from its unique national attributes: a long history of territorial identity and a strong political center. These characteristics formed the foundations of a distinctive national secular identity which prevailed in the Turco-Egyptian elite until the late 1930s. The evolution of Egypt’s role in contemporary regional Arab politics stemmed from domestic social developments, resulting in a shift of symbols and values of collective identity as well as of elite political interests. Unlike the Fertile Crescent—where Arab nationalism emerged as a secular anti-Ottoman sentiment—nationalism in Egypt assumed a strong Islamic
character as a result of early British domination beginning in 1882. As of the late 1920s, the emergence and spread of Islamic revivalist movements became an ever-increasing social force in Egypt, which boosted the sense of Islamic identity in its political community at the expense of a distinctive Egyptian nationalism.13

Egypt's political involvement in the Fertile Crescent affairs toward the late 1930s was a result of the royal court's aspiration to assume the Islamic Caliphate and the adoption of the intensifying Palestine conflict during the 1936–39 Arab revolt by the Muslim Brotherhood movement and Pan-Arab proponents. With the growing power struggle between King Farouq and the leading Wafd party after nominal independence was achieved, the Palestine cause became an official Egyptian concern. On the eve of World War II, Egypt already presided over the Arab states' collective involvement in the Palestine question. Egypt's leading role in the Arab world gained momentum through growing cultural and economic influence, soon to be recognized by spokesmen of Arab nationalism in the Fertile Crescent. At the same time, Egyptian Pan-Arab figures emphasized their society's need for the Arab world as a natural hinterland.14 Egypt's role as Britain's military and administrative center in the Middle East during World War II contributed to its leading stature in the region. Its leading inter-Arab role was institutionalized when its government, headed by Nahhas Pasha, led the deliberations over Arab unity that resulted in the foundation of the League of Arab States in March 1945.

Inter-Arab Politics and the Palestine Question

From the late 1930s on, the intensifying Arab-Zionist conflict in Palestine became a focal Arab issue on both domestic and regional agendas, culminating in the invasion of Palestine by the Arab states' regular armies in mid-May 1948. The process represented a convergence of interests, though not of identical political goals, of the Arab-Palestinian community and the neighboring Arab countries. From the early 1920s on, Arab-Palestinians strove to mobilize Arab and Muslim support for their struggle against the Zionist movement and the British Mandate. The Palestinians focused their efforts on the Zionist threat to the country's Muslim-Arab character and particularly to the Muslim shrines in Jerusalem. The defense of Palestine was thus presented as an Islamic and Pan-Arab national duty.15

The Arab states' involvement in the Palestine conflict represented aspirations for regional leadership as well as a response to domestic pressures stemming from strong religious and national sentiment for the Arab-Palestinians' cause. This involvement had undergone a major shift during the 1926–1939 Arab revolt in Palestine, when the issue developed from a domestic public matter to a central regional concern involving official policies of Arab govern-
ments. The result was an unprecedented series of inter-Arab conferences and inter-governmental consultations held in Damascus and Cairo, which established instruments for collective Arab action on the Palestine issue. The contribution of the Palestine question was indeed unique in enhancing common Arab action and crystallizing the regional system's nucleus, comprising Palestine, Transjordan, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen.16

An essential factor in this shift was Britain's encouragement of Arab rulers to become involved in the Palestine question, in hopes of mitigating Arab-Palestinian positions and, ultimately, Anglo-Arab tension regionwide. This strategy underlay the "round table" conference convened in London early in 1939 to discuss Palestine's future. In addition to Arab-Palestinian and Zionist delegates, official representatives of Egypt, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Transjordan also participated. The growing domestic difficulties and anti-government agitation after independence was achieved induced Arab ruling elites in the neighboring countries to espouse this issue to legitimize their authority. Encapsulating Islamic, Arab nationalist, and anti-Western sentiments, the Palestine cause became a core political and moral theme in Arab public life. As such, it turned into an indispensable source of legitimacy intensively and continually exploited by politicians both domestically and regionally. Rhetorical support of, and manifestations of solidarity with, the Palestine cause became the character trait of Arab regional politics, and a core of intellectual Pan-Arab nationalist discourse. Palestine thus came to serve as a focus of regional Arab politics, stirred by supra-state Pan-Arab and Islamic networks and movements as well as by rulers' schemes and ambitions for power.17

The fragmented Arab-Palestinian community itself became a microcosm of regional Arab politics. Rival Arab regimes aligned with rival Palestinian factions, offering support for the struggle against Zionism and the British Mandate but also against each other. Arab regimes were too divided by rivalry, mistrust, and jealousy to present a united front, and their cross-alliances with the Palestinian leadership further deepened their division. This pattern was repeated in the post-1948 war when Arab governments recruited, armed, and financed armed Palestinian activist refugee groups to establish influence over the Palestine issue.

By the 1940s, the Palestine Question (qadiyyat filastin) had become a central component of the emerging doctrine of Pan-Arab nationalism. Palestine's symbolic significance, on the one hand, and its territorial implications on the regional status quo on the other, made the issue both divisive and a rallying force in inter-Arab politics. Ideologically, there was an all-Arab consensus on the need to defeat Zionist ambitions. Practically, however, Arab states' policies on the issue were shaped by realistic and self-interested considerations. Typically for a balance-of-power system, the Arab actors' behavior was marked by a constant quest to increase their own individual political gains.
while seeking to undermine other actors' efforts to do the same at their expense.\textsuperscript{18}

The foundation of the AL in March 1945 was a paradoxical result of the Arab rulers' intense competition to lead a regional unity. The thrust was instigated by the approaching end of the war, and was perceived as a historic opportunity to reshape the Arab region. Yet Arab rulers were reluctant to cede their newly achieved independence (Transjordan was still under British Mandate) and to shift "loyalties, expectations and political activities toward a new center whose institutions possess or demand jurisdiction over the pre-existing national state." Having struggled for their national liberation, Arab elites insisted on no less than total independence and sovereignty. Contrary to the common perception of the AL as an instrument for promoting Pan-Arab unity, it was initially shaped as a loose regional organization of independent Arab states whose \textit{raison d'être} was to reinforce and protect the status quo and balance of power among its member states.

