

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-43833-9 - The Arab Predicament: Arab Political Thought and Practice  
Since 1967, Updated Edition

Fouad Ajami

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## THE ARAB PREDICAMENT



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*The Arab Predicament*  
*Arab Political Thought and Practice Since 1967*  
UPDATED EDITION

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FOUAD AJAMI



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PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK [www.cup.cam.ac.uk](http://www.cup.cam.ac.uk)  
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA [www.cup.org](http://www.cup.org)  
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia  
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain

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First published 1981  
First paperback edition 1982  
Reprinted 1983 (twice), 1984, 1985, 1986, 1987 (twice), 1989, 1991 (twice)  
Update edition 1993  
Reprinted 1999

Printed in the United States of America

Typeset in Meridien

*A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data is available*

ISBN 0 521 43243 X hardback  
ISBN 0 521 43833 0 paperback

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**To my son  
Tarik F. Ajami**



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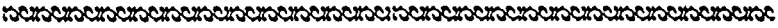
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## Preface to the Canto Edition



There is a certain kind of criticism born of proximity and some sense of belonging. Michael Walzer had it right when he wrote of the critic's relation to the people he studies: "The critic need not feel kindly toward the people he criticizes. But he ought to acknowledge his connection to those people: If he were a stranger, really disinterested, it is hard to see why he would involve himself in their affairs."<sup>1</sup>

This book – the first edition completed in 1981, this revised Canto edition done a decade later – is not the work of a "stranger." I was born in Lebanon, in 1945, to a Muslim Shi'a family. The political tradition I hack away at here was, in the most intimate way, my own and my generation's. Years in a faraway land could never sever the bonds to that older world. The verdict issued here on the Arab condition seemed bleak to me when I probed it in the first edition. But I took no joy in the verdict: It was where the trail had led me. The book had a tempestuous career among Arabs who read it. Some saw their world reflected in it, others saw alienation and bad faith and excessive moral judgment. But Arab political history offered compliance, as it were, and confirmation beyond anything I might have imagined.

No author, however cruel or perverse, could have foreseen that "summer of Arab discontent" in 1990: Saddam Hussein of Iraq stepping out of the shadows and treating his world to a season of carnage and wrath and cruelty. But the Iraqi claimant did not emerge out of a void; he "did not descend from the sky," as one Kuwaiti put it. He walked right out of the dominant political legacy of Arab nationalism: its mix of dreams and delusions, its sins of omission and commission, its dominant political style, out of the sectarian-

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ism which modern Arabs had denied and papered over but which had grown wildly in the dark. The winds had been sown over a long period of time; in that summer of 1990 the Arabs would reap the whirlwind. It is with the sowing of those terrible winds that this book is concerned.

This is a book about the grand political ideas that have swept the Arab world in the two decades or so following the Six Day War of 1967. I have not written a chronicle of political events. Fernand Braudel, the great historian of the Mediterranean, was right, I think, when he observed: "Events are the ephemera of history; they pass across its stage like fireflies, hardly glimpsed before they settle back into darkness and as often as not into oblivion."<sup>2</sup> There were some central themes I targeted – the balance between the religious and the political, between Arab nationalism and reasons of state, between the claims of authenticity and the powerful attraction of the foreign world beyond; the place of Egypt in the Arab scheme of things. These are the themes I stay with here.

In this edition a good deal of the Introduction has been rewritten. I have expanded Part II at some length, to cover the assassination of Anwar el Sadat and the kind of order that Sadat's successors and inheritors put together in the aftermath of his death. We are lucky that Egypt's police and prosecutors are as methodical as they are. They have given us a vast amount of material about Sadat's assassins and the underground Islamic politics they came out of. I draw on this material here. The years that followed the Six Day War of 1967 were, in the main, about Egypt's place among Arabs. That question has been resolved. In the pages that follow the story is carried to its conclusion.

Part III has also been substantially augmented. Years ago, when the Iranian Revolution was still an audacious and novel experiment, the received wisdom was that the revolution would catch on in Arab lands. In the first edition I had taken a dissenting view. In this edition I follow the twists and turns of the Iranian Revolution's push into Arab politics. The struggle between the Iranian Revolution and its Arab tributaries and the dominant order in the Arab world (played out between Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and Saddam Hussein) is explored at some length. The larger bal-

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ance between fundamentalist/nativist politics and the power of entrenched states is also given a new look and a new assessment with the use of some illustrative new material. I probe at greater length here the stress that secular politics is subjected to in the Arab political landscape of today.

