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The Metaphysical Universe of Michel ‘Aflaq and His Party: A Reappraisal of the Ba‘th

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Abstract

This article offers a reassessment of Arab Socialist Ba‘th Party founder Michel ‘Aflaq’s thought in the context of decolonization and global intellectual history. Engaging with ‘Aflaq’s thinking in terms of its metaphysical foundations and its relationship to universality, this work examines four key concepts in his oeuvre: resurrection (ba‘th), faith (īmān), spirit (rūḥ), and unity (waḥda). In essence, ‘Aflaq’s metaphysics links the Arab nation with the past while his universalist aspirations open the way forward for the future. While numerous scholars in recent years have explicated the universal ambitions of anticolonial nationalists, the place of Arab nationalists and their relationship to decolonization are in need of greater scholarly attention. In turn, I argue that ‘Aflaq’s ambition of national resurrection ought to be understood as such a quest to realize the universal.

Introduction

In recent years, studies of decolonization concerning the Arab world and beyond have engaged with reinterpreting the various emancipatory movements and thought forms that emerged in the early to mid-twentieth century. One of these ideas that became a movement, Ba‘thism, can be counted among such aspirations for a comprehensive liberation—not just in terms of the political change of government, but also in terms of a deeper reckoning with the self. Indeed, the pressing issue at hand for Arabs from the Mashriq to the Maghrib was not merely a political question but rather a metaphysical crisis that went to the very root of the Arab experience of being itself. Michel ‘Aflaq (1910–89), the Arab intellectual who was a pioneer in articulating this human condition, took up the task of formulating an aspiration of national resurrection—or, in Arabic, *ba‘th*—for the Arab nation, from the Atlantic Ocean to the Gulf. For ‘Aflaq, the problem of colonization in the splintered Arab homeland in which fragmentation (*al-tajzi‘a*) is the “biggest obstacle on the path of its renaissance” refers to much more than a sociopolitical reality.¹

¹Michel ‘Aflaq, “Nazratunā li-l-ra’smāliyya wa-li-l-ṣirā‘ al-ṭabaqī” (Our View on Capitalism and the Class Struggle) (1956), in ‘Aflaq, *Fi Sabil al-Ba‘th* (In the Path of the Resurrection) (1959), 4th edn (Beirut, 1970), 319–23, at 321. See also ‘Aflaq, “Waḥdat al-niḍāl wa-waḥdat al-maṣīr” (Unity of Struggle

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To wit, this fragmentation represented a far deeper problem that afflicted the very Arab soul. Thus ‘Aflaq sought to provide a new orientation—Arabism as *universal-ity*—and in turn a new political current in response to the crisis of fragmentation.

‘Aflaq emerged on the intellectual scene during a time of great disorder in the Arab world. The devastation of the First World War in the region was followed by the colonial partitioning and violent occupation of the Arab Mashriq by the French and British. This devastation would be followed in 1938 by the Turkish occupation and annexation of the Sanjak of Alexandretta in northern Syria.² While Lebanon and Syria would eventually become independent in 1943 and 1946 respectively, these new entities bore the stamp of their colonial creation, further solidifying the fragmentation of Greater Syria and the Arab world writ large. This, of course, would be followed by the violence of the Zionist occupation and colonization of Palestine—the Nakba—in 1948, entrenching a European settler colonial project in the middle of Syrian Arab lands. The political independence of partial entities coexisted with the further colonization of the Arab East: the fragmentation of land, of identity, and of possibility. Established political actors in the region refused to acknowledge this moment of despair and failed to offer an adequate response or tried to mask that despair with fragmentary independence.³ ‘Aflaq, conversely, articulated a message of regeneration, renewal, and reinvigoration. Or, put more simply, he articulated a message of hope. In ‘Aflaq’s view, the problem of fragmentation had afflicted the Arab homeland precisely because the existing political leadership did not offer a vision that could in fact get to the root of the matter—that is to say, understanding the deep distortion done to the Arab soul and the Arab national spirit. This disorder had thrust the Arab human person into a state of inauthentic existence, anxiety, and subservience to contingency, with no sense of rootedness in his own lands.⁴ Thus ‘Aflaq turned precisely to a reckoning with the Arab self and the Arab subject’s existence in the world, and to how to repair the deeper damage done to his soul that had snuffed out the greater aspiration of one united Arab nation comprising free and authentic persons contributing to humanity. His diagnosis of the problem of fragmentation went beyond its material manifestations. ‘Aflaq’s metaphysics, then, allowed him

and Unity of Destiny) (1955), in *ibid.*, 233–8, at 234. It is important to note here that the foundational texts of Ba’thist philosophy exist across multiple editions and volumes. *Fi Sabīl al-Ba’th*, originally published in 1959, comprises a collection of ‘Aflaq’s essays, talks, and speeches. Other important volumes, such as *Ma’rakat al-Maṣīr al-Wāhid*, first published in 1958, exist in a similar format. Upon his move to Iraq in 1975, all of ‘Aflaq’s political writings would eventually be compiled into a five-volume collection under the name of *Fi Sabīl al-Ba’th*, with the aforementioned two titles serving as volumes 1 and 2 respectively. All of the translations present in this article are my own, unless indicated otherwise.

²For a key piece on this historical episode, see Dalal Arsuzi-Elamir, “Zakī al-Arsūzī and Syrian-Arab Nationalism in the Periphery: The Alexandretta Crisis of 1936–1939,” in Thomas Philipp and Christoph Schumann, eds., *From the Syrian Land to the States of Syria and Lebanon* (Würzburg, 2004), 307–27.

³On the political forces and the established figures that would see through the independence of Syria in such a fashion, as well as the events leading up to this moment, see Philip S. Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism, 1920–1945* (Princeton, 1987).

⁴In terms of notions of rootedness, Godmer briefly makes note of ‘Aflaq as a theorist of deracination in the vein of Simone Weil (1909–43) or Martin Heidegger (1889–1976). See Laurent Godmer, “Le monde arabe à la recherche de son unité,” *Labyrinthe* 1 (1998), 93–108, at 95–6.

to shift political ideas as merely politics in itself into a project of spiritual reconstruction.

In this regard, I wish to define some key terms up front. There remains no question that ‘Aflaq was an idealist thinker; however, his idealism was one of a particular sort: *idealist vitalism*. He exalts the eternal Arab idea, but not merely in the realm of abstraction alone—it must be placed in its living context.⁵ Indeed, for ‘Aflaq the quest of regeneration, renewal, and resurrection expresses the will of life itself. Furthermore, ‘Aflaq’s idealist metaphysics leads him to diagnose the problems facing his people by way of shifting the political into the spiritual. He cautions against the danger of the Ba’th’s vitality transforming into “stagnant critique” or “theoretical thinking,” calling upon his followers to embrace the “current of life” and to be among those who “seek out the meaning behind the utterance” and “search for the living thing behind the expression.”⁶ In spite of the Ba’th’s role as a political party, ‘Aflaq emphasizes that “politics is a means” and not an end in the course of reminding his followers that the Ba’th’s entry into politics is in fact “a test of our idealism”; that is to say, “an active living idealism” seeking out creative and constructive humanist work.⁷ Simply put, he aims to ground political ideas in a new spiritualism. It is precisely the metaphysics of ‘Aflaq’s idealist vitalism that allows him to carry out this process, in the course of which he rejects materialism, positivism, and utilitarianism as false philosophies. In turn, there exists a distinction between ‘Aflaq’s broader philosophy of Arab idealist vitalism and his metaphysical rendering of political ideas as spirituality. While such a metaphysics remains a foundational aspect of his thought and is a primary focus of this article, it is just one component of his comprehensive intellectual output.

