Hawliyat is the official peer-reviewed journal of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Balamand. It publishes articles from the field of Humanities.

**Journal Name:** Hawliyat  
**ISSN:** 1684-6605  
**Title:** Egypt’s National Identity According to ‘Abdallah al-Nadim  
**Authors:** Mohammad Rihan

**To cite this document:**  

**Permanent link to this document:** DOI: https://doi.org/10.31377/haw.v17i0.67

Hawliyat uses the Creative Commons license CC BY-NC-SA that lets you remix, transform, and build upon the material for non-commercial purposes. However, any derivative work must be licensed under the same license as the original.
Egypt’s National Identity
According to ‘Abdallah al-Nadim

Mohammad RIHAN¹

There is no doubt that ‘Abdallah al-Nadim, an Egyptian nineteenth century intellectual, was a man of unusual talents: he was a journalist, poet and playwright, orator and educator, a propagandist, politician and revolutionary, but when writing about the intellectual origins of Egyptian nationalism or about thinkers and reformers who affected it, some scholars tend to ignore his intellectual legacy or review it swiftly and somewhat superficially². He is usually described as the orator of the ‘Urabi Revolution, a mission in which he excelled. But to confine al-Nadim to the function of a spokesman or a propagandist would not do full justice to his role as a political thinker and a nationalist revolutionary precursor who worked to define and defend Egypt’s right to exist as a free nation³.

(1) Mohammad Rihan is an assistant professor in the Cultural Studies Program at the University of Balamand. He holds a PhD in Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies from the University of Cambridge. He has several scholarly articles and books to his name, notably The Politics and Culture of an Umayyad Tribe: Conflict and Factionalism in the Early Islamic Period (London, 2014); Jund al-Khalifa: Tarikh ‘Amila Hatta Nihayat al-‘Ahd al-Umawwi (Beirut, 2008); Encyclopaedia of Islam, Third Edition, s.v. “‘Amila”.

This study grew out of an MA thesis submitted to the History and Archaeology Department at the American University of Beirut. The author would like to thank Drs Samir Seikaly, Abd al-Rahim Abu Husayn, Nadia El-Shaykh, Malik al-Sharif and the late Kamal Salibi for their valuable comments that enriched the text at the time. Many thanks go to the two anonymous reviewers and the editor in chief of Hawliyat, who read this article in its present form for their important remarks and corrections.


(3) Several works were devoted to the study of al-Nadim’s life and his political activities. Among the best are: ‘Ali Hadidi, ‘Abdallah al-Nadim: Khatib al-Wataniyya (Cairo, n.d); Ahmad Amin, Zu’ama’al-Islah fi al-‘Asr al-Hadith (Beirut, n.d.), 202-248; Muhammad
In his analysis of ‘Abdallah al-Nadim’s contribution to the evolution of the Egyptian national image, Charles Wendell concluded that al-Nadim’s notion of Egypt as a nation was ambiguous because he seemed to have been more concerned with the problem of survival for the entire Islamic world than with the assertion of a self-centered Egyptianism. It is possible to disagree with this view as the study realized by Wendell was based on only one source, namely Sulafat al-Nadim, which reproduced a limited number of his articles. Sulafat al-Nadim actually provides a representative but incomplete view of al-Nadim’s political thought. It was printed in 1914, well after his death, by his brother ‘Abd al-Fattah, who carefully selected the articles in a manner that did not provoke the anger of the British or the Khedive. He even drew a revisionist picture of al-Nadim suggesting that he was an anti-‘Urabist:

He joined them (the ‘Urabist) against his will, and they called him the orator of the National Party and they used his journal to express their views but he used secretly to complain about that.

Although Felix Gilbert has pointed to the necessity of examining the written material of an intellectual figure from each period of his life separately because no idea ought to be explained by reference to retrospective statements, the ideas of ‘Abdallah al-Nadim should not be dealt with in this way. His legacy more or less resembles a jigsaw puzzle that ought to be looked at as whole and not bit by bit. Viewed as such it would seem that al-Nadim concentrated all his energies on


(4) Charles Wendell, The Evolution, 156.
(7) Felix Gilbert, “Intellectual History: Its Aims and Methods”, Daedalus 100 (1971), 90.)
elaborating one idea: Egypt. Starting with his first journal *al-Tankit wal-Tabkit* before the revolution, continuing with *al-Ta‘if* during the revolution and ending with *al-Ustadh* under the British occupation, he never abandoned his preoccupation with the Egyptian nation, its nature, its destiny, its enemies. Al-Nadim’s nationalist thought developed over a long period of time and can be traced to several origins. It is probable that four main sources decisively influenced his intellectual development and helped to make him into a nationalist political thinker. These sources were his childhood and adolescence in Alexandria, his life in Cairo, his political activities with the Young Egypt Society between 1878 and 1881, and of course the ‘Urabi revolt in 1882.

