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*Revisiting Ideological Borrowings in Syrian Nationalist Narratives:
Sati 'al-Husri, Michel 'Aflaq and Zaki al-Arsuzi*

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Introduction¹

The intellectual origins of Syrian nationalism may be traced back to 18th and 19th century European nationalism. Interestingly, while modern Syrian nationalism evolved in the second half of the 20th century, the narratives surrounding it were broadly based on the specific interpretation of nationalism that emerged in Europe. However, in this paper I propose to take a different approach, and trace the formulation of Syrian nationalist thought as something that emanates from the way these three Syrian nationalist thinkers viewed and conceptualised the idea of the nation and its life-giving ideology i.e. nationalism. More importantly, I seek to identify the roots of the Syrian conception of nationalism as an ideological borrowing from the two key European Schools (the German and the French). Given this framework, I argue, there is a need to bring into the foreground two interrelated overarching questions: First, were these nationalist narratives original in their content and reflection? Second, how did these thinkers conceptualise their nationalist ideologies in relation to the European conceptions of nationalism?

A careful study of the literature on the conception of nationalism in the thought of these three thinkers shows that the debate has primarily focused on identifying notions of nationalism in the Syrian context to be borrowed from one European tradition – German nationalist thought – particularly Herder and Fichte. However, this study sets out to examine the duality of sources (French and German traditions) that have influenced the development of nationalist thought in modern Syria. While doing so, this study will engage with these three Syrian thinkers in a combined framework and suggest that their modes of nationalist thinking both introduced and consolidated the basic tenets of Syrian identity manifested in the Ba’ath ideology in Syria.

In dealing with the relationship between the European conceptions of nationalism (particularly featured in the works of Herder, Fichte and Renan) and the formulation of Syrian national identity in the 20th century, I shall proceed as follows. I first highlight the contingent nature of the emergence of the politicised notion of nationalism in the European context in line with contextualising the ideological borrowings of European nationalist thought manifested in the Syrian nationalist narratives. I shall then examine the basic tenets of Syrian nationalist ideologies, as formulated by al-Husri, ‘Aflaq, and al-‘Arsuzi – the most prominent Syrian thinkers in the 20th century (Saba’, 2005: 270).² In this sense, this study aims to identify briefly the origins of the emerged nationalist thought in modern Syria through investigating the works of al-Husri, ‘Aflaq and al-‘Arsuzi. In its largest part, it seeks to examine the dimensions of these ideological borrowings and place them within a comparative theoretical framework. This intellectual exercise allows us to underscore how the undercurrents or basis of Syrian nationalist thought is a replica of the two European theories of nationalism.

Theoretical Overview: Visions of Nationalism

An overview of the theoretical debate around what constitutes nations and nationalism reveals the difficulty of producing a unitary definition of these two ideologically loaded concepts (Calhoun, 1997: 7–8; Hugh Seton-Watson, 1977: 5; Smith, 1983: 3–6). However, in terms of its genesis, it has been widely accepted that the 18th century was the age when the politicised

¹ I wish to thank Dr Omar Imady and the anonymous reviewers for their invaluable feedback. I would also like to thank Dr Amalendu Misra for his support and guidance.

² Saba’ called al-‘Arsuzi and ‘Aflaq: ‘The knights of the Ba’ath Party.’

notion of nation and nationalism came into being.³ While the emergence of the politicised concept of nationalism is a complete Western construct (Hayes, 1949: 8–9; Kedourie, 1961: 9; Smith, 1973: 7), yet these revolutionary ideas proposed by European philosophers gradually spread to other parts of the world (Blom, 2000: 3). Most of these ideas featured in the modernist English school of nationalism, most notably in Anthony Smith (1983; 1991), Benedict Anderson (2006), Ernest Gellner (1994; 1998) and John Breuilly (1993).

The unanticipated nature of the field can be found in the writings of the founding fathers Renan, Herder and Fichte. Suffice to say that these two schools of thought have laid the foundations for a dichotomised perception of the nation either as organic/natural or constructionist entity (Dawisha, 2002: 7–13; 2003: 60–5). Within this context, the most defining dichotomy between the two conceptions, organic and civic, can be seen in the way these thinkers envisaged the notion of belonging. Thus, one might ask how they theorise the sense of belonging to this new emerged political notion. In order to answer this question, it is sufficient to illustrate what is meant by the *voluntary* and *non-voluntary* belonging to the nation, and to consider how these conceptions have further laid the foundations for the main argument that nations are ‘natural’ or ‘invented’. In other words, is the nation’s origin primordial/natural or modernist/constructed? (Miscovic, 2008: 85).

Cultural/Organic Conception of Nationalism

From the philosophical and cultural movement provisioned by the thinkers of Romanticism, it is clear that the movement affirms the necessity of ‘subjective’ and ‘emotional’ characters of the nation. Their concept of the nation is intensified by emphasising the centrality of the same language, culture, pure race, education, history and being attached to one’s soil. Defining belonging to the nation as non-voluntary, the nation is primarily viewed as an extension of the family. The main contributors to this school of thought were German thinkers, especially the Romantics who dominated German nationalist discourse in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. In fact, the idea of German nationalism arose as a reaction to the Napoleonic Wars, as it advocated the idea of the cultural unity of Germany. The most notable contributor to the idea of Pan-Germanism was propounded by Herder and his later foe Fichte (Motyl, 2001).⁴ Herder was particularly enthused by the restoration of German culture and language. He adopted a particular ‘constitutive approach to language’ in which it becomes the manifestation of thinking and communication among people (ibid). More importantly, language, to him, defines the distinctiveness of the nation. Although Herder used the element of blood relations as a constitutor to the German nation, yet his concept of racial superiority did not lead him to consider Germany as superior to other nations. In this regard, he advocated the concept of particularity defined by the distinctive language, race, and culture of each nation rather than racial superiority, while he further celebrated the notion of a diverse world (*PW*: 379).

Fichte followed Herder’s perception of language as a definer of the nation, yet he also supplemented this linguistic conception of nationalism with other elements. Given the Prussian defeat at the hands of Napoleon in 1806 at Jena, Fichte’s notion of the German nation promoted a more particular and political nationalist conception that is different from his earlier foe Herder. Nonetheless, although Fichte and Herder shared the same concepts of Romantic

³ For further reading on the emergence of the politicised concept of nation and nationalism see: Guntram H. Herb and David H. Kaplan (eds.), *Nations and Nationalism: A Global Historical Overview 1880–1945*, Volume Two (California: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2008).

doctrine of the nation in that humanity is divided naturally according to unique cultural and linguistic differences (Smith and Hutchinson, 1994: 47), Fichte's departure from Herder is Fichte's sense of German racial superiority (see Adamson, 1881: 37 -9).

In addition, although Fichte contended that language and culture characterise the nation, he called for the need for the establishment of Germany as a state (Fichte: 2006). Within this essentially primordialist conception, this German Romantic version of nationalism experienced two phases: cultural and political. Herder, representing the father of the cultural perception of the nation, had the idea that the nation is a cultural construct and that the world is distinctively divided into language groups. The second phase, developed by Fichte, anticipates that after the realisation of the unique cultural character of the nation through unification of language and history, the nation should proceed to achieve its sovereignty of statehood (Smith 1983:17). In this sense, Fichte went a step further than Herder in defining the continual struggle of the nation in not only preserving its cultural character, but in realising its political sovereignty. However, in all cases, the nation precedes the state and that only through the realisation of cultural identity of the nation can the political state be achieved (see Dawisha 2002: 7).

Civic/Modernist Perception

The late 18th century witnessed flourishing nationalist sentiments provided by French thinkers. These liberal principles were an attempt to oppose the organic version of the nation elaborated by the German Romantics. The chief recognisable opposite characteristic in the French version is the belief that the essence of belonging to the nation is voluntary rather than a given or natural one. The Enlightenment encapsulated rationality and freedom of the individual, and envisaged the nation as a *sovereign* which in turn laid the first seeds of the notion of 'civic' nations. Among the most remarkable advocates of the French idea of nationalism is Renan, whose political ideology was inspired by the defeat of France in the Franco-Prussian War (1871). In his influential article 'What is a Nation?' (1882), Renan argued against the three defining factors enunciated by the Romantics, the notions that language, race and geographical particularities supply an adequate basis of the nation.

Substantively, Renan defied the Germanic assumption of 'pure race', suggesting instead that the constitution of the nation is based on the will and determination of the people. He further argued that communal pain, struggle and destiny are the main tools to construct national imagination. Renan insisted on selective history so much so that '*forgetting*' certain parts of history is needed to foster national identity (Renan: 1882). His conception of the nation is grounded on *the will of the people* to 'have many things in common' and that the claim of the purity of race, language and culture is impossible, as most of the modern nations were historically affected by 'its wars, its marriages, and its treaties' (1882).

Another idea that distinctively opposes the German doctrine that the nation is a political construct and an entity grounded in its subjects' consent is Renan's proposal that the 'will' of the people to be united superseded the ethno-linguistic unifications. He argues: 'There is something in man which is superior to language, namely, the will' (1882). More importantly, Renan, unlike Fichte and Herder, considered the state as an end in itself and that it precedes the nation, which further highlights his notion of the nation as a 'legitimate' political power and not as an ethnic natural entity realised by its cultural and linguistic identifications (1882).

Contextualising the Ideological Borrowings in the Syrian Context

Al-Husri, 'Aflaq and al-Arsuzi, while belonging to different racial and religious denominations, have been depicted as ideologues of Syrian nationalism.⁵ Since the early years of the 20th century, the Syrian national narrative traced in their writings relied heavily on the works of Herder, Fichte and Renan. As Paul Salem affirms, the emerged concept of nationalism between the 1950s and 1960s shows a 'devotion to the emanation in the spirit of modern Western nationalism' (1994: p. 49). Notably, when these Syrian thinkers borrowed these nationalist elements to theorise the definition of the nation between the 1920s and 1960s, their conceptions were anything but original. Within this context, their attempt to answer the question 'what formulates the nation?' reveals predominant borrowings and encounters with the two European versions of nationalism, cultural and civic. Interestingly, while the basis of their conceptualisation of nation and nationalism was distinctively cultural, other politicised features borrowed from Renan's civic national ideology can also be traced.

These borrowed ideologies represented two manifestations of Syrian national thought: cultural and political. 'Aflaq and Arsuzi represented the emergence of the political ideology in Syria in terms of the political institutionalisation of al-Husri's cultural conception of nationalism through establishing the Ba'ath Party ('Ayubi, 2009: 140). As a starting point, the manifestation of the cultural conception of nationalism in the early phase of Syrian national thought can be attributed to what Frantz Fanon distinctively illuminates as the need of post-independent regions to affirm the legitimacy of their existence. Such emphasis on the idea of the nation as a cultural entity confronts the pre-colonial repressive practices in diminishing the cultural identity of colonised nations (Fanon 1996: 236–7). In the Syrian context, al-Husri, 'Aflaq and al-Arsuzi conceptualised the nation as a linguistically defined entity and that it is a natural extension to the family (al-Husri 1985a: 28–29; 'Aflaq 1941; al-Arsuzi 1973: 213–6). While the nation is a cultural entity that foregrounds language, culture and history as the basis for the inculcation of national identity, yet another political facet of Syrian encounters with the French idea relates to the echoes of Renan, such as the elements of 'forgetting', the 'will and determination' of the people and 'common destiny and suffering' (Renan: 1882).

There is no direct admission of these theorists of the adaption of European thought in their nationalist writings. In this sense, the question of their ideological borrowings varied between direct and obvious copying, as in al-Husri's (see al-Husri 1928; 1951: 43–5, 65–78) and al-Arsuzi's nationalist theorisation (Watenpaugh 1996: 363–4), and a keen rejection as in 'Aflaq (Nordbruch 2009: 163). Nonetheless, such propositions would have been denied vehemently by these thinkers, given the dilemma they experienced during the struggle against colonial powers and in the post-independence era (1940s and 1960s) which made them uncomfortable with aligning their national ideologies with French and British national ideologies.

Some would argue that Syrian nationalist thought admired, and was influenced particularly by, Fichte and Herder (see Kuntzel, 2007: 25). In this sense, John Myhill illustrates the reaction of Arab nationalists towards the European schools of nationalism by stating that

⁵ While such a label is an oversimplification of other pioneer Syrian intellectuals such as Qustantin Zuriq and Salah Al-Bitar, these three nationalist theorists have formulated the main aspects of a Syria national identity under the Ba'ath.

they rejected British and French conceptions of nationalism and turned to German philosophers in an act of ‘conscious imitations’ for national aspirations (2006: 144–5; see also Tibi 1997: 117). In the same vein, Christopher Schumann’s demonstration of the ideological origins of the concept of nationalism that emerged after the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire has resulted from the ‘reception of primordial German nationalism rather than republican French nationalism’ (Schuman, 2010: 177). Such a proposition was also confirmed by Majed Khadduri who considered the great influence of the Germanic conception of the three Syrian thinkers ‘as a reaction to the French and English domination and to Zionism’ (Khadduri, 1970, 24).

Yet the influence of the French conception of nationalism was also established by Safouh Al-Akhrass, who stated:

Culturally, Western influence in general and the French influence in particular, left its mark – particularly on the minds of young intellectuals. This influence operated mainly through students who went abroad to study, and more importantly, through foreign private educational institutions established by different Western religious groups (al-Akhrass, 1972: 55).

Al-Akhrass’ point is a reflection of these Syrian thinkers who studied in France and were exposed to the French nationalist ideology. Such implicit attraction to the French national idea might also have been transmitted through the French language (see ‘Ayubi, 2009: 138; Benewick & Green, 1988: 4; El-Attrache, 1976: 18, 22; Lewis 2006). In the case of al-Husri, William L. Cleveland argues that al-Husri’s national concepts were:

drawn mainly from nineteenth century European thinkers. His intellectual introduction to Europe had been through the medium of French language, his first intellectual synthesis had centred around French scientific popularisers, sociologists, and educators, and he himself was largely a man of French culture and outlook (1971: 85).

A close reading of their texts and articles shows that the French idea of nationalism appealed and shaped their nationalist concepts. However this is not to say that there were not any other reasons for the adoption of French ideas such as the depiction of Renan’s definition of the nation as an entity constructed through its heroic past,⁶ which is reflected in ‘the need of Arab nationalists to re-create the real and mythical glories that reside in a distant period in their history’ (Dawisha, 2003: 61). Taking into consideration the tremulous situation of the Arab world in the post-independence era during the 1940s, there was an urgent need for these theorists to invent a sense of historical solidarity among people, and to make use of a glorious past (*majid*) to implement a unified image of history. This emphasis on *selecting* and implementing a certain way of teaching history is a French notion.

Within this context, in order to understand the origin of Syrian nationalism in the thought of these ideologues, there is a need to demonstrate the relationship between these three Syrian thinkers. This in turn will highlight the influential role of al-Husri’s theorisation of nationalism in the institutionalisation of Ba’athist ideology advocated by ‘Aflaq and al-Arsuzi.

⁶ This can be detected in Renan’s words: ‘The nation, like the individual, is the outcome of a long past of efforts, sacrifices, and devotions. Of all cults, that of the ancestors is the most legitimate: our ancestors is the most legitimate: our ancestors have made us what we are. A heroic past with great men and glory’ (1882).

Al-Husri's Impact on the Formulation of 'Aflaq's and al-Arsuzi's Nationalist Ideologies

In terms of the relationship between the three thinkers, I have opted to devote considerable space to the views of al-Husri, 'Aflaq and al-Arsuzi in order to present the content of their nationalist thought. I begin with al-Husri, as he has widely been considered the 'better known exponents' (Karpat, 1968: 28) of secular nationalism,⁷ and his nationalist legacy appealed to Ba'athist ideologues ('Aflaq and al-Arsuzi). In this context, the influence of Sati al-Husri's writings cannot be underestimated in terms of the ideological construction of the Ba'ath Party. The historian Bassam Tibi argues that the co-founders of the Ba'ath Party were heavily influenced by the writings of Sati al-Husri. He states that '[t]he significance of Sati al-Husri[s] work lies first... in that his writings themselves had a considerable impact on political developments in the Middle East... [and] the guiding principles for the leading nationalist parties and organisation... the Arab Ba'th/Rebirth Party' (1997: 203). Khadduri further claims that the Ba'ath ideology proposed by 'Aflaq and al-Arsuzi, is a mere extension to al-Husri's nationalist thought (1970: 205). Another prominent thinker in the field, Adeed Dawisha emphasises the ideological influence of al-Husri on the formulation of Ba'athist nationalist thought (2003: 3). More specifically, Arshin Adib-Moghaddam affirms that the role of al-Husri's nationalist thought has not just influenced 'Aflaq and al-Arsuzi but rather his ideology was 'institutionalised' in the Ba'ath political party later in Syria (2006: p. 18; see also Salem, 1994: 49). Such influence was even welcomed by al-Husri who explicitly 'allied himself with the Syrian Ba'ath Party of Michel 'Aflaq. The main source of the Party's ideology was al-Husri's own (Moubayed, 2006: 439; see also Kazziha, 1979: 60; Nadhmi, 1985: 148; Taylor, 1988: 39).

It may be said that the three thinkers embraced different ideological standpoints which subsequently affected the formulation of Syrian nationalist thought. Al-Husri, the father of the idea of secular nationalism in Syria advocated cultural perception and his ideology was followed later by 'Aflaq and al-Arsuzi. However, while 'Aflaq and al-Arsuzi followed al-Husri's cultural conception of seeing language and history as the driving elements of the nation, 'Aflaq can be considered to be the one who advocated the political conception of the nation through his writings. On the other hand, al-Arsuzi adopted the modernist dimension of nationalist thought by implementing, in addition to the main cultural notion of the nation, a statist understanding of Syrian national identity, and the one who introduced the thought of citizenship in the Syrian context.

Sati' al-Husri (1882–1968)

Al-Husri helped King Faysal of Syria in 1921 during his reign, and became the dean of the faculty of law at the University of Baghdad, and minister of education and archaeology. His ideas were extraordinary and 'revolutionary' to his age, and made his nationalist ideology attractive to later Syrian ideologues (Moubayed, 2006: p. 437). He played an influential role in the newly established Syrian state under King Faysal after the fall of the Ottoman Empire. His interest in the unity of national education made him minister of education in the Syrian state from March to July 1920 (Moubayed, 2006: 437–9). More importantly, al-Husri was the first

⁷ Sati al-Husri has been widely considered as the father of Arab nationalism; his legacy is often considered as the basis for Arab nationalist thought in the region. For further reading see: Sylvia Haim, *Arab Nationalism*, (Berkeley: '[n.p.]', 1964), pp. 43–54; Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798–1939* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 311–6.

to introduce the ‘core subject called *Qawmiyya* (Nationalism)’ (Moubayed, 2006: 439). During the 1920s, he further advocated the role of history and education in raising national consciousness. He implemented his nationalist ideology by delivering numerous lectures and publishing more than twenty books on the same subject. His service as a general director of education until 1927 placed him in a perfect position to influence the curriculum under the mandate system. Moreover, al-Husri considered schools to be the most influential place for implementing his nationalist ideology. His interest in the way ‘history’ is taught at schools is considered to be a medium for raising national consciousness in the minds of young scholars (see Goode, 2007: 199).

In terms of al-Husri’s encounters with the European philosophy of nationalism, his attraction can be attributed to being caught up by the demise of the Ottoman Empire and the need to formulate a theoretical basis for the Arab world. In an attempt to discover the grounds of nationalism, he was concerned to find an objective reasoning for the political transformation in the region especially during the period of the 1920s to 1950s. Owing to the political situation, al-Husri’s preoccupation with constituting a national ideology that united the Arabs was illustrated by providing the reader with unlimited examples drawn from the West (see al-Husri: 1951, pp. 43–5, 65–77, 78). His overwhelming desire to reach a wider audience had made him propose his nationalist principles through ‘a spare but forceful literary style’ (Cleveland, 1971: 90; see also Hourani, 1970: 312).

Vigorously debated in his books was the question pertaining to the theoretical basis of the emergence of Western nationalism, especially Germanic and French, and how these Western nationalist sentiments are adapted in his nationalist ideology (al-Husri, 1964a: 15–6).⁸ The rhetorical questions asked at the beginning of most of his books were: ‘What is a nation? What are the main characteristics that distinguish nations from each other? What are the main factors that make certain group of people feel that they are one nation (al-Husri, 1959: 31; 1985a: 15–6).’⁹ Such propositions force us to evaluate the originality of al-Husri’s nationalist ideology, as this originality is hugely doubted by many theorists. For example, Sylvia Haim considered al-Husri’s nationalist conceptions as an ideology that lacks originality (Haim: 1964: 39; see also Zuwiyya-Yammak, 1966: 13). Nonetheless, most critics attributed al-Husri’s nationalist borrowings only to the Germanic school of thought, particularly Fichte and Herder. Within this context, Lu’ayy Safi criticised the direct influence of the German Romantics on al-Husri’s nationalist ideology, stating that al-Husri’s theorisation was ‘a replica of the one advocated by the German nationalists J. G. Herder and J. G. Fichte’ (1994: 142). In line with this, Suleiman argues that al-Husri’s construction of nationalist ideology is ‘remarkably similar to those of the 18th century German writer Herder... [and] to the ideas put forward by the 19th century writer Fichte’. He went further to claim that it is ‘nothing but a variation on the theme of German nationalism’ (Suleiman, 2003: 11–12). This view is further supported by Tibi who regards the foundation of al-Husri’s nationalist thought as a ‘synthesis of the German idea of the nation’ (Tibi, 1997: p. 142). More specifically, Cleveland demonstrates the resemblance of al-Husri’s nationalist sentiments to those of Fichte. He argues that al-Husri was particularly

⁸ This book will be used in a different edition.

⁹ Al-Husri answered these questions by providing a theoretical and objective analysis of the Western emergence of nationalism, following the nationalist sentiments of the three Western philosophers, Herder, Fichte and Renan.

captivated by Fichte's *Addresses to the German Nation* (2008).¹⁰ These echoes and encounters between Fichte and al-Husri were in terms of their propositions of language, history, national unity and national education (Cleveland, 1971: 85–6; Viereck, 2004: xxii–xxiii).

Al-Husri's Ideological Encounters with Herder and Fichte

In the case of al-Husri's depictions of Fichte and Herder, he primarily advocated a romanticised conception of nation and nationalism based on both linguistic and historical unity. His central idea of the origin of the nation is formulated through two stages: first, the nation comes into existence after recognising the particularity of its language and its history; and second, the nation preserves its existence through the will and determination of its subjects. In the course of his discussion of what constitutes the nation, al-Husri emphasised the construction of an ideal 'national character' through implementing national education and enforcing army conscription (Al-Husri, 1944: 50; 1985a: 450).

Al-Husri states: 'The foundations for formulating nation and nationalism are unity of language and history. This is because unity in these two factors paves the way for unity of feelings and inclinations, unity of sufferings and hopes, unity of culture and traditions, thus making the people feel that they are the sons of one nation, distinguished from other nations' (al-Husri, 1964a: 249). This romanticised construction is not very distinct from Herder's and Fichte's notions of the origin of the nation. In a more explicit adaptation of the romantic ideology, al-Husri defines the nation as 'a living being, with life and feeling, life through its language and feeling through its history' (1985a: 63). Another dimension to his cultural conception is how he perceived the primacy of language and history. In his influential lecture 'Elements of Nationalism' (1928), al-Husri's deep influence of Herder and Fichte prevailed. First, in his definition of the primacy of language, he followed Herder's spiritual definition of language as a bond between subjects. Herder further asserts that an eternal national language will be achieved by the internalisation of language in the manner of thinking. Such formation of language is naturalised in that it is transmitted through the familial bond. Herder states:

the formation of a familiar manner of thinking through the instruction of upbringing and since the instruction of the single soul is the parental language's circle of ideas, the further formation of human instruction through the spirit of the family, through which spirit nature has united the whole species, becomes also the further formation of language (PW: 141).

This alliance between the formations of thought is internalised in the formation of language which, in return, constructs the particularity of each nation. As Herder states: 'each nation speaks in accordance with its thought and thinks in accordance with its speech' (PW: 50). Al-Husri stated clearly that 'this section is taken from Herder and that it is very influential to what we believe in' (1959: 55). He also clearly quoted Herder's words in describing the language as it is the 'tribal core' and the 'soul' for forming the 'national thought' (1959, 56).¹¹ More importantly, Herder conceived language as the 'soul and spirit of the nation' (Minogue, 1967: 60). It is the 'medium' between the inner self and the consciousness of the individual. Illustratively, this Herderian notion of language is mimicked in al-Husri's words:

¹⁰ This book will later be used in a different edition.

¹¹ These words are directly quoted from Herder (PW: 143). These concepts and phrases have been required without even referencing. So it can be argued that Herder's conception had been internalised.

Language is the most influential spiritual tie which binds mankind together. First, it is the means of mutual understanding among individuals. In addition, it is the instrument of thought... Finally, language is the means for transmission from ideas and acquired knowledge from fathers to sons, from ancestors to descendants. The language with which man grows up melds his thought in a special manner just as it deeply influences his sentiments as the language which the individual listens to since childhood is the language of the mother, it is these childhood lyrics that influence his sentimental identity. Therefore, it is found that unity of language establishes a kind of unity of thought and feelings which binds individuals with a long and interconnected series of intellectual and sentimental ties. Within this context, we can say that language is the strongest tie that binds individuals with groups (al-Husri: 1928).

This quote highlights al-Husri's naturalised perception of the transmission of language through parental upbringing. Al-Husri supports Herder's idea of the ultimate role of language in sustaining and preserving the particularity of the nation during times of wars, subjugation and suppression (see al-Husri: 1928 Tibi, pp. 129–30).

More distinctive encounters with Herder are grounded in having a particular national character constructed by renovating history. Such perception conceives that each individual is a 'folk-character' who is a reflection of 'national culture'. Therefore, it is essential that they preserve their national character and transmit it from generation to generation (Hayes 1949: 29-30). In Herder's own words:

As a mineral water derives its component parts, its operative powers, and its flavour from the soil through which it flows, so the ancient character of peoples arose from the family features, the climate, the way of life and education, the early actions and employments that were peculiar to them. The manners of the fathers took deep root and became the internal prototype of the race (quoted in Hayes 1949: 30; see also Barnard, 1965: 58).

While these words highlight the non-voluntary/naturalistic sense of belonging to the nation, Herder affirms that the particularity of national identity is affirmed by the very natural features of each nation that are transmitted and intensified by both racial and environmental identifications. However, although al-Husri adopted both Fichte's and Herder's linguistic and cultural foundations of the nation, he disregarded the notion that pure race or environment are prerequisites for the formulation of the nation (al-Husri 1928; el-Attrache, 1976: 26). In such an argument, al-Husri disregarded Herder's notion and picked on Renan's reactionary argument of the impossibility of constituting a homogeneous national identity based on race and environment (1928).

Yet al-Husri continued to use Herder's ideas in relation to the primacy of the role of language. In his *Letters on the Advancement of Humanity*, Herder masterfully associated the belonging of the nation with speaking the original language: "whoever was raised in the same language, who poured his heart into it, and learned to express his soul in it, he belongs to the nation (*Volk*) of this language" (quoted in Patten, 2010: 667). This enforced belonging to the nation, mediated by speaking the same language, was strongly emphasised by al-Husri:

Every Arab-speaking people is an Arab people. Every individual belonging to one of these Arabic-speaking peoples is an Arab. And if he does not recognise

this, and if he is not proud of his Arabism, then we must look for the reasons that have made him take this stand... But under no circumstances should we say: “As long as he does not wish to be an Arab, and as long as he is disdainful of his Arabness, then he is not an Arab.” He is an Arab regardless of his own wishes. Whether ignorant, indifferent, undutiful, or disloyal, he is an Arab, but an Arab without consciousness or feeling, and perhaps even without conscience (quoted in Dawisha 2003: 72).

This repetition of Herder’s ideas was not an intellectual slip, a close reading of several books of al-Husri confirms such repetition (al-Husri, 1951: 43–5, 66–78; 1959: 7–11, 14, 19, 23, 53). More importantly, al-Husri was conscious of this borrowing, yet this did not stop him from claiming that these conceptualisations were his own. Tibi highlights this arrogance by al-Husri, suggesting that while ‘[s]uch statements suggest a close relationship between the ideas of al-Husri and of Herder, which the former does not disavow. He gives a number of quotations from Herder’s writings, and comes to the conclusion that he was a pioneer of the idea of the nation adopted by al-Husri himself’ (1997: 146).

In terms of al-Husri’s notion of history, his conceptualisation of unified history resembles Herder’s construction of cultural identity (see Hutchinson, 1989: 13; 1994: 122; Meinecke, 1970: 29; Smith 1983: 22). According to al-Husri, the nation needs memory. He states as follows:

Unity of history gives rise to shared feelings... It leads to common memories of bygone exploits and past misfortunes, and to mutual faith in the awakening and to mutually shared hopes for the future... Every nation feels its self-consciousness and creates its personality by means of its special history (al-Husri: 1982).

The importance of history is conceptualised through its *particularity*. While al-Husri’s constructivist approach to the conception of history conveys a deep encounter with Herder’s notion of history as a ‘chain of traditions’ (quoted in Tibi, 1997: 129), and Fichte’s notion of creating a particular national identity through history (Fichte, 2008, 50–1), however, this definition mimicked Renan’s notion of ‘forgetting’ (Renan 1882). Al-Husri’s conception of selective history emphasises the ideological encounters with Renan (al-Husri, 1985c: 23–33). More particularly, al-Husri clarifies what he means of history as not the one ‘recorded in books and buried between the pages of manuscripts’ but rather, the history ‘which lives in the minds and which possess traditions’ (al-Husri: 1928). This, in fact, highlights Benedict Anderson’s notion of the nation as an ‘imagined community’ (Anderson: 2006). Notwithstanding, this memory is constructed by selecting a particular history, one that is discursively imagined and invented. According to al-Husri, this belief in the nation is further initiated through teaching the history of ‘our glorious past’ (1944: 147). The notion of heroic past is not however limited purely to Herder’s and Fichte’s exploration of patriotism (See 1974: 21; Hutchinson, 1989: 13; Smith, 1983: 21–2), and even Renan explicitly celebrated this notion. In this sense, while the conception of history can be perceived as a Germanic encounter, al-Husri’s emphasis on selecting and forgetting certain elements in the history of the nation foregrounds his ideological borrowings from Renan. Following on from this Renanian constructivist notion of history, al-Husri imitates Renan’s conception of imagining a nation of ‘common destiny’ (Renan: 1882).

Taking into consideration the aforementioned, al-Husri’s conceptualisation of language and history as means of ‘cultural survival continuity’ (Suleiman, 2003: 13), he further discusses

the means of raising national consciousness and supplementing the ultimate aim of nationhood in individuals that is the unconditional sacrifice for the nation. This leads us to the ideological borrowings of Fichte to whom al-Husri explicitly shows his admiration: 'Fichte is an extreme enthusiastic nationalist thinker [...] [and] the following quotes is what I want to include in my theorization' (1959: 59, 61). According to Fichte, education can be a 'moral agent' that sustains in the individuals the needed will 'to act in accordance with the unconditional duties that have both as moral agents and as members of the German nation' (Hippler, 2006: 172). Fichte's conception of national education encompasses two stages, the first 'of which was characterised by disciplinarian submission and the second by the development of a sense of autonomous responsibility for the community' (Hippler, 2006: 159). While the first stage of education entails 'love for order that intensifies to an ideal' that is realised by the incorporation of a punishment system (Fichte, 1968: 28–9), yet this internalisation of order and submission to the rules will prepare individuals for the second stage that is characterised by the ultimate readiness of sacrifice for the nation (Fichte, 1968: 148–50).

In the case of al-Husri, he derived this conception of internalising submission and order through education from his study of Fichte. Al-Husri vigorously called for renovating national education in the sense that it removes any element of selfishness and rather prepares the individuals for the unconditional sacrifice for the nation through army conscription. More specifically, because al-Husri contends that the gravest enemy to the nation is the excessive love to one self as opposed to 'altruism' and 'sacrifice', he followed Fichte's conception of education as a 'moral agent' that defies 'selfishness' (al-Husri, 1985a: 117). In his book *Speeches and Reflections upon Arab Nationalism*, al-Husri considers national education as a strengthening tool that not only aims at instilling a homogeneous national identity, the ultimate aim of education is internalising the sense of morality in society (1964b: 57). In his call for ultimate national devotedness and love to the nation, al-Husri proposed two stages for national education, the first stage is school and the second is military barracks.

According to him, the school plays the most important role in the child's life. For example, in his book *Speeches on Education and Society*, it is a seminal account on the 'right way' of educating children early in their life at school (1984: 15). Al-Husri affirms that the school is the 'big society' that incorporates the sense of 'morality' and 'order' in the personality of the child (1984: 20). In another book *Views and Discussions upon Pedagogy and Education* al-Husri gives detailed discussion on how to cultivate the ideal characteristics of national identity that is through the promotion of 'sociability'. According to al-Husri, there are certain features that need to be developed in order to realise nationhood. One of these features is sociability and motivation (1944: 50). Hence, following Fichte's two stages, theoretical and practical, al-Husri relied on the school for the internalisation of order, idealism and submission in the first stage, and the second stage characterises the practical phase in which after the internalisation of love of the nation, men are ready for the ultimate sacrifice for the nation and this is through army conscription (1985a: 450).

Some Traces of Al-Husri's Ideological Encounters with Renan

Although al-Husri defined a nation's borders in linguistic terms, his attraction to the French idea can be traced back to several of his works (al-Husri 1959; 1985a; 1985d). This borrowing, however, is not very clear and pronounced. There was a slight difference in the way he considered the nationalist instruments of the French idea that is the state as only a production to the formulation of the nation, thereby advocating the 'will and determination' of the people and 'common destiny' as nationalist sentiments to an already culturally established nation (see Cleveland, 1971: 107).

In this sense, having defined language as the ‘soul’, and history as the ‘memory’ of the nation, al-Husri goes beyond this cultural definition of the German Romantic tradition, since he sees that the ‘will’ and ‘determination’ of the people is required after realising the cultural identity of the nation. Will is primarily a political question with bearings in a political project. Not only are the aforementioned nationalist sentiments borrowed from Renan, but other solid arguments are used by al-Husri. More specifically, al-Husri used Renan’s argument to reason his disagreement with the ethnic origin of the nation provided by both Herder and Fichte. What Renan called the idea of purity of race as a ‘chimera’ is further supported by al-Husri (1928; 1959: 129). Al-Husri demonstrates that what binds the nation together is not so much its ‘physical kinship’, but its ‘psychological and spiritual kinship’ (1928). He states: ‘The important thing in kinship (*qaraba*) and lineage (*nasab*) is not blood relations but rather the belief in this relation’ (ibid). This demonstration further conveys al-Husri’s deep influence of Renan’s definition of the nation as a ‘spiritual family’ (Renan, 1882).

In terms of al-Husri’s national theorisation, he enacts two dialectic steps for the formulation of the nation. The first step is achieved through the instilling of the enforced cultural identity of the nation, the second is expressed in realising the political borders of the nation that is achieved through the ‘will’ and ‘determination of people’. In discussing the nation–state conception, Renan captured the essence of constituting the political form of nation that represents people through the state. Hence, the essence of Renan’s ideology is that the nation is a political entity realised by the consent of its subjects rather than a linguistic and cultural one: ‘It [nation] presupposes a past but is reiterated in the present by a tangible fact: consent, the clearly expressed desire to continue a common life’ (Renan, 1882).

In the course of al-Husri’s conceptualisation of Renan’s nationalist ideology, at the beginning he disregards the notion of ‘will and determination’ as initiated through the form of ‘consent’ or in its political context (see al-Husri: 1928). However, he could not hide his attraction to this notion, as he considers these sentiments to be implemented after the nation is culturally constructed. His conception of the state is that the formation of the state cannot precede the realisation of the nation as a cultural entity (al-Husri 1985e: 31–5; see also Ayubi 2009: 138–9). This, on the other hand, does not mean that al-Husri’s culturalist approach to the nation was not fused with the need to form a state, he clarified this position by stating that ‘every nation (*umma*) should aim to constitute a state of its own’. Al-Husri is quite conscious of the advantages of having a political border that is identical with national borders: ‘What a beautiful nation, that achieved national unity, and completed its political identity, and that managed to make its political borders the same with its national ones’ (1985d: 7). These words highlight that al-Husri’s disposition of the state entails recognition of the unified cultural identity of Arabs as an initial step for forming the political realisation through people’s will and determination.

