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Goal for the Egyptian Nation-State, Yellow Card for Arab Nationalism

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The recent three-match shootout between Egypt and Algeria over a coveted spot in next summer's World Cup soccer tournament may well be remembered as having driven the last nail in the coffin of the idea and praxis of Arab nationalism. The physical and verbal violence employed by the players and supporters of both sides, and the statements made by leaders of the two countries, as well as by a gamut of societal actors that were swept up into the maelstrom – including political parties, labor and professional syndicates, tourism companies, and non-governmental social and cultural organizations – provided clear-cut evidence of the deeply rooted patriotic sentiments of Egyptians and Algerians alike towards their respective countries, and utter lack of solidarity with their “fellow Arab” state. These sentiments reached a peak following the third and decisive match in Khartoum, won by Algeria. Violent incidents and demonstrations were marked by mutual calls for revenge, demands that the rival country's embassy be shut down and that their resident nationals, now deemed “enemies”, be expelled from each other's country.

By way of comparison, the Algerian reaction was more tempered than the Egyptian one, at least at the beginning of the saga. Attempting to promote an atmosphere of conciliation and solidarity prior to the matches, the Algerian minister of information declared that he "only wishes that the Egyptian and the Algerian teams could either succeed together or fail together so that the devils of hatred would not have a chance to drive wedges between these two **brother peoples**" [*my emphasis: MT*]. In contrast, the Egyptian media spared no opportunity to censure their opponent, and became ever more hostile as events unfolded. Algerians were nicknamed "savage barbarians," and the Algerian national liberation movement – the very same movement that during the heyday of radical pan-Arabism was offered continuous financial and material support by Nasser's regime, until it obtained its liberation from France in 1962 – turned from "a revolution of a million martyrs" into "a nation of a million whores." The Algerian media responded by accusing Egypt of collaborating with the United States and Israel against the Palestinians, and of killing innocent Palestinians as well.

Understanding what transpired requires going beyond the obvious manifestations of sports-related fanaticism and hooliganism, and linking the events to the larger history of the region from the late 19th century up through the end of World War I and into the 1920s and 1930s. What eventually emerged during those tumultuous times was a hegemonic ideology of Arab nationalism that co-existed uneasily with multiple territorial states, themselves the product in large measure, of the interests and actions of Western imperial powers.

Arab nationalism served to both unite and divide Arab states. During the 1950s

and 1960s, in particular, regimes were required to act on behalf of the Arab nation in order to maintain their legitimacy in the eyes of their citizens, and thus had to adjust their foreign policies accordingly. On occasion, they even mobilized their armed forces to fight and die for the sake of the Arab collective. At other times, they competed bitterly with fellow Arab states. Overall, pan-Arabism did serve as a rallying cry for Arab peoples in the face of perceived common enemies (primarily, Western imperialism and Zionism). However, it proved to be an inadequate basis for enabling the comprehensive social, cultural and economic breakthrough which Arab states and societies required in order to successfully compete in the modern world. Nor could it overcome the developing entrenched interests and affiliations of local, territorial nationalisms. One explanation for the simultaneous intimacy and rivalry between Arab states was recently offered by the Egyptian analyst 'Abd el-Moneim Said: "the very commonalities that bind Arab countries together, and that formed a basis for their solidarity, are what fire the desire of each Arab society to distinguish itself from the others."

Since the era of Egypt's late president Anwar al-Sadat, and as an integral part of his de-Nasserization policy, Egypt has abandoned the pursuit of political pan-Arabism. Under both Sadat and his successor, Husni Mubarak, adopted a legitimizing formula centering on Egyptian nationalism, i.e. one emphasizing the centrality of a specific Egyptian collective identity and the pursuit of policies based on purely Egyptian interests and priorities. The responses of millions of Egyptians to the Egyptian-Algerian soccer matches demonstrated how deeply rooted this sense of Egyptian-ness has become. For example, a young Egyptian woman, when asked by a journalist how she felt after Egypt's team, nicknamed the "Pharaohs", won the second game, she enthusiastically responded, "We are all Pharaohs" (*nahnu Pharaouniun*). In doing so, she

expressed the uniqueness of Egyptian identity and Egypt's special collective personality (*shakhsiyya Misriyya*), which is neither Arab nor Islamic. After Egypt lost the third and deciding game in Khartoum, a group of Egyptian men watching the game in a typical Cairene coffee house cried out in tears, "Algeria has stolen Egypt's dignity", *karama*, an Arabic term fraught with meaning and generally used when referring to the Gordian knot linking the honor of women, family and nation. For the average Egyptian, the whole matter now transcended sports, becoming a matter of national pride.

The Mubarak presidential family, both father Husni and sons Gamal and 'Alla, sided with the angry Egyptian crowds by calling for the return to Cairo of Egypt's ambassador to Algeria in protest against "Algerian hooliganism" during and after the Khartoum game. An Egyptian senior official explained that Egypt could not ignore public anger over the incidents there. Moreover, the Egyptian minister of information stated that Egypt would "sever cultural ties with Algeria." Through his populist-nationalist approach, President Mubarak was seeking to reinforce his frayed popularity and legitimacy.

Over the course of his 28-year presidency, Mubarak has repeatedly proven that he is inured to criticism whenever he is convinced that his actions serve his own personal interests and Egypt's national ones, as he defines them. In this instance, he preferred to fan the flames of popular anger towards Algeria, rebuffing political opponents at home who accused him of cheap populism, inciting anti-Algerian hatred, and dragging Egypt into an unnecessary conflict with a fellow Arab state. Similarly, Mubarak recently decided to erect a deeply embedded iron wall along the Egypt-Gaza Strip border to inhibit smuggling and infiltration via subterranean tunnels. An unspoken subtext to the decision was a desire to prevent a deepening of the links between the Egyptian Muslim

Brotherhood, the most powerful opposition organization in Egypt, and its Palestinian offshoot, *Hamas*. Egypt's actions drew considerable criticism, including from two prominent Islamic leaders: Sunni Egyptian Qatar-based sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi harshly criticized the Algerian-Egyptian violence in his Friday sermon (*khutbah*), stating that it ran contrary to the requirements of Islamic solidarity, and told *al-Jazeera* TV that the building of the iron wall was religiously forbidden; Shi'ite Hizballah leader Hasan Nasrallah demanded that Mubarak cease building the wall immediately, for it would impart more suffering on Gazan Palestinians. For Mubarak, the clear linkage between his personal interest and Egypt's national one enables him to largely ignore such attacks.

The foregoing events provide ample evidence that those who were quick to eulogize the Arab world's multiple territorial states in general, and the Egyptian nation-state in particular, were far too hasty in doing so.

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