**Sources of al-Nadim’s nationalist thought**

Al-Nadim spent his childhood and adolescence in Alexandria. During that period, Alexandria was undergoing a major metamorphosis: at the time of the French invasion in 1798, it was a poor waterfront town with a mere 8,000 inhabitants, of which only one hundred were Europeans. By 1850 it had become a major sea-port with more than 100,000 inhabitants. Alexandria was thus turning into a cosmopolitan center comprising several large foreign communities, the number of foreigners coming to represent about a fifth of the total population. Egyptians, however, constituted the majority due to a continual influx from neighboring towns and villages, attracted by good wages and fairly good social services (medical care and education). Alexandria’s most influential inhabitants were the foreigners, in particular the Europeans. A few Egyptians were in this category, but most belonged to the middle and lower classes, who survived through hard labor and charity. As the vast majority of these experienced a common subjugation of their interests, due both to the urban class structure and to the legal immunities and exemptions enjoyed by the foreigners, it is not surprising that Alexandria became a crucible for anti-European

sentiment. Alexandria had, as it were, become "a colonial city before Egypt was a colony". According to Daniel Panzac, "Alexandrie de l'aveu de ses visiteurs, paraît désormais comme étrangère à l'Égypte". While not wishing to enter into the details of psycho-history and its importance or pretending to write about al-Nadim in such terms, I find it possible to hold the view that in the making of an individual's mental makeup, cultural and social experiences must always claim a sizable share. It is probable, then, that the young ‘Abdallah felt the full weight of the foreign presence. Europeans no doubt exercised his imagination but at the same time insulted his ego. He was poor and they were rich; he was weak and they were powerful. If we accept that "it is a well-known irony of colonization that it generates its antithesis, anticolonial nationalism", we can assume that al-Nadim developed his first anti-colonial sentiments during his adolescence in his home town of Alexandria. Some of his biographers, indeed, maintain that the suffering of his fellow citizens as a result of the European exploitation was the first lesson he learned in politics.

During his stay in Cairo, al-Nadim encountered several circles of literature and politics, which in all likelihood influenced his intellectual development and nationalist ideas considerably, notably the circles of Mahmud Sami al-Barudi and Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, as also that of Shaykh Hamza Fathallah and ‘Abdallah Fikri Pasha. His contacts with these circles probably widened his intellectual horizons and deepened his political consciousness, driving him more and more towards the articulation of some kind of Egyptian Nationalism, this thought shaped by his experience with the Young being Egypt Society (Misr al-Fatat). For the first time in his life he became actively involved in politics. His nationalistic views evolved more and further more and began to take final shape. They appear to have been greatly influenced by the Charter of Reforms that the Young Egypt Society published shortly

(10) Ibid., 531.
(13) Ahmad Baha’ al-Din, Ayyam Laha Tarikh, (Beirut, 1975), 11.
(14) Ibid., 14.
after the accession of Khedive Tawfiq (1879), a copy of which was presented to him by the Union of Egyptian Youth. In this Charter, the Union attacked the evils suffered by the Egyptian people, offering remedies and solutions. They asked for sweeping reforms in almost every branch of the administration and life in Egypt. They demanded equal treatment for all Egyptians, and the abolition of all capitulatory privileges and immunities¹⁶.

It is, however, the ‘Urabi revolt which had the deepest impact on the evolution of al-Nadim’s political thought. He regarded that revolt as the only means to fulfill Egyptian nationalist aspirations, to adopt constitutional reforms and to limit European authority. It was only due to the revolt that he, as a political thinker, was able to elaborate his nationalist views. Accordingly, he joined it and became its journalist, orator and propagandist. Unlike many intellectuals, al-Nadim had the rare opportunity to apply in real life what he preached on paper.

Al-Nadim’s grand design

Gilbert has maintained that a person’s mind is not constant; it is in flux, changing and developing. Al-Nadim’s mind was, in a way, in continuous motion yet dealing with a single idea. He adopted and developed a variety of tactics but never altered his overall strategy. He changed the details but never the essence; he only modified his writing style and tone. He was sarcastic and cautious when he edited al-Tankit wal-Tabkit prior to the revolution. He became extremely emotional and aggressive during the revolution in 1882, when he issued al-Ta’if. And when in 1892 he published his third journal, al-Ustadh, he was primarily a rationalist¹⁷. In my opinion, his overriding concern was that