Some final words about personal debts: My good friend, Walter H. Lippincott, Jr., was there for the first edition. Emily Loose of Cambridge University Press provided the incentive and the inspiration for this new endeavor.

*New York City*  
*January 1992*

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## Note to the Nonspecialist Reader

People familiar with a particular subject often write as though their readers ought to be equally familiar with particular names, movements, and dates. What follows is a selective glossary of names and concepts that appear in the text with a brief note as to their significance.

*Adonis*: An Arab poet and essayist of great depth and substance. “Adonis” is the pen name of the Syrian writer Ali Ahmad Said, born in 1930. He did battle with the formalism and stiltedness of Arab poetry and writing. His concerns, like those of so many of his generation, became more political after 1967. In 1968–1969, he helped found a literary/political magazine, *Mawaqif*, which became one of the leading forums for young intellectuals. Readers interested in his poetry should consult a translated volume entitled *Blood of Adonis*, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1971.

*Michel Aflaq, Sami al-Jundi, and the Ba’th Party*: Michel Aflaq, a Paris-educated publicist and teacher of Greek Orthodox background, founded the Ba’th Party in the 1940s with his friend Salah al-Din al-Bitar. The Ba’th was part of what can best be described as a radical, nationalist alternative to the Communist Party. This was part of the post–World War II middle-class nationalist evolution in the Arab world. Syria was the base of Aflaq and his associates, but their horizons were pan-Arab and they developed a substantial base in Iraq. They were committed to Arab unity and to a vague and mild socialism. Much as Aflaq and the Ba’th talked about political mobilization, it was their success in recruiting military officers that gave them whatever power they knew in the 1950s and 1960s. Aptly enough, it was their alliance with the mil-

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itary that proved to be their undoing. After a turbulent period, Aflaq and the other theoreticians of the Baʿth were driven out of power and banished from Syria in the aftermath of a military coup in 1966. Aflaq went into exile in Beirut to lament and write; the Baʿth–military alliance turned into full-scale military rule in Syria. Eventually Aflaq was invited to settle in Iraq, home of the competing branch of the Baʿth Party, and to serve as a general secretary of the shell that remained of that party. He died in 1989.

But the ideological tale and the polemics no longer mattered. In Syria under Hafez Asad and in post-1968 Iraq, power belongs to the military. To a very limited degree, a man like Michel Aflaq could buttress Iraq’s claim to preeminence over Syria and to being the true and legitimate heir of yesterday’s Baʿth, but power in both countries now belongs to the military. Of the Baʿth there remains the pamphlets, the symbols, the icons. A historic footnote to their tale was provided in July, 1980, when Salah al-Din al-Bitar, Aflaq’s friend during his Paris schooldays and his partner in politics, was murdered in Paris. By then Bitar had broken with his own past, dismissed the polemics of the Baʿth, declared it as dead and finished, and founded an exile magazine for which he wrote some cogent pieces about the crisis of authority in Syria and the Arab world.

Sami al-Jundi was one of the Baʿth’s articulate founders and members, a colleague of Aflaq and Bitar. He left a set of remarkable books and memoirs, examined in Part 1 of this study. He left the world of politics to practice dentistry in Tunisia.

*Sadeq al-Azm*: A Syrian, Azm was educated in philosophy at Yale University. He taught at the American University of Beirut and wrote some substantial studies on Kant. Radicalized by the 1967 experience, he went on to write *Self-Criticism After the Defeat* (1968), *The Criticism of Religious Thought* (1969), and, later, a critical study of the thought and practice of the Palestinian movement. Azm’s writings cost him his post at the American University of Beirut and made him a target of the Lebanese religious and political authorities. He came from a distinguished aristocratic Syrian family. His drift to the left and membership in one of the more radical Palestinian movements in the early 1970s were part of the broader rad-

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icalization that took place after 1967. Both those who agree and disagree with him credit him with having made noteworthy contributions to the debate after 1967. There is a novel theme to his life – novel in the Arab context of this period: It is the story of affluent young men who could have chosen acquiescence and security but instead chose to oppose, to dissent, and to lose out.

*George Habash:* A physician, a Palestinian of Greek Orthodox background, Habash was educated at the American University of Beirut, and now heads the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. His story illuminates the Palestinian drama after 1948: first the period of individual salvation as the Palestinian refugees tried to put together personal careers and lives, assimilation into the Arab world in the 1950s and 1960s, then radicalization and the struggle for Palestinian autonomy after 1967. His political beginnings were in the pan-Arab nationalist movement of the 1950s, which drew together small groups of university teachers and students. The stirrings were those of postcolonial nationalism. Then he and like-minded Arab nationalists were drawn into the orbit of Nasserism in the late 1950s and early 1960s, only to be rudely awakened by the 1967 defeat. Habash split off from the Arab nationalist movement to lead the more radical, Marxist-leaning Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine.

