

Arab Nationalism

The New Saladin

Saddam Hussein draws for his support on a number of different causes - Iraq, united Arab nationalism and Islam. *Robert Sole* talks to **Maxime Rodinson** about the ideological confusions of the Gulf conflict

'It is true that the confusion is at its greatest now, even among the Arabs themselves'



Maxime Rodinson is an academic, sociologist and leading authority on the Arab world. He is the author of *Israel And The Arab Refusal*.

Do you think that Saddam Hussein's designs upon Kuwait are wholly unjustified?

A lot of nonsense is spoken about this every day. There is talk of Iraq's eternal right to Kuwait, and of Kuwait as an integral part of Iraq. There is talk of either scrapping or maintaining the borders inherited from the era of colonisation. Yet neither Iraq nor Kuwait were ever really colonies. Besides, it was not until 1921 that the country Iraq was defined and created by the British in the context of the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire.

What happened after the disappearance of the Ottoman Empire?

An unratified Anglo-Ottoman accord of 1913 recognised the independence of Kuwait within the theoretical framework of the Ottoman Empire. The war brought this link to an end. By 1923, the rise of the Saudi Kingdom presented a new threat to stability, and so a convention fixed the border between the emirate of Kuwait and Iraq, which had just been created under a British mandate.

When in 1961 an Anglo-Kuwaiti accord dating back to 1899 expired, Kuwait became independent. Iraq (itself fully independent since 1932, and rid of the monarchy with its London connections since 1958) claimed that it owned Kuwait. Britain, Nasser's Egypt and the Arab League sent troops to defend its independence and Iraq withdrew. Kuwait was admitted to the Arab League and to the United Nations.

How do you explain Saddam Hussein's progression from his early years in a secular party, the Ba'ath, to his pose today as a leader of Islam?

From what we know of him, Saddam

does not seem to be driven primarily by any ideology. You cannot deny *a priori* that he had some sort of sincere ideological outlook in his formative years. However, his desire for power soon took precedence over any other consideration. Napoleon Bonaparte, remember, was also once a committed Jacobin and follower of Robespierre. While a member of the Ba'ath Party, Saddam manoeuvred within it to gain control, and had no qualms about his methods. He formed a united clan, largely through family ties amongst army officers, and used this clan for his own purposes. But he was always ready to eliminate any recalcitrant members.

This is in marked contrast to the progress of Nasser's career...

Saddam does not feel the same filial affection for Nasser as, for example, Gadaffi. They are certainly both motivated by the same united Arab nationalism, as well as a move towards social reorganisation described as socialism. Nevertheless, Saddam has also been inspired by the historical rivalry between the Ba'ath and the pro-Nasser movement. Nasser can be credited with a sincere dedication to his ideals, despite any lapses involved in the seizure of power. There doesn't seem to be much of that in the character of the Iraqi leader.

Has the secular nature of the Ba'ath Party been exaggerated?

The ideological muddle forged with passionate lyricism by Michel A'flaq was, in the final analysis, inspired by the romanticism of Herder and other German thinkers. It is essentially secular in the sense that it wishes to group

together the Arabs without taking into account the differences between communities. In A'flaq's view, nationalism was to be the sole bond.

On top of Arab nationalism, hasn't Saddam Hussein also made use of Iraqi nationalism? Saddam draws together any useful ideologies, favourable to his own ambitions and personal glory. He sees himself as the successor both to the Assyrian and Babylonian monarchies, conquerors of the Middle East, and to Saladin, who became leader of a vast Syro-Palestino-Egyptian Empire, and gained a prodigious reputation for avenging Islam when he recaptured Jerusalem from the Frankish crusaders in 1187.

Aside from the personal ambitions of Saddam Hussein, is there a growing confusion between the terms 'Arab' and 'Muslim'? This confusion has existed for centuries in Europe, notably in France. Today, Muslims are classed as Arabs, while at the end of the Middle Ages and at the beginning of the modern period, they were classed as Turks. It is true that the confusion is at its greatest now, even amongst the Arabs themselves. They tend to consider themselves as the true bearers of Islam, forgetting that four out of every five Muslims are not Arabs.

In this context, do you think that the war in the Gulf might appear as a war of religion? In the religious wars of the past, each side tried to convince the other of the truth of its own religion. Fighting was even stopped to allow intellectual debate. No such thing occurs today, whether in Ireland or Lebanon. These are not wars of religion but conflicts between communities which have different religions; no side tries to convert the other.

What about the rise in Islam we are witnessing?

In the Muslim world over the last two centuries, Western recipes have been used for government and society. These secular Utopias have failed. However, since man is unable to do without Utopias, now the hour of religious Utopias is at hand.

As someone who, long before the present crisis, was once a militant communist, what is your reaction to these Utopias and to the general confusion?

I would say, 'Exploited and humiliated brothers of the West, did we really gain anything by placing the struggle against our just grievances in the hands of a merciless and megalomaniac Georgian with a moustache?' In the same manner, I would also say, 'Arab brothers, do you believe that you will make progress in the fight for your cause by helping to realise the plans, unknown to us all, of a megalomaniac and ruthless Babylonian with a moustache?' •

This interview is reprinted from Le Monde. Translation by Nigel Saint.