---


¹⁷ For example, when he dealt with the notion of the Arabic language being a major element of Egypt’s national identity in his journal al-Ustadh, al-Nadim himself asked the reader to refer back to an article he had written twelve years before in his first journal al-Tankit wal-Tabkit on the same topic, where he used the same arguments. See ‘Abdallah al-Nadim, al-Ustadh, comp. ‘Abd al-Mun‘im al-Jumay‘i, (Cairo, 1994), 1:468; ‘Abdallah al-Nadim, al-Tankit wal-Tabkit, comp. ‘Abd al-Mun‘im al-Jumay‘i, (Cairo, 1994), 53.
of defining the nature of the Egyptian *watan* (nation), its political and economic system, and its social and cultural background. He clearly identified its enemies and the way to confront them. He acknowledged the difficulties facing ‘his’ *watan* and considered the remedies that it needed. It was as if he had a ‘grand design’ for Egypt. My two articles intend to delineate the details of that ‘grand design’ and present his political thought as expressed in his journals. In this first article, I shall examine what I call the components of al-Nadim’s notion of Egypt’s national identity and, in the second, I shall discuss what I consider his political program.

1. Egypt’s national identity

The political thought of al-Nadim was undoubtedly influenced by its context. As Quentin Skinner has noted:

> Any statement is inescapably the embodiment of a particular intention, on a particular occasion, addressed to the solution of a particular problem, and thus specific to its situation in a way that it can only be naïve to transcend ... There simply are no perennial problems in philosophy: there are only individual answers to individual questions.18

Al-Nadim’s political thought can be described as creative answers to individual questions, pertaining to particular political, economic, and social problems that existed in Egypt between 1881 and 1893. One of the most important contexts for reading texts is our own, as Dominick Lacapra has pointed out:

> The past has its own voice that must be respected, texts should be seen to address us in more subtle and challenging ways, and they should be carried into the present in a dialogical fashion.19

A dialogue, he added, is a two-way affair: it needs a good reader who knows how to ask the right questions but it especially needs “an

---

attentive and patient listener\textsuperscript{20}. We have, first of all, to listen to the “voices of the past” in order to interpret it. Let us listen to the voice of ‘Abdallah al-Nadim in the following pages.

Al-Nadim, in many articles throughout his life, advocated the idea that Egypt should be a free nation with its own national identity, enjoying special political, social, economic, and educational systems, enabling it to confront its adversaries and become a developed, advanced, modern state. But first, Egypt for al-Nadim was already in itself a nation. So what was the nature of this nation, its national identity, its constituents?

Despite having been adopted and used by others before him in Egypt, with al-Nadim the term \textit{watan} acquired new dimensions and a special significance. The first person to use the term \textit{watan} in a political sense equivalent to the French \textit{patrie}—a national territory as the basis of identity and the focus of loyalty—as opposed to the traditional, religious and communal loyalty to Islam represented by the Ottoman state, was Rifa‘a Rafi‘ al-Tahtawi\textsuperscript{21}. His \textit{watan} was not Ottoman, nor Arab, it was Egyptian\textsuperscript{22}. Al-Tahtawi meant by \textit{al-watan wa hubb al-watan} (the nation and love of the nation) not that feeling shared by all Arabs or Ottomans or Muslims; he rather meant the feeling shared by those who had lived in the land of Egypt since times immemorial. For al-Tahtawi, Egypt was a separate entity that had existed since the days of ancient Egypt. For the first time in Egyptian historiography, history did not begin with the Arab conquest and Islam. Al-Tahtawi, in 1870, was the first to introduce the notion of a country as a continuous living existence in spite of several changes of language, religion, and civilization\textsuperscript{23}.

However, for ‘Abdallah al-Nadim the notion of Egypt seems to be more complex. I was able to identify, in his writings, three basic elements necessary for the creation of a national identity: common descent, language and religion.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 274.
\textsuperscript{23} Rifa‘a al-Tahtawi, \textit{Manahij}, 187; Bernard Lewis “Watan”, 530; Albert Hourani, \textit{Arabic Thought}, 79.
Common Descent

As to the first element, common descent, al-Nadim considered Egypt was an Islamic country inhabited by a majority of Muslims, and a minority of Copts, bound together by patriotic attraction, “jadhiba wataniyya”. It was first, he argues, a sense of patriotism that brought Egyptians together:

Patriotism (wataniyya) unites different races (ajnas) who are prompted by the love of country (hubb al-watan) to unite their efforts and to do everything possible to safeguard the country (al-watan), protecting its civilization, maintaining its order, expanding its trade and improving its industry, totally disregarding any differences in race or religion amongst them.