The verdict of Habash and his associates on the Syrian and Egyptian regimes was particularly harsh. Henceforth, they declared in 1967, one had to fight not only against Israel, the West, and the Arab monarchies but also against the “petty bourgeois” regimes of Syria and Egypt. Habash’s group survives as a counter to the more strictly Palestinian nationalist perspective of Yasser Arafat and the Palestine Liberation Organization.

*Ahmad al Shuqairi:* If George Habash tells part of the Palestinians’ story, Shuqairi tells a different and older one. Born to a Palestinian upper-class background, Shuqairi was active in the Palestinian politics of the 1930s and 1940s – in the struggle for Palestine that culminated in the victory of the Zionists and the establishment of Israel in 1948. The politics that Shuqairi knew were the politics of clans and notables that were hardly a match for the modern, committed politics of the Zionists.

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With a gift for words, the demagogic, venal Shuqairi went on to serve as a delegate of Syria, then of Saudi Arabia, to the United Nations. When an Arab summit established the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1964, Shuqairi was designated its leader thanks to his latest patron, Gamal Abdul Nasser of Egypt. The defeat of 1967 sealed Shuqairi's fate, and power passed to a younger generation of Palestinians who pushed Shuqairi aside and took over the PLO. Shuqairi died in Beirut, a broken and forgotten man. He is remembered for his oratory. Some students of the Arab–Israeli conflict still argue over whether Shuqairi said or did not say in 1967 that he wanted to “drive the Jews into the sea.” Few others remember him. The world he knew and the politics he represented have passed from the scene and become memories.

*Sulta*: The term recurs throughout the text, particularly when I reproduce the arguments and concerns of Arab intellectuals. It is an evocative term used to describe political authority and power. Though used by conservatives as a somewhat neutral term, radicals and critics use it to conjure up the capricious, heavy-handed nature of political power in the Arab world. To refer to authority as *sulta* and to today's ruler as the *sultan* is to underline how little has changed over centuries in the relations between ruler and ruled.

*Sunnis, Shi'a, Alawis*: Strictly speaking, *sunna* means “the custom,” “the orthodoxy” (the closest approximation in English). Sunnis are the majority of Muslims, particularly among the Arabs. The first doctrinal split in Islam took place between the main body of the community of Muslims and those who became known as *Shi'at Ali* (the partisans of Ali). Ali was the son-in-law of the Prophet; he was passed over for succession after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in A.D. 632. The battle over the succession (Ali was passed over three times in a row) became a broader split as Shi'a served as the focus for disaffected ethnic elements and dissidents.

The Shi'a subscribe to the doctrine of the *imamate*, the infallible leader. As their doctrine has it, the *imamate* belongs to what they call “the people of the House” – the descendants of Ali and his wife Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet. The doctrine of the hidden imam maintains that someday the imam will reappear to establish the realm of justice. Shi'ites suffered persecution that drove

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them and their beliefs underground. Shi'a is the dominant orthodoxy in Iran and has a substantial following in both Iraq and Lebanon, where the Shi'a outnumber Sunni Muslims.

The Alawis (also known as Nosairis) are a heterodox small sect who are mostly located in northern and central Syria. The practice of the Alawites is a mixture of pagan, Christian, and Muslim beliefs. Alawites carry the veneration of Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet, to extremes that place them, as far as Sunni Islam is concerned, beyond the proper boundaries of Islam. Alawis see Ali as the incarnation of Universal Soul, and they are said by other Muslims to make Ali either equal or even superior to the Prophet. The practice of the Alawis is shrouded in secrecy, and much is imputed to them by the main body of Muslims, who consider the Alawis to be seceders from Islam.

These doctrinal differences between Sunnis, Shi'a, and Alawis are internalized; they become part of self and history, correspond with lines of ethnicity and class, and matter less for the hair-splitting arguments about orthodoxy than for what people make of them.

IMPORTANT DATES

*June 5–11, 1967:* The Six Day War. The defeat of Egypt, Jordan, Syria.

*Early 1968:* The rise of the Palestinian movement as an independent force in Arab politics. Their early base was in Jordan.

*March–June, 1969:* The war of attrition along the Suez Canal. A war designed to challenge the status quo along the Canal, to give Egypt some diplomatic leverage.