Further demonstration of al-Husri’s attraction to Renan can be traced in the use of Renan’s words without making any reference to Renan. This again can be attributed to how Arab intellectuals perceived French philosophers as standing for colonisation. Al-Husri quotes Renan saying:

We might need to follow what a thinker [al-Husri means Renan] said once that: ‘Every nation should forget some parts of its history’. He continues: ‘I do not doubt that this quote implies a great extent of truth. Because the true unity in any nation cannot be guaranteed unless it forgets some parts of its history. That,

I declare clearly... that what I mean is just ignoring these incidents... and give the priority to common history (1928).

Al-Husri quotes Renan's words without even mentioning his name. This appears to be mainly to dispel the appearance of any close affinity between the two. Moreover, these words highlight the fact that al-Husri is not only calling for a blending of facts, but also enunciates an imaginative culture based on invented 'solidarity', which is in turn highly reflected in Renan's nationalist theory.

It is little wonder that al-Husri's deep influence from the German Romantics is attributed to the similarity between cultural Germany in the 18th century and the Arab world of the early 20th century. Al-Husri was occupied with reasoning about the rejection of Islamic rule, and rather, called for a unified nation based on cultural nationalism. According to al-Husri, the primary goal of his ideology was to convince the Arabs of the legitimacy of his national philosophy. Within this context, in order to formulate a political state, there should exist a cultural entity that includes the different Arab countries in one nation. Al-Husri's conceptualisation of the notion of state was very limited and this is due to his preoccupation with the question of cultural unity of the nation. For this reason, his emphasis on the concept of 'community' rather than the 'state', al-Husri derived this distinction between nation and state from the German tradition (1928; 1985e). More specifically, al-Husri adopted the Germanic perception of people of the nation as identifying a cultural homogeneous group (*Volk*). In that, he did not recognise people of the nation as citizens.

Indeed, in taking one step further in this cultural ideology, 'Aflaq's cultural conception and theoretical stance form the basis for a later political mobilisation by his Ba'athist voice which had institutionalised al-Husri's conception. Yet they also transcend the universality of al-Husri's cultural ideas to influence the political constitution of the Syrian state under the Ba'ath. However, it must be said that in line with Herder's minor interest in the state, one might call al-Husri the Herder of his time. Just as Herder is depicted as the father of cultural nationalism, al-Husri is the father of the emerged cultural nationalism in Syria.

Michel 'Aflaq's Political Theorisation

Michel 'Aflaq (1910–1989) was a Syrian philosopher, sociologist and nationalist thinker. He is perceived to be the political founder of Ba'athist thought. He published various books during his lifetime, the most notable collection of his nationalist ideology is found in the five-volume work '*On the Way of Resurrection*' (*Fi Sabil al-Ba'ath*).¹² Born into a middle-class family in Damascus, Syria, he studied at the Sorbonne, where he was exposed to the European philosophers and especially the two Germanic and French nationalist traditions. He returned to Syria in 1932 equipped with his political ideas on the future. His influential role in constructing the Syrian nationalist thought can be traced back to 1947 when the first congress of the Ba'ath Party was held in Damascus (Rabinovich, 1972: 228), with him positioned as the 'leader' of the party (Moubayed, 2006: 131). In terms of the basis of his nationalist ideology, it sprung from al-Husri's conception of nationalism and the two European schools of nationalist thought.

¹² This work is composed of five volumes, and includes most of 'Aflaq's lectures, articles, speeches and conferences roughly between the 1930s and the 1970s. Full access to this work can be found online at: <http://albaath.online.fr/>. Any reference to 'Aflaq's work will be taken from this website unless I specified that it is from the hard copy version.

He is often perceived as a figure whose ideology forms a bridge between the cultural conception of the nation and the political realisation of its entity.

Given the political context around which 'Aflaq spread his ideology, his authorial and pessimistic tone cannot be missed in his speeches. His excessive lectures on the formulation of national identity during his involvement in the political leadership of the Ba'ath Party between the 1940s and 1960s witnessed a constant call for 'struggle' and 'determination' against imperialism. In fact, the striking difference between al-Husri and 'Aflaq is that while the former did not hide his influence from European ideologues, translating their works and applying their nationalist concepts on the Arab nation, 'Aflaq rather disregarded any attraction to European nationalist philosophy. Despite the influence of al-Husri's nationalist thought, 'Aflaq clearly contradicted al-Husri's objective debate and his analytical way of conceptualising nationalism. According to him, the very attempt to rationalise and objectify the idea of nationalism through drawing examples of Western nationalism should be rejected (Al-Khalil 1990: 190). 'Aflaq criticised the abstraction of the idea of nationalism as it 'strips things of their flesh and blood, and robs them of colour and taste'¹³ ('Aflaq, 1940a). More specifically, 'Aflaq stressed that nationalism is 'faith' and 'love' that can be felt by the heart not the mind, to which such feeling of national sentiments precede all knowledge and practical definitions (ibid). In this sense, 'Aflaq, unlike al-Husri, proposed a different nationalist perspective of how to tackle a nation's formulation, based more on a profound 'emotional basis' rather than on an objective analytical question (ibid).

In terms of style, 'Aflaq's words are often flowery and passionate, prompting some to criticise him for a lack of real substance, stating: 'Nearly three hundred pages of text yield no insight, on his part, into what went wrong and what needed to be done; there is only the visible infatuation with words' ('Ajami, 1982: 27; see also Makiya, 1998: 201). This mystical way of approaching the question of belonging to the nation is merely linked to how he defines his nationalist ideology. 'Aflaq demonstrates an obsessiveness with the role of the Ba'ath Party, preventing him from constituting a practical narrative. His emphasis on the 'originality' of his Ba'athist ideology (see al-Khalil, 1990: 183), however, still one can trace encounters between him and Fichte, Herder and Renan. In this regard, 'Aflaq's name is associated with the Ba'ath, an Arabic word that can be translated as 'awakening' and 'resurrection'. It is within his political theorisation that the meaning of this word has become the most persistent theme in his nationalist ideology. In his pursuit of Ba'athism, he called on the 'new generation' to renounce the 'glory' (*majid*) of the old 'past'. His words in an article entitled '*The Battle between superficial and genuine existence*' (1955) captured the essence of his nationalist message:

Life cannot be constantly based on inconsistency. It has to find a way to resolve it, either by deadening the urge for the mission and the genuine aims, by acquiescing to facile reality and surrendering to it, or by moving the forces that respond to the aspiration of the nation to realize the genuineness of its existence ('Aflaq, 1955).

Fundamentally, these words convey the ideas of enthusiasm and force for regenerating society through the Ba'ath message (rebirth). This message entails resurrection from weakness and oblivion to action and willingness for the sake of the nation. It is a movement that transfers the

¹³ Ibid. <http://albaath.online.fr/Volume%20I-Chapters/Fi%20Sabil%20al%20Baath-Vol%201-Ch30.htm>

generation's aspiration from 'the realm of sentimental and inactive wistfulness to a combative interaction with the wills, forces and vital interests' (ibid).

Nonetheless, for the realisation of such message (Ba'ath), 'Aflaq considered the question of language and history as the driving elements behind his ideology. He developed this view from the German Romantics and al-Husri's nationalist conception. However, more specifically, given the grim and pessimistic situation of his time, 'Aflaq's account of the subjective perception of nationalism shows the major influence of Fichte. The Syrian defeats during the 1948 Arab–Israeli War were the trigger for the tenets of his nationalist ideology. Within this context, 'Aflaq's preoccupation with struggle to unity echoes Fichte's words in his call for the constitution of a unified German state:

At most, a particular German state might aim to unite the entire German nation under its government and introduce absolute rule in place [...] Nevertheless, even in this worst of all cases it would still have been German who rules over Germans... and if the characteristic German spirit had briefly gone astray, there would still have remained the hope that one day it would reawaken, and every stouter soul up and down the land could have been sure of obtaining a hearing and making himself understood; a German nation would still have remained in existence, governing itself, and it would not have sunk into an existence of a lower order (2008: 115–6).

Such provisions very much resemble the messianic message propounded by 'Aflaq's political tone, as he followed Fichte's excessive call for unity and struggle against the enemy through the common passage of pain. In a speech delivered in 1950 entitled '*The meaning of the eternal message*', he states:

Brethren, at time when waves of pessimism and defeatism increase as do calamities and disasters, the true Arabs feel that the day of salvation is approaching, for the road has been opened at last for the Arab psyche to be shaken, to be deeply moved so that it remembers itself, and its task and rises with alacrity, vitality and faith, finding all sufferings and sacrifice sweet for the sake of achieving its mission in existence... the truly faithful must emerge and true faith cannot be acquired except through experience and suffering ('Aflaq: 1950a).