The existence of this sense of patriotism was innate, al-Nadim thought; it was in the blood of every Egyptian; it was a kind of “electric power scattered around”, attracting Egyptians and repelling strangers. Patriotism was firstly based on common descent. People were considered Egyptian if they had common ancestry and were living on Egyptian soil. This did not imply that Egyptians were descendants of the same race; on the contrary, several races had forged the Egyptian nation. To al-Nadim, an Egyptian could have Coptic, Arab, Turkish or Circassian origin. The Arabs came to Egypt with the Arab conquest and were able to integrate quickly with the Copts. A few centuries later, the Turks came to Egypt and merged with the existing Egyptian society. But with only one difference, al-Nadim argued; the Turks kept learning and using their own language. The Circassians were the last to inhabit Egypt. In addition to their patriotic bond, al-Nadim continued, these three races were united by Islamic bonds. Thus, he concluded, they and the Copts had forged the Egyptian nation.

Although a minority and living under Islamic rule, the Copts were an essential part of the Egyptian nation, according to al-Nadim; they were the founding fathers of the nation, which originated not

(24) 'Abdallah al-Nadim, Al-Ustadh, 2:711.
(26) Ibid., 2: 712.
(27) Ibid., 1: 79.
with Muslims or Arabs, as one might expect, but rather with the Copts who were joined later by the Muslims. Egypt was an Islamic country with Christian roots. Although al-Tahtawi made the same point, this was an interesting position for a nineteenth-century Muslim writer threatened by “Christian” European imperialism to hold. However, al-Nadim’s stance was not sentimental and did not spring only from nationalistic considerations; it was the result of good judgment. Any disagreement, any division between Muslims and Copts, might lead to the intervention of the foreigners, the imperialists. Al-Nadim asked the Egyptian Muslim to work for mutual agreement with the Copts and to renounce disagreement because national unity, “wihda wataniyya”, demanded that Egyptians remained in accord with one other. But most importantly, al-Nadim argued, Muslims and Copts must remain united in order not to offer the foreigner any pretext to intervene. The foreigner’s aim was to cut the East up into small, quarrelsome entities. That is why al-Nadim invited all Egyptians, Muslims, Copts and Jews to remain united.

According to al-Nadim, this national unity had over several generations proved its efficacy in protecting both Muslims and Christians and, unlike other Christian minorities, the Copts remained loyal to the ruler because “they know by experience that the rule of the local Egyptian government is complete happiness” compared to the miserable life of other Christian minorities in the region. Thus the relation between the two communities was a marriage of convenience they both needed: the Muslims to prevent foreign interference and the Copts to avoid persecution. They both had much in common, a unity of territory, of descent, and of language:

Let the Muslim amongst you unite with his Muslim brother for the sake of unity of religion, and both of you unite with the Copt and the Jew for the sake of national unity, with the whole lot acting as one man pursuing one single goal: to keep Egypt for the Egyptians.

(28) Ibid., 1: 394.
(29) Ibid., 1: 77.
(30) Ibid., 1: 526.
The Arabic Language

As to the second element of Egypt's national identity, the Arabic language, al-Nadim believed that every nation should be distinguished by its own particular language. In this context it is appropriate to read the opinion of Eric Hobsbawm, who maintained that "languages multiply with states; not the other way round." It was, thus, only appropriate to consider that the state of Egypt should have an official language of its own, separating it from others. It could not be Turkish since al-Nadim was a major participant in the 'Urabi revolution which had challenged the power and privilege of the established Turko-Circassian elite. Adopting the Turkish language would naturally amount to recognition of Turkish sovereignty over the Egyptians. The official language could not be European since it was the tongue of the invader and if adopted would represent a form of capitulation and the end of the Egyptian nation. Arabic—the language of the Qur'an—was the natural and indeed only choice. Language, thus, could be considered the second criterion of Egyptian nationhood advocated by him.

The Arabic language, al-Nadim argued, was essential for the survival of the Egyptian nation as an entity for three main reasons. First, the Arabic language was the means by which ordinary people in Egypt communicated, loved, hated, raised children, and made a living. Like any other nation, they simply lived through their language. Their language became them and their watan. To al-Nadim, language represented the watan, the country; thus to learn foreign languages in a country where most of its population was illiterate and then inject it into the Egyptian spoken dialect meant to learn foreign habits and ideologies and to replace the Egyptian identity with a foreign one and to succumb to its influence and control. In this way, he warned, "you sleep the night a free patriot and you wake the next morning in the foreigner’s hands."  

Second, changing a people’s language under foreign threat or occupation would lead to the weakening of their ‘asabiyya and eventually

to its disappearance because “to lose language is to surrender oneself”. Therefore, preserving the national language would reinforce the national ‘asabiyya and through it the hope of regaining independence:

When the Arabs came to rule over the Turks and the Persians, they allowed these [subject] peoples to maintain and use their native languages. Neither through coercion nor through education, did the Arabs try to impose their language over these races, thus these subject peoples kept [their sense of national identity] alive and waited for the right opportunity to revolt, which they eventually did either out of their own initiative or as a result of foreign interference. The only person who would deny [the importance of language in maintaining national unity] is one who is ignorant and does not know how Persians, Afghans, Yemenis, Tunisians, Moroccans, Bulgarians, Rumanians, Serbians, Sudanese, Muslim Indians broke away from Arab, Turkish and Persian rule respectively.