Concern over the Hashemites' aspirations for regional hegemony spurred Egypt, together with Syria, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen, to compose a Charter that would preserve each member state's political sovereignty and territorial integrity. The Charter focused on the principle of non-intervention in other members' domestic affairs, giving it priority even over the objective of mutual protection from external aggression. The Charter stipulated that only unanimous decisions would be binding. Majority decisions would commit only those who voted for them except in cases of arbitration and mediation, where majority decisions would suffice. Although the Charter emphasized the AL's role in resolving inter-Arab conflicts, it was not granted authority over the states involved. The Charter does not discuss unity even as an ultimate goal. In fact, the word "unity" never appears in the Charter's text. The AL was indeed a far cry from the unity of merger envisioned by Arab national ideologists or even the federative union advocated by Hashemite Iraq. In retrospect, it certainly was not "something more than the sum of its parts."\textsuperscript{19}

The AL Charter included a "Special Appendix on Palestine," in which the signatories recognized Palestine's independence and undertook to allow representation of its Arab people in the League's work. The exceptional concern with Palestine in the AL Charter, though it was not the only Arab country still under colonial rule, attested to its unique stature in Arab regional politics and essential role in the AL foundation. That the AL co-opted the Palestine question, turning it into a collective Arab matter \textit{par excellence} which dominated most of its meetings, reflected a majority interest in preventing the possible threat to the regional balance of power that would result if it were employed to benefit individual states.\textsuperscript{20}

Given the structural weakness of the Arab-Palestinian national movement, the AL in fact appropriated the former's sovereignty over its cause, undertaking actual responsibility for shaping and implementing the collective Arab policy on the issue. This included diplomacy and propaganda, as well as an economic boycott against the Jewish community in Palestine, ostensibly on behalf of the Palestinian Arabs. But the AL members were divided between an Iraq-Jordan Hashemite alignment and an Egyptian-led majority coalition. Besides Egypt's own political weight and capacity to counterbalance the Hashemites' regional ambitions, Egypt's success rested on its quest for regional leadership and commitment to maintaining the regional status quo. Moreover, Egypt's long struggle for a full withdrawal of British forces from Egypt's soil coincided with the Arab ideal of national liberation. By contrast, the Hashemites had been stigmatized by their collaboration with Britain—in suppressing the brief Iraqi nationalist revolt in 1941—and were portrayed as stooges of British imperialism whose very survival depended on their alliance with Britain.\textsuperscript{21}

The Egypt-Iraq rivalry had an indirect impact on collective Arab policy concerning Palestine. Iraq's frustrated ambition for regional leadership generated separatist ultra-extremist positions concerning Palestine with the aim of persuading the rest of the Arab rulers to accept Baghdad's lead in this respect. Regardless of the intentions of the AL's founders and the limits put on its action, the organization's bi-annual meetings—often attended by PMs—aroused high expectations among the politically conscious Arab masses. Such hopes were promoted by the Arab leaders themselves, who presented an unrealistic image of the organization as a manifestation of Arab unity, solidarity, and joint action, primarily on Palestine.\textsuperscript{22}

In effect, the AL did not improve the Arab states' ability to cooperate or deal more effectively with the issues in conflict. It became an arena of constant tension and rivalry as the Arab member states made it an instrument for advancing their own interests, impeding their adversaries' policies, and passing resolutions they did not mean to implement. Such an example was King Faruq's initiative of convening the first Arab summit conference at Inshas in May 1946. Ostensibly it was meant to forge a collective Arab response to the recommendations made by the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry on Palestine. In fact, Faruq sought to promote his own quest for regional Arab leadership and to serve Egypt's particular cause in its conflict with Britain.\textsuperscript{23}

The early expectations at the AL soon gave way to frustration and contempt for its failure to supervise the Arab collective diplomatic and military effort during the 1947–49 Palestine war, which was aimed at preventing the partition of this land and the establishment of a Jewish state.

The Arab fiasco in handling the Palestine conflict—the one theme on which an all-Arab consensus was theoretically guaranteed—was a reflection of serious inter-state rivalries and conflicting interests even in the face of a common enemy. Efforts to forge collective Arab action in the war withth-
standing, Arab governments sought to serve their individual interests. Hence, the Arab collective thrust in the war proved always too late and too little to tip the scales in the Arabs’ favor. The divided Arab military front allowed Israel to wage separate successful offensives against each Arab army consecutively and to conclude separate armistice agreements with each of its contiguous neighboring states. The end of the war indicated not only Israel’s military eminence but also the primacy of particular state interests over the fate of Palestine.

The Arab military defeat and the Palestinians’ tragedy led to fierce disputes and mutual recriminations among Arab governments over responsibility for the loss of Palestine. Arab societies were thrown into turmoil, political assassinations of Arab leaders, and military coups. Militant Arab nationalism called for revenge and a “second round” of war to wipe out the shame, perceiving it to be the Arab nation’s fateful test. The defeat fomented political radicalization and revolutionary trends in which Palestinian refugees from an urban, educated, middle-class background played an important role. Pan-Arab nationalism came to be perceived as a prerequisite for the national resurgence and liberation of Palestine and the removal of the Arab stigmas of imperialism blamed for the disaster. Faced with domestic and regional turmoil, Arab ruling elites tended to ideologize their rejection of Israel’s existence, using this as a major source of legitimacy. The failure in Palestine also diminished the AL’s prestige, resulting in lower-ranking representation of Arab states at its main forums. It also put an end to the potente ALSG ‘Abd al-Rahman ‘Aziz’s attempt to turn the AL into a supra-state representative officially recognized by the great powers. The scope of the AL’s activities thus shrank mainly to supervising the Arab boycott against Israel.