Another similarity with Fichte lies in the assertiveness of 'Aflaq's political tone. 'Aflaq addressed his audience in the hope of finding a way to renew the national spirit and inspire the creation of unity. Taking after Fichte in his *Addresses to the German Nation* (2008), 'Aflaq shared with him his stress on the importance of the philosopher's voice. As Andrew Fiala pointed out, Fichte's conclusion in the *Addresses* stressed that 'the philosopher's voice can inspire the German people [and] is thus centered around a claim about the spiritual nature of language and the creative spiritual and political power of the philosopher's voice' (2002: 107). In the case of 'Aflaq, he explicitly considered the philosopher's voice as part of the national idea. In his own words:

The leader, in times of weakness of the "idea" and its constriction, is not one to appeal to majority or to a consensus, but to opposition and enmity; he is not one to substitute numbers for the "idea", but to translate numbers into the "idea"; he is not the ingatherer, but the unifier. In other words, he is the master

of the singular “idea” from which he separates and casts aside all those who contradict it (‘Aflaq, 1944).

The authorial voice of ‘Aflaq is further accompanied by his nationalist perception of correcting the mistakes of the past. Like Fichte, ‘Aflaq took it upon himself and his nationalist message to correct and renounce the glory of the past. An article entitled ‘Age of Heroism’ (1935) reflects ‘Aflaq’s proposition for a new era that will correct the mistakes of the past. ‘Aflaq starts with saying that: ‘Now we close a page of weakness from our history and open a new one... A page full of patriotism and heroism’ (‘Aflaq, 1935). In another speech delivered in 1943, ‘Aflaq stresses the necessity of renouncing the glorious past: ‘Our belonging to our patriot grandfathers... We should remove barriers of inertia and decadence to restore our inherited glorious blood. We should purify our land and sky to elicit the souls of our heroic ancestors’ (‘Aflaq, 1943a).

Nonetheless, ‘Aflaq’s attraction to the ideals of the German Romantics prevail in his articulation of national belonging as conforming to destiny. The early essay ‘Nationalism Is Love before Anything Else’ (1940a) outlines his influence by Herder’s primordialist conception of the nation. In the course of ‘Aflaq’s conception of the nation as a cultural entity, he assumes that belonging to nationalism is non-voluntary, and is based on the unconditional love of the nation. He further establishes a connection between the individual’s love of the family and the nation. This ultimate recognition of the nation as a ‘big family’ consists of spiritual connotations which determines the forceful belonging to the nation (ibid), and, more importantly, prepares individuals for the passive submission to the love of the nation that is characterised by sacrifice and heroism. In his words:

Nationalism is like every love... And as love is associated with sacrifice and thus nationalism, and the sacrifice for nationalism leads to heroism, for the one who sacrifices for his nation and its past glory and for the happiness of its future, is rather perfecting life in its highest image... He who loves does not ask for reasons (ibid)

Another demonstration of ‘Aflaq’s naturalised conception of belonging can be explored in his assumption that love of the nation is transmitted like the inheritance of physical features. This attempt to compare the physical inheritance of facial features to belonging to nationalism strikingly illuminates ‘Aflaq’s indoctrination of sacrifice for the nation (‘Aflaq, 1940b). Nonetheless, this form of patriotism and sacrifice initially appears in Fichte’s conception of unconditional love to the fatherland. According to Fichte, the ultimate aim of such love is to inspire individuals to act in accordance with the unconditional commands of duty, however, such demands are only achieved through producing in individuals the moral will to die joyfully for the fatherland. Such manifestation of active will to sacrifice oneself is employed to achieve unity (Fichte, 2008: 107).

This leads us to show how ‘Aflaq approached the definition of nation and nationalism in his nationalist legacy. ‘Aflaq’s definitions seldom vary from the cultural-based conception. He stresses that both language and history are the main driving elements that constitute the nation. In his article ‘About the Arabic Message’ in 1946, ‘Aflaq takes after Herder’s conception of the particularity of the nation through its language, history and culture. ‘Aflaq states that the nation can only renounce its particular position between nations through the unity of its language, culture and history. Such preservations of unity of cultural elements are the chief constituents of a particular cultural identity which will subsequently retrieve the

recognisable rank and position of the nation that arose in previous pasts of history ('Aflaq, 1946). In another speech 'The relation between Arabism and the movement of radical change' in 1950, 'Aflaq stresses the central role of heritage as it stems from the 'spirit of the nation', as such spirit acts as a driving force to strengthen the will to achieve unity ('Aflaq, 1950c). Even after more than ten years, 'Aflaq's conception of the role of heritage and culture as constituents of national identity had not changed. In a speech in 1966, he stated:

The doctrinal movement cannot grow if it ceases to have a bond with its heritage and its past. This does not mean that we should stand still with regard to the past, but that we should have a living and conscious link with it in a way that realizes the unity of the party, its march and the soundness of its orientation ('Aflaq, 1966).

While this national spirit of unity may be seen in Fichte's nationalist ideology, 'Aflaq's call for unity is associated with his conceptualisation of the national journey from darkness to resurrection which is through shared experience of pain and suffering. In a speech delivered on 1 February 1950 under the title of *on the meanings of the radical change*, 'Aflaq emphasised the notion of suffering as a unitary tool for Arabs. Suffering becomes the survival means for the nation to transcend its diseases and barriers. According to him, believing in the Ba'ath movement is the only guarantee for experiencing true life. It is such 'a tremendous, profound, genuine experience which is commensurate with the greatness of the Arab nation, equal to the depths of afflictions suffered by the Arabs, equal to the magnitude of the dangers threatening the survival of the nation' ('Aflaq, 1950b). Nonetheless, renouncing the glorious past (*majid*) is linked with experiencing communal 'pain' and 'suffering'. This conceptualisation of 'pain' and 'suffering' as ideals for the promised 'struggle' against the enemy is strikingly depicted in Renan's nationalist ideology. Renan's words captured these notions:

"Suffered together", I said, for shared suffering unites more than does joy. In fact, periods of mourning are worth more to national memory than triumphs because they impose duties and require a common effort (Renan, 1882).

This notion of shared suffering can be detected in 'Aflaq's speech delivered in 1956 (*Auruba and 'Alam*) 'Arabism and Suffering' where he affirmed that the process of resurrection can be through experiencing communal 'suffering'. Moreover, the concept of nationhood can be realised through 'struggle and pain' ('Aflaq, 1956). As 'Aflaq states: 'The destiny of Arabism is suffering' ('Aflaq, 1983). 'Aflaq stresses the 'spiritual message' of the Ba'ath as the only guarantee of a glorious future. Such renouncing of the past can be achieved through remembering the sufferings of people which will inspire them with the will to achieve the 'humane message' of the Ba'ath ('Aflaq, 1943b).

Another demonstration of the affinity between 'Aflaq and Renan is the role of national heritage in constructing the spiritual and psychological formation of national identity. In this sense, 'Aflaq strikingly conceptualises the nation as having always lived in the mind of Arabs, which, on the other hand, demonstrates a constructivist approach to the formulation of the nation.¹⁴ In his own words:

¹⁴ Among the modernist nationalist thinkers that consider the nation a psychological formation are Anderson 2006; Kohn 1945: 16; Otto Bauer 1996: 63.

We should not forget that Arab culture in the past was not possible and could not have been realized had it not been for that period of struggle which did not take more than a few decades; but it was the spiritual yeast, the psychological and moral treasure which permitted the Arabs to expand, spread and intermingle with various nations who were in a luxurious cultural milieu ('Aflaq, 1949).

In this quote, it seems that 'Aflaq fused the psychological phenomena of the formation of the nation with the primordial sentiments (language, culture and history). It further illuminates traces of the constructivist approach in his national ideology which is that the nation is not just limited to the natural extension of the family.

Examining the tenets of his nationalist thought shows the deep influence of Herder, Fichte and Renan. While the ideological content of his theorisation is based on the commonality of language, history, culture and, most importantly, his 'revolutionary message' (Ba'ath), his conception goes beyond the Romantic sentiments of the German thinkers and reflects Renan's notion of common experience of suffering and pain as constitutors of the nation. Despite what might be suggested about the reception of his public figure as 'awkward... and very much not a soapbox politician' (Lund, 2014), his nationalist perception further lay in the theoretical basis of Hafiz Assad's practical approach to the Ba'ath (Saba', 2005: 298). El-Attrache significantly demonstrates in his book *The Political Philosophy of Michel 'Aflaq and the Ba'ath Party in Syria*, the basis of the Ba'ath Party can be found in the writings and ideas of 'Aflaq's (1973: 1–2). However, one of the other philosophical trends that have influenced the emergence of modern nationalist thought in Syria is Zaki al-Arsuzi. His thought demonstrates the most prevailing conjunction between the republican and primordial traditions.

Zaki al-Arsuzi: Modernist and Primordialist Conceptions

Zaki al-Arsuzi was born to an Alawite family, and his family was marginalised during the reign of the Ottoman Empire. His father's political activism against the Ottoman Empire shaped Arsuzi's political passion in nationalist ideologies (Watenpaugh 1996: 365). Calling 'Aflaq a 'thief' of his nationalist ideology the 'Ba'ath' (see Curtis, 1977), al-Arsuzi as a public figure was less popular than 'Aflaq and al-Husri. The reason for this might be because he lacked the conventional style of al-Husri's nationalist narrative and the ardent voice of 'Aflaq in his speeches. During his stay in France between 1927 and 1930, he was exposed to both French culture and European philosophy (Choueiri, 2000, p. 144). This attraction to the French ideals might be attributed to his excellence in speaking French and to his studying at the Sorbonne University. He came back to Syria in 1930 very influenced by the French Revolution and its principles. This, however, later caused him trouble with the French authorities for teaching the principles of French Revolution to his students in Syria. However, he grew in opposition to both the old Turkification policies carried out by the Ottomans and the repressive procedures of the French mandate system. Al-Arsuzi, therefore, like other nationalists at that time, developed a nationalist ideology based on centralising the Arabic language as the primary principle for formulating the nation.

In terms of the reception of his national ideology, al-Arsuzi is considered an 'icon' in the Arab world for his philosophy of the Arab language (Elamir 2010: 66–7). On the other hand, his name is almost unknown to Western scholarship, which may be due to the close similarity between his thought and both 'Aflaq and al-Husri (ibid). Despite such 'superficial treatment' of his works and ideas (ibid), al-Arsuzi, unlike both al-Husri and 'Aflaq, introduced

novel elements to the formulation of nationalist thought in modern Syria.¹⁵ His perceptions further flourished and shaped Syrian political thought, especially during 'Aflaq's exile in 1966 (Elamir 2010: 66). According to Saba's important demonstration of the ideological influence of both 'Aflaq and al-Arsuzi in shaping Ba'athist thought under Assad rule, he argues that despite 'Aflaq's 'spiritual role' in preaching the Ba'athist message, he was marginalised in the aftermath of the 1963 coup that was led by Assad. In a deep revelation of the conflicting relationship between 'Aflaq and Assad, Saba' states:

The one who studies the historical evolution of the Ba'ath can envisage that 'Aflaq was the theorist and Assad is the one who applies this theorisation. However, neither the theorist accepted the applier nor the applier accepts the theorist. Therefore, one of them needed to disappear from the Ba'ath field and that was 'Aflaq (Saba', 2005: 298)

However, because Assad needed an ideological preacher to further strengthen his rule over Ba'athist supporters, during Assad's appointment as the Syrian Regional Commander after the 1963 coup and as Minister of Defence after the 1966 coup, he took al-Arsuzi with him to meet soldiers and officers in the military. Assad's interest in al-Arsuzi has enlivened al-Arsuzi's ideological stance who in return wrote extensive ideological profiles on Assad in the Ba'ath periodicals (Saba' 2005: 270). Needless to say such writings had a significant outcome on Assad's development as a future ruler of the Ba'ath (ibid). In a further demonstration of his ideological role in Syria, Elamir depicted the 'complex role' of al-Arsuzi as manifesting both the 'spiritual founder of the Ba'ath' and the one who was marginalised by the party. Capturing such ambivalent treatment to his ideology, Elamir importantly indicates that the uncertainty of the Ba'ath Party in dealing with his works can be attributed to 'reasons of internal party history' to which after the party came to power in 1963, it needed him 'for purposes of its own legitimisation' (2010: 67).

Such provision describes the essence of al-Arsuzi's nationalist theory in its two phases. The first stage was during the early period of his writings, in which al-Arsuzi aligned his national ideology with the German Romantics and adhered to the cultural principles, primarily language and history, to constitute the origin of the nation. However, in his later years, al-Arsuzi revised his works drastically and showed explicit attraction to the French ideas particularly in the conceptualisation of state, freedom and democracy as formulators of the nation. Such a change in his modes of thinking depicts the duality of the sources that influenced the emergence of his nationalist philosophy.

Al-Arsuzi's Early Writings: The Nation as a Cultural Entity

These writings are marked by the influence of both his political struggle in Antakya and against the French mandate. In this phase, al-Arsuzi's manner of approaching the definition of the nation seldom varies from the Romantics' conception of language and culture as essential components of the nation. In this regard, he followed a drastic perception of language, his conceptualisation of language was deeply spiritual and philosophical. His early works demonstrated the link between the emergence of the nation and the etymology of the Arabic language. In essence, this phase captures al-Arsuzi's ideological encounters with al-Husri's and 'Aflaq's cultural conception of the nation. Within this context, the cultural perception of his nationalist theory can clearly be reflected in his definition of the nation. As he states:

¹⁵ This is connected to his conceptualisation of freedom, democracy and state.

The terms nation (*'umma*) and mother (*'umm*) derived from the same root, and the mother is the living image of the nation, and like subjects of the society is the mother with its sons, and above all the nation is the fountainhead of customs and public institutions. And we mean of public institutions: language, literature, art and other things that represent public life (al-Arsuzi, 1973: 213).

This wording reflects the essentialist and primordialist conception of the nation. Al-Arsuzi clearly defines belonging to the nation as non-voluntary and cultural. More importantly, this definition of the nation signifies the presentation of the nation as a kind of extended family.

Further encounters with the German Romantics prevails in his belief that the world is distinctively divided in accordance with language (1973: 213). In his attempt to define the origin of the nation in the particularity of its language, al-Arsuzi assumed genetic superiority to the Arab race. Unlike al-Husri's elimination of the racial kinship (*qarabit al-nasab*) (1928), al-Arsuzi rather adopted the German Romantics' idea of the nation as premised on its blood relations. More specifically, giving race a primary role in identifying the greatness of the nation, al-Arsuzi adopted Fichte's proposition of the superiority of the German people. Fichte supported such a proposition and claimed that the German people were 'destined for greatness' which was due to the purity of their race (Baradat, 2016: 248). In a strikingly similar manner, al-Arsuzi depicts the Arab race as genetically superior, which is linked to the race's ancient origins that it is 'a myth reaching back to Adam and Eve' (1973: 214). In line with such revelations, al-Arsuzi grew very aggressive against inter-marriages with other races. According to him, such marriages would endanger the continuity of the moral message of the Arab nation (1973: 307). His attack on the idea of mixed races further anticipated that this mixing would result in psychological, social and intellectual deficiencies (1973: 305–6).

In his hopes of fighting the abuses of colonialism and corruption, al-Arsuzi relied on education as a means of raising national consciousness (1973: 284). Like Fichte, he was interested in the unification of language and national education (Watenpaugh 1996, p. 365). Al-Arsuzi felt there was a need to construct an educational system that lifted society from its 'condition of misery' (*al-wadi' al-bali*) (al-Arsuzi, 1954: 15–33). He took it upon himself to introduce a national education that fought the backwardness of the Arab situation. This was through his extensive writings on renovating national education to implement language and history as constituents of the nation. Suffice to say that such provisions explain encounters with Fichte and Herder, who consolidated the foundation of the nation through education. Yet al-Arsuzi's political writings that reflected his obsession with philosophising the origin of the Arab language as tools for constructing Arab national identity, witnessed a drastic change after independence from the French colonisers and the rash military coups in Syria. Within this context, the following section aims at capturing this ideological shift in al-Arsuzi's nationalist thought.

Al-Arsuzi's Later Writings: The Nation as a Modernist Construct

Owing to the disappointment of the break-up of the United Arab Republic (1961), al-Arsuzi realised that constructing a homogeneous cultural identity was not enough to realise national unity. This led him to divert his mode of thinking from the German essentialist version of nationalism to the French modernistic view in which the nation was premised on common destiny, will and determination of the people. More specifically, al-Arsuzi's definition of national unity no longer provided a basis for language and culture, but rather adopted the

French idea of constituting a political state as a means to achieve not only Arab unity, but also to build a good society.

A close reading of his later works (1965; 1974; 1975) captures the essence of his modernistic views of the nation. One can clearly discern that al-Arsuzi is more practical in terms of understanding the Arab situation and that Arab unity is just a myth (Elamir 2010: 75). This had led him to the attraction of Renan's ideology of the nation as a political entity, as Renan defined the nation's existence 'a daily plebiscite' (Renan 1882). In this manner, the nation's existence becomes based on people's political consent and it is further defined by their collective will and determination to live together and form the nation. Such sentiments were proposed by Renan's insistence on the voluntary belonging of the nation. A clear adoption of Renan's conception can be found in al-Arsuzi's words:

Because the state represents the identity of mature society... The tasks of the state are to take care of its citizens and makes sure to raise their national consciousness to the level of freedom, this awareness will make the citizens participate voluntary in the public affairs (al-Arsuzi, 1974: 27).

These words represent a departure from al-Arsuzi's essentialist and naturalistic definition of the nation. Moreover, they capture al-Arsuzi's shift from the non-voluntary belonging to the nation manifested in his early writings. In that, al-Arsuzi distinctively demonstrates that what is required is the voluntary decision of citizens. Another underlying message is that they stress the political notion of consent proposed by Renan (1882). This political consent implies the free will of citizens to decide and to determine their political representation of the state. This is clearly demonstrated through the use of term 'citizens' that, unlike both 'Aflaq, al-Husri and the German Romantics, 'people' are no longer limited to the homogeneous cultural identification, but are envisaged as political citizens with will and determination. On another occasion, al-Arsuzi further assigned to the state the task of not only raising members of society to the level of freedom, but even to raise in them the awareness of their collective will and determination to form the nation. Al-Arsuzi states:

The role of the state is to make members of society, who were driven by instincts, into individuals, each of whom determine his own and general fate in full freedom. The citizens have to be able to satisfy their needs within limits which protected them from temptations that might lead their will astray (1965: 188).

As we have seen, there was a general disregard of the state as a prerequisite for constituting the nation in al-Husri's nationalist thought. 'Aflaq, at the same time, was preoccupied with politicising the Ba'ath Party through disseminating their principles and values. However, according to al-Arsuzi, no longer was the state considered as an outcome to the realisation of the nation, but rather the state represents the essence of the nation's message:

The primary role of the state is to defend the true essence of the nation, its living space and its value system. Its primary task is to furnish the necessary means for the nation to realise its identity (1974: 102)

Al-Arsuzi insisted that communal values and cultural identification needed to be featured in a political body i.e. the state. The necessity of the state lay in mobilising citizens politically and culturally. In this regard, al-Arsuzi incorporated the concept of the state as a means to realise

the nation and to manifest the relationship between citizens within society (al-Arsuzi 1965: 182).

In terms of his notion of natural belonging to the nation, the transcendence of the natural belonging implies the shift of the enforced belonging that incorporates passive submission to national duty i.e. sacrifice. In an act to reason the concept of belonging and in his attempt to make this belonging stems out of reason, al-Arsuzi insisted that belonging to the nation implied both reason and love. He even put reason before love in a way to highlight the necessity of citizens' will and determination. Al-Arsuzi significantly captured the shift in his thought by saying:

[Nationalism] is influenced in its development by two factors which lead to humanity... The first factor is reason and the second is love. We mean by "reason" the connection between results and the principle... Reason motivates human beings to collaboration to gain control over the conditions of nature and make them subject to man's will... As far as the role of love [for nationalism] is concerned, it brings together the various individuals and communities, an insight which is based on my own experience. When I came back from Paris I had a racial¹⁶ orientation in my feelings of brotherhood for the human race which exists in all human beings... When I reached this stage – the stage in which the divisive limits between individuals and communities fall – I became a refuge for all and strived for our highest ideal to establish a state which would guarantee to its citizens freedom and dignity, be they Armenians, Kurds, or Turks (al-Arsuzi 1975: 153–4)

These sentiments reflected al-Arsuzi's ideological shift, his emphasis on incorporating 'man's will' in contrast to the conception of unconditional love for the nation that entitles man's submission to physical sacrifice, and further demonstrated his adoption of the French modernist idea of the nation. These words also significantly illustrated the complex nature of al-Arsuzi's relationship to France by being caught between his attraction to the French idea of the nation as a political entity and his hostility towards its imperial role in the Arab world. Yet, al-Arsuzi justified his attraction as his nationalist ideology in later years manifested a cosmopolitan and humane message.

This brings us to question whether al-Arsuzi's later works completely disregard his initial attraction to the German version of the nation. In his review of his idea of genetic superiority that forms the Arab nation, al-Arsuzi added that such superiority despite being attributed to the fact that the Arab race descended from Adam and Eve, there should be a consideration of territorial closeness (*jiwar*). His interpretation of territorial closeness (*jiwar*) encompassed communal interest and destiny. The manifestation of the two versions of nationalism (French and German) can be traced in his summary:

Nationalism to Arabs, is inveterate, and as ancient as the earliest human history, Arabs had a myth reaching back to Adam and Eve. It is believed that Arabs were all of one kin, and that this was the basis of their superiority and their erected rank among nations [...] And as for the principles of Arab nationalism, it is based on:

¹⁶ The term 'racial' in this context refers to the Arab people.

- 1 – Fraternity and brotherhood by nature and the proximity of their descent (qaraba bi-l-nasab) ... This kinship (qaraba) is not constricted to racial kinship only, but there is kinship in culture and superiority. Therefore, Arab nation is not only an extension to one family, but also a human construction.
- 2 – Common interests.
- 3 – Common solidarity (al-Arsuzi, 1973: 213–6).

The espousal of the two conflicting nationalist ideologies can be traced in this quote in which al-Arsuzi clearly maintained the notion of racial superiority of the Arab nation and that it is based on natural kinship (*rawabit tabi 'yiyā*). However, it is also a civic entity that rests on the initialisation of a 'realist' conception. In this manner, he insisted that this cultural and racial proximity is reinforced by experiencing communal solidarity, be it through forgetting or remembering certain memories of the nation. (Al-Arsuzi, 1958: 179).

In this sense, the role of al-Arsuzi is quite remarkable in him being the first to introduce the notions of democracy and state in his ideology (Elamir 2010). He moved from the only cultural definition of the nation to include in his ideology the need for social justice (Elamir, 2010: 67). Moreover, he was ahead of his rivals in realising that shared language and culture are not enough for the political and social realisation of the nation (*umma*) (ibid). While al-Husri and 'Aflaq were preoccupied with the abstraction of the idea of the nation, al-Arsuzi's later works dealt with the social and political problems faced by citizens (Elamir, 2010: 68, 72).

In terms of al-Arsuzi's nationalist perception, he transcended 'Aflaq's ardent political voice and his absorption with the national idea, and al-Husri's objective and cultural approach, and, more importantly, advocated a strategic and political standpoint based on the state as a means of constituting the nation. This perception is very much linked to his attraction to the French idea and its modernist principles. Al-Arsuzi brings us together to praise the introduction of modern political thought in his national doctrine. His nationalist thought embraced the application of state, democracy and free society, in contrast to al-Husri's and 'Aflaq's chief theorisation of the nation as a cultural and primordial entity. This notable consciousness of the importance of deploying the state and the notion of freedom and democracy in order to constitute the nation is the result of his deep influence by the French idea of the nation (1973: 321–3). However, one should bear in mind that despite his ideological shift towards the civic notion of the nation, he remained an advocate of the primary role of language and blood relations. Hence, it must be argued that the unpredicted nature of al-Arsuzi's political ideology is attributed to his attraction to the conflicting conceptions of nation and nationalism proposed by the German Romantics and French modernists.

Conclusion

This study investigated how the idea of nation and nationalism developed in Syria. It first focused on the ideas of nation and nationalism, and subsequently contextualised its emergence in the second half of the 20th century within the German and French traditions. It has reviewed the main currents of Syrian national thought on nation and nationalism in great detail, analysing and deconstructing the traces of ideological influences by the three European thinkers. It is worth noting that Syrian national thought evolved around two overlapping yet contradictory themes, focusing on the cultural identity of the nation, and realising the political body of the nation.

In the writings of these three Syrian thinkers, the rise of the idea of nation and nationalism in its initial phase (the cultural one) emphasised primordial sentiments as prerequisites of nation-formation. In this phase, they were concerned with the realisation of the cultural identity of the nation by focusing on unity of language, history, education and culture. While in this phase the adoption of the German idea of nationalism was rather profound and explicit, the three Syrian thinkers relied on the natural and cultural formation of the nation, in this sense, perceiving national belonging as non-voluntary. However, despite this conscious borrowings of the basic idea of the nation as a primarily cultural entity from both Herder and Fichte, al-Husri, 'Aflaq and al-Arsuzi supplemented their arguments with traces drawn from Renan. On the one hand, al-Husri was conscious in his attraction to the German idea of nationalism, yet he disregarded the ethnic and environmental identifications to constitute origin of the nation. In doing so, he was adopting Renan's reactionary argument to the German doctrine. Al-Husri even augmented his notion of history as based on forgetting and selecting particular national events to construct a national memory of the nation that instilled a homogeneous national identity. In doing so, he was identifying Renan's constructivist notion of the nation. 'Aflaq, at the same time, while emphasising the primordial construction of the nation based on language and history, used Renan's conception of communal experience of struggle and suffering to constitute the nation. In terms of al-Arsuzi, his national ideology was concerned primarily in dealing with the superiority of the Arab race, drawing such notions from the German doctrine (particularly Fichte), while, on the other hand, insisting on the idea of common destiny and interest in formulating the nation.

In the attempt to elucidate the traces of the civic notions in the Syrian context, al-Husri showed a limited consideration of the state in his theorisation, yet still he argued in favour of achieving a political body of the nation. His reference to the necessity of constructing a sense of 'will' and 'determination' of people can be considered as laying the foundations for practical institutionalisation of his cultural thought in 'Aflaq's foundation of the Ba'ath Party. In this sense, 'Aflaq constitutes the development of Syrian national thought towards a civic phase in which theory becomes practised in a political body i.e. the Ba'ath Party. However, the French idea of the state flourished in al-Arsuzi's later works, as he extensively discussed the tasks of the state in realising the nation. In this sense, he distanced himself from the German idea of constituting cultural entity before realising the state. He, more importantly, called extensively for autonomy of citizens, giving the previous identification of homogenous cultural groups of people a political term 'citizens' that defined their political autonomy, freedom, responsibility and duty.

Having established the main course of movement that led from the cultural version of nationalism to the constitution of political nation and the state in the Syrian context, this paper has aimed at identifying these three Syrian thinkers as manifesting the development of Syrian national thought in its early emergence. In surveying the origins of their ideas, further research can be done in terms of identifying traces of these ideas in the Syrian Constitution (1973). For their influence on the construction of Syrian national identity this can be seen in the major principles of the Syrian Constitution. The deep analysis of their national ideas would pave the way for future studies to examine how language, culture, history, struggle and education feature in defining the basic tenets of Syrian citizenship.

To this end, understanding the origins of ideological borrowings in the Syrian national thought can be the first step towards unearthing the foundations of politics in Syria. This study further underscores the production of national thought in Syria through the two crucial characterisations of cultural and political phases.

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