No wonder, al-Nadim added, that European countries, once established as independent political unities, imposed one national language in order to eliminate any aspirations for independence that might be encouraged by the use of a different language. These views did not mean a total rejection of the foreign languages, on the contrary al-Nadim differentiated between the learning of a second language and substituting a foreign language for the Arabic language:

What is meant by the term abandoning a language is when one ignores his language and replaces it with a foreign language. However, learning a foreign language and borrowing translated terms from it while one still maintains and protects his native language by using it in his everyday speech does not amount to an abandonment of the language because the fusion of languages is an essential foundation of civilization.

The third reason was the religious dimension of the Arabic language. Faithful to the Islamic tradition, ‘Abdallah al-Nadim believed sincerely that the Qur’an was literally untranslatable, because Allah’s truth was accessible only through the Arabic in which the Qur’an was written:

(33) Ibid., 54.
(35) Ibid., 1:340.
(36) Ibid., 1:14.
I blame a Muslim who neglects his language to the point where he forgets it, thus forgetting the Qur’an, which if translated in the most elegant style into a foreign language would appear as a simple story that any writer is capable of writing and thus lose its eloquence.37

By linking Arabic to religion or a specific language to the sacred, he was proposing a cultural concept that Benedict Anderson decades later called “great antiquities”, namely that:

A particular script-language offered privileged access to ontological truth, precisely because it was an inseparable part of that truth. It was this idea that called into being the great transcontinental sodalities of Christendom, the umma of Islam, and the rest.38

However, it was the decline of such cultural concepts, Anderson asserted, that led to the emergence of modern nations and modern nationalism in the first place39. So why would al-Nadim try to use this purportedly cultural concept to defend Egypt’s national language and therefore its national identity?

By focusing on the sacred aspect of the Arabic language it is possible that al-Nadim was reverting to one of his early methods as a propagandist: that of manipulating and molding public opinion. Since he believed that a nation’s independence rested on preserving its language, he had to resort to any available argument that would help him win his battle; by touching upon the sensitive topic of religion, he was trying to mobilize the Egyptians and gain their sympathy. In 1892 the situation was critical, the Egyptian government, under British influence, had decided to replace Arabic with English as the language of instruction in schools40. At the same time, William Wilcocks, a British engineer, called for the use of the Egyptian vernacular instead of literary Arabic which, he argued, was the main reason for the Egyptian lack of inventiveness41. ‘Abdallah al-Nadim could not conceive this measure and invitation as other than a direct threat to the Egyptian national

---

(37) Ibid., 1: 470.
(39) Ibid., 20-25.
identity: “Many people intend to destroy this language [Arabic] and to push us to speak another language so as to lose by its destruction our identity and honor”\(^\text{42}\). To him two factors might lead to the weakening of the language: the first was the use of foreign words in the daily language, and the second was adopting foreign languages instead of Arabic as languages of instruction: “Once this happens in any nation it will lose its language, followed by religion and national history; for language is linked to religion as the soul is linked to the body”\(^\text{43}\).

How, then, did al-Nadim decide to counterattack and save the Arabic language from oblivion?

I believe that by establishing the solid bond between religion and the Arabic language, al-Nadim was trying to mobilize the population and to create a favorable climate in which to launch his own project to revive the Arabic language as the one official language. He started by acknowledging the fact that Arabic was facing two major problems: the first was its inability to adapt and cope with technological advancement and the new technical terminology, this forcing people to insert foreign terminology into their written and oral discourse\(^\text{44}\). Thus words completely foreign to Arabic were in common use, such as sodium, platinum, hydrogen, magnesium, which had no Arabic equivalents. The second was the huge number of the ignorant, which compelled writers and journalists, among them al-Nadim himself, to use colloquial Egyptian in their writings in order to reach a wider public\(^\text{45}\). Thus “the Arabic language confronted two armies, the army of the foreign intruder and the army of colloquialism”\(^\text{46}\). After he had diagnosed the problem, he prescribed what I call the treatment. Concerning the problem of illiteracy and the extensive use of the vernacular, he recommended that students be taught a simplified Arabic in order to encourage them to learn it quickly\(^\text{47}\). Meanwhile, the Arabic language needed to be rejuvenated, in order to reach more people and

---

\(^{42}\) Ibid., 1: 169.