The traumatic results of the war, phrased in terms of a catastrophe (nakha), disaster (karita), and ordeal (milaha), and the ongoing conflict with Israel became the focus of collective Arab political cognition and a touchstone of Arab dignity and self-esteem. The unresolved conflict turned into a black hole that sapped the Arab energies and served as a center of gravity of Arab regional politics. Israel’s existence in the heart of the Arab homeland became a painful reminder of Arab weakness and division. The Jewish state epitomized everything the Arabs hated about the West and its historical influence and power; an intolerable monument on which Arab incompetence and ineptitude was inscribed.

For the Arab-Palestinians, the 1948 war ended with a disaster the scope of which reached beyond the loss of lives and land, the uprooting of more than half of them from their homes, social disintegration, and economic devastation. Politically, the war resulted amounted to a total loss for the Arab-Palestinian people, manifested by the disintegration of its national leadership and the blurring of the fragile collective identity that had crystallized during the Mandate years. The annexation of the West Bank to Jordan following the war underlined the tragedy and loss of the Palestinians, although they were granted full Jordanian citizenship. The Palestinian identity, however, was administratively and politically repressed by the Hashemite regime, which sought to appropriate Arab Palestine and consolidate a Jordanian identity. The incorporation of the Palestinians into the kingdom—now composing two-thirds of the total population—was represented by the euphemistic slogan, “Unity of the Two Banks” (wadad-daffuain). In the Gaza Strip, the Egyptian government adopted a different policy, the thrust of which was the highlighting of the Palestinian identity and of the temporary nature of the Egyptian military government in this area. In contrast to Jordan’s policy, no citizenship was granted to the Palestinians of Gaza, who were subjected to strict limitations on movement across the Egyptian border as well as on political activity.

The 1948 war resulted in a structural shift of the Palestinian conflict from an inter-communal dispute to a regional conflict between sovereign states bound by international rules and constraints. Due to domestic and regional inter-Arab turbulent politics during the first decade after the war, the Palestine issue was held on a low burner, which proved to be only temporary.

Regional Politics and the Wave of Nasirism

The first fifteen years of Israel’s existence were the most tumultuous in the modern history of the Arab world in terms of both domestic and inter-Arab politics. The prolonged turbulence of Arab politics reflected rapid social and political change, as well as state-building efforts combined with a power struggle over the essence of inter-Arab relations and their global orientation in the postcolonial era. So intense was this struggle for power that the Palestinian issue was effectively shunted aside, except for propaganda purposes. A major phenomenon of this period was the tide of supra-state ideological movements, whose militant outcry against foreign influence and challenge to the very existence of separate Arab states attested to the weakness of the state and the strength of society.

The turbulence marking Syria’s domestic politics during 1949 prompted new Iraqi efforts to advance the idea of unity with Syria. Although this unity was officially meant to enhance Syria’s defense against Israeli threats, these efforts failed as a result of both domestic politics in Syria and Iraq and Egyptian-Saudi antagonism. Confronted with the threat of a Syrian-Iraqi union, Egypt initiated an Arab Collective Security Pact as an alternative way to offset Israel’s threat to Syria. The Egyptian demarche was also a nationalist response to Anglo-American efforts to conclude a regional defense pact that would have left the British in the Suez area and diminished Cairo’s leading position in the Arab world. The new Arab pact might have drawn on the Western example of NATO, founded in April 1949, which included provisions
for both military and economic cooperation. The Pact of Joint Defense and Economic Cooperation, known as the Arab Collective Security Pact (ACSP), included the AL’s seven member states. The controversial nature of the new treaty was evident in its delayed acceptance by the Hashemites. Although the treaty was concluded in June 1950, almost three years passed until each individual Arab state ratified it.²⁸

The ACSP stipulated that all member states would support any state that faced external aggression, following collective consultations and coordination among their armed forces. The Pact also stipulated the establishment of a Permanent Military Committee to function within the AL subject to a joint Arab Defense Council (ADC) composed of Foreign and Defense Ministers and Chiefs of Staff. In two main respects the ACSP went beyond the AL Charter. First, it was agreed that decisions of the ADC made by a two-thirds’ majority would bind all the signatories. Second, signatory states pledged not to sign any international agreement or take any political line that might conflict with the Pact’s provisions. The pact, however, remained a mere scrap of paper: no joint command was formed and no coordination was maintained. Egypt intended mainly to use this pact to ensure the regional status quo, by preventing Iraqi-Syrian unification and to defy the Anglo-American project of a regional defense system.

Iraq sought to enhance its regional status by serving as a link between the Arab states, Turkey, and the Western powers, and by weakening Egypt’s regional Arab leadership and use of the AL to undercut their hopes for unity with Syria. For Britain, a system of defense treaties with Middle East states was to preserve its political influence and military presence in the eastern Mediterranean, especially in view of the prospective total evacuation of British forces from the Canal zone in 1956 and the expiration, a year later, of the Anglo-Iraqi treaty of 1930. True, the Soviet threat was by far more real to Iraq than to any other Arab state due to its territorial proximity. Yet the Western scheme collided head-on with the growing sense of Arab nationalism in Arab societies, the obsessive drive for no less than total independence, and the deep alienation toward Britain following the 1948 war. The Tripartite Declaration of May 1950 by the United States, Britain, and France, which guaranteed the territorial status quo in the region and restricted arms supplies to states involved in the Middle East conflict, was tantamount to an imposition of Western patronage over the region. Furthermore, the Western endeavor was combined with a proposal to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict on the basis of Arab recognition of Israel—in return for the latter’s concessions of the Negev, which would minimize Israel’s threat to the Arabs and enable contiguity between Egypt and Jordan—at a time when Arab nationalist movements sought to develop a military option for the recovery of Palestine.²⁹

Public opposition to the West’s prolonged presence or even indirect influence in the Arab countries was already irreversible in the late 1940s when radical leftist and nationalist groups joined forces to defeat the efforts of their governments to revise the existing Anglo-Egyptian and Anglo-Iraqi treaties, in 1946 and 1948 respectively. Later on, it was forcefully expressed in the strong Egyptian opposition to the 1951 Anglo-American proposal to establish the Middle East Defense Organization as part of their strategy of containment in the Cold War. But a major gap separated the Hashemite rulers from their Egyptian counterparts on this matter even before the 1952 revolution. The former considered their political survival and prosperity contingent on continued alliance with Britain, hence their support for its effort to sustain strategic primacy in the Middle East. In contrast, Egypt sought to ensure its own regional posture by eliminating the British presence and weakening the Hashemites’ primacy in the Fertile Crescent.