‘Aflaq’s intellectual efforts can be characterized as formulating an entirely new outlook and politics for Arabs that links them to a larger, universal aspiration. This article thus understands ‘Aflaq as a diagnostician whose treatment of the Arab struggle for freedom and authenticity speaks to the hopes and dreams of a broader, common humanity. Jean Grondin, in his intellectual history of (Continental) metaphysics, argues that the “quest for universality” is “first and foremost a requirement of metaphysical thinking in its effort to comprehend reality.”⁸ Thus I argue that ‘Aflaq’s *ba’th* ought to be understood as the Arab quest for universality. As ‘Aflaq expounds, “unity [*wahda*] has been a quest for the Arab nation since fragmentation has befallen it,” and although the Ba’th “did not create the quest or the objective of unity,” it brought forward a “new concept” of *wahda* that enables its realization.⁹ For ‘Aflaq, the resurrection of the Arab nation is the

⁵Michel ‘Aflaq, “al-Dāfi’ al-tārikhī li-ta’sīs al-ba’th” (The Historical Impetus for the Founding of the Ba’th) (1945), in ‘Aflaq, *Fi Sabil al-Ba’th: al-Kitābāt al-Siyāsiyya al-Kāmila* (In the Path of the Resurrection: The Complete Political Writings), vol. 4, *al-Ba’th wa-l-Quṭr al-Sūrī* (The Ba’th and the Syrian Region) (Baghdad, 1987), 25–8, at 26. Interestingly, ‘Aflaq claims that this is why he chose to call his party the “Arab Resurrection” and not simply the “National Resurrection.”

⁶Michel ‘Aflaq, “Nazratuna al-ḥayya li-l-ḥizb” (Our Living Outlook towards the Party) (1955), in ‘Aflaq, *Sabil al-Ba’th*, 4th edn, 43–6, at 44–5.

⁷*Ibid.*, 46.

⁸Jean Grondin, *Introduction to Metaphysics: From Parmenides to Levinas*, trans. Lukas Soderstrom (2004) (New York, 2012), 248.

⁹Michel ‘Aflaq, “As’ila wa-ajwiba” (Questions and Answers) (1957), in ‘Aflaq, *Sabil al-Ba’th*, 4th edn, 217–30, at 220.

resurrection of the universal. In turn, it is precisely in its universal aspirations that the true meaning of ‘Aflaq’s Ba‘thism is to be found. What historiographical insights, then, might be gleaned by engaging with ‘Aflaq’s thought in terms of its metaphysical foundations and its relationship to universality? How precisely does ‘Aflaq posit such a quest to realize the universal? In order to answer such questions, this article offers a reading and interpretation of four key concepts in ‘Aflaq’s thought: resurrection (*ba‘th*), faith (*īmān*), spirit (*rūh*), and unity (*wahda*).

Historiographical overview

This work seeks to traverse a multifaceted historiographical terrain, to include decolonization studies, postcolonial studies, Middle East studies, and global intellectual history. In bringing ‘Aflaq and the Ba‘th into the fold of decolonization studies, I propose that a serious engagement with ‘Aflaq’s thought has much to offer one’s understanding of the “decolonization of the mind.”¹⁰ Decolonization in this regard ought to be understood as far more than just postcolonial state sovereignty. Following the lead of Cyrus Schayegh and Yoav Di-Capua, this article understands decolonization not as merely a “historical era” but rather “as a broader human condition” which beyond the goal of national independence ushered forth “the ambition to temper with ‘the self’ and forge a new collective ontology.”¹¹ Indeed, Munif al-Razzāz (1919–84), a follower of ‘Aflaq and fellow Ba‘thist, recounts the “first duty” of party members as “the realization of the revolution of our souls,” which is to say “the spiritual revolution” (*al-inqilāb al-naḥḥī*).¹² Nearly two decades after his death, ‘Aflaq’s daughter Razān would recall her father’s insistence upon “the self-revolution” (*al-inqilāb al-dhātī*) first and foremost.¹³ From this vantage point, the human condition of decolonization does not refer to a political problem, but in fact to a metaphysical one—particularly as regards Arab ontology, the question of religion and the nation, revolution and time, and faith.

Omnia El Shakry has contributed to these efforts in rethinking decolonization, particularly in the need to overcome the reified binary of the religious and the secular in the historiography of Arab thought.¹⁴ In his piece on decolonization and the

¹⁰Yoav Di-Capua, *No Exit: Arab Existentialism, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Decolonization* (Chicago, 2018), 15.

¹¹Cyrus Schayegh and Yoav Di-Capua, “Why Decolonization?,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 52/1 (2020), 137–45, at 142. See also Todd Shepard, *Voices of Decolonization: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston, 2015), 10–12.

¹²Munif al-Razzāz, *al-A‘māl al-Fikriyya wa-l-Siyāsīyya* (The Political and Intellectual Works), vol. 1, *al-Tajriba al-Murra* (The Bitter Experience) (1966) (Amman, 1986), 19.

¹³Razān ‘Aflaq, “Al-qā‘id al-mu‘assis li-l-ba‘th” (“The Founding Leader” of the Ba‘th), interview by Ghassan Charbel, *al-Ḥayāh* 16528 (5 July 2008), 10.

¹⁴Omnia El Shakry, “History without Documents: The Vexed Archives of Decolonization in the Middle East,” *American Historical Review* 120/3 (2015), 920–34, at 924–5, 928–9. She has also contributed an important work in terms of conceptualizing the Arab aspiration of decolonization at the intersection of psychoanalysis and Sufi metaphysics. See Omnia El Shakry, *The Arabic Freud: Psychoanalysis and Islam in Modern Egypt* (2017) (Princeton, 2020). Šabascevičiūtė’s work on the “metaphysical drive” of Sayyid Quṭb (1906–66) is also relevant in this regard. See Giedrė Šabascevičiūtė, *Sayyid Quṭb: An Intellectual Biography* (Syracuse, 2021), 8–11, 63. Wien has contemplated Arab nationalism and its relationship to the secular and the religious, particularly as it developed in the presence of various schools of Sufism at the turn of the twentieth century. See Peter Wien, *Arab Nationalism: The Politics of History and Culture in the Modern Middle East* (New York, 2017), 3–12.

sacred, Di-Capua examines the political theology of Gamal ‘Abd al-Nasser and the movement bearing his name, Nasserism. By looking at the manner in which collective sacrifice for the nation brings about self-transcendence, Di-Capua argues that this “sacred experience” produces a feeling of the colonized subject becoming “[m]etaphysically connected to something bigger” than their “fragmented colonized self.”¹⁵ He also importantly calls attention to the fact that much of the revolutionary terminology of Nasserism originated with ‘Aflaq’s development of a “vocabulary of salvation politics,” traveling from Syria to Egypt.¹⁶ Yet, despite their similarities and aspirations of comprehensive unity, and their eventual collaboration during the period of the United Arab Republic (UAR) (1958–61), there are, of course, distinctions between Nasserism and Ba’thism.¹⁷ Most importantly, ‘Aflaq did not take up a political theology resting upon an axiomatic principle of the friend–enemy distinction in the vein of Carl Schmitt (1888–1985).¹⁸ Rather, as a pioneer of “positive neutrality” (*al-ḥiyād al-ijābī*) that rejected the political domination of the United States and the Soviet Union alike, he called for “the refusal of war and the recognition of the necessity for peace.”¹⁹ Furthermore, ‘Aflaq ultimately sought “a final end to the logic of conflict [*manṭiq al-ṣirā*]” wrought by extant political doctrines, to be achieved “realistically and peacefully.”²⁰ Against the Schmittian politics of enmity, then, there is the political metaphysics of a new way forward that ‘Aflaq endeavored to realize. In turn, the very language and terminology of ‘Aflaq’s thought are in need of reinvigorated scholarly engagement.