\(^{43}\) Ibid., 1: 179.

\(^{44}\) Ibid., 1: 180.

\(^{45}\) The importance of the use of colloquial by al-Nadim and its impact on Egyptian nationalism will be addressed in the next article.

\(^{46}\) Ibid., 1: 226.

at the same time to preserve its eloquence and grandeur. Therefore al-Nadim suggested the use of a simpler form of Arabic than the one used in classical books yet one which paid due attention to grammar—effectively a new language in journalism that would reach and satisfy both the learned and the ignorant:

I want to address you in a language that can be easily understood by children, men and women and does not need explanation nor a teacher to explain it for you. This language is as simple as the colloquial (baladi) tongue yet is grammatically correct.48

Concerning the problem of the inability of the Arabic language to adapt itself and to cope with technological advancement, al-Nadim believed in the ability of the Arabic language to modernize itself and to cope with the spirit of the modern age because “a true language is a living one49”. He called for the creation of a council for the Arabic language which would include ‘ulama from al-Azhar and other scholars in different fields, with the aim of adapting or creating new Arabic technical terms for the foreign ones commonly in use50. Before him, Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq in 1860 and ‘Abdallah Fikri in 1876 had made similar suggestions51; for al-Nadim, however, the raison d’être for this council was different. To introduce foreign words and terms freely into everyday Arabic would eventually lead to its end. Thus al-Nadim urged Egyptians, to use one language (Arabic) as a means of instruction in schools firstly, to prevent the creation of a hybrid language composed of a mixture of foreign and Arabic words without rules or laws to regulate it and, secondly, to prevent children from growing up being neither Egyptians nor foreigners52.

To cope with the spirit of the modern age meant reform should be realistic in its goals. The council could not change at a stroke the daily language used by society. It simply aimed at replacing foreign words that were employed daily with Arabic words and recording them

---

(49) Ibid., 1: 471.
(50) Ibid., 1: 180.
in books; the decision and the timing to abandon the foreign words was then left to the wisdom and choice of society. Language is a living organism; it could accept or reject any word implanted in it. But in order to be effective the council should be a professional body. Al-Nadim offered several suggestions in order to achieve this aim: the council should gather a large membership from all disciplines and professions and should deal with a multitude of themes, to publish new words, and to cooperate with other councils in other Arab countries in order to unite efforts and avoid confusion.

A few months later, in 1893, such a Council for the Arabic language was established and was presided over by Muhammad Tawfiq al-Bakri, who gathered several ‘ulama and scholars: Shaykh al-Shanqiti al-Kabir, Muhammad ‘Abduh, Hamza Fathallah, Hasan al-Tawil, Muhammad Bayram, Muhammad al-Muwallihi, Muhammad ‘Uthman Jalal and Muhammad Kamal. The Council met several times and was able to introduce several new words which are still in common use. These words were the subject of heated discussions between al-Nadim and Jurji Zaydan, who accepted some and rejected others. The Council lived for only a few months, but the idea survived until the next century, when Majma’ al-Lugha al-‘Arabiyya was established in Cairo. From the few words the Council had adopted and are still in use in our days, we can appreciate the importance of this Council and, therefore, acknowledge the importance of the ideas advocated by ‘Abdallah al-Nadim.

Language was an essential criterion for establishing national identity, al-Nadim believed. But what should be the relationship between Egyptians and the Arabic-speaking non-Egyptians living in or outside Egypt, i.e., the shawam?

After reading issue No. 35 of your magazine I became certain that you are faithful to national Arab objectives, which you made public through your

---

(53) Ibid., 2: 685.
(54) Ibid., 2: 673–86.
(56) Among these words: marha for bravo, ‘im sabahan for bonjour, ‘im masa’an for bonsoir, bahu for salon, numra for numero, mi’taf for par-dessus, shurti for policeman, muhami for avocat.
magazine among all the Arabs regardless of their religion; your aim has always been the progress of Arab unity. Since I am a wholehearted supporter of this national principle, I have sent this amount of money as subscription in your magazine which is bound to become an effective instrument for the dissemination of national Arab principles among the Arab nation which is in need to be assembled under the banner of union.  

This letter was not sent in the heyday of pan-Arabism in the 1950s and 1960s but in 1893 from a Syrian living in Russia to 'Abdallah al-Nadim, who was fiercely advocating Egyptian nationalism and Egypt's right to become a separate national entity. Was al-Nadim advocating pan-Arabism? How did he view the Syrians?

No doubt al-Nadim believed in the ability of the Arabic language to unite people. In the first article he wrote about reviving the Arabic language in his journal *al-Tankit wal-Tabkit* in 1881, he addressed his speech to *al-Natīq bil-dad* and not only to his Egyptian fellow citizens. However he did not preach Arab unity as a political program; he rather advocated it as a kind of sentimental and brotherly bond that the Arabs should cultivate in their confrontation with Europe. To him, the Egyptians and the Syrians (*shawam*) were first of all “neighbors brought together by language, race and loyalty to the Sultan” and *al-Sham* was an Ottoman land inhabited by the Arabs and others and as such was the sister of Egypt, which was characterized by imperial privileges (*imtiyyazat shahaniyya*). Thus they had to unite in their opinions and their political beliefs for they knew that their lands were the object of European imperialism. Egyptians and Syrians were neighbors, brothers, but they constituted two separate political entities. Their agreement was extremely important but this, he pointed out, should not result in the creation of a single political entity. Why was their agreement so important? Al-Nadim argued that their relationship was due to factors of geography and history; not only were they neighbors but the link between them went back to ancient times when Egyptians and Phoenicians joined forces in traveling all

---

around the ancient world and spreading their knowledge to ancient Greece\(^{61}\). Agreement between the two entities was inevitable if they wanted to survive and face European imperialism. Al-Nadim believed that their combined efforts had once given humanity civilization and he invited them to join forces again in order to confront the West and its designs. Yet it is clear that for him this alliance was an exercise in political realism and not the fulfilment of a patriotic or national dream. Language, like the history and geography that linked them, was not a matter of design but of coincidence.

**Religion**

As to the third basic element of Egypt’s national identity, religion, ‘Abdallah al-Nadim never regarded religion per se as a part of Egyptian national identity. He did, however, appreciate its importance and link it to the two other components. In a political sense, he had only one concern: to preserve Egypt’s national identity. He expressed his feelings through writing, demonstrating, fighting. He thus used both legitimate and illegitimate methods to attain his goal. “The relation”, argued Hobsbawm, “between religion and national consciousness grows closer where nationalism becomes a massive force”. Al-Nadim seems to have realized this connection in advance and understood just how much influence religion was able to exercise on the human spirit. He even added in his last years the title al-Idrisi to his name, limiting himself to a descendant of Hasan the grandson of the Prophet\(^{62}\). This does not mean that he deliberately abused religion, but rather that he was a true Muslim, a true believer who saw no conflict between being a Muslim, a follower of the Ottoman Caliphate, and being a true Egyptian. And if religion could have so much influence on people, then why not use it for patriotic purposes? He maintained that religion exercised greater influence on the spirit than any human laws. The promises and threats a religion was able to deliver could not be matched by any other human authority. A true believer would never doubt the authenticity of his religion when it

---

(62) Ibid., 1: 87.
promised him heaven if he was obedient and hell if disobedient. Thus a soldier, al-Nadim argued, would sacrifice his life if he was promised paradise in the after-life, but would not do so for a mere political cause, or for a politician. Other factors, I firmly believe, pushed al-Nadim close to considering religion an essential part of Egypt's national identity. Firstly, he seemed to believe that the presence of several religions in the same country could “lead to dispute, internal discord and external intervention”, so that to achieve an independent, stable, prosperous state, one religion should prevail. That is what Europe had done in order to maintain itself, he argued, and that is what Egypt should also do. This was not an invitation to confront the Copts in Egypt; to al-Nadim the religious identity of Egypt was well defined. It was a Muslim country and the Copts, deeply rooted in it, had accepted this fact and did not contest it. Secondly, he strongly believed in the role played by the clergy in politics: “The clergy in Europe are the masters of politics and the politicians are the guardians of religion”. Although he was critical of the minor role the ‘ulama were playing in Egypt’s political life and their mediocre level of education, he believed in their potential because they “deserve more than anybody else to manage politics and the kings who are facing problems should consult them”. They could, he insisted, become well educated and well read, able to interpret laws, treaties and international affairs better than anyone else.

But what kind of Islam was al-Nadim preaching? He was very specific about this point: it was a tolerant Islam that would enable Egypt to interact with those around it:

Goodness, all goodness, lies in adhering to religion in the sense of following the preaching of the prophet and maintaining it, without arguing, insulting or being contemptuous of others [who might disagree with you]. It is this kind of adherence to religion which the enemies [of Islam] call fanaticism.

(63) Ibid., 1: 339.
(64) Ibid., 1: 343.
(65) Ibid., 1: 207.
(66) Ibid.
(67) Ibid.
(68) Ibid., 2: 924.
Hobsbawm maintains that “religion is an ancient and well-tried method of establishing a sense of community through common practice and a sort of brotherhood between people⁶⁹”. Al-Nadim had grasped this reality long before and wished to transform religion into an efficient method of reaching the masses inside and outside Egypt. He perceived the world as a dichotomy: the West versus the East, the West wanting to colonize and humiliate the East. The West was Christian and the East was Muslim. But it was the East’s fault that it had been colonized:

Weakness has taken its hold on us Easterners in general and Egyptians in particular because of our defeatism and division. As a result, it has become easier for foreigners to accomplish their aims [in our region].⁷⁰

The East, he argued, had common interests (al-maslaha al-sharqiyya) that should be defended by all Easterners alike, and this could not happen if they did not unite in their views and opinions. He called upon all Easterners, whether Arabs, Turks, Syrians, Egyptians, Indians, Yemenis, Iraqis, Persians, Tunisians and Morrocans to do this and to work for an ideal more important than their own nationality: a unified East⁷¹. The East had nothing in common except Islam. ‘Abdallah al-Nadim was aware of this fact, and was successful in exploiting it. Religion was not only an essential part of Egypt’s national identity; it had great potential for becoming an important element of the East’s national identity as well. The East had to use all its potential in its struggle against the West and one of its most effective resources was Islam. Was al-Nadim anticipating the idea of third world countries? Or was he simply under the influence of al-Afghani? His Pan-Islamic rhetoric notwithstanding, it is well known that he was not a consistent Pan-Islamist and implicitly advocated the establishment of a secular political system. His relation with al-Afghani was somewhat equivocal. On the one hand, he never considered himself one of his faithful students or followers; on the contrary, he thought himself his equal as an activist and reformer. On the other hand, he admired al-Afghani’s political activism and his rebellious spirit. He appreciated al-Afghani’s style

---

(69) Eric Hobsbawm, Nations, 68.
(71) Ibid., 1: 413.
more than his ideas, it seems clear. He was influenced by his character rather than by what he had to say.

Another method to reach the masses was through the religious *khutba* (oration or sermon). As an orator of great talent, al-Nadim believed deeply in the effects of the *khutba* because it was usually linked to the prophet's practice and *hadith*, which for every Muslim Egyptian represented the ideal to follow\(^2\). But the *khutba* in his time was used in a negative way because preachers talked about the renunciation of the world (*zuhd fi al-dunia*). Their impact was devastating on Egyptian audiences, more powerful than that of the press and the rulers. Al-Nadim accordingly called Egyptians to action: renunciation of the world, *zuhd fi al-dunia*, he argued, prevented Egyptians from progressing and attaining knowledge. The aim of life could not simply be to remain idle and depend on the will of God. To renounce worldly matters and to accept the will of God did not prevent the prophet from working hard to settle the nation's affairs, he maintained. So why should Egyptians remain idle? To do so would bring grave consequences: it was as if the Egyptians wanted the foreigner to remain in power. The only way to revive the Egyptian spirit was to alter the content of the *khutba*, which should discuss not only religious matters but also affairs of the state, in this way mobilizing the people against the foreigner.

It is important to understand that Egypt's task in seeking to preserve its national identity was not an easy one. The constituents of its national identity, as maintained by al-Nadim, might undergo minor or radical change due to internal or external factors; this could alter the national identity altogether. He was aware of this fact. So he called upon Egyptians to fight the enemy—external or internal—who would use every available means to change Egypt's identity and turn the country into a docile vassal. He even preached the adoption of a superior model, though this model should be Egyptianized and not adopted blindly, thereby endangering Egypt's national identity. He finally advocated the implementation of a whole political program, which topic I shall discuss in my second article.

\(^2\) Ibid., 1: 416.
Egypt’s National Identity According to ‘Abdallah al-Nadim

References

Abstract

This article examines the constituents of Egypt's national identity as understood by ‘Abdallah al-Nadim, the orator of the ‘Urahi revolution. It seems that al-Nadim was preoccupied constantly with one single idea: Egypt. Throughout his career he tried to define the nature of the Egyptian “watan”, its political and economic system, and its social and cultural background. The paper will argue that al-Nadim presented a complex, evolved definition of an Egyptian nationalism based on specific elements which he considered necessary for the creation of an Egyptian national identity.

ملخص

بحث هذه المقالة في مكونات الهوية الوطنية كما فهمها عبد الله النذير، خطيب الثورة العرامية. فهو كان مهتمًا بالدوام بفكرة مصر الوطن. ولقد حاول النذير خلال حياته الاحتفالية، أن يحدد طبيعة وعاليتها الوطن المصري ونظامه السياسي والاقتصادي، فضلًا عن مكوناته الاجتماعية والثقافية. تحاول هذه الدراسة أن تثير من خلال كتابات النذير الصحفي، أنه قدَّم فكرة متطورة ومركزية عن القومية المصرية ارتكزت إلى عناصر محددة أساسية لتكوين الهوية الوطنية المصرية.