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Integration Problems of the Federation of Arab Republics

By Nikolaos van Dam

On April 17, 1971, it was announced that Egypt, Libya and Syria were to be officially united in a federation called the Federation of Arab Republics (FAR). The date chosen for this was not accidental. Exactly eight years before, on April 17, 1963, Egypt, Syria and Iraq also announced the formation of a federation which, however, failed to succeed, mainly because of a strong opposition among some important Syrian Ba'thist officers against that federation, and because of an enmity between president 'Abd an-Nāṣir of Egypt and the Syrian branch of the Ba'th Party.

The FAR which was formed in 1971 caused serious trouble amongst the Egyptian political leaders. The decision to form this federation was taken almost exclusively at the presidential level, and met with great resistance from a majority within the Central Committee of the Arab Socialist Union (ASU) in Egypt. The opposition against president as-Sādāt was led by the Egyptian vice-president 'Alī Ṣabrī who, especially, objected to the hasty way in which the formation of the federation had been announced and to the membership of Ba'thist Syria. The struggle for power that arose in Egypt, amongst other things because of the proclamation of the FAR, ended finally with a victory for president as-Sādāt. In May, 1971, purges were held at a large scale resulting in imprisonment of 'Alī Ṣabrī and a great number of other political opponents of as-Sādāt. In Egypt the internal troubles related to the formation of the federation had, for the time being, come to an end.

Nevertheless a number of fundamental differences between the member states of the FAR may seriously hinder a full integration. These differences can be found i. a. in 1. the different 'party systems' of the respective member states, 2. in the place of Islam in their different ideologies, 3. in the composition of their armies and the rôle of non-Sunni minorities therein, and 4. in the different loyalties concerning the idea of the 'nation state'.

It is my intention to deal in this article with these above mentioned differences respectively.

1. The different party systems

The only political organization allowed in Egypt is the Arab Socialist Union (ASU), which is actually not a political party but a mass organization directed from above, and intended to legitimize the Egyptian regime.

The only political organization allowed in Libya is the Libyan Arab Socialist Union, which is similarly organized as the Egyptian ASU.

The Ba'th Party ruling in Syria is unlike the Egyptian ASU and the Libyan ASU a genuine political party with, moreover, a clear ideology. Within the Ba'th Party the actual power is in the hands of a small core of Ba'thist officers. Next to the Ba'th some other political parties are allowed, although they are forbidden to be politically active inside the army and among the students. These parties are the Socialist Unionists, the Syrian Arab Socialist Union, the Syrian Communist Party and the Arab Socialist Movement. Together with the Ba'th they are officially represented in the National Progressive Front.

Concerning the rôle of political organizations within the member states of the FAR, one finds the greatest contrast between those of Libya and Syria. Whereas several political parties are allowed in Syria, all party activities are considered treason in Libya. This might well be illustrated by the presence of large triumphal arches at the airports of Benghazi and Tripoli on which is written: 'He who forms a party acts treacherously'. Moreover, the Libyan Revolutionary Council has issued a law which makes the belonging to a political party punishable by death.¹⁾

The fact that the Syrian Communist Party is allowed is a thorn in the side of the strongly religious al-Qadhāfi, the more so as this party openly encourages the presence of Soviet military advisers in the Arab world. Al-Qadhāfi, however, is opposed to any outside influence in the Arab world, whether it be the United States of America or the

Soviet Union. According to his opinion the Arab states can only really develop themselves and achieve a worthy existence when cooperating with each other and striving for independence from the outside world as much as possible.

In June, 1972, the relations between Syria and Libya seemed to have reached their lowest point since the foundation of the federation. On June 18, 1972, just before the Presidential Council of the FAR, consisting of the presidents al-Asad, al-Qadhāfi and as-Sādāt, was to have a meeting in Egypt, a fierce anti-Syrian article was published in the Libyan magazine *al-Balagh*, titled: 'And also in the land of the union Nasserists are being imprisoned.' In this article Syria was accused of having imprisoned the Nasserist officer Muḥammad al-Jarrāh in February, 1972, after his return to Syria from Libya, following a meeting of the Libyan ASU, as a representative of the Syrian ASU. The Ba'thists heavily accused him of acting in Libya as the only representative of the National Progressive Front of Syria, while he was not even a member.