As regards the question of decolonization and the universal, a number of scholars have carried out important work in bringing attention to such a pivotal topic. Gary Wilder understands figures like Léopold Sédar Senghor (1906–2001) and Aimé Césaire (1913–2008) as “planetary thinkers who were concerned with the relation between decolonization, human redemption, and the future of the world.”²¹ Indeed, of particular interest in Wilder’s account is Senghor’s aspiration to realize the “civilization of the universal,” a new order which would bear witness to “cosmopolitan reconciliation, human self-realization, and even cosmological concordance among human, natural, and spiritual worlds.”²² In a similar register, Adom Getachew’s deep engagement with anticolonial thought, primarily in the anglophone black Atlantic context, “recovers the universal aspirations of anticolonial nationalism.”²³ As she explains, it was precisely *through* the nation that

¹⁵Yoav Di-Capua, “Revolutionary Decolonization and the Formation of the Sacred: The Case of Egypt,” *Past and Present* 256/1 (2022), 239–81, at 247.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 248.

¹⁷Sayegh’s text on the UAR remains a masterpiece in its erudition of historical and theoretical insight. See Faye A. Sayegh, *Arab Unity: Hope and Fulfillment* (New York, 1958).

¹⁸Di-Capua, “Revolutionary Decolonization,” 246. See Paul W. Kahn, *Political Theology: Four New Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (New York, 2011), 19–20.

¹⁹Michel ‘Aflaq, “Fi al-ḥiyād al-ijābī” (On Positive Neutrality) (1957), in ‘Aflaq, *Sabīl al-Ba’th*, 4th edn, 346–51, at 347.

²⁰*Ibid.*

²¹Gary Wilder, *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World* (Durham, NC, 2015), 258.

²²*Ibid.*, 164. See also Ato Sekyi-Otu, *Left Universalism: Africentric Essays* (New York, 2019).

²³Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton, 2019), 5, 28.

thinkers such as Kwame Nkrumah (1909–72), W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963), and others envisioned the “road to a universal postimperial order,” such that national liberation was the prerequisite for international solidarity.²⁴ Looking at the annals of South Asian intellectual history, Kevin Sullivan articulates the liberatory vision of Indian philosopher and scholar of comparative religion Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888–1975) as the passage from the human person’s embodied self-realization to a higher goal of “the liberation of all human beings” consummated as “universal spiritual emancipation.”²⁵ ‘Aflaq ought to be understood as a heretofore unacknowledged contributor to these universalist efforts. Indeed, in his thought also one understands that there can be no *internationalism* without *nationalism*. In speaking to the deep suffering experienced by the peoples of Africa and Asia, ‘Aflaq contemplates that “perhaps fate” has led them all to emerge from such oppression with a “ripened fruit” not just for the peoples of their own lands, but for “all of humanity” (*al-insāniyya kullihā*).²⁶ Anticolonial nationalism and the human condition of decolonization, in this regard, cannot but be understood as a universal ambition.

In terms of the intersection of the historiography of Middle East studies and global intellectual history, Max Weiss’s recent intervention stands out. Weiss has taken the initial steps towards positively reconstructing what he calls “‘Aflaqism (*al-‘Aflaqiyya*).”²⁷ In focusing on the ‘Aflaqist concepts of nationalism (*al-qawmiyya*) and revolution (*al-inqilāb*), Weiss argues that the Arabism (*urūba*) of ‘Aflaq is better understood in relation to the thought of French Catholic personalist philosopher Emmanuel Mounier (1905–50), demonstrating the former’s alignment with the latter’s “primacy of the spiritual.”²⁸ While Weiss effectively understands ‘Aflaq as influenced by Mounier’s personalism, Norma Salem-Babikian has demonstrated the importance of André Gide (1869–1951) among his philosophical and literary inspirations.²⁹ This is further corroborated by a 1961 interview with Patrick Seale, in which ‘Aflaq stated, “I had learned my socialism from André Gide and Romain Rolland [1866–1944].”³⁰ Others have repeatedly pointed out a variety of additional influences, including Giuseppe Mazzini (1805–72), Henri Bergson (1859–1941), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900),

²⁴Ibid., 28.

²⁵Kevin Sullivan, “Radhakrishnan’s Concept of Universal Liberation,” in William Sweet, ed., *Idealism, Metaphysics and Community* (2001) (New York, 2018), 181.

²⁶Michel ‘Aflaq, “Ṭumuḥ al-ba’th” (The Ambition of the Ba’th) (1957), in ‘Aflaq, *Sabil al-Ba’th*, 4th edn, 47–51, at 48.

²⁷Max Weiss, “Genealogies of Ba’thism: Michel ‘Aflaq between Personalism and Arabic Nationalism,” *Modern Intellectual History* 17/4 (2020), 1193–1224, at 1194, 1199. See also Weiss, “Left Out: Notes from the Struggle over Middle East Intellectual History,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 51/2 (2019), 305–8; Weiss, “Is Baathism an Arabic Word?,” *Immanent Frame*, 22 June 2021, at <https://tif.ssrc.org/2021/06/22/is-baathism-an-arabic-word>.

²⁸Weiss, “Genealogies,” 1202.

²⁹See Norma Salem-Babikian, “A Partial Reconstruction of Michel ‘Aflaq’s Thought: The Role of Islam in the Formulation of Arab Nationalism,” *Muslim World* 67/4 (1977), 280–94; Salem-Babikian, “Michel ‘Aflaq: A Biographic Outline,” *Arab Studies Quarterly* 2/2 (1980), 162–79.

³⁰Patrick Seale, *The Struggle for Syria: A Study of Post-war Arab Politics 1945–1958* (1965) (London, 1966), 149–50.

Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910), and the Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948).³¹ Yet, as fruitful as it might be to draw out genealogical connections between thinkers, so too can this approach be limiting in preventing one from reading an intellectual on his own terms. As Hussein A. H. Omar claims, building upon the argument of Andrew Sartori, “asking where an idea or concept comes from is far less important than asking why and when it becomes a plausible or useful means of apprehending the world for the historical actors that adopted it.”³² In turn, while I acknowledge the aforementioned intellectual influences on ‘Aflaq and see their varying imprints on his thought, the aim of my article is to first and foremost read him on his own terms.

There is, however, an important historiographical and methodological point to bring to the fore when considering ‘Aflaq as he relates to Gandhi. In Shruti Kapila’s pathbreaking intervention on the question of violence in modern Indian political thought, she captures the interpretive difficulty of illuminating the full expression of thinkers like Gandhi. As Kapila explains, the challenge in reconstructing Gandhi’s political thought stems from his “unsystematic, aphoristic and somewhat slippery style of argumentation”—yet she emphasizes that it is “precisely this style, however, that allowed him to circumvent the available political languages of the day, be it that of liberalism, of historicism, or of communism.”³³ Above all else, Kapila’s argument that Gandhi’s stylistic refusal of systematization generated a new language of liberation holds true in the Arab context for ‘Aflaq as well. So too the coupling of “self-realization” with politics, this notion that “[i]nner change within the individual ought to be the starting point of outer changes in society.”³⁴ ‘Aflaq puts forward not so much a “systematic” school of thought as a vision that breaks through stagnant, ready-made doctrines while still possessing fidelity to the Arab past, joining together a sense of newness with authenticity. That is to say, the varying theological, spiritual, and metaphysical aspects of ‘Aflaq’s thought ought to be understood as a conscious rejection of the extant political languages of his day and age—his rejection of “systematic” thinking was in fact a virtue. This does not mean that ‘Aflaq’s thinking was incoherent, however, but rather that the

³¹See Majid Khadduri, *Arab Contemporaries: The Role of Personalities in Politics* (Baltimore, 1973); Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: A Study of Iraq’s Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of Its Communists, Ba’thists, and Free Officers* (1978) (Princeton, 1982); Aziz al-Azmeh, *Secularism in the Arab World: Contexts, Ideas and Consequences*, trans. David Bond (Edinburgh, 2019), among others. Regarding his personal library and influences particularly, see Dhūqān Qarqūt, *Mishlil ‘Aflaq: al-Kitābāt al-Ūlā ma’a Dirāsa Jadīda li-Sīrat Ḥayātih* (Michel ‘Aflaq: The Early Writings with a New Study of His Biography) (Beirut, 1993), 44–5; and Jūzif Ilyās, *‘Aflaq, al-Adīb: Dirāsa fī adabiyāt ‘Aflaq* (‘Aflaq, the Man of Letters: A Study in the Literature of ‘Aflaq) (Beirut, 1994), 23.