The advent of Nasirism in the mid-1950s as a movement of protest and defiance of Western influence renewed the traditional Egyptian-Iraqi competition for regional hegemony, which now assumed an unprecedented ideological context. The conflict sprang from Iraq’s intention in the fall of 1954 to sign a British-backed defense pact with Turkey, which other Arab states could join. These efforts, however, triggered an inter-Arab struggle of wills, represented by Iraq and Egypt, over reshaping the region’s political orientation in the postcolonial era.³⁰

The new Egyptian regime perceived the intended pact as an intolerable threat to its regional Arab leadership and national security. The pact was to consolidate Iraq’s leadership in the Fertile Crescent—with Syria and Jordan joining—leaving Egypt isolated in the face of Israel’s military threat, deprived of substantial sources of arms. In October 1954, an Anglo-Egyptian agreement on British withdrawal from the Suez Zone was concluded. It brought the new Egyptian regime under heavy domestic and regional criticism, from the Muslim Brothers on the right to the Communists on the left. Thus, Iraq’s plan to sign the pact with Turkey and Britain provided the Egyptian military junta a golden opportunity to adopt an assertive Arab nationalist foreign policy and a stance of non-alignment in the Cold War, to enhance their patriotic, independent image.

In a last-ditch effort to dissuade Iraq from joining the proposed treaty, Nasir gathered the Arab PMs in a conference in Cairo in January 1955, at which he proposed conformity of Arab states’ policies toward non-Arab actors. Nasir insisted that the AL and the ACSP were the only bases for Arab states’ foreign and security policies and that no Arab state was allowed to join another defense pact without the previous consent of other ACSP signatories. Nonetheless, a month later Iraq and Turkey signed the treaty—which came to be known as the “Baghdad Pact”—later joined by Iran, Pakistan, and Britain. Indeed, for “Nuri Said’s political school,” Arab neutralism was a revolutionary thought. Yet the main cause for the conference’s failure was the Iraqi-Egyptian competi-
tion for regional leadership and their determined quest for narrow individual state interests.\textsuperscript{31}

The Baghdad Pact was a watershed in the historical course of Arab regional politics. It indicated a growing drift toward power struggles saturated with ideological rhetoric and tightly linked to domestic affairs. Nasser isolated Iraq and kept other Arab states from joining the Pact despite Jordan’s declared interest in doing so. The campaign against the Baghdad Pact was taken to the public throughout the Arab world by the mass media, particularly the Voice of the Arabs (\textit{sawt al-\-'arab}) radio, broadcasting from Cairo. The Egyptian propaganda, combined with indigenous political agitation, succeeded in moving the Arab masses in the Fertile Crescent countries to defy their respective governments. Nasser’s success in challenging the sovereignty and authority of other Arab regimes evidently attested to the latter’s weakness and permeable borders. His campaign against Britain’s efforts to induce Jordan and Syria to join the new alliance elevated him to the status of an Arab national hero, reflecting the masses’ yearning for a daring leader whose challenge to the West instilled a sense of national pride. Nasser’s appeal to the masses to reject Western domination proved a potent source of legitimacy in the inter-Arab struggle for power. Typically, those identifying with the West were portrayed as taking the reverse flow of history and denounced as unpatriotic.\textsuperscript{32}

The fortunes of Arab nationalism, led by Nasser, seemed on the upswing throughout the 1950s. Nasser’s success against the Baghdad Pact was followed by an ever-increasing campaign against British and American influence in the Middle East, which could have well reflected his sense of insecurity. His prestige soared following his role in the April 1955 Bandung conference of nonaligned states; the Czech-Egyptian arms deal in September, which was hailed by the Arab world as a courageous assertion of Arab independent will and an elimination of the Western arms monopoly; nationalization of the Suez Canal in June 1956; and the joint Anglo-French-Israeli offensive against Egypt in October of that year, from which Nasser emerged as a victor.\textsuperscript{33}

The growing force of Arab nationalism across the region reflected the worldwide withdrawal and collapse of European colonialism, including in the Middle East. The process of de-colonization and the expanding phenomenon of national liberation in Asian and African countries boosted hopes for a new era of renaissance and resurgence for the newly independent Arab states. From 1955 on, Cairo became the Mecca of national liberation movements in Africa. Egypt’s primacy forced other Arab rulers to take a clear position concerning Nasser’s policies. More than ever before, the Arab regional status quo became politically threatened by militant Pan-Arab alliances of cross-national movements and official regimes.

Nowhere was Nasser’s influence on the Arab masses’ behavior more visible than in Jordan, especially among its Palestinian residents. In March 1956, under pressure from the Jordanian-Palestinian nationalist-leftist opposition and Egypt’s propaganda campaign, King Husain was forced to expel the Arab Legion’s British command and join a military pact with Syria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen. Ostensibly it was to serve as a common Arab defense shield for Jordan. In effect it was a ploy to force the abrogation of the Anglo-Jordanian treaty of alliance of 1946, offering to replace the British subsidy to Jordan by Arab aid. The treaty proved to be a broken reed when, six months later, the signatories remained idle in the face of the joint British-French-Israeli offensive against Egypt. The summit conference convened in Beirut (two weeks after the Suez campaign had begun) to discuss a collective Arab response expressed support for the UN decision on the matter and denounced the tripartite aggression against Egypt. Palestine was not mentioned.\textsuperscript{34}