In case of a complete integration of the member states of the FAR, one of the first conditions would be an equalization of the respective political organizations and political systems. In that respect president Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad has partly met with the wishes of al-Qadhāfi by enlarging the base of his government by admitting representatives of other political organizations, like the Syrian ASU, next to the dominating Ba'thists.

Although this might be a first step in the direction of creating a large Syrian political mass organization with the same structure as the Egyptian ASU or the Libyan ASU, it remains almost unthinkable that an 'elite party' such as the Ba'th, whose power mainly depends on the Ba'thist officers in the Syrian army, could be transformed into a mass 'party'. In that respect the Ba'th has learned many lessons from the union between Syria and Egypt formed in 1958, which fell apart in September, 1961. Not long after the Syrian branch of the Ba'th Party had dissolved herself because of the formation of that union, and was submerged in the political mass organization of the United Arab Republic, the National Union, she lost most of her power. In that respect the Syrian Ba'thists have now become much more careful.

2. The place of Islam in the ideologies of the member states

Whereas al-Qadhāfi's Arab nationalism is strongly tinged by Islam, and to a lesser extent as-Sādāt's Arab nationalism, religion and politics are clearly separated in the Ba'th ideology.

In the ideology of the Ba'th Islam is subordinate to nationalism, and is considered an important part of the Arab national culture, of which all Arabs, both Christians and Muslims can be the heirs. Michel 'Aflaq, Greek Orthodox Christian, and founder of the Ba'th Party, writes on this subject:

"The relation of Islam with Arabism ... is not like a relation between a religion and whatever nationality. When in the Arab Christians nationalism completely awakens, and when they recover their original nature, they know that to them Islam is a national culture, with which they have to be saturated until they understand it and love it and cover Islam like the most precious thing in their Arabism."²⁾

Only when religion and politics are totally separated, all Arabs can be equal members of the Arab nation, irrespective of their religions. If, however, Islam would be a decisive and dominating factor in Arab nationalism, non-Muslims would unavoidably play a subordinate rôle.

Because of the fact that there are many Christians and non-Sunni Muslim minorities, like the 'Alawis, Druzes and Ismā'ilīs, present in Syria, it is important whether or not the government adopts a kind of Arab nationalism which is coloured by Sunni Islam. In accordance with the Ba'th

ideology a new permanent constitution has been drawn up for Syria, which does not make mention of a state religion. In February and March, 1973, this led to great disturbances in several Syrian cities, containing the Sunni majority of the population. In Ḥamāh there were many casualties and wounded people as a result of clashes between demonstrators and security forces. It was demanded that Islam should be the religion of state. President Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad, who himself is an 'Alawī Muslim, partly met with the demands of the demonstrators by declaring that the religion of the Syrian head of state should be Islam.

By abolishing a religion of the state, the Syrian Ba'ṯists have tried to find a formula according to which all people can be equal before the constitution, disregarding their religions. Many Sunnis, however, oppose this, partly because they feel that this might weaken their position as to other religious groups, and because of their fear of being dominated by the non-Sunni minorities, like for instance the 'Alawīs, who, for several reasons, are relatively strong represented in the Syrian Ba'ṯ Party and the army.³⁾

The Syrian demonstrators against the new permanent constitution argued that the absence of Islam as religion of state would be in disagreement with the constitution of the FAR. This constitution does make mention of Islam, though not as the religion of the state. At the discussions on the constitution of the FAR in August, 1971, a fierce dispute took place between al-Qadhḥāfi and the Syrian Ba'ṯist delegation whether or not an article referring to Islam should be included. In a debate that took several hours, al-Qadhḥāfi managed to have his way, despite heavy opposition of the Syrian Ba'ṯists. Article 6 of the constitution of the FAR reads now:

"The federal state emphasizes spiritual values and considers Islamic law a principal source of legislation."

