This service assumes even more significance when we bear in mind Ibn ‘Abbâd’s special relevance for the contemporary man’s search for meaning and direction as “a ṣâﬁ teacher whose attitude can be shared by modern man and [who] is relevant in our day” (p. xiv).

Abdollah Vakily

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Delving into the heart of Lebanon’s confessional predicament in a study published a few years ago (*Inside the Lebanese Confessional Mind*, University Press of America, 1992), Khashan moves to a higher level of analysis and looks at the broad spectrum of the conundrum characterizing present Arab political endeavours.

To achieve his analytical aims, the author attempts to sustain the argument he presents in his preface. In his opinion, the current ‘morbid’ situation and poor state of development prevailing in the Arab world is due to the failure of Arabs in coming to terms with the question of political identity and thus redefine (define?) the nature of the relationship between state and society or the governor and the governed.

The opening statement of the book in fact is that Arabs are presently at a loss suffering from a severe identity crisis. The entire study is overshadowed with heavy-laden pessimism suggesting that this alleged identity crisis began in the 19th century when no alternative was offered to affiliation with the Islamic Ottoman Empire with which the Arab world remained identified for almost four centuries. This was a time when Islamic universalism had the upper hand over group particularism. When nationalism was suggested as a potential identity alternative to the Islamic character of the Ottomans State, one defeat after the other added to its ailments till the Arab defeat in the 1967 war signalled its death. 1967 is, therefore, a key date in Khashan’s analysis and ushers in the revival of political Islam when it stepped forward to fill in the vacuum and offered messianic redemption to a perplexed people.

In handling his argument, several core concepts such as political identity, nationalism, political Islam and class/elite notions are used by the author as analytical tools and constitute the means by which he approaches his selected themes. The range of topics examined in the study begin with the first chapter
tracing the evolution of the Arab search for identity and two last chapters dealing consecutively with the symptoms of the current impasse in the Arab world and the proposals the author offers to lift the burden of that stalemate. In between the opening and concluding chapters, Khashan looks at the birth of the nation-state in Europe as well as the path of Arab nationalism in the modern history of the Middle East. Moreover, issues such as the impact of the creation of the state of Israel, the reason for the failure of Arab attempts of development, the implications of the two Gulf wars on the Arab system and, finally, the resurgence of political Islam in the region are also thoroughly examined.

Historical analyses pinpointing important incidents combined with a class/elite analytical approach characterize Khashan’s attempts to illustrate the shift of focus in Arab nationalism and thus the identity crisis in the Arab world. More specifically, events such as World War One (Khashan obviously belongs to the school which attributes the evolution of the modern Middle East to the First World War), the inception of the Jewish state in 1947, the Gulf wars of 1980 and 1990, intertwine with the nature of the ruling elite in the different Arab states in order to trace Arab nationalism through the 20th century.

With the demise of the Ottoman Empire, pleas for reforming Islam went in tandem with the rise of Arab national conscience and western notions and ideas were courted. At that time Arab nationalism was directed against the Turkish pan-Turan Unionists. Even though colonialism was an obstacle to a full adoption of the western ethos such as liberalism and humanism, it wasn’t till the declaration of the state of Israel that a shift in the criteria on which Arabs based their national aspirations occurred and the new version of Arab nationalism became a radical anti-western movement. Khashan reminds the reader that in many parts of the world where western ideas advanced ahead of colonialism, the latter tarnished the transformation to nationalism, which would thus pursue an anti-colonial agenda instead of striving for genuine structural changes in society.

The Arab world was no exception for political nationalism proved maladaptive to its culture. The concept of the modern nation state as it emerged in Europe relies on a pattern of relationship between the governor and the governed. In the Arab world, traits such as particularism, kinship relations, the presence of competing religious and ethnonationalistic affiliations are inherent. Lining up with Emerson’s definition of a nation as a community of people brought together by past experiences and future expectations, Khashan offers his interpretation of why state systems in the third world are weak and therefore why there is an Arab weakness of identification with an already ill-fitted political state structure. How does the
elitist analysis, reminiscent of Malcolm Kerr’s *The Arab Cold War*, fit in Khashan’s study? In his chapter over war and peace with Israel, for example, the author highlights how Arab dealings with the Palestinian plight were governed by personal elitist ambitions of King Farouq, King Abdullah, Sadat and Assad as illustrations of the ruling elites’ exploitation of political slogans for domestic legitimisation.

On the other hand, in his examination of the doomed development process in the Arab world, Khashan attributes the maladjustment of Arab political systems to the requirements of modernity and the failure of liberalism to ruling elites’ anti-western inclinations as well as political culture. Army officers, oil conservative monarchies, and the Algerian, Yemeni and Lebanese cases show the susceptibility of democratisation in the Arab world to socio-political upheaval. Arab regimes have thus invariably failed to transfer their societies in the direction of genuine democracy and have not managed to place them on the right development track.

From another perspective, Khashan considers that the Iraq-Iran war confirmed the salience of very important variables on the conduct of inter-Arab affairs: the demise of the inherently defective Arab order on the one hand, and the paramount significance of the West in determining the outcome of regional conflicts on the other. The war in question set the precedence of personal leader grudges superseding pan-Arabism, the Second Gulf War being the culmination of all ailments, flagrant western intervention and a big boost to the might of political Islam on the rise since 1967.

In the absence of political parties and an active civil society, religious groups play that role in co-opting people and rapidly gain momentum on the popular level. Khashan sees what he dubs as Islamic revival (the term revival is later refuted by the author who prefers to consider Islamic resurgence as a reaction to the identity crisis), a side effect emanating from the injudicious policies of incompetent elites as well as a counter-reaction to western arrogance. However, the author contends that even though Islamic groups may gain more influence in the near future, they are out of touch with the reality of contemporary politics.

Summarizing all his findings in the chapter entitled “The Arab Impasse”, the author presents us at the end of his analysis with his proposals to step out of the current vicious cycle in which the Arab world is immersed. The proposals include the Arabs’ need to understand the West, to believe in the myth of Arab nationalism, to define and pursue realistic objectives, to nurture respect for authority, and to realize the inevitability of political representation. The book, on the whole, is a sound scholarly contribution, avoiding the pitfall of excessive historical narrative and the author is well in control of his data and how it serves his argument.
However, even though the author was clear about pinpointing the causal relationship between autocratic ruling elites and the prevailing impasse, he alludes to vague recommendations in his concluding proposals that implicitly suggest the continuation of the *status quo*. Why, one may wonder, would conditions be liable to change under the same type of governance? On the other hand, in tackling its themes, the study may be different from the mainstream American contributions as the author claims in his preface. But the heavy intonations regarding the impact of political culture (a fashionable 1960s approach) and the open call to Arabs to acknowledge that the ‘West has won’. One would wonder about how different this approach is from the that of the staunchest of Orientalists. A large proportion of academic contributions puts the Arab world in direct opposition to the West implying that there was a real opposing confrontation. Is this really the case? And if so, is acknowledging an alleged defeat the way out from the predicament or the path the Arab are to choose now that they are at the crossroads? Nevertheless, the book represents a deep, serious analysis giving considerable insight to many aspects of the Arab sub-system.

*Shahira Samy*