*September, 1969:* Qaddafi and his fellow officers seize power in Libya. A hitherto marginal country is brought into Arab politics. Qaddafi throws Libya's weight and money behind Nasser and stakes out a position for himself as spokesman for pan-Arabism and for a radical kind of Muslim fundamentalism.

*September, 1970:* The civil war in Jordan between the Jordanian regime and the Palestinian movement.

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*September 28, 1970:* The death of President Nasser.

*November, 1970:* Hafez Asad seizes power in Syria.

*May 15, 1971:* President Sadat, hitherto a titular figure, pulls off what he calls his “corrective movement” – essentially a coup against the apparatus claiming to represent the remnants of Nasserism.

*July, 1972:* The expulsion of Soviet troops and advisors from Egypt. A straw in the wind for yet more drastic changes in Egyptian policies.

*1972–1973:* The putting together of the coalition that waged the October War based on an understanding between Egypt and Saudi Arabia and the participation of Syria.

*October, 1973:* The outbreak of the October War. The deployment of the Arab oil weapon.

*September, 1975:* The conclusion of the Sinai accord between Egypt and Israel under American auspices. The accord causes a rift between Egypt and Syria.

*1975–1976:* The outbreak of the Lebanese civil war, its institutionalization into a way of life for the country.

*November, 1977:* Sadat’s journey to Jerusalem.

*September, 1978:* The Camp David accords between Egypt and Israel, with President Carter’s participation.

*March, 1979:* The signing of the Egyptian–Israeli treaty.

*January–February, 1979:* The collapse of the Pahlavi regime in Iran. The rise of Ayatollah Khomeini.

*November, 1979:* The attack on the Grand Mosque in Mecca, symbolizing the troubles of the Saudi state and the appeal of religious fundamentalism.

*December, 1979–January, 1980:* The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan; the “Carter Doctrine” as an American response affirming the will to use military force in the Persian Gulf; deepening po-

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larization and discord between the superpowers; an escalating ideological quarrel between the Khomeini revolutionary regime and its neighboring states.

*September, 1980:* The outbreak of the Iran–Iraq war; a fight between the Sunni order of states and the Iranian Revolution.

*September–October, 1981:* A massive wave of arrests in Egypt of President Sadat’s critics; Sadat’s assassination on October 6.

*April, 1982:* Israel’s evacuation of the last strip of the Sinai Peninsula.

*Summer of 1982:* Israel’s Lebanon war; the expulsion of the Palestine Liberation Organization from Beirut.

*1983–1985:* The deepening troubles of Lebanon. The Iranian Revolution finds a base among the Shi’a of Lebanon. Israel’s withdrawal from the bulk of its positions in the south of Lebanon.

*1983–1986:* A trail of anti-Western, principally anti-American, terror. The peak of Iran’s revolutionary crusade.

*February, 1987:* The Syrian army enters Muslim West Beirut. A turning point for the Syrians and the Lebanese. The Syrians rein in the Iranian-inspired “Party of God.”

*December, 1987:* The eruption of the *intifada*, the uprising, on the West Bank and Gaza. A young generation of Palestinians, children of the occupation, mount a serious challenge to it.

*Summer of 1988:* Ayatollah Khomeini declares the end of his crusade against the Iraqi state. The waning of Iran’s influence. The King of Jordan renounces his claim to the West Bank.

*June, 1989:* The death of Ayatollah Khomeini on June 3.

*November, 1989:* Elections in Jordan give the edge to Islamicists. The same outcome in Algeria’s municipal elections in the summer of 1990.

*August, 1990:* The Iraqi conquest of Kuwait on August 2. Iraq declares Kuwait its “nineteenth province.” The dispatch of American forces to Saudi Arabia.

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*October, 1990:* Syrian hegemony is strengthened in Lebanon. The defeat of the Maronite enclave in east Beirut.

*January, 1991:* Joint U.S. congressional authorization for the use of force against Iraq on January 12. The beginning of an air campaign against Iraq on January 16.

*February 27, 1991:* The liberation of Kuwait after a swift ground war; the thwarting of Saddam Hussein's bid for primacy.

*March, 1991:* Shi'a and Kurdish rebellions in Iraq erupt and are then put down by remnants of Saddam Hussein's army.

*October, 1991:* The convening in Madrid, under American auspices, of a conference to settle Arab–Israeli claims. First direct face-to-face negotiations (Egypt excepted) since the armistice talks and negotiations over Palestinian refugees held in 1949.