Libya is the only member state of the FAR which is almost exclusively inhabited by Sunni Muslims. Unlike the presidents of Syria and Egypt, al-Qadhḥāfi, for this reason, does not have to take into account people of a different persuasion. On December 4, 1972, al-Qadhḥāfi in a speech very clearly pointed out the importance which he in his Arab nationalism acknowledged to Islam:

"The political slogans and leftist ideologies have proven their own failures. They have not been able to mobilize the Arab masses for the sake of the struggle against the enemy. As for today, the only way out for the Arab masses is the armament with the belief and the rallying **under the banner of Islam**, which united the Arabs in the past and enabled them to go from one victory to another, and which, today, is the only factor able to unite them and to mobilize them for the sake of the liberation battle of Palestine, the occupied territories and the holy places in the city of Jerusalem."⁴⁾

Al-Qadhḥāfi's speech was, otherwise than usual, only very partially and in a very modest way reproduced in the Egyptian and Syrian (government controlled) newspapers. It was clear that the Egyptian and Syrian rulers did not agree at all. To the Syrian Ba'ṯists al-Qadhḥāfi's words may well have sounded as reactionary.

More than ten per cent of the Egyptian population consist of Christians. It would be difficult to expect them to be enthusiastic about a dominating part of Islam in the Arab nationalism of the Egyptian leaders. Nevertheless, on September 11, 1971, 99.9 per cent of the voters in a referendum (a number one encounters frequently in Egyptian referenda (approved of a new Egyptian constitution, declaring Islam the religion of the state, and declaring the principles of the Islamic *sharī'a* principal source of legislation.

In 1972 several serious clashes occurred between Egyptian Muslims and Christians, after which president as-Sādāt in his speeches stressed the need for a strong national front and pressed for an ending of internal disputes with a sectarian character.

Under the regime of as-Sādāt the Islamic mystical orders (Ṭarīqa's) have started to flourish again. Within the Ṭarīqa's the Muslim Brothers, who were severely suppressed during the regime of the late president 'Abd an-Nāṣir, are very active. The Ministry of Religious Affairs sees to it, however, that the influence of the Muslim Brothers within the popular Ṭarīqa's does not become too great. The Ṭarīqa's, lately, enjoy a rather great run of workers and young university people. And it looks as if the Egyptian authorities in some respects are putting into practice a part of the program of the Muslim Brothers for an Islamic

theocracy.⁵⁾ On January 6, 1973, it was announced in Cairo that the People's Council was to discuss a law bill in the near future, aiming to encourage the learning by heart of the Qur'ān. The law bill was to implicate a shortening of the compulsory military service to a period of one and a half year instead of the usual three years, for all those who know the Qur'ān by heart.⁶⁾

The system of government in the FAR is, according to the constitution, 'democratic and socialist' (art. 4). And the only way in which the members of the different religious groups of the FAR can be really equal constitutionally, is by separating politics and religion, which implies having no religion of state. Syria is, up until now, the only member state of the FAR which has put this principle into practice, with the exception that the Syrian head of state is to be a Muslim.

3. The composition of the respective armies and the rôle of non-Sunni minorities therein

A merger of the armies of Egypt, Libya and Syria into one army, with a common supreme command, seems at present quite impossible. An important reason for this is the fact that in the armies of Egypt and Libya the important posts are occupied by Nasserist officers, while in Syria Ba'ṯist officers rule the roost. In case Nasserist officers in Syria would become powerful enough to threaten the regime of Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad, they undoubtedly would try to topple his regime. The opposite would be the case in for instance Libya, if Ba'ṯist officers would become powerful enough to topple the regime of al-Qadhḥāfi.

There is, however, a much deeper background which makes it difficult for the armies of Egypt and Libya on the one side and the army of Syria on the other side, to merge. This is the fact that the higher officers' corps in Egypt and Libya consists almost exclusively of Sunnis, whereas the Syrian officers for a relatively great part originate from special minorities, of which the 'Alawīs play the most important part.