³²Hussein Ahmed Hussein Omar, “Minorities Are Like Microbes”: On Secularism and Sectarianism in English-Occupied Egypt, 1882–1922,” *Critical Historical Studies* 9/1 (2022), 63–102, at 68.

³³Shruti Kapila, *Violent Fraternity: Indian Political Thought in the Global Age* (Princeton, 2021), 135. See also K. C. Chacko, *Metaphysical Implications of Gandhian Thought* (Delhi, 1986). Ilyās refers to ‘Aflaq as the “Gandhi of Arab nationalism” and as a “missionary of nonviolence” (*dā’iyat al-lā’uf*). See Ilyās, *‘Aflaq wa-l-Ba’th: Niṣf Qarn min al-Niḍāl* (‘Aflaq and the Ba’th: Half a Century of Struggle) (Beirut, 1991), 58.

³⁴Anthony J. Parel, “Editor’s Introduction,” in M. K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj and Other Writings* (Cambridge, 2009), xiii–lxii, at lxi. See also Kapila, *Violent Fraternity*, 149–50. On ‘Aflaq and the Arab self see Kamel S. Abu Jaber, *The Arab Ba’th Socialist Party: History, Ideology, and Organization* (Syracuse, 1966), 9, 125, 129.

terminology he employs exhibits a dynamic structure that was conceptually innovative for his time, defying easy categorization.

Broadening the historiographical scope further, Arab nationalism in particular and Third World nationalisms in general have been the subject of much scholarly inquiry for many years now. While ʿAflaq remains, alongside Nasser, one of the more frequent references in studies of Arab nationalism, there remains work to be done in taking seriously his understanding of nationalism and nationness beyond conventional approaches to anticolonial nationalism. In turn, this work seeks to provide a comprehensive reassessment of Arabism for intellectual historians of the Middle East, the Third World, decolonization, and nationalism alike. Thus, if Syrian independence in 1946 can be seen as “Asia’s first decolonization,”³⁵ how to understand the anticolonial nationalism of the Baʿth, that while existing as a group and movement prior to independence, was officially founded as a political party a year later in 1947? A clue to this understanding can be found in a 1957 piece by ʿAflaq:

Our ambition is great, our ambition is the ambition of humanity ... Our ambition is not limited to the removal of dangers and the riddance of enemies and their injustice which has afflicted us for a long time. Our ambition does not stop at the limits of negativity, rejection, and escape, but rather it is in its depths a constructive positive ambition [*ṭumūḥ ijābī bannā*] wherein we work and reclaim anew our sincere response to life, as we contribute to the building of civilization and the fertilization of human values [*al-qiyam al-insāniyya*], defending them and sincerely embodying them in our lives and our behavior.³⁶

ʿAflaq does not see the anticolonial struggle as limited to the mere ouster of the foreign occupier in his Arabism. As ʿAflaq further explains, the Baʿth called for “a new phase,” one which holds “colonialism as an effect more than a cause.”³⁷ National resurrection represented something more for the Arab people and humanity writ large. That ʿAflaq holds colonialism as an effect more than a cause provides hope in terms of the Arabs themselves harboring the agency to realize their highest goals.

Overall, this article endeavors to provide a reading of ʿAflaq that further illuminates the relationship between metaphysics and the universal with regard to anticolonial nationalism and decolonization. Speaking from a broader philosophical perspective, William Desmond, in formulating his concept of the “intimate universal”—in which the transcendent and the immanent coincide—argues that “there can be a sense of metaphysics that is also intimate to politics” in order to underline the cardinal importance of “political metaphysics.”³⁸ This article provides a glimpse into the Arab context of this reality through ʿAflaq’s thought. In terms of method, the eminent intellectual historian Dominick LaCapra emphasizes the dialogical approach in engaging significant texts, upholding “the importance of

³⁵Schayegh, Di-Capua, “Why Decolonization?”, 144.

³⁶Michel ʿAflaq, “Ṭumūḥ al-baʿth,” in ʿAflaq, *Sabīl al-Baʿth*, 4th edn, 47–51, at 47.

³⁷Ibid., 49.

³⁸William Desmond, *The Intimate Universal: The Hidden Porosity among Religion, Art, Philosophy, and Politics* (New York, 2016), 10–11, 452 n. 8.

understanding as fully as possible what the other is trying to say.”³⁹ What might it mean, then, for intellectual historians to understand anticolonial nationalists’ ideas on their own terms, instead of projecting theoretical models or conventional categories onto their ideas? Allowing ‘Aflaq to lead me in my reconstruction of his thought, this article seeks to begin the work of answering such a question. First, though, a brief foray into clarifying the use of the terminology of “metaphysics” and “the metaphysical” with respect to the historiography of ‘Aflaq and the Ba‘th is in order.

What is Ba‘thist metaphysics?

Since the middle of the twentieth century, when scholarship on ‘Aflaq began to appear, varying commentators—critical, sympathetic, and those somewhere in between—have invoked “metaphysics” of some variety in order to explicate his thought. While the broad historiographical implications of this article have been outlined in the introduction alongside my characterization of the relationship between ‘Aflaq’s idealist vitalism and his metaphysics, in this section I provide a more in-depth look at the ways in which ‘Aflaqism qua metaphysics has been dealt with in decades past. In doing so, this article provides a more coherent rendering of the disparate uses of “metaphysics” in the context of Ba‘thism in the pursuit of more explicitly defining what exactly constitutes ‘Aflaq’s metaphysical thinking. One of the earliest examples comes from Sylvia Haim’s assessment that ‘Aflaq provides a justification for revolution and an “insistence on violence” and “on the virtues of struggle ... at a metaphysical level.”⁴⁰ While this assessment misunderstands the internal struggle of the self for a different form of revolutionary violence,⁴¹ it remains an early example of how the metaphysical, broadly construed, came to be associated with ‘Aflaq. Much more clarifying would be the interpretation of Patrick Seale, who notes, “A strong dose of metaphysics was injected into the three objectives of unity, freedom, and socialism,” such that Arab unity does not refer to a political goal but instead to “a regenerative process leading to the reform of Arab character and society.”⁴² ‘Aflaq’s metaphysics in this case concerns the process of regeneration of self and nation, both the soul of the Arab human person and the spirit of the Arab nation itself. In a rather underappreciated engagement with the Ba‘th, Michael W. Suleiman proposes that, in ‘Aflaq’s view, “there is a ‘will for goodness’ in the universe which seeks manifestation in man and thus guides humanity toward progress and betterment.”⁴³ In this formulation, ‘Aflaq’s voluntarism appears to the reader, such that the Arab will drives the revolution of resurrection. Suleiman further emphasizes that this “real will of man, of the universe, and of history” ‘Aflaq observes in every nation and people down to

³⁹Dominick LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language* (Ithaca, 1983), 50.