The Egypt-Iraq struggle over the Baghdad Pact and the results of Suez also intensified the struggle for power in Syria among ideological parties, especially the Pan-Arab Ba’th Party, the Communists, and the Muslim Brothers, amid growing involvement of the military in politics. Syria’s domestic turbulence underpinned the Ba’thi civilian and military leaders’ sudden appeal to Nasser for unity with Egypt, which came into effect with the announcement of the United Arab Republic in February 1958. The Hashemite monarchs’ response—a hasty declaration of a federal unity of their own—was meant to preempt expected pressures to join the UAR, attesting to their domestic and regional vulnerability in the face of Nasserism. The merger of Syria and Egypt into the UAR at first appeared to be the apex of Nasser’s Arab national achievements despite his initial reluctance to undertake such a union. In September 1961, however, a new military coup in Damascus declared secession and put an end to the union with Egypt. The UAR was the first attempt—and the only one until the 1989 merger of the republics of North and South Yemen—at fusing two Arab sovereignties into one. Retrospectively, the union’s breakdown served to consolidate still more the political forces within Arab states that were determined to preserve their independence.\textsuperscript{35}

The roots of the UAR’s failure lay in the circumstances under which it took place. It was a hasty action that purportedly drew on a shared political vision of Pan-Arab unity, but practically was intended to serve different goals of the two partners. The union was not a result of experienced practice or genuine conviction regarding the advantages of unity. Rather, it stemmed from Syria’s domestic chaos and threats to Ba’thi political and military leaders, who perceived unity with Egypt as the only feasible strategy for securing their political future. Hence the acceptance of Nasser’s humiliating terms—actual surrender of Syrian sovereignty—which was tantamount to a Syrian political suicide. Paradoxically, what made the union possible was probably the lack of territorial contiguity between Egypt and Syria, so that the merger with Egypt
could under no circumstances alter Syria’s national boundaries or stop Syria from secession.36

The demise of the Iraqi Hashemite regime in July 1958 as the result of a military coup led by Colonel Qasim radically changed the inter-Arab balance of power and the region’s traditional alignment. The coup, which was initially interpreted as part of the Nasirist wave, accelerated Arab nationalist sentiments in Jordan as well as in Lebanon—where the regime had been confronted with a rebellion led by Sunni Muslim Nasirists. The perceived crisis of Western posture in the region led Britain and the United States to send token military forces to Jordan and Lebanon, respectively, to prevent the collapse of their regimes and their fall into the radical nationalist orbit. Another reaction was a Saudi-Jordanian rapprochement which led to a coalition of conservative regimes to protect themselves from the Nasirist trend. In the new inter-Arab alignment, Saudi Arabia was to replace Iraq as the main power countering Egypt.

The expectations for Iraq-UAR unity were soon frustrated by the new Iraqi regime due to their fear of Nasir’s hegemony and domestic Kurdish and communist opposition. Within a few months, relations with the UAR came under a heavy strain of mistrust and tension, expressed by an ever-intensifying mutual propaganda war. Several plots by adherents of unity with the UAR came under a heavy strain of mistrust and tension, expressed by an ever-intensifying mutual propaganda war. Several plots by adherents of unity with the UAR against the new Iraqi regime, perceived as inspired by Nasir, deepened the hostility between the two regimes, which came to a peak in March 1959 with diplomatic relations between the two states cut off until Qasim’s demise in 1963. The Baghdad-Cairo feud became a total war of propaganda and mutual subversion, reaching unprecedented levels of hostility. The battle of rhetoric assumed an ideological character of mutual de-legitimization, employing the Palestinian cause in the service of the rhetoric of national liberation and anti-Western domination.37

Iraq’s revolutionary regime posed a serious challenge to Nasir’s hegemonic and unionist concept because it too had turned against the West and become a recipient of Soviet arms. The Iraqi challenge threatened the fragile unity with Syria, which experienced growing discontent among the Syrian Ba’thi leaders, who, by the summer of 1959, began undermining the union when they realized they would be given no real power in it. The UAR’s breakup in September 1961 marked a new escalation of inter-Arab conflicts, reflecting Nasir’s efforts to recover his injured prestige, as well as his political isolation in the Arab world. Nasir could deny the new Syrian regime’s legitimacy but could not prevent other Arab rulers from extending their hands to Damascus and overtly rejoicing at his frustration.

Nasir perceived Syria’s secession as a response to the radical nationalization policy he had undertaken in the summer of 1961 against the “bourgeoisie and feudalism,” which indeed reinforced the conservatives’ objection to Nasir. Blaming the “reaction” for Syria’s secession from the UAR, Nasir embarked on a more radical concept of social revolution, which he undertook to implement both domestically and regionally, to secure his power. His National Charter of May 1962, which focused on Egypt’s domestic affairs, stipulated a series of radical social, political, and economic reforms geared to suppress political opponents, reduce private enterprise, and enhance the state-run economy. Nasir’s response to Syria’s secession was tantamount to a declaration of indiscriminate war against his Arab rivals—“reactionaries” and “revolutionaries” alike—expressing his wounded pride and threatened regional leadership.38

Nasir defined his new ideological approach with the slogan “Unity of Purpose” (wahdat al-hada’), said to represent the Arab nation’s overriding desire for unity through social revolution. He openly took the liberty—in the name of this goal—to interfere in other Arab states’ domestic affairs. The previous slogan, “Unity of Rank” (wahdat al-asf), denoting inter-Arab coexistence regardless of ideological differences—would bring disaster on the Arab nation, Nasir declared. The new guiding principle was to reflect Egypt’s solidarity with Arab peoples, not their rulers. Implicit here was Nasir’s true purpose: to besiege his Arab rivals by bringing internal pressures to bear on them.