In case the armies of Syria, Egypt and Libya would merge, there would be a chance of Egyptian and Libyan Sunni officers trying to exploit the 'sectarian' anti-minority feelings of Syrian Sunnis politically, therewith endangering the positions of those Syrian officers who originate from the minorities.⁷⁾ It is understandable that they would like to prevent such a situation. So one would expect them to be more cautious, before committing their army to a complete union with the armies of Egypt and Libya. It is hardly imaginable, for instance, that the strongly religious al-Qadhḥāfi would tolerate the present Syrian Chief of Staff Joseph Shakkūr, who is a Greek Orthodox Christian, in his present or a likewise position, in case of a full merger of the three armies of the FAR.⁸⁾

Only if the political systems of the member states of the FAR would be made equal, and, in addition to that, there would have taken place a complete change of mentality, after which differences in religions or for instance tribal loyalties would cease to play a part in politics, it would be possible to achieve a complete integration of the respective armies of the FAR, without its existence being endangered.

4. The different loyalties concerning the idea of the 'nation state'

The Arab language has two words for nationalism: Waṭaniya and Qaumiya. Waṭaniya is derived from Waṭan (homeland) and denotes the kind of nationalism which is related to a special territory with defined boundaries. The kind of nationalism which is exclusively restricted to the territory of Syria, Egypt or Libya would fall within the term Waṭaniya, which can also be translated with patriotism.

Qaumiya is derived from Qaum (people) and denotes the kind of nationalism which is related to a special people, without political boundaries being important. Arab nationalism in the sense of Qaumiya applies to all Arabs, without making any distinction between different Arab states. One of the final goals of the FAR is to achieve an Arab unity in which all Arabs are united in one state. According to the constitution of the FAR Arab republics that believe in Arab unity, work for the realization of a unified socialist Arab society, and agree to accept the rules given form in this constitution shall be admitted to the federation on the strength of an unanimous resolution of the Presidential Council (art. 9). Among the member states of the FAR, however, different kinds of nationalisms and loyalties exist. These could thwart an integration, when continuing to coexist.

In Egypt the Waṭaniya feeling is more developed than the Qaumiya feeling. Usually, someone from Egypt in the first place feels himself to be an Egyptian and only in the second place feels that he is an Arab. Egypt is the only member state of the FAR that has a political identity dating from very early times. As a state, Egypt already existed in the time of the Pharaohs. After its being conquered by the Arab Muslims in the seventh century it has formed a part of larger Islamic political units. The core of the present state Egypt, consisting roughly of the territory of the Nile delta and the river Nile up to Aṣwān, has, however always remained about the same. In modern history it was only after the first Arab-Israeli war of 1948, that Egypt started acting as a part of the Arab world. It is, therefore, not surprising that the feeling of being an Egyptian (Waṭaniya) is usually more developed than the feeling of being an Arab (Qaumiya).

The present state of Libya dates from only 1951, when it became an independent federal monarchy, consisting of the three provinces of Tripolitania, Cyrenaica and Fazzān. An important problem the new state was confronted with was that of creating a feeling of national identity and unity among the population of the newly formed political unit, since the loyalties of the Muslim Arabs towards their villages or tribes were still greater than their being loyal to the federal state. Creating a Libyan identity was made even more difficult because the three Libyan provinces were separated from each other by great spaces of desert land, and because of poor communications and the lack of an efficient modern administration. Provincial rivalries, especially between Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, have clearly influenced the course of political events in Libya since 1951.

In April, 1963, Libya became by royal proclamation a unitary state, being divided in ten new administrative units. This, however, did not at all clear away the existing regional rivalries and loyalties.