⁴⁰Sylvia Haim, “Introduction,” in Haim, ed., *Arab Nationalism: An Anthology* (1962) (Berkeley, 1976), 3–72, at 70.

⁴¹For a concise refutation of Haim’s polemical treatment of ‘Aflaq see Abu Jaber, *Arab Ba‘th Socialist Party*, 131–2.

⁴²Seale, *Struggle for Syria*, 154.

⁴³Michael W. Suleiman, *Political Parties in Lebanon: The Challenge of a Fragmented Political Culture* (Ithaca, 1967), 136.

the individual human person, differences existing in “characteristics acquired through his cultural–educational–social environment.”⁴⁴ Thus ‘Aflaq’s metaphysical voluntarism remains coupled with his emphasis on not just Arab togetherness but that for all of humanity. Tarif Khalidi’s classic article on ‘Aflaq’s thought places metaphysics at the center of his analysis, holding that ‘Aflaq’s “metaphysics cannot be divorced from his politics and, indeed, it would be more accurate to describe them as ‘political metaphysics.”⁴⁵ That metaphysical concerns remain indissoluble from the political objectives of the Ba’th is an essential component of ‘Aflaq’s vision. Indeed, Spencer Lavan argues that ‘Aflaq “defines ‘Arabism’ on a metaphysical rather than an ethical level,” in characterizing him “as a kind of neo-Thomist” who views the necessity of “the salvation of the Arab ... by a ‘religious’ process.”⁴⁶ The metaphysics of ‘Aflaq also allows for broader meditations on the sacred, the theological, and the religious. In rounding out this historiographical glimpse from the 1960s alone, Malcolm H. Kerr, in pondering the possibility of how ‘Aflaq’s “Christian origin played an unacknowledged part” in his idea of resurrection, emphasizes that the Ba’thist trinity of unity, freedom, and socialism “were not only interdependent goals but aspects of a single undefinable metaphysical reality.”⁴⁷ Once again a scholar emphasizes a notion of indissolubility with regard to varying categories, concepts, and goals in ‘Aflaq’s thought.

For Majid Khadduri, ‘Aflaq’s Arab nationalism is “romantic in character rather than realistic,” such that one “may even be tempted to call it mystical, in the sense of ‘Aflaq’s idea of nationalism being essentially love of one’s own countrymen comparable to al-Hallaj’s love of God.”⁴⁸ In this rendering the mystical nationalism of ‘Aflaq also finds resonances in the Sufi tradition. Salem-Babikian critiques Khalidi’s emphasis on the Hegelian influence on his metaphysics, instead arguing for ‘Aflaq’s fidelity to Islamic philosophy and Gide.⁴⁹ Perhaps most illuminating in Salem-Babikian’s analysis is the manner in which “[t]he dialectic proper to ‘Aflaq progresses from affirmation to contrasting affirmation, which mutually deny and mutually recall each other.”⁵⁰ In other words, there remains more than meets the eye to the supposed lack of systematization in ‘Aflaqist thought. Fouad Ajami upholds the contention of Bassam Tibi in dismissing ‘Aflaq’s thought as “vague metaphysics,” stating, furthermore, “The most eminent theorist of a party that came to power in two countries never wrote a serious book.”⁵¹ In this context one observes “metaphysics” used pejoratively in the course of dismissing the form in which ‘Aflaq’s thought

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Tarif Khalidi, “A Critical Study of the Political Ideas of Michel Aflak,” *Middle East Forum* 42/2 (1966), 55–68, at 56.

⁴⁶Spencer Lavan, “Four Christian Arab Nationalists: A Comparative Study,” *Muslim World* 57 (1967), 114–25, at 120.

⁴⁷Malcolm H. Kerr, *The Arab Cold War: Gamal ‘Abd al-Nasir and His Rivals, 1958–1970* (New York, 1971), 8.

⁴⁸Majid Khadduri, *Political Trends in the Arab World: The Role of Ideas and Ideals in Politics* (1970) (Baltimore, 1972), 198.

⁴⁹Salem-Babikian, “Partial Reconstruction,” 284–5.

⁵⁰Ibid., 285.

⁵¹Fouad Ajami, *The Arab Predicament: Arab Political Thought and Practice since 1967* (1981) (Cambridge, 1992), 35.

appeared.⁵² In his rigorous analysis of foundational Ba‘thist philosopher Zaki al-Arsūzī (1899–1968), Saleh Omar rightfully takes seriously Arsūzī’s metaphysics and his mystical-intuitionist approach to the Arabic language as the foundation of nationalism, while at the same time dismissing ‘Aflaq’s contribution as “vague generalities.”⁵³ The careful consideration Omar gives to Arsūzī as a serious metaphysician contributes to filling a significant scholarly gap—however, understanding ‘Aflaq as just as serious a metaphysician has yet to be realized. In looking at ‘Aflaq and Arsūzī together, Orit Bashkin argues that Ba‘thist thought “was exceedingly hybrid,” as it “incorporated readings of western metaphysics in order to understand Arab philology” alongside its fusion of “socialist secularism” with the historical role of the Prophet Muḥammad (570–632) “as a role model for both Christian and Muslim Arabs.”⁵⁴ Similarly, while calling attention to the differences between ‘Aflaq’s and Arsūzī’s thought, Götz Nordbruch emphasizes that “both shared a metaphysical concept of the nation.”⁵⁵ Positing ‘Aflaqism as a monist philosophy, Carlotta Stegagno calls attention to “the metaphysical and non-material aspects of his ideas” as distinguished from his more “practical” expositions.⁵⁶ Characterizing Ba‘thism as a “movement of intellectuals,” Georges Corm argues, “Its doctrine was marked by a strong romantic penchant for metaphysics” in speaking to the party’s emphasis on there being an essence to Arabism.⁵⁷ In Weiss’s illuminating exegesis on ‘Aflaq’s concept of *inqilāb* as “a program for total human transformation,” he notes that “his spiritual nationalism demands a novel political metaphysics.”⁵⁸ Finally, in speaking to the “ambivalence” of the influence of vitalist philosophies on ‘Aflaq and his contemporaries—particularly of German Romantic origin—in twentieth-century Syria, Aneka Lenssen insists that “their meaning in Syria was mediated by a host of other metaphysical philosophies,” consequently demonstrating the vexing task

⁵²For the use of “metaphysics” as pejorative see Grondin, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, xix–xx.

⁵³Saleh Omar, “Philosophical Origins of the Ba‘th Party: The Work of Zaki Al-Arsuzi,” *Arab Studies Quarterly* 18/2 (1996), 23–37. See also Keith D. Watenpaugh, “‘Creating Phantoms’: Zaki al-Arsuzi, the Alexandretta Crisis, and the Formation of Modern Arab Nationalism in Syria,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 28/3 (1996), 363–89; Hiroyuki Aoyama, Wafiq Khansa, and Maher al-Charif, *Spiritual Father of the Ba‘th: The Ideological and Political Significance of Zaki al-Arsūzī in Arab Nationalist Movements*, trans. Mujab al-Imam and Malek Salman (Tokyo, 2000); Yasir Suleiman, *The Arabic Language and National Identity: A Study in Ideology* (Edinburgh, 2003), 146–58; and Dalal Arsuzi-Elamir, “Nation, State, and Democracy in the Writings of Zaki al-Arsuzi,” in Christoph Schumann, ed., *Nationalism and Liberal Thought in the Arab East: Ideology and Practice* (New York, 2010), 66–91.

⁵⁴Orit Bashkin, “Looking Forward to the Past: Nahda, Revolution, and the Early Ba‘th in Iraq,” in Brenda Deen Schildgen, Gang Zhou, and Sander L. Gilman, eds., *Other Renaissances: A New Approach to World Literature* (New York, 2006), 59–86, at 62.

