A PARTIAL RECONSTRUCTION OF MICHEL 'AFLAQ'S THOUGHT

The Role of Islam in the formulation of Arab Nationalism

Political theories are as diffuse in the writings of modern-day Arab nationalists as they were in the writings of Muslim political philosophers of medieval times. The problem of deriving a viable theory of government is, even at present, reduced to the problem of formulating it in terms compatible with an Arabo-Islamic frame of ethics. H. A. R. Gibb has observed: “Just as European romanticism gave colour and emotional appeal to a new nationalism founded on language, racial theory, and a historic past, so, too, the modernist... reform movement in Islam is combined with a nationalist interpretation of Islam.”1 W. C. Smith, by contrast, suggests that “the driving force of nationalism has become more and more religious.”2 Whether Islam has been nationalized or whether Arab nationalism has become “more religious” does not really answer the question of how Arab political thinkers, specifically Michel 'Aflaq, view the role of Islam in the formulation of Arabism in the twentieth century.

'Aflaq’s writings are difficult to comprehend because his views are scattered throughout numerous literary and political essays and speeches. He has yet to produce a systematic, logically consistent work presenting the fundamental elements of his thought. The most important of his essays and speeches are collected in two anthologies,3 arranged thematically and, within each theme, chronologically. It has been observed that most of 'Aflaq's political essays and published

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3 These are: Fi sabiil al-ba'th (In the Way of Resurrection) and Ma'rakat al-maqir al-wähid (The Battle for One Destiny). Both collections were published several times in various Arab countries. All references to Sabiil will be to the second Beirut edition (Dâr al-Ta'ifi'a) of 1963 while all references to Ma'raka will be to the third Beirut printing (Dâr al-Ádâb) of 1963, unless otherwise indicated. A third anthology has been recently published under the title Nuqbat al-bidâya: aḥâdith ba'd al-khâmis min ṣaḥîrûn (The Beginning Point: Discourses after the 5th of June [1967]) (Beirut: Al-Mu'assasa al-'arabiyya, 1971). These more recent essays and speeches echo 'Aflaq's earlier themes, suggesting that the main lines of his thought have not changed fundamentally.

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speeches, like his earlier literary works, are the product of the moment, governed by the chance occasion. Because his essays and speeches lack that element of disciplined contemplation which would have clarified his ideas systematically, 'Aflaq leaves himself open to the criticism that he neglected “serious” (jiddī), “scientific,” or “analytical” (‘ilmī) thought. Nonetheless, he is admired for expressing himself in “sentences which carry conviction.”

The choice and use of words 'Aflaq made in his essays and speeches are clues in the investigation of that basic problem: the role of Islam in the formulation of Arabism in the twentieth century. Many of the terms 'Aflaq used are either directly derived from Islam or carry broadly religious connotations. Such is the term ba‘th (resurrection) cited in the Qur’ān at least three times in this form and numerous other times in different forms. Another example is sabīl (way) referred to in the Qur’ān many times. But one does not find the two terms, sabīl and ba‘th, juxtaposed in the Qur’ān. Each of the terms has its own separate “semantic field” and both are separately governed by the concept of God; man is to strive in the Way of God, the Day of Resurrection is dominated by the figure of God sitting in judgment. By juxtaposing sabīl and ba‘th in the expression fi sabīl al-ba‘th (in the way of resurrection), 'Aflaq places the two terms within the same semantic field such that the Resurrection governs the Way, in the absence of God.