On September 1, 1969, Libya's form of government was changed once more: a group of young officers, led by Colonel al-Qadhāfi, brought down the monarchy by a coup d'état, and proclaimed the Libyan Arab Republic. Al-Qadhāfi's policy is strongly based on Arab nationalism. According to his views, the problems of the Arab world can only be solved if the Arab states achieve unity. By stressing pan-Arabism, al-Qadhāfi is diverting the development of a loyalty to the state of Libya to a loyalty of a 'nation state' that would comprise all Arabs. It should, however, be questioned whether it is possible to make the great leap from tribal and regional loyalties to a loyalty to an all-embracing Arab nation state, or, for the time being, to a part of it, consisting of Egypt, Libya and Syria, while the intermediate stage of a well developed loyalty to a Libyan nation state is omitted. Just because of the magnitude of such a transition, there might be a bigger chance that the existing regional and tribal loyalties become even stronger.⁹⁾

The present state Syria, as a political unit, dates from only 1942. Before that date Syria, as such, never existed. During the time of the first Islamic conquests, Syria (aṣḥ-Shām) referred to the territory that comprised roughly the present states of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Israel. During the Ottoman Empire this territory was divided into several administrative districts. In 1920, it was split into French and British Mandate territories. Britain got the Mandate over Palestine and Trans Jordan. The rest of Syria (aṣḥ-Shām) was divided by the French into the Republic Lebanon, the states of Damascus and Aleppo, the districts of Latakia (with a majority of 'Alawīs) and the Jabal ad-Durūz (inhabited by a majority of Druzes) with their own governments, and the district of Alexandretta. In 1925, the states of Damascus and Aleppo were united into the Republic of Syria. In 1939, the French ceded the Alexandretta district to the Turks. And, at last, in 1942, the districts of Latakia and the Jabal ad-Durūz were added to the united states of Aleppo and Damascus, with which the present state Syria came into existence as a political unit.

The political boundaries of present Syria have, in fact, cut off several former rather important trade routes. For that reason Syria has been described, more than once, as a 'limbless trunk, severed from her hinterland'.

The many changes which the political unit 'Syria' has undergone, prevented the development of a clearly definable loyalty to a 'Syrian' nation state. The Waṭaniya feeling has, consequently, hardly been able to obtain a strong

foothold, and the feeling of being an Arab (Qaumiya) has developed, relatively, much more than the Syrian identity. It is not without any reason that Damascus bears the surname of 'the beating heart of Arabism' (Qalb al-'urūba an-nābiḍ).

The Ba'ṯh Party has usually encouraged pan-Arab loyalties, and has rejected any kind of loyalty to a smaller 'nation state', such as Syria or Iraq, as a sort of provincialism or regionalism that would form an obstacle in the way of achieving an all-Arab unity. Nevertheless, political and social commitments are still strongly influenced by regional loyalties. In fact, 'the development of a political consciousness has stressed supra-national and sub-national loyalties at the expense of a commitment to the smaller nation state as a whole.'¹⁰⁾ And because of the great gap still existing between the ideal of Arab unity and its accomplishment, these regional loyalties may, perhaps, be easily prevented from weakening.

From the existence of the above discussed loyalties in Egypt, Libya, and Syria, concerning the 'nation state', the following conclusions might be drawn:

- a) While in Syria and Libya the Waṭaniya feeling has scarcely developed, its present political rulers try to create a strong loyalty to the ideal of a future pan-Arab nation state. Regional loyalties have, however, continued to exist in Libya and Syria. And, because of the great gap still existing between the ideal of Arab unity and its accomplishment, these regional loyalties might have an extra opportunity to strengthen themselves. This might be a serious obstacle to the realization of an Arab unity.
- b) Different from Syria and Libya, the Waṭaniya feeling is strongly developed in Egypt, where Egyptian nationalism seems to be relatively stronger than Arab nationalism. A well developed Egyptian nationalism might also be an obstacle to the realization of an Arab unity of which Egypt would form part, because the Egyptians in such a union might, because of their own nationalism, feel 'superior' to the Arabs from other states. Since Egypt is the Arab country with the largest population and the largest number of specialists and technicians, such a division into 'Egyptians' and 'the rest' might easily occur. Many Syrian officers, in this respect have unfavorable reminiscences of the former Syrian-Egyptian union.