⁵⁵Götz Nordbruch, *Nazism in Syria and Lebanon: The Ambivalence of the German Option, 1933–1945* (New York, 2009), 119.

⁵⁶Carlotta Stegagno, “Miṣīl ‘Aflaq’s Thought between Nationalism and Socialism,” *Oriente Moderno* 97/1 (2017), 154–76, at 158–9.

⁵⁷Georges Corm, *Arab Political Thought: Past and Present*, trans. Patricia Phillips-Batoma and Atoma T. Batoma (2015) (London, 2020), 151.

⁵⁸Weiss, “Genealogies,” 1213. See also Nabil M. Kaylani, “The Rise of the Syrian Ba‘th, 1940–1958: Political Success, Party Failure,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 3/1 (1972), 3–23, at 5–6; Suleiman, *Political Parties*, 142–9.

of getting to the heart of Ba‘thist thought.⁵⁹ Thus, into the twenty-first century, more than sixty years since the dawn of scholarship concerning ‘Aflaq, a variety of commentators have picked up on there being a “metaphysical” component to ‘Aflaq’s thought. Yet there remains ample room to offer a renewed interpretation of ‘Aflaq precisely through reading him on his own metaphysical terms first and foremost.

Having outlined the historiographical treatment of the metaphysical contours of ‘Aflaq’s thought, one observes that much work still needs to be done in more explicitly defining such a metaphysics. Indeed, in order to grasp ‘Aflaq’s thought in the fullest sense, one must be able to understand the metaphysical foundations of his intellectual project, as well as the reasoning for his proceeding metaphysically, as it were. A recent historiographical intervention by Omar provides a robust engagement with the question of metaphysics as it relates to anticolonial thought. While his analysis concerns Egypt at the turn of the twentieth century, a period earlier than ‘Aflaq’s intellectual output, his work demonstrates the manner in which metaphysical speculation and thinking often remained inextricable from the concerns of those struggling for freedom in the midst of colonial modernity. In studying the Egyptian anticolonial nationalists Luṭfī al-Sayyid (1872–1963), Muṣṭafā Kāmil (1874–1908), and ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Jāwīsh (1876–1929), Omar illuminates their “deep concern with metaphysics.”⁶⁰ He critiques Partha Chatterjee’s formulation of anticolonial nationalists’ thought being relegated to the “domain of the spiritual” alone, countering that “such ‘spiritual’ meditations were inseparable from their concerns with the ‘material.’”⁶¹ For ‘Aflaq, the spirit is always present. In stressing the “importance of material conditions” (*al-awḍā‘ al-maddiyya*), ‘Aflaq clarifies that “the material conditions are not material, but rather they are spirit [*al-rūḥ*].”⁶² Omar emphasizes in his piece that “anticolonial activists’ extensive investigations into human nature were necessary for beginning the process of imagining alternative political futures” and that “even realism about politics needed metaphysical consideration, because it was predicated on coming to terms with man’s true nature and his inevitable tendencies.”⁶³ In the intellectual contributions of ‘Aflaq, one observes a similar paradigm, albeit in a later context with different stakes: one where Syria and other Arab entities were slowly but surely achieving independence, but in which the remnants of colonialism remained in varying ways: mentally, materially, spiritually, and otherwise.

⁵⁹Anneka Lenssen, *Beautiful Agitation: Modern Painting and Politics in Syria* (Oakland, 2020), 104.

⁶⁰Hussein Omar, “Arabic Thought in the Liberal Cage,” in Faisal Devji and Zaheer Kazmi, eds., *Islam after Liberalism* (Oxford, 2017), 17–45, at 31.

⁶¹*Ibid.*

⁶²Michel ‘Aflaq, “al-Waḥda al-‘arabiyya ... wa-l-ishtirākīyya” (Arab Unity ... and Socialism) (1956), in ‘Aflaq, *Ma‘rakat al-Maṣīr al-Wāḥid (The Battle for One Destiny)*, 4th edn (1958) (Beirut, 1972), 59–71, at 68. Much remains to be said about ‘Aflaq’s contemporary Anṭūn Sa‘āda (1904–49) and his notion of *al-madrahīyya* (spiritual materialism) in this regard. See Mouen Haddad, “Sa‘adeh and Marxism,” in Adel Beshara, ed., *Antun Sa‘adeh, The Man, His Thought: An Anthology* (Reading, 2007), 539–83. Elias Khoury interestingly frames ‘Aflaq and Sa‘āda as carrying on the “literary prophecies” of writers such as Jubrān Khalīl Jubrān (1883–1931) through their political projects. See Elias Khoury, “Beyond Commitment,” in Friederike Pannewick and Georges Khalil, eds., *Commitment and Beyond: Reflections on/of the Political in Arabic Literature since the 1940s* (Wiesbaden, 2015), 79–87.

⁶³Omar, “Arabic Thought in the Liberal Cage,” 31.

‘Aflaq’s metaphysics does ultimately affirm that there exists an essence of the Arab nation which must be resurrected—such is the eternal message (*al-risāla al-khālida*). As ‘Aflaq emphasizes, although the Arab nation remains afflicted by fragmentation and has been torn asunder by colonialism as well as other internal forces, it remains its true self “in its essence” (*fi jawharihā*).⁶⁴ By tapping into this metaphysical essence that is the core of true national resurrection, the future is able to flourish and not remain shackled to the past. ‘Aflaq calls out to his fellow Arabs to realize that they are the masters of their destiny who together embody “the living nation” (*al-umma al-ḥayya*) which “serves its past” while looking ahead to the future.⁶⁵ That ‘Aflaq focuses on the eternal alongside the new, for example in the new Arab generation embodying the eternal message, demonstrates the creative possibilities his metaphysics opens up. In other words, ‘Aflaq’s metaphysics provides the link to the Arab past while his universalist ambitions yield the opening to the future. It is precisely through this metaphysical–universal continuum that ‘Aflaqism disrupts colonial temporality. Consequently, ‘Aflaq’s political thought can only be effectively gleaned when understood holistically—as mentioned earlier, his metaphysics allowing him to shift the political into the spiritual—and thus as a comprehensive reckoning with the Arab state of being in order to provide a new path forward. Having established the context and stakes of ‘Aflaq’s metaphysics, this work now moves on to explicating four decidedly metaphysical concepts in the Ba‘th Party founder’s thought: resurrection, faith, spirit, and unity.

Resurrection (*ba‘th*)

In his vision for the future of a liberated, united Arab nation, ‘Aflaq holds that all begins with the belief in resurrection. He formulates the Ba‘th Movement as “the affirmative step [*al-khaṭwa al-ijābiyya*] that must arrive after the negative step [*al-khaṭwa al-salbiyya*].”⁶⁶ While the anticolonial struggle is the negation of occupation and misery, it is the *ba‘th* which brings about positive construction. Thus, it is of the utmost necessity that the Ba‘th and its followers develop “a general philosophy of life” as this “progressive liberation movement ... is a movement with a very deep connection to the eternal humanist concepts [*bi-l-mafāhīm al-insāniyya al-khālida*].”⁶⁷ For ‘Aflaq, the specificity of the Arab struggle finds itself located within the universality of humanist aspirations. The change he calls for sees the Arabs as a people recognizing their needs within their own context, while at the same time realizing that the local context cannot be separated from the universal context of humanity. Indeed, to further illustrate the change of consciousness needed to realize such a movement of thought and action, ‘Aflaq—as an Orthodox Christian—calls special attention to Islam in Arab history. He emphasizes the manner in which the Arab peoples differ from the other nations of the

⁶⁴Michel ‘Aflaq, “Ḥawla al-risāla al-‘arabiyya” (Concerning the Arab Message) (1946), in ‘Aflaq, *Sabil al-Ba‘th*, 4th edn, 101–8, at 102.