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5 Ibid., p. 82.
7 A representative verse is S. 30:56: “But those to whom knowledge and faith are given will say: The Truth is ye have tarried, by Allah’s decree, until the Day of Resurrection [yaum al-ba‘th]. This is the Day of Resurrection, but ye used not to know” (M. M. Pickthall’s translation).
8 An example is S. 2:261: “The likeness of those who spend their wealth in Allah’s Way [sabīl Allāh] is as the likeness of a grain which groweth seven ears, in every ear a hundred grains. Allah giveth increase manifold to whom He will. Allah is All-Embracing, All-Knowing.” See also Toshihiko Izutau, God and Man in the Koran: Semantics of the Koranic Weltanschaung (Tokyo: Keio Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies, 1964), pp. 143-144, where the author presents the concept of sabīl as a key principle in Islam.
9 Ibid., p. 27.
One of the earliest essays ‘Aflaq wrote was on īmān (belief). The question whether īmān is created or eternal was a controversial point in Islamic theology but, in either case, it was clear that īmān occurred in man at the initiative of God. In ‘Aflaq’s usage, the term īmān is devoid of God, as is clear from this passage: “There is no one who can boast that he created (khalāqa) or actualized in time (awjada) this belief. It is within each man, and within each Arab.” ‘Aflaq distinguishes two stages in the articulation of belief, as spiritual principle (mabda’ ka-rūḥ) and as intellectual principle (mabda’ ka-dhihn). As spiritual or intuitive principle, belief is that human quality which enables man to discriminate between the true and the false. Belief is not to be discovered by reason or by experiments, but when reinforced by experience and refined by reason, it becomes an intellectual principle. At both stages, belief is a function of man; it is man who determines whether belief remains a spiritual principle or is refined, by man, into an intellectual principle. These are only a few examples illustrating the use ‘Aflaq makes of religious terms, placing them in a secular context such that Arabism is lifted to the level of the sacred in the absence of the supernatural.

As for the sources of ‘Aflaq’s thought, it seems to have been taken for granted that, since he spent four years studying in France, he must have been influenced exclusively by Western thinkers. “To the Western critic, ‘Aflaq’s exposition of Arab nationalism presents a hodge-podge of vulgarized European philosophies.” As one example of ‘Aflaq’s “hodge-podge” borrowings, Binder, by translating risāla as “mission” rather than “message,” thinks ‘Aflaq reflects Herder in the view that every nation has a particular mission. Binder loses sight of the meanings inherent in the term risāla as message, referring to rasūl (the one who is sent with a message, the Prophet Muḥammad) and of the rich Islamic literature dealing with prophecy.

10 ‘Aflaq, “Īmān,” Sabīl, pp. 29-30; the term occurs in many of his other essays as well.
13 Ibid., p. 30.
Binder sees Hegel's influence in 'Aflaq's insistence on the importance of history, forgetting the importance Ibn Khaldûn was assuming and the place history has always had in the Arabo-Islamic tradition. Such oversight is unfortunate, particularly in view of 'Aflaq's concept of a cyclical Arab history with alternating periods of decline and glory. Because he assumes that Hegel was a decisive influence on 'Aflaq, Binder is surprised that the latter does not accept the Marxist theory of class struggle; how could he while rejecting Hegel's dialectical determinism and Marx' materialism! If one must see alien elements in 'Aflaq's view of history (these views and the underlying dialectic are discussed more fully later in this article), I would suggest the influence of Tolstoi or Dostoevski rather than of Hegel. As for the dialectic 'Aflaq assumes, it may be derived from André Gide's concept of dialectic as creative opposition which idea itself may be considered quite Islamic in view of the Qur'anic verse S. 2:143: "Thus We have appointed you a middle nation, that ye may be witnesses against mankind, and that the messenger may be a witness against you." The "will" 'Aflaq talks about might be Rousseau's General Will or Schopenhauer's concept of will (the latter is attacked by 'Aflaq in one of his short stories), but it is also reminiscent of the Mu'tazila insistence on man's free will as concomitant with his responsibility for his actions.