The future will perhaps tell which way to an Arab unity is the more promising one: the great transition from regionalism and tribalism to pan-Arabism, omitting the intermediate stage of the 'smaller' nation state (Waṭaniya thought), or the gradual way via an integrated 'smaller' nation state.

It should, however, be remarked that an Arab union is very probably condemned to be a failure in case one of the member states would contain a large non-Arab population like the Kurds of Northern Iraq or the inhabitants of Southern Sudan. A union comprising such 'Arab' states would probably only have a reasonable chance to succeed if the large non-Arab groups of the respective states would have been given autonomy.

From the foregoing it may be concluded that of the member states of the FAR, Egypt and Libya have most in common, and that it would be easier for these two states to integrate, than integration for either of them with Syria, which is different in several fundamental respects. Of the fundamental differences dealt with in this article, Egypt and Libya only differ essentially in the existing loyalties concerning the ideas of a 'nation state' and in the place acknowledged to Islam in their respective ideologies. These two points may cause strained relations between the Egyptians and the Libyans when a full merger between their two countries is to be achieved. As to the first point, it is to be hoped for that the Egyptians have learned some lessons from the former full union with Syria, that fell apart in 1961. As to the second point, al-Qadhāfi will, at least, have to lessen his demands concerning the rôle of Islam if he wants a full merger between Libya and Egypt to become a reality.

It should not be concluded from the foregoing that an Arab union is an impossibility. The ideal of an Arab unity is a powerful living reality, which will have a heavy impact on Arab politics in the near future, and should not too easily be underestimated.

Notes

- 1) al-Hawadith, June 30, 1972, pp. 24, 25.
- 2) Michel 'Aflaq, *Fi Sabil al-Ba'th*, fourth print, Bayrut 1970, p. 136.
- 3) See Nikolaos van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria and the Ba'th Party (1958—1966)*, ORIENT (XIV) 1, March 1973, Opladen
- 4) al-Hayat.
- 5) Neue Zürcher Zeitung, November 3, 1972.
- 6) al-Hayat, January 7, 1973.
- 7) According to Major General Zahr ad-Din, former Syrian Chief of Staff during the so called "separation period" (from September 28, 1961, till Mardi 8, 1963), the Egyptian army command during the Syrian-Egyptian union objected to the appointment of Syrian officers originating from non-Sunni minorities to the function of commander of the first (i. e.) Syrian army of the UAR. So when it was suggested that Lieutenant Colonel Jadu 'Izz al-Din might be suitable for this position, he was rejected mainly because of his being a Druze. 'Abd al-Karim Zahr al-Din, *Mudhakkirati 'an Fatrat al-Infisal fi Suriya ma bayna 28 Aylul 1961 wa 8 Adhar 1963*, Bayrut 1968, p. 43.
- 8) According to the Lebanese weekly ad-Dustur al-Qadhdhafi seems to have said to al-Asad once: 'What is Ba'th? What is a party which is led by an unbelieving Christian?' It was clear that al-Qadhdhafi was referring here to Michel 'Aflaq, the founder of the Ba'th Party. Ad-Dustur, No. 44, Bayrut, August 16, 1971, p. 12.
- 9) al-Qadhdhafi is himself of tribal origin and was born in 1942 in the neighbourhood of Sirte. It is being told that his father sold his camels to have him, as the only member of his tribe, study. In Subbah, in the Fazzan district, al-Qadhdhafi visited a school. Several of his former school friends later became members of the Libyan Revolutionary Council. 'Imad al-Takriti, *Mu'ammarr al-Qadhdhafi, al-Tha'ir wa al-Thawra*, Milaff al-Nahar, No. 66, September 6, 1971, p. 6.
- 10) Michael H. Van Dusen, *Political Integration and Regionalism in Syria*, Middle East Journal, Vol. 26, Spring 1972, No. 2, p. 123.