Nasir’s entrenchment in his ultra-radical Pan-Arab ideology aggravated his isolation in the Arab arena and rendered compromise with his rivals inconceivable. The Egyptian political elite showed its readiness to accept the logical consequences of Nasir’s Arab policy, such as severing diplomatic relations with Jordan for having recognized the secessionist Syrian regime. Yet Nasir’s intrusive Arab policy endangered the fragile improvement discerned in U.S.-Egypt relations under the Kennedy administration, the main result of which was a significant American food aid to Egypt. In 1962, this food aid accounted for 99 percent of Egypt’s wheat imports and 53 percent of its net supply of wheat. The repercussions of Nasir’s revolutionary policy on his relations with Washington did not linger for long. Just as the Cairo-Washington rapprochement culminated in October 1962 in an agreement to supply food aid to Egypt for three years, Nasir’s intervention in Yemen that month aroused new difficulties between Washington and Cairo.39

The military coup in Yemen and the new rulers’ appeal to Nasir for support against the Imam’s loyalists provided Nasir with an opportunity to restore his prestige and implement his new revolutionary ideology. Whatever the motives and calculations that drove Nasir to entangle Egyptian forces in Yemen, the decision coincided with his new self-declared war against the Arab monarchies. A foothold in Yemen would enable Nasir to outflank and threaten the Saudi regime, which he perceived as the bastion of Arab Reaction, and establish a potential foothold near the British-dominated Arab territories of Aden and the Gulf emirates, where the UAR could fulfill its commitment to
Arab national liberation from Western imperialism. But the intervention in Yemen risked provoking American concern for their oil interests in Saudi Arabia, a scenario Nasir could hardly overlook. 40

For the next five years, Yemen was the battleground of a violent inter-Arab conflict that drained Egypt's scant economic resources, served as the focus of regional Arab politics, and, indirectly, shaped Egypt's relations with the United States and the Soviet Union. The Yemen war obliged Egypt to increase its arms procurement from the Soviet Union; this arms trade helped improve relations between the two countries, which had been strained since the late 1950s. At the same time, the Egyptian military buildup, accompanied by growing animosity toward conservative regimes and air raids of Saudi towns, intensified the tension with the United States.

The Yemen war assumed an ideological character, with the UAR fighting for the new republican regime while Saudi Arabia and Jordan supported the Royalists, led by the deposed Imam. The employment of massive Egyptian forces in Yemen, in turn, pulled Riyadh and Amman closer, leading to an accord on military, economic, and political cooperation in November 1962. Furthermore, with U.S. backing, the Saudis formed the Muslim League to heighten Islamic consciousness and combat radical secular ideologies—a blatant challenge to Nasir's Pan-Arab nationalism. 41

In February and March 1963, Ba'athist regimes came to power following military coups in Baghdad and Damascus, respectively. The fall of Qasim and Syria's secessionist regime seemed to vindicate Nasir's Arab policy and hold the possibility of restoring unity with Syria, to be joined by Iraq. The instant initiation of tripartite unity deliberations was a typical example of political manipulation of Pan-Arab nationalism by these regimes. What appeared as an earnest action toward unity was in part a response to public expectations and in part a political maneuver to influence rivals in both domestic and regional spheres. The unity deliberations in Cairo were marked by deep mistrust and suspicion, mainly on the part of Nasir; his bitter experience with the Syrian Ba'ath leaders constituted a significant part of the talks. On April 17, 1963, the three parties proclaimed an agreement on a two-year transition period of loose unity and close cooperation, at the end of which a federal constitution would be promulgated and elections held. Yet the parties undertook no firm commitment to promote their unity during the interim period, indicating the unbridgeable gap between Nasir and the two Ba'ath regimes on issues of ruling institutions and political leadership. The stance adopted by the Iraqi and Syrian delegates showed unmistakably that their governments were not interested in a union but wished to use Nasir's prestige to gain domestic and regional legitimacy. 42

Within two weeks of the signing ceremony, the propaganda machineries of the three countries were engaged in a fierce war, combined with political subversion by Nasir's adherents, which led to an abyss of hostility, especially between Cairo and Damascus. The ruthlessness marking the inter-Arab struggle—especially the July bloodbath in Damascus following an abortive Nasirist coup—epitomized the contrast between the high hopes aroused in the Arab world by the prospect of a tripartite unity and the deadly struggle of the new Ba'ath regime for political survival, for which control of the domestic arena was paramount. The Egypt-Syria crisis spurred a rapprochement between the Ba'ath regimes in Damascus and Baghdad, resulting, in October 1963, in a treaty of military union that was to be followed by a federal union. Yet this honeymoon between the ideological twins soon came to an end following a bloodless coup in Baghdad in November, which removed the Ba'ath Party from power and brought on a renewed propaganda war with Damascus. 43

By the end of 1963, large sections of the entire Arab world, from the Indian Ocean to the Atlantic, were in ferment. In addition to the exhausting Yemen war, entangling Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan, the advent of newly independent states in the Maghreb involved serious inter-Arab conflicts deriving from Moroccan irredentist claims for the "Greater Moroccan Homeland." The September border clashes between Morocco and Algeria over the Tinduf area dragged Nasir into yet another violent inter-Arab conflict, albeit on a smaller scale than Yemen's war. At Algeria's request, Nasir sent arms and advisors to the infant independent state, whose leadership he had supported during its long struggle for national liberation. This resulted in Morocco's joining the anti-Nasir camp portraying the AL an "Egyptian puppet." Morocco found itself also at loggerheads with Tunisia after the latter, together with Algeria, recognized the independence of Mauritania, on which Morocco had a claim as an integral part of its historic homeland. 44

The prolongation and proliferation of inter-Arab disputes rendered futile Nasir's distinction between "progressives" and "reactionaries," in the name of which he had justified his "Unity of Purpose." The intensive employment of symbolically loaded language by Arab regimes in their mutual propaganda wars underlined the cheap instrumentality of hitherto sacrosanct values. The fierce inter-Arab struggle for power—although by far more violent than Malcolm Kerr's term "Arab Cold War" denotes—was crucial to state formation and the definition of state sovereignty and boundaries challenged by an abstract Pan-Arab national entity. This was particularly critical to the "revolutionary" regimes, where the breakdown of pre-independent socio-political and value systems necessitated the construction of new viable political institutions and sources of legitimacy. Nasir's compulsive concept of Pan-Arabism represented a new version of the power struggle between advocates of the regional status quo and claimants of regional hegemony. His revolutionary interpretation of Pan-Arabism was geared to serve his aspired regional hegemony—a
pursuit motivated by political and strategic needs. Yet such hegemony was clearly beyond Egypt’s political capabilities, and its failure only fortified the walls of suspicion and segregation among Arab regimes.

Egypt’s primary role in the inter-state Arab disputes of the late 1950s and early 1960s further weakened the AL’s capabilities and stature because it had been identified as an Egyptian political instrument. During this period, Arab governments refrained from approaching it on disputes with Egypt, preferring to complain directly to the UNSC, as attested by Lebanon’s (1958) and Saudi Arabia’s (1963) complaints against the UAR. Still, Nasir was powerful enough to rally the Arab states around a common cause that coincided with their interests as sovereign states, as revealed in the Kuwait crisis of June 1961, following Iraq’s claim that Kuwait was “an indivisible part of Iraq.” The threat of an Iraqi invasion of Kuwait was eventually rebuffed by British troops deployed on the emirate’s soil, a presence later replaced by a joint Arab Security Force under the AL auspices comprising UAR, Saudi, and Jordanian troops. The awkward presence of British forces in Kuwait provided Nasir with an opportunity to lead the joint Arab venture, using the AL to isolate Iraq. Although the crisis remained a bone of contention in Iraq-Kuwait relations, the AL proved effective in serving a coalition of core members.45

The AL survived criticism of its ineptitude as well as years of intense inter-state Arab disputes. Whereas it helped to settle the Kuwaiti crisis, the AL was paralyzed by Egypt’s direct involvement in the Yemeni war. Although it never stopped being the stage for discussing core Arab issues, the AL’s activity was kept at a low profile and its finances were limited. Disputes among members were reflected in the occasional boycotts of meetings by regimes subjected to attacks or interference in their domestic affairs by Egypt. Even Egypt boycotted the League’s meetings for about six months following the AL’s session in Shuara (August 1962) to protest Syria’s accusation that Egypt had betrayed the Palestinian cause.

Regional Politics and the Conflict with Israel

Until 1964, Arab strategy in the conflict with Israel was marked by uncertainty, lack of a defined political or military plan, and a vast discrepancy between vision and reality. Israel’s existence in the heart of the Arab homeland was essentially rejected as an injustice to the Palestinian people, an obstacle to the realization of Pan-Arab goals, and a permanent cultural, economic, and political threat to the neighboring Arab countries. Considering Israel an illegitimate entity, the Arabs’ objective in the conflict was defined in terms of elimination of the state of Israel. Practically, however, no clear Arab program of action—whether political or military—had been worked out to accomplish this objective. Arab strategic and political thought focused on justifying the objective and explaining its feasibility regardless of practical constraints, postulating that the disappearance of Israel was historically inevitable. Indeed, the Arab objective in the conflict with Israel was a utopian goal that fitted well into the messianic doctrine of Arab nationalism.46

The absence of a specific program of action reflected the Arab states’ awareness of its impracticability of their objective—vague and undefined as it was—in view of their limited military capabilities, political weakness and division, and the wide international support for Israel’s right of existence. The lack of a clear Arab program of action before 1964 might have reflected the absence of domestic pressure on the Arab regimes; the Palestinians were in disarray and it was only their national territory that came under Israeli occupation; and Jordan’s annexation of the West Bank was obviously an obstacle to the advancement of the liberation of Palestine. The Palestinian problem was not a priority for the Arab states, whose policy remained confined until 1964 to diplomatic activity in the UN and repetition of resolutions pertaining to the right of the Palestinian refugees to return to their homes. Thus, Nasir’s important manifest The National Charter (al-nithaq al-watani) of 1962 made no reference to Palestine at all.

Arab governments were incapable of either liberating Palestine or admitting their powerlessness and, hence, adopting a peaceful strategy. Their divisions and jealousies made secret and separate diplomacy the only practical option for an Arab-Israeli dialogue. It is noteworthy that Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon, and Syria were each involved in separate secret diplomacy with Israel in the aftermath of the 1948 war. Diplomatic contacts between Israel and Egypt’s revolutionary regime continued even through the mid-1950s. However, all these efforts ended in failure before they were exposed to the public or reached a substantial level. The futility of these efforts was demonstrated by the Israel-Jordan five-year non-belligerency agreement intimated in February 1950. Referring to the combined pressures of Arab governments and his own political elite, King Abdullah suspended the agreement and virtually ceased further peace talks with Israel.47

Early Israeli-Arab diplomacy revealed the unbridgeable gap between the conflicting parties. Israel wanted peace based on the status quo, whereas the Arab parties insisted on Israeli territorial concessions and repatriation of the Palestinian refugees—demands that Israel perceived as detrimental to its very existence. The Arab rulers’ opposition to direct and official negotiations with Israel reflected both their shaky domestic positions and the Arab public consensus that any political agreement with Israel was illegitimate. Especially because of their responsibility for the 1948 defeat, Arab ruling elites needed a substantive Israeli concession—Egypt insisted on the Negev, which would give it territorial contiguity to the Mashreq—the Arab world’s East—to justify a settlement. The pitfalls of this phase of Arab-Israeli diplomacy reflected the
The Decline of the Arab-Israeli Conflict

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The Emergence of a Regional Conflict System

53

sense of insecurity in Israel, the weakness of the Arab states vis-à-vis powerful Arab popular opposition movements and the depth of their hostility toward Israel, and growing calls for a "second round." 48

In the absence of a real capability to destroy Israel, Arab states adopted a policy of hostility short of war, accompanied by measures of containment. These measures included: economic boycott, strategic blockade, sporadic guerrilla warfare—carried out by Palestinians, mainly under Egyptian supervision—political and diplomatic warfare in the international arena, and continued pressure to bring Israel to implement UN resolution 194 concerning the return of the Palestinian refugees to their homes. Yet the more distant the goal seemed, the louder Arab leaders tended to voice their hostility against Israel and reinforce their commitment to the objective of eliminating it. The inclination to define the objective in such terms nevertheless stemmed from the domestic and regional political radicalization and social turmoil that swept the Arab states, threatening the ruling elites' legitimacy and survivability. This, in addition to inter-Arab disputes, subjected any Arab ruler who sought accommodation with Israel to immense opposition, delegitimation, and even threats to his life. 49

Under Nasir's leadership, the absence of clear Arab strategy in the conflict with Israel was officially admitted. Nasir was increasingly pressured by radical Arab opponents who aimed to embarrass him into launching the Arab war against Israel even before unity was achieved, claiming that such a strategy would hasten the achievement of Arab unity. But with his prestige tarnished after Syria's secession from the UAR, confronted by Arab opponents and entangled in a deadlocked war in Yemen, Nasir was least of all able to lead an Arab war against Israel. Until May 1967, Nasir repeatedly argued that there was no Arab option for war against Israel, giving priority instead to his thrust for establishing regional hegemony in the name of Arab unity. He advocated an indefinite postponement of war against Israel to give the Arabs time to prepare for the decisive, all-out showdown, preparation that he portrayed as a comprehensive Arab effort—military, economic, and industrial—to build an immense Arab capability, not only to fight Israel but also to deter "those behind Israel." The total war envisioned by Nasir turned into an instrument to enhance and legitimize his regional policies. 50

At the peak of his strife with Qasim, at the ALC's session in March 1959, Nasir brought up the idea of establishing a "Palestinian entity," namely an institutional representation of the Palestinian national identity and political cause. The timing of Nasir's initiative might have been determined by other, international initiatives regarding the resolution of the Palestinian refugee problem and growing discontent among the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. But the decisive reason for his proposal was apparently the intensive criticism of his inaction on behalf of the Palestine cause by Arab adversaries, primarily Qasim. The initiative indicated Nasir's interest in demonstrating political action for this cause at a time when the military option in the conflict with Israel was missing. The Palestinian entity idea was meant to shift the form of the conflict with Israel from an international one between the Arab world and Israel—in which he was expected to assume a leading role—to a Palestinian struggle for national liberation spearheaded by the Palestinians themselves and only supported by the Arab world. 51

Advocating a Palestinian entity was another manifestation of Nasir's inconsistent quest for Pan-Arab unity; a pragmatic decision undermined by international and regional constraints that prevented an all-out war against Israel. Shifting the Arab-Israeli conflict to a struggle of national liberation indeed constituted a radical change in the Arab concept of war against Israel, which had been hitherto unspecified. Yet Nasir's policy concerning the Palestinian entity before 1967 clearly manifested an intention to confine the struggle for Palestinian national liberation to the political sphere, at least as long as the Arabs had no military option against Israel. Nasir's new concept gathered momentum in the coming years. It corresponded with the rapid process of decolonization in Asia and Africa, Moscow's official endorsement of national liberation movements in early 1961, and Nasir's efforts to establish himself as a primary leader of the Third World. In hindsight, the Palestinian entity idea was Nasir's first step toward limiting his role in the liberation of Palestine. 52

The Palestinian entity idea aggravated the competition between Nasir and Qasim who embarked each on a propaganda race to champion the project. With no common border with Israel and eager to embarrass Nasir, Baghdad called for turning the West Bank and Gaza Strip into a "Palestinian Republic" to serve as a basis for an armed struggle against Israel. Inter-Arab conflicts and competition for legitimacy rendered the Palestinian entity mainly an instrument in the vicious inter-Arab propaganda campaign. However, Egypt (1957) and Iraq (1960) also made symbolic gestures to substantiate their positions and further propagate their arguments by establishing units of the "Palestinian Liberation Army" under the command of their respective General Staffs. These units were comprised of Palestinian refugees, whose voluntary recruitment might have diverted some of their bitterness and drive for action. Additionally, Nasir took measures toward the political organization of the Palestinians within the UAR. In addition to the popular-military component, Nasir initiated the establishment of representative Palestinian national institutions in the Gaza Strip and Syria as an organic part of a political realignment within the UAR. In 1962, a temporary constitution was given to the Palestinians in Gaza, to function until "the promulgation of the permanent constitution of the Palestinian State." The public debate on the "Palestinian Entity" in Arab forums gathered
further momentum because it was brought up in conjunction with Israel's beginning to construct its National Water Carrier (INWC) which was perceived as a strategic threat to the Palestine cause and the Arab countries.\textsuperscript{53}

The intensifying debate on the Palestinian entity in the Arab world paralleled, and interacted with an authentic process of political awakening, revitalization of Palestinian nationalism, and social radicalization among the Palestinian refugees. Growing education and social mobilization; a strong sense of Palestinian identity brought into focus by humiliating social and economic conditions in the refugee camps; the restrictive and suspicious attitudes of the Arab "hosting" countries; and frustrated hopes for a rapid redemption by the Arab states—all these contributed to the development of a new generation of young professional Palestinian activists whose role was to become crucial in the Palestinian Resistance (PR) movement from the mid-1960s onward. The newly emerging leadership in the Palestinian refugee society called for self-organization of the Palestinians and their assumption of an active role as a vanguard in the war of national liberation against Israel.\textsuperscript{54}

II

THE POLITICS OF ESCALATION:
FROM THE "ARAB COLD WAR" TO THE JUNE 1967 WAR

"It is about time to face realities . . . Let me tell you, and forgive my candor, that what has been going on between us is demonstrative rather than a real action. We have announced the establishment of a unified political leadership, held meetings . . . and spoke of issues, all of which are general and superficial. I am afraid that we have not taken them seriously at all . . . We meet [for] long hours and do nothing but examining positions, but we never unify with capable of action. Thus, we uphold placards behind which there is nothing."


"We actually have no plan for the liberation of Palestine now, and we do not have the means to realize that goal [even] if we have had a plan. I believe that the conflict between us and Israel is a matter of a hundred years."

—Nasir to King Faisal, August 1965, ibid., p. 208.

"[Israel] hates to the extent of death everything we do in the cause of progress. Because [progress] for us, is the death for Israel."

—Nasir, Al-Ahram, March 10, 1965.