By analyzing 'Aflaq's early literary output,16 it may be shown that the most important European mentor for 'Aflaq was, indeed, André Gide.18 Other than the obviously sympathetic elements of

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16 See Shâkir Muṣṭafâ, Muhâdarât 'an al-giṣṣa fī Sūriyya kattâ al-karb al-'alamiyya al-thāniyya (Lectures on the Short Story in Syria until the Second World War) (Cairo: Ma'had al-Dîrâsât, 1958) including a section Al-giṣṣa 'inda Miḥlîl 'Aflaq (The Short Story according to Michel 'Aflaq).

18 Note The Journals of André Gide, translated by Justin O'Brien (New York: Knopf, 1949) and the three-volume collection Œuvres d'André Gide (Paris: Gallimard, 1960). 'Aflaq's indebtedness to Gide is particularly clear in his theory of knowledge and in his approach to literature and the creative activity. For a discussion of Gide's theory of creative art, see Hagop J. Nersoyan, André Gide: The Theism of an Atheist (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1969). According to Nersoyan, Gide, as a creative writer, was indifferent to logical consistency. Moreover, contradiction was for Gide an effective means of comprehending Truth. Cultivating extremes, Gide attempts to hold them in precarious balance; the state of oscillation between two opposites becomes the basis of a new ethics. For Gide, the function of the artist therefore is not to present an unchanging ideal. It is to bear witness to an unfolding process while the artist experiences in his person the birth pains of the ever new; art is the bridge between incomplete actuality and the unfolding future.
religious alienation in Gide’s and ‘Aflaq’s lives, the views Gide held about art and, later, about socio-political issues are paralleled by ‘Aflaq. As suggested earlier, ‘Aflaq also read and studied other European thinkers, but this fact does not rule out the possibility that he derived his essential frame of reference from Arab and/or Muslim thinkers. It is impossible at this stage of our study to attempt tracing either the style or the content of ‘Aflaq’s writings to earlier Arab or Muslim thinkers, except in a general manner. The fact that ‘Aflaq was able to strike a reverberating chord among Arabs, the great majority of whom are Muslims, attests to his fundamental reliance on Arabo-Islamic sources. It is my proposition, therefore, that ‘Aflaq chose to be influenced by Gide precisely because Gide echoes ideas very close to the Arabo-Islamic ethos.

In the only study in English devoted to the analysis of ‘Aflaq’s thought, Tarif Khalidi relies exclusively on internal evidence to show that ‘Aflaq’s metaphysics was largely influenced by Hegel, in that ‘Aflaq postulates a dualism between Spirit and Matter with Spirit dominating Matter. According to Khalidi, ‘Aflaq’s “spirit of Arab life or nation is a synonym for [Hegel’s] spirit.”

In his rejection

17 Gide, a Protestant in a Catholic milieu, and ‘Aflaq, a Christian in a Muslim milieu.


of Marxist materialism, 'Aflaq does tend to emphasize the spiritual and the mystical, but it should also be pointed out that 'Aflaq, as an Arab, was heir to a rich tradition of Islamic philosophy, some schools of which emphasized not less than Hegel the dualism of spirit (rūḥ) and matter (mādda), and the dominance of spirit over matter.

As far as Khalidi's attempt to trace 'Aflaq's dialectic to Hegel's influence is concerned, it is true that 'Aflaq poses a dualism between Earth and Heaven, between the old and the young, and between the past and the future, but the dynamics of these pairs of opposites is not as simple as Khalidi seems to suggest.

It seems that the dialectic which Gide presents is of much greater interest than the Hegelian dialectic as far as a possible similarity to 'Aflaq's thought is concerned. The key term in Gide's dialectic is contradiction or, in other words, "tension vivante," as the source of creativity. 'Aflaq never attempts to resolve the ambivalences and contradictions in his essays. The dialectic proper to 'Aflaq progresses from affirmation to contrasting affirmation, which mutually deny and mutually recall each other. Negation becomes an affirmation of the opposite "thesis" and not a negative mediation. The Hegelian deterministic progress, from thesis to antithesis to synthesis, which in turn creates its own antithesis in view of a higher level of synthesis, is fundamentally different from 'Aflaq's discontinuous dialectic.

Arising out of the Arabic language, 'Aflaq's dialectic, in its alternating movement, tends to diversify into opposites, such that these opposites do not produce one another but bear witness to each other. The polarity of the pairs of opposites does not lead to synthesis, where the two terms would cease their opposition, but rather, thought grasps the opposites in conjunction.

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21 He was criticized for his "mystical" (rūḥi) tendencies by Ṣafāḍī, Ḥīṣb al-ba‘tā, pp. 5, 32, 50.
23 'Aflaq, "Al-Ārṣ wa l-samā’" (Earth and Heaven), Sabīl, p. 34.
24 'Aflaq, "Khibrat al-shuyūkh wa indīfā‘īt al-shāhāb" (The Experience of the Old and the Rashness of the Young), Sabīl, p. 36.
25 'Aflaq, "Al-‘Arab bayn mādhīhim wa mustaqbalīhim" (The Arabs between their Past and their Future), Sabīl, pp. 83-91.
26 Dijdt, Personnalité, p. 13.
This non-Hegelian dialectic that ‘Aflaq assumes underlies his view of history, which is thus neither Hegelian nor Marxist. His philosophy of history, like his views on most topics, is not presented in a coherent system and needs to be reconstructed from several of his essays. ‘Aflaq sees history as being composed of alternating phases of decline and glory, clearly recalling Ibn Khaldun’s conception of history. The cyclical emphasis appears when ‘Aflaq stresses the past glory of the Arabs and the almost fateful need to rediscover it. The same view is reflected in the Ba’th Party Constitution, which notes that the Arabs have experienced many historical reverses but have always risen again to high points of glory.

Islam, in ‘Aflaq’s view, represents that period in history when the Arabs did bespeak their eternal message in a form that was best suited to the historical circumstances. As the ideal manifestation of the Arab genius, Islam is one of, if not the most, glorious periods in Arab history. Because of this fact, the Arab, even the Christian Arab, has to seek himself in Islam. The Arabs, particularly the Christian Arabs, are to find in Islam “their national culture in which they must become absorbed.”

The return to past glories is not in the spirit of imitation, but rather that the present can benefit from the lessons of the past in order to build a better future. It becomes clear that in ‘Aflaq’s view each stage of decline has within it the seeds necessary to produce the following stage of glory (khulud); each stage is itself an “être” and a “vouloir être.” The inexorable pull towards the future rests upon a realistic, yet optimistic, view of the present; ‘Aflaq defines his position as realistic and idealistic simultaneously. He distinguishes two types of idealism: “illusory idealism” and “realistic idealism,” asserting that the idealism of the Ba’th is of the second type. It is almost synonymous with belief (imân) since he defines “realistic...
idealism” as that “believing spirit” which is “optimistic, confident in itself, in the nation, and in the future.”  

'Aflaq explains that his idealism is realistic in that the real is to be studied and known, so as to be changed and overcome. The dialectical conjunction of the two terms in the compound expression al-mithāliyya al-wāqi'iyya (realistic idealism) becomes a creative force propelling the Arab nation towards conscious transformation.

The existence of the Arab nation is an axiom for 'Aflaq, requiring neither rational justification nor analysis of any kind. He writes: “We did not have to think for long about investigating the foundations of the Arab nation, and whether... it has the ties common to all its regions and people that justify its unity.... This is an obvious thing that imposes itself.” Arabism, for 'Aflaq, is not a concept that can be described in precise terms; it is an emotionally-charged idea with Arab unity as its fundamental tenet. 'Aflaq asserts that Arabism is not theoretical, but gives rise to theories; that it is not contrived by art, but is the source and inspiration of art.

Even though 'Aflaq considers the existence of the Arab nation as an axiom, he posits a principle higher than Arabism.

We believe that Arabism is above everything, in the sense that it is above well-being and selfishness... but we believe that one thing is above Arabism, and that is Truth [al-ḥaqq]. Arabism must be bound to an eternal principle.... Our slogan ought to be Truth above Arabism so that the union of Arabism with Truth may become a reality.

From the context and by obvious omission, 'Aflaq is not equating Truth with God. As eternal principle, Truth partakes of the attributes of God, but it is in no way identified with the over powering, all embracing God of the three monotheisms. For 'Aflaq, the “divine spark” lies dormant within each human being, waiting to be fanned into flames. It is the thin line between absolute humanism and

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35 Ibid. Also see his essay, “Al-Ma`raka bayn al-maṣṭ al-asʿal wa `l-wujūd al-sāli`” (The Battle between Superficial Destiny and Authentic Existence), Ma`raka, pp. 25-32.
36 'Aflaq, “Al-Ba`th huwa al-šubhah min al-dākhil” (The Resurrection is Rebirth from Within), Ma`raka, p. 58.
37 'Aflaq, “Fi al-qawmiyya al-`arabiyya” (About Arab Nationalism), Sabū, p. 43.
38 'Aflaq, Fi sabīl al-ba`th, p. 50, as quoted by Binder, Ideological Revolution, p. 175.
absolute theism that might be considered the thread running through all of 'Aflaq's thought.

'Aflaq continues his discussion by elaborating what Arab nationalism should not be. It should not be religious, since religious affiliation does not bind the nation, but, on the contrary, may divide one people.89

Arabism is not theory, nor love, nor belief, nor will, although these are some of its necessary ingredients;40 like love of family 41 or like one’s fate,42 nationalism is a beloved fate.43 And one’s fate must be accepted since one must accept oneself in order to fulfill one’s potentialities to the greatest extent possible. ‘Aflaq’s refusal to define Arabism is consistent with his early attack on abstract thinking and theoretical definitions.44 Interestingly enough, ‘Aflaq draws an analogy between those who attempt to reduce nationalism to theory and those who attempted to rationalize Islam, the dialecticians (‘ulamā’ al-kalām).46

At first sight, these arguments seem to indicate that ‘Aflaq is striving to reject the rational approach to nationalism, but he is not simply insisting on subjective nationalism. He only rejects rationalizing in general terms and insists on talking of specifies: ‘urūba (Arabism) instead of qawmiyya (nationalism), and Islam instead of dīn (religion).48

‘Aflaq clarifies these ideas further by distinguishing between the “Arab idea” and the “nationalist theory.”

It is the Arab idea which is axiomatic and eternal; it is a beloved fate since it is love above everything else. By contrast, a nationalist theory is a progressive expression of this eternal idea, dependent

89 ‘Aflaq, “Al-Qawmiyya al-arabiyya wa l-naẓariyya al-qawmiyya” (Arab Nationalism and Nationalist Theory), Sabīl, pp. 102-106.
40 ‘Aflaq, “Fi al-qawmiyya al-arabiyya,” Sabīl, p. 44.
41 ‘Aflaq, “Al-Qawmiyya ḥubb” (Nationalism is Love), Sabīl, p. 45.
42 ‘Aflaq, “Al-Qawmiyya qadar muḥabbab” (Nationalism is a Beloved Fate), Sabīl, p. 47.
43 Ibid. In another passage, ‘Aflaq equates the “spasm of love” with the “revulsion of hate,” exemplifying the power of contradiction in his expression, the conjunction of opposites which creates a transformation of consciousness.
on time and circumstance. The theory is presented today—according to our belief—in freedom, socialism, unity.\textsuperscript{47}

The relationship between the “axiomatic, eternal” and therefore absolute and the relative “dependent upon time and circumstance” underlies 'Aflaq’s understanding of Islam as well. On the one hand, Islam is a “living being characterized by clearly apparent features and boundaries,”\textsuperscript{48} probably a reference to historic Islam. On the other hand, “Islam is general and eternal,”\textsuperscript{49} a statement from which one can easily deduce that the eternal Islam is practically synonymous to the “Arab idea.” The contrasting views are joined in an Islam “relative to a specific time and place, absolute in meaning and action within the limits of that time and place.”\textsuperscript{60}

The first element of the eternal Arab idea specific to this, the present time, is freedom.\textsuperscript{61} 'Aflaq insists on this point quite strongly, while rejecting the thought that only in democracy can freedom be safeguarded, individual and national.

We would not impose upon the rulers respect [of freedom] and we would not reveal to the people its value and its sacredness, if we did not believe in it actively (\textit{jihādan}) and protect it at great sacrifice (\textit{istishhādan}).\textsuperscript{62}

According to 'Aflaq, freedom is not to be found in more articles in the Constitution or in more laws, but in action both against foreign domination and internal exploitation.

Michel 'Aflaq is primarily a nationalist, both in the sense of an anti-imperialist and in the sense of a builder of a political community.

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., pp. 102-103. This later clarification, bridging a gap of seventeen years, illustrates how 'Aflaq's ideas, although qualified, remained basically unchanged. It is noteworthy that 'Aflaq’s three pillars of the Arabism specific to this contemporary period—freedom, socialism, unity—are analogous to the three principles of the 1789 French Revolution: liberté, égalité, fraternité. How far one may push this analogy is an open question; at this stage of our study it is sufficient to note that for 'Aflaq unity/fraternité is central in his conception of the interrelationship of the three elements.

\textsuperscript{48} 'Aflaq, "Dhikrā," \textit{Sabūl}, p. 56.

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{60} 'Aflaq, "Limādhā nḥrūṣ 'alā al-ḥurriyya" (Why we aspire to Freedom), \textit{Sabūl}, p. 319.

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., p. 321. Note the use of religious terms such as “sacredness” and the specifically Islamic terms \textit{jihād} and \textit{istishhād}. 

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., pp. 102-103.
And, as he himself insists, socialism is indispensable for the realization of the goals of nationalism.

The nationalist struggle requires the socialist view; in other words, [it requires] the belief that the Arabs cannot rise unless they feel that their nationalism includes justice (′adāla), equality (musāwāh), and a life of dignity (′aysh karīm) for all.53

Since ‘Aflaq rejects Marxism, his combination of nationalism and socialism (ishtirākiyya) 54 in one system of political thought is not necessarily a contradiction in terms. He explained his rejection of Marxism in two essays, the first published in 1944 and the second in 1946.55 In these essays, ‘Aflaq fails to distinguish between Marxism

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54 According to the analysis made by Izute, God and Man, Arabic terms used to translate foreign concepts may be classified as transparent, semi-transparent, or opaque. Such words as talijūn (telephone) and dimuqrātiyya (democracy) are completely transparent; the original Western word is “palpably” there. Terms like qawmiyya (nationalism) and ishtirākiyya (socialism) are considered semi-transparent since they mean what they mean only through the intermediacy of genuine Arabic words, each one of which has its own proper meaning and history in the Arabic language. One is supposed to be led to the Western concepts of nationalism and socialism in a flash, passing over the bridge as “lightly as possible.” Nevertheless, the Arabic connotations cannot but be felt whenever the terms are used. Moreover, if one is unfamiliar with the Western concepts, the terms then become opaque. In other words, the Arabic terms are understood according to their basic meanings in Arabic, without reference to the Western concepts. In this case, ishtirākiyya derives from sharaka (to share, participate, be or become partner, participant, or associate). The emphasis is on sharing and participation, in both the economic and the political spheres, without carrying any connotations of class distinctions or class conflicts. The difference in emphasis between “socialism” and ishtirākiyya did not go unnoticed. Shibli Shumayyil, one of the earliest modern Arab political writers, considered the term ishtirākiyya as a misleading translation and insisted on ijimā‘iyya from ijimā’ (society, community); see Hisham Sharabi, Arab Intellectuals and the West: The Formative Years, 1875-1914 (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1970). The fact that ishtirākiyya rather than ijimā‘iyya persisted indicates that participation in the political as well as the economic system was more important for Arabs than the concepts of class conflicts.

and communism, or between Marxism as methodology of analysis and Marxism as mode of political action. 'Aflaq attacks communism (shuyd'yya) on four points. He considers communism to be a Western philosophy and, therefore, a stranger to the Arab ethos. According to ‘Aflaq, communism has absolutely no positive link with Arab history, or thought, or life. Communism developed in the industrialized part of Europe, which had already passed through a nationalist phase and was entering upon an expansionist phase.

‘Aflaq remarks that the Western-inspired communist view of history follows the Hegelian thesis of deterministic and continuous progress as the underlying dynamics of history. Arab history, by contrast, is portrayed in ‘Aflaq's frame of reference as a series of contradictory stages, of “tensions vivantes.” As we noted earlier, one such basic opposition in ‘Aflaq’s thought is that between past Arab glory and present Arab decline.

‘Aflaq asserts that the Arab nation realizes it has to reject its actual present in order to enter upon a phase of renewal, contrary to the Western countries whose history has seen continuous progress. Moreover, the Arab nation is neither imperialist nor does it lust for expansion. The Arab nation does not need to espouse a materialist philosophy since the spirit is the great hope and mover of revival. For ‘Aflaq, communism is not simply an economic system but a message, a materialistic, artificial message denying the truth of nationalism and the spiritual historic basis upon which the Arab nation rests. Communism is a total philosophy which imposes a specific foreign policy, a specific governmental system, a specific social system, an intellectual, and a moral life. According to ‘Aflaq, either the Arabs have to accept it as a whole or reject it in order to carry their own message, embodied in a living humanism strengthened by a mature nationalism. Finally, ‘Aflaq reasserts the spiritual values underlying Arab socialism. Only by retrieving the original and genuine meaning of spiritual concepts will the Arabs save their nation from the dangers of materialist thought.

The last but most important element of contemporary Arabism,

57 Ibid., p. 197.
60 Ibid., p. 196.
national unity, is, for 'Aflaq, the fundamental and constructive principle of society, of its history, and of humanity as a whole.\textsuperscript{61} National unity falls within the category of concepts which are "axiomatic, requiring no analysis or proof; [its comprehension] enters the heart and possesses the mind at once." \textsuperscript{62} Since the feeling of alienation, of 'otherness' was a powerful motive in 'Aflaq's psyche, the unity he proclaims is, first and foremost, spiritual unity, closer to Gide's concept of balance and harmony than to Hegel's triumphant Spirit. Unity is not, for 'Aflaq, merely a clear-cut political objective; it is a paramount search for the "treasure of hidden vitality," for the moral fiber of the nation. Arab unity, therefore, is the central prerequisite, since socialism and freedom cannot be achieved except on the basis of unity. Arab unity assumes the proportions of an apocalyptic vision:

... social differences, provincial partitions, confessional conflicts, every trace of slavery, particular interests, ignorance, and imitation disappear. At that time will the future come to us, progress in us, and nothing will return to reign separate from and external to us.\textsuperscript{63}

'Aflaq's three immediate objectives—freedom, socialism, and unity—are indissolubly fused; none can be achieved without the others, but all are only means to the ultimate message of the Arab nation. It is only through pain and struggle that Arab unity, the central objective, may be achieved. The struggle for unity is not conceived of simply in terms of the elimination of political boundaries; 'Aflaq sees it as a regenerative process leading to the reform of Arab character and society. In other words, only through Revolution can the Arab Resurrection be achieved.\textsuperscript{64} Thus, for 'Aflaq, Revolution is both the means and the aim of Arab unity.

... the new Revolution is the sharply conscious, believing progress towards that level where contradiction is resolved and opposites

\textsuperscript{61} 'Aflaq, "Ma'ālim," \textit{Sabil}, p. 206.

\textsuperscript{62} 'Aflaq, "Hawl al-raisāla al-'arabiyya," \textit{Sabil}, p. 139.

\textsuperscript{63} 'Aflaq, "Al-Mustaqbal" (The Future), \textit{Sabil}, p. 35.

\textsuperscript{64} 'Aflaq, "Min ma'ání al-inqilib" (On the Meanings of Revolution), \textit{Sabil}, p. 175. Although 'Aflaq continues to use the term \textit{inqilib}, in other Arab political writings it has come to mean a military coup while the term \textit{thawra} is accepted to mean revolution in the full sense.
are united; where the past meets the future, and the nation is reconciled with itself in creativity.65

‘Aflaq lays down three essential conditions for the Revolution: (1) awareness of the historical and contemporary realities which call for drastic transformation; (2) a feeling of responsibility rooted in a strong moral base; and (3) a genuine belief in the feasibility, at the present stage of Arab history, of the Revolution. These conditions are to be fulfilled by each individual since awareness and belief are characteristics of the individual, not of the group.66 On the individual level, revolution is imperative in order to “reconstruct the true Arab personality, to free thought, to establish a serious, responsible, ethical system to burst open the sources of belief.” 67

‘Aflaq’s concept of the revolution is non-materialist (ma’na‘wī), as may be seen from the following passage:

Revolution is the victory of Truth over reality, because the [existence of the] nation, despite its retardation and its disfigurement, is a truth. This Truth declares itself whatever might be the domination of reality. Revolution is this declaration, this reinforcement of the existence of Truth.... Revolution is thus the victory of the future [over the present] which is our truth.68

And again, ‘Aflaq asserts:

Revolution... before being a political and social program is that primeval propelling power, that strong psychic current, that mandatory struggle, without which the reawakening of the nation is not to be understood.69

65 Ibid., p. 179. The Ba’th Party, which ‘Aflaq helped found in 1940, was to be the instrument of the Revolution. The Ba’th Party, supposedly a core of revolutionaries, was to spread itself within the nation as a diminutive image of the Arab nation of the future. See ‘Aflaq, “Al-Šīla bain al-‘urūba wa ’l-fikra al-inqīlābiyya” (The Link between Arabism and the Revolutionary Idea), Sabīl, p. 171. Also see his essay, “Al-Mustaqbal,” ibid., p. 35, and the several articles in ibid., pp. 163-170.
68 Ibid.
69 Ibid.
Obviously, ‘Aflaq’s is an ethical, nonlegalistic conception of the Revolution, and is closely tied to his ideas about sacrifice and pain. Only by passing through the crucible of sacrifice and pain will each individual be transformed and thus change the Arab nation into a healthy society. And it is Islam, as the ideal expression of the Arab idea, which provides the ethical dimension of Arabism:

As long as the communion between the Arab nation and Islam remains strong and as long as we see in the Arab nation a body whose soul is Islam, there is no fear that the Arabs will deviate in their nationalism.

The Arab existential revolt is then to be guided by the precepts and ideals of Islam, never straying from within the boundaries of the Islamic ethos. For ‘Aflaq, Islam, in its essence, is a revolutionary movement, nourished by struggle and pain, which transformed men and institutions. But from ‘Aflaq’s perspective, one needs to differentiate between the true, ideal Islam and its present, historically disintegrated form. The new generation, rejecting Islam in its totality, needs to be reminded that the ossified Islam of today is not the true Islam, and it must struggle in order to bring Islam back to its true inspiration. Thus, according to Michel ‘Aflaq, the constraint of the true Islamic values is, in the final analysis, the “eternal message” (al-risāla al-khālidā) of the Arab nation.

Institute of Islamic Studies
McGill University, Montreal, Quebec

N. Salem Babikian

70 Ibid., p. 178.


73 Ibid., p. 127.