⁶⁵Ibid., 103.

⁶⁶Michel ‘Aflaq, “al-Ba‘th al-‘arabi mawqif ijābi” (The Arab Resurrection Is an Affirmative Position) (1947), in ‘Aflaq, *Ma‘rakat al-Maṣīr*, 33–40, at 37.

⁶⁷Michel ‘Aflaq, “al-Ḥaraka al-fikriyya al-shāmila” (The Universal Intellectual Movement) (1950), in ‘Aflaq, *Sabil al-Ba‘th*, 4th edn, 32–6, at 34.

world: “their national awakening was joined together with a religious message [*risāla dīniyya*].”⁶⁸ This is a special gift—the spiritual and the secular inform one another, inextricably bound together. Far from claiming any position of Arabo-Islamic exclusivity, ‘Aflaq explains that “every great nation” remains “deeply connected with the eternal meanings of the universe” and that for the Arab nation, the history of Islam clarifies “the striving of the Arab nation towards eternity [*al-khulūd*] and universality [*al-shumūl*].”⁶⁹ Thus resurrection brings about a different understanding of time and temporality altogether.

‘Aflaq insists that the future can be attained through the integral experience of the history that all Arabs carry within them as a people. Distinguishing between “quantitative time” (*zaman ḥasābī*) and “spiritual time” (*zamān nafsi*), ‘Aflaq declares, “The future is not the time which will come, but rather the spiritual and intellectual level” which all Arabs must reach “at the present time.”⁷⁰ The collective efforts of politically and intellectually conscious individuals realizes this spiritual sense of time. He proclaims that the “unified, free, socialist life”—that is to say, the Ba‘thist life—“is the life in which societal differences, regional obstacles, and sectarian arrogance disappear” and in which there no longer exists “any trace of servitude, private interest, ignorance, and the imitation of outmoded beliefs.”⁷¹ National resurrection brings about a new way of life and thus a new person. This realization of Arab renewal then substantially influences the world writ large.

Arab resurrection derives from life in its most authentic sense. Characterizing the Arab Ba‘th as “the will of life” (*irādat al-ḥayāh*), ‘Aflaq calls on his fellow party members to fully grasp the reality of “the eternal truth of our nation.”⁷² Indeed, he further emphasizes that “the philosophy of the Arab resurrection” can be summarized as “the trust of the Arab nation in itself.”⁷³ The Arab nation must believe in itself, its cause, and its role as part of a larger tapestry of universal humanist endeavors that all nations seek to realize. Furthermore, this belief must be qualitative over and above quantitative. As ‘Aflaq intones, “our power therefore is not only the power of greater numbers among a group of Arabs at this time, but rather it is the force of Arab history [*quwwat al-tāriḫ al-‘arabī*] also, because we are walking in the direction of the authentic Arab spirit [*al-rūḥ al-‘arabiyya al-aṣīlā*]” and that the Arab people carry on this task in accordance with “the heroic ancestors” of the nation.⁷⁴ Thus resurrection strengthens the vital connection to the past and in turn allows for Arabs to collectively bring about an emancipated future. In ‘Aflaq’s view, the new generation simply brings forth the message of eternity always existing within each Arab, with the present struggle yielding the future as the realization and renewal of the eternal Arab message.

⁶⁸Michel ‘Aflaq, “Dhikrā al-rasūl al-‘arabī” (In Memory of the Arab Messenger) (1943), in ‘Aflaq, *Sabīl al-Ba‘th*, 4th edn, 127–38, at 132.

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰Michel ‘Aflaq, “al-Mustaqbal” (The Future) (1950), in ‘Aflaq, *Sabīl al-Ba‘th*, 4th edn, 22.

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²Michel ‘Aflaq, “al-Ba‘th al-‘arabī irādat al-ḥayāh” (The Arab Resurrection Is the Will of Life) (1950), in ‘Aflaq, *Sabīl al-Ba‘th*, 4th edn, 40–42, at 40.

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴Ibid., 41–2.

In the ‘Aflaqist metaphysical universe, national resurrection remains inextricable from the Arab nation’s universalist duties. Insofar as “true nationalism is true humanism,” ‘Aflaq proclaims that “the resurrection of our nation is the resurrection for humanity in its entirety [*li-l-insāniyya bi-kamilihā*].”⁷⁵ Seeking a higher ambition than a mere political reordering, the Arab Ba’th wishes to link its aspirations to humanity writ large. ‘Aflaq’s idea of resurrection, of national liberation, then, does not mean a turning inward or away, but rather an opening up as one nation to other nations—the universality of human interconnectedness. Indeed, “the idea of the resurrection” must not be understood as a mere response to colonialism, but rather as “an answer to a question the Arab nation asks itself when it wants to take a historical position on the principles [*al-mabādī*] and ideals [*al-muthul*] in which it believes, and when it encounters the responsibility of the message which awaits it.”⁷⁶ What one observes here, then, is an immense responsibility of the Arab nation to the fabric of humanity—a responsibility that, left unfulfilled or abandoned, would unravel that very same fabric. How, then, to realize such a revolution of resurrection? For ‘Aflaq, the answer to such a question begins with faith, as in Ba’thism “consciousness [*al-wa’i*] in its best form encounters faith [*al-īmān*] in its deepest form.”⁷⁷ It is to elucidating such a deep faith that this article now turns.

Faith (*īmān*)

The ‘Aflaqist aspiration of Arab national resurrection emerges from the faith of the Arab people in its nation and in each other. Early on in his intellectual output, ‘Aflaq emphasized that faith is “the eternal foundation” for the work of the Ba’th and in fact the basis of life itself.⁷⁸ Thus the Ba’thist revolution is one based on faith first and foremost. ‘Aflaq formulates the revolution as a “struggling psychological movement” (*al-ḥaraka al-naḥsiyya al-mukāfaḥa*) that is “perseverance saturated with faith which creates in the Arabs new souls, new morals, and new thinking.”⁷⁹ Revolution in this regard is rendered salvific, allowing the Arab human person to discover unforeseen potential and bring about a radically renewed experience of being. Such a revolution is not limited to the domain of politics alone. As ‘Aflaq proclaims, “we are the new Arab generation [*al-jil al-‘arabī al-jadīd*] bearing a message, not politics, a faith and a creed, not theories and statements.”⁸⁰ The idealism of ‘Aflaq stands against materialist reductionism that views the nation—

⁷⁵Ibid., 42.

⁷⁶Michel ‘Aflaq, “al-Dawr al-tārikhī li-ḥarakat al-ba’th” (The Historical Role of the Ba’th Movement) (1960), in ‘Aflaq, *Sabīl al-Ba’th*, 4th edn, 52–6, at 55.

⁷⁷Michel ‘Aflaq, “al-Ba’th al-‘arabī ḥaraka tārikhiyya” (The Arab Ba’th Is a Historical Movement) (1950), in ‘Aflaq, *Sabīl al-Ba’th*, 4th edn, 37–9, at 38.

⁷⁸Michel ‘Aflaq, “al-Īmān” (Faith) (1943), in ‘Aflaq, *Sabīl al-Ba’th*, 4th edn, 15–16, at 15.

⁷⁹‘Aflaq, “al-Ba’th al-‘arabī ḥaraka tārikhiyya,” 39.

⁸⁰‘Aflaq, “Dhikrā al-rasūl al-‘arabī,” 137–8. This disdain for deracinated theory and analysis in the course of asserting a burning faith was articulated in a similar manner a century earlier by Mazzini. See Giuseppe Mazzini, “Faith and the Future” (1850), in Mazzini, *Essays: Selected from the Writings, Literary, Political, and Religious, of Joseph Mazzini*, ed. William Clarke (London, 1887), 1–58. There is much to be said about the varying ideas of national resurrection and resurgence across the Mediterranean, from Risorgimento to Ba’th. See Youssef M. Choueiri, *Narratives of Arab Secularism: Politics, Feminism and Religion* (New York, 2023), 33.

whether the Arab nation or other nations—as a passing historical phase. Indeed, “the Arab message is faith above all else,” having in the past been revealed by the religion of Islam, but in whichever age such a message appears it derives from “humanist principles.”⁸¹ This humanism ensures that the Arab nation is outward-looking and in touch with universality. As ‘Aflaq emphasizes, Ba‘thists must understand that “truth is above Arabism” (*al-ḥaqq fawq al-urūba*) and that the ethical Arab nationalist strives to realize “the union of Arabism with truth” (*ittihād al-urūba bi-l-ḥaqq*).⁸² In this sense, the Arab national resurrection, derived from faith, must in turn possess a fidelity to a higher truth. For ‘Aflaq, it is this fusion of Arabism with truth that overcomes any false instantiations of nationalism which would abandon its higher universal endeavors.

Faith in Arabism must be joined together with faith in humanity writ large, in ‘Aflaq’s view. To be in touch with faith is thus to be in touch with the vital spiritual force that is authentic existence and thus life itself. ‘Aflaq formulates nationalism as “the prime mover” (*al-muḥarrik al-asāsī*) for his fellow Arabs, whereas in the past it had been Islam.⁸³ In any case, though, such an impetus is based on faith. Much as the social reform of the past had emerged from “deep faith in religion,” so must the sweeping change of the Ba‘th derive from “national faith.”⁸⁴ Given ‘Aflaq’s treatment of Islam in his vision of Arabism, national faith is based upon the foundation of religious faith—or rather, they derive from the same eternal source. As he explains, “the genesis of the Arab Ba‘th [*nushū’ al-ba‘th al-‘arabī*] is a shining proof of faith, and the confirmation of the spiritual values [*tawkīd li-l-qiyām al-rūḥiyya*] from which religion originates.”⁸⁵ Indeed, ‘Aflaq holds that “the Arab Ba‘th has called for a new understanding of the national life and of life in general, in its upholding of faith in spiritual humanist values [*al-īmān bi-l-qiyām al-rūḥiyya al-insāniyya*].”⁸⁶ As one observes, he views humanity as spiritually linked together, with each people and nation participating in concretizing universal values in their own particular context. Lest there be any further confusion on such a spirituality, ‘Aflaq does not mince words in affirming his and his followers’ faith and belief in God, which remains indispensable for the high aims of the Ba‘th and its universalist commitments.⁸⁷ In this regard, ‘Aflaq wishes to instill a sense of humility in his fellow Ba‘thists as they strive to make true their ambitions and political objectives. Much as politics is but a means for followers of the Ba‘th to put their idealism to the test, so too does entering into this arena of struggle serve primarily as “a

⁸¹‘Aflaq, “Ḥawla al-risāla al-‘arabiyya,” 101–4.

⁸²Ibid., 107. Though Lavan argues that this is tantamount to ‘Aflaq “making Arabism into a religious principle,” I would more precisely offer that ‘Aflaq recognizes the necessity of Arabism being compatible with the Islamic and broader Abrahamic context in which he lived. See Lavan, “Four Christian Arab Nationalists,” 120. See also Kenneth Cragg, *The Arab Christian: A History in the Middle East* (Louisville, 1991), 162.

⁸³Michel ‘Aflaq, “Ma‘ālim al-ishtirakiyya al-‘arabiyya” (The Contours of Arab Socialism) (1946), in ‘Aflaq, *Sabīl al-Ba‘th*, 4th edn, 301–9, at 306.

⁸⁴Ibid.

⁸⁵Michel ‘Aflaq, “al-‘Arab bayn maḍīhim wa-mustaqbalihim” (Arabs between Their Past and Their Future) (1950), in ‘Aflaq, *Sabīl al-Ba‘th*, 4th edn, 160–68, at 165.

⁸⁶Ibid., 166.

⁸⁷‘Aflaq, “Dhikrā al-rasūl al-‘arabī,” 138.

test of faith.”⁸⁸ In all, the more one understands faith in ‘Aflaqism, the more one encounters spirit (*al-rūḥ*). Indeed, it is the intuitive or “spontaneous spirit” (*al-rūḥ al-afwiyya*) that is the “password” for those walking the path of the Ba‘th.⁸⁹ Accordingly, this article now moves on to elucidating ‘Aflaq’s concept of spirit, one of the most crucial aspects of his metaphysical thinking.

Spirit (*rūḥ*)

In surveying ‘Aflaq’s works, one encounters the cardinal importance that he places on an effective understanding of the spirit and spirituality. This is because the Ba‘thist project is one of revolution of self, soul, and spirit. ‘Aflaq does not deny the importance of material conditions, but he maintains that “our spiritual call is a realistic call” and in turn he warns of the threat of “matter [*al-mādda*] taking the place of spirit [*al-rūḥ*] and of atheism [*al-ilḥād*] occupying the place of faith.”⁹⁰ In essence, his faith in spirit was prior to his material goals: “we believe that spirit is the origin of everything ... The deep spiritual impetus not only controls matter ... but in fact [this spiritual impetus] creates it as well.”⁹¹ Much of the ‘Aflaqist project hinges on understanding the interplay between spirit and matter in this regard. ‘Aflaq calls for a “revolution (*inqilāb*) in the deeper sense” that is far more than a mere political revolution, one in which the Arab nation undergoes “a deep, severe movement in the spirit.”⁹² Such a rendering of revolutionary change as affecting the depths of the Arab soul and national spirit allows for the deeper metaphysical problem of fragmentation to be overcome. To wit, ‘Aflaq maintains that the Arab nation must be rescued from “the perils of the materialist mentality” (*akḥṭār al-aqliyya al-māddiyya*) precisely through a struggle of the soul which brings his countrymen back in touch with the aforementioned spiritual values.⁹³ As he emphasizes further, “how can we move from one state to its opposite if we are satisfied with changing outward forms and appearances without a change in the spirit?”⁹⁴ Without such a deeper reckoning, any attempts at change in the material domain would prove fruitless.

In metaphysically opening up the Arabs of his age to the past, ‘Aflaq’s thought demonstrates how a reinvigorated spirit propels the nation into a more universal future. Thus he clarifies that the *inqilāb* for which he calls is “this effort to reawaken a sound and transparent compliance between the nation and the requirements of life” and that therefore politics in their present state remain incapable of effecting fundamental change.⁹⁵ Traditional politics and its adherents—that is, reform-minded nationalists or those who felt that the existing system and state structures following independence represented freedom—are asking the wrong questions

⁸⁸ ‘Aflaq, “Naḥratuna al-ḥayya li-l-ḥizb,” 46.

⁸⁹ ‘Aflaq, “al-Īmān,” 16.

⁹⁰ ‘Aflaq, “Ma‘ālim al-ishtirakiyya al-‘arabiyya,” 309.

⁹¹ Michel ‘Aflaq, “al-Ba‘th al-‘arabi huwa al-inqilāb” (The Arab Resurrection Is the *Inqilāb*) (1950), in ‘Aflaq, *Sabil al-Ba‘th*, 4th edn, 65–70, at 69.

⁹² Michel ‘Aflaq, “al-Waḥda ... wa-l-ishtirakiyya,” in ‘Aflaq, *Ma‘rakat al-Maṣīr*, 59–60.

⁹³ ‘Aflaq, “Ma‘ālim al-ishtