Our Arab Nationality Between Past, Present, and Future

Al-Hilal, January 1959.

The Arab nation, from its north to its south, and from its east to its west, was in the pre-Islamic age most deeply divided; the substance of its life was strife, aggression, raids, pillage, and plunder, and nothing united it in that pre-Islamic age save its language — despite the great divergence among the dialects of that language — and the one thing that managed to forge some bond among these scattered tribes was poetry, which, almost as soon as it arose, imposed a particular dialect upon the whole Arab nation in all its regions and lands, from the Arabian Peninsula; so that when an Arab poet composed an ode and recited it in one of the gathering-places, the people understood him, whatever their tribes, whatever their dialects or their own particular tongues …

Nor were they content merely to understand it: rather, the transmitters would pass it on from the poet, and an ode had scarcely been recited before it spread throughout the Arabian Peninsula, and many transmitters in the various regions of the Peninsula would commit it to memory. Thus the first unification of the Arab mind came from this quarter, from this tongue which allowed the Arabic language, in the pre-Islamic age, to become a social language, one through which tribes — for all their remoteness from one another, their divergence, and their feuds — could understand one another and feel what one another felt. The first constituent element in the attempt to forge a unity among these Arab tribes was thus literature, and poetry in particular among the forms of literature, because it was the first to come into being, and the brotherhood of prose did not arise until ages had passed, many ages later.

When did Arab nationalism take shape? If we wish to know when Arab nationalism took shape, in the precise sense of the word "nationalism," we must trace this back to the rise of Islam; for the true constituent of Arab unity in all its kinds and branches — political, economic, social, and linguistic unity as well — is none other than the Prophet, peace be upon him: it was he who brought the Qur'an, called people to the truth, and gathered around him the few among his companions, and made that small number grow, little by little, until the Hijra came, and until the first Islamic city was founded — or, more

precisely, the first organized Arab city known to history; and I do not mention ancient Yemen, for I scarcely know anything of its civilization and its institutions; rather, the first city known to history, in which the essential nucleus of Arab nationalism took shape, is the city of Yathrib, after the Prophet migrated there together with his companions from Quraysh. And from this slight, small unity in this city — which did not belong purely to its Arab inhabitants, for the Jews shared it with them — from this slight and modest unity, which the Arabs around it could so easily have snatched away, had God not supported His Messenger and supported the city through His Messenger — from this unity, He made Arab union grow little by little, at times through gentleness, at other times through force and severity. And the Prophet did not pass on to his Lord's presence until the unity of the Arabian Peninsula had been completed, and an organized Arab nationality had come into being, with its law, which was the Qur'an, and its political order, founded upon the justice, fairness, and equality among people that the Qur'an called for, and its rulers, who were themselves both the organizers and the organized, who claimed no privilege for themselves and favored themselves with no advantage, but were rather servants of the Arab nation, spreading justice among it, teaching it the ordinances of religion, and preparing it to discharge its great human duty. And after the Prophet had completed the unification of the Arab nation, and his successors after him had risen to the task, this Arab nationality began to extend beyond the Arabian Peninsula into other lands, and the first of these lands into which Arabism spread, or which Arabism reached beyond its own peninsula, were lands that one should note had already become somewhat Arabized in the pre-Islamic age. The first thing the Arabs did, on leaving their peninsula as conquering warriors wishing to spread Islam and call to the religion of God, was to go to Iraq and to Syria; and Syria had already become Arabized before Islam, not only along the border between it and the Arabian Peninsula, where the Ghassanids dwelt, but into the interior of Syrian lands as well. Some Arab tribes had already spread into Syria before Islam, had been influenced by the life the people of that land lived — the life of the Byzantines — and had adopted the religion the Byzantines professed, which was Christianity. Iraq, too, had already been reached by the Arabs in the pre-Islamic age, and they had been influenced to some degree by the Christianity that had come to them from the Peninsula, and influenced to some degree by the policy of the Persians, who had gone into Iraq and into Syria; and the Arabs served as guardians of the frontiers of the Byzantine Empire in Syria, and guardians of the frontiers of the Persian Empire in Iraq. The

Islamic conquest, in its early days, met with little resistance when it encountered the Arabized elements in Syria and in Iraq; but when the Persians, on one side, and the Byzantines, on the other, grew concerned with this flood that was pouring into Syria and Iraq, Arab nationality found itself faced with a grave duty: to take up a position of hostility and contention against these two great powers — the Byzantine Empire in Syria and the Persian Empire in Iraq.

The triumph of Arab nationalism. Arab nationality triumphed here, in these two lands, in Syria and in Iraq, but it did not stop at this point; rather, it went beyond them to lands that had had no prior association whatsoever with Arabism, extending to Egypt in the west, and extending to Persia and the Persian lands in the east; it triumphed over the Byzantines in Egypt, just as it triumphed over the Persians in their own country and overthrew their state, and then triumphed over the Byzantines afterward in North Africa, and Arabism settled in North Africa after fierce trials; then it went beyond Africa to the third continent, which the Arabs had not known before Islam, namely the European continent: Andalusia was conquered, and the Arabs settled in Spain just as they had settled in Africa, and just as they had settled in the eastern reaches of the Islamic state in the Persian lands, reaching as far as the borders of India. From that day on, Arab nationality became complex; it no longer remained a nation living purely in the homeland in which it had arisen, belonging purely to that homeland and the homeland belonging purely to it; rather, it became a nation that went beyond its own homeland and milieu, settling into homelands and milieus it had not known, and which in turn knew very little about it. And the strangest distinguishing feature of this Arab nationality is that, once it had settled in these lands it had conquered, and attempted to establish itself there when this kind of settlement became possible, it was not content with that alone; it was not content merely to establish a dominant government in Syria, or a dominant government in Iraq, or likewise in the Persian lands; it was not content with possessing the land, nor with subjecting the people to its authority, because it did not wish merely to possess the land, nor did it wish merely to subject people through political dominion; rather, its aim, before anything else, was to win hearts, to take hold of consciences, and to enter into the depths of feeling in the lands it conquered and settled, on the condition that all of this come about without coercion or violence. This, then, had to come about of its own accord, spontaneously, without any forceful effort — indeed, in most cases, without any effort at all; for after the Muslims had conquered, they did not impose their language

upon any of these lands, nor did they impose their religion upon them, because they were content, on the people's part, with the principles Islam had laid down, namely: Islam for whoever wished to embrace it willingly, or else the payment of the jizya. And within the first half-century — that is, before even half a century had passed since the conquest of the Persians, for example — some Persians had already mastered the Arabic language and excelled in it, and had begun competing with the Arabs themselves in Arabic poetry itself; and in the days of the Umayyads there arose poets who composed poetry as eloquent as any poetry could be in the Arabic language, yet whose origins were Persian, who had not known the Arabic language until after they embraced Islam and came to live as neighbors of the Arabs in their own lands, or in the Arabian Peninsula itself. And no sooner had the second century drawn to a close than, looking at Arab nationality, we see a wonder of wonders: we see the cradle of Arab nationality abandoned, or nearly abandoned; we see the Arabian Peninsula reverted to its old nomadism, while Medina and Mecca alone retained what had been taught in them of religion and learning; but the old Bedouin milieus in Najd reverted to their nomadism, reverted to a great deal of their old isolation, and the link between them and the other lands was nearly severed; and so it became clear that Arab nationality was not confined to the Arabian Peninsula alone, but existed, before anything else, in these conquered lands, in which the Arabs had mingled with the other original inhabitants of those lands. And the meaning of this is exceedingly grave; for these inhabitants spoke vastly different languages: the Persians spoke their Pahlavi tongue; Syria had its Semitic languages, as did Iraq and the Peninsula likewise; the Egyptians spoke their Coptic language; the language of culture and politics in Syria and Egypt was Greek; the language of politics in Iraq and the Persian lands was Persian; and the language of culture and politics in North Africa and in Spain was Latin.

The strength of the Arabic language. And when we look toward the end of the second century, we find that all these languages had given up their place on people's tongues, in their minds, and in their hearts, to this Arabic language: the Persians spoke it and wrote it, vying with the Arabs themselves and even crowding them out; and it was the Persians who composed the books of Arabic grammar and its foundational principles, who took care to collect and codify the Arabic language, sharing with the Arabs in all of this, and sometimes surpassing them at it; and the Semitic languages that people had spoken in Syria, and spoken in the Peninsula, and spoken in Iraq, all retreated into the monasteries, and people came

to speak Arabic; and Arabic, by its very nature, became the language of politics so long as the rulers were Arabs, but this political language that people spoke soon became the language of culture and learning as well. There was, then, a new Arab nationality that Islam had created, one that was not made up of a pure Arab element, but rather was made up of all these elements, of the elements that inhabited all these lands. Islam thus created a new nation, and made this nation Arab: Arab in language, Arab in thought and feeling, Arab in civilization, Arab in learning, culture, and literature. And among the strangest literary phenomena in the life of this new nationality that Islam created — a nationality in which it abolished distinctions between races, and abolished any superiority of an Arab over a non-Arab save through piety — among the strangest phenomena is that the poets who monopolized poetry and distinguished themselves in it, and who became the very tongues of the Arab nation in its new sense, included not a single poet of pure Arab stock … some of them were Persian, some Nabataean, some Greek; not one of them was a pure Arab poet, but all of them belonged to these nations that had become Arabized, and gave expression to their old feelings, their old minds, and their old sensibilities, in Arabic poetry, in the Arab mind, and in Arab feeling. The Greek language had prevailed in the East which we now call the Arab East, particularly in Egypt, Syria, and the Peninsula, but it was unable to erase these native languages; so the Egyptians continued to speak their Coptic language, the people of Syria continued to speak their Semitic Aramaic language, and the people of the Peninsula and Iraq likewise; and the Latin language prevailed in North Africa and in Spain, but it was unable to overcome the Berber language in North Africa, nor to force the Spaniards to abandon their first native tongue. But the Arabic language came and overcame Greek, overcame along with it the native languages as well, overcame Latin in the Maghreb, and overcame the Persian language for nearly four centuries. All of this, if it proves anything, proves the strength of the Arabic language, the strength of the Arab nature, and the strength of this religion, which was the first factor, or the first influence, in the spread of the Arabs beyond their peninsula, and then in the formation of this new Arab nation. And it is a certainty that the lands which make up the modern Arab world cannot truly be said to be composed of pure Arab elements traced back to Adnan and Qahtan; rather, they are Arab through their language, Arab through their feeling, mind, and conscience, Arab through their religion, whether that religion be Islam or Christianity; they are Arab through all of this, Arabism having prevailed over whatever else was there, so that a new Arab nation came into being, which Islam created — and created without coercion,

compulsion, or violence; it took shape by this means, and with this ease.

The tolerance of Arab nationalism. The most particular merits of this Arab nationality are that it is free and tolerant, that its doors are open rather than closed, and that it is cooperative with those who wish to cooperate with it; for it accepted foreign cultures in its early Islamic centuries — it accepted the culture of the Persians, the Indians, and the Greeks, and accepted a great deal of the ancient Semitic cultures, and of the culture of the ancient Egyptians; it accepted all of this, absorbed it, and made it Arab; then it was not content with this alone, nor did it monopolize it apart from the rest of civilized humanity, but set about disseminating as much of all this as it could, both East and West alike; so it exerted influence through its new culture in the East — in India and in the lands of China — and exerted influence through its new Arab culture in Europe, in the West; and in Europe, it did not merely influence through its science and philosophy, but influenced through its science and philosophy, and influenced through its poetry as well, for it was the one that taught the French poets of the Middle Ages to compose that poetry with which they used to travel between the cities of France. This, then, is Arab nationality: poetry formed it, or attempted to form it, at the very first; then the Qur'an formed it in the end; then it set about imposing itself, without violence or coercion, upon the ancient world, until it occupied the place once held by the Byzantine Empire, and occupied the place once held by the Persian state. And now, after misfortunes have befallen it time and again, after calamities have pressed upon it relentlessly, after the Turks in particular bore down upon it insistently across various ages of their history, and after it was driven to indolence and to weakness, it has nonetheless, despite all this, remained in possession of its nationality, remained in possession of its language, its mentality, its feeling, and everything that distinguishes it. It has remained in possession of all this, even as various misfortunes befell it, even as it split apart and separated into fragments, even as states arose within it; despite this, it has remained, and will remain, one in feeling, one in thought, one in sorrows, and one in hopes.

The merit of men of letters. And if the Arab nation has now begun to rise, has begun to know itself, has begun to know its rights and to know its duties, then the credit for all of this belongs to literature, and to literature alone. What was it that gave rise to the modern renaissance in these Arab lands? It was that this nation encountered the West, and came to know a foreign way of life it had not known before. The Ottoman Turks

had severed every connection between it and the outside world, so that it did not know the West, and scarcely even heard of it, and the West itself had all but forgotten it; but it was compelled, by the course of events that occurred in the late eighteenth century and in the nineteenth century, to come to know Europe, and it beheld new forms of life, and wished to know something of this life, and so it set about learning the European languages, and thus came to know the printing press; and no sooner had it come to know the printing press than it remembered that it possessed ancient books, piled up in mosques, in churches, and in monasteries, and it set about publishing these books; and the revival of ancient Arabic literature came about thanks to the printing press, while contact with modern Western life came about through these two currents. A new culture arose in these Arab lands. And who created it? These individuals who had become educated, who used to read the ancient books and publish them, who learned the modern languages and translated from them, and who used to spread learning and literature in their own lands and in the neighboring lands — and who were these people? Who were these men? They were the vanguard of the men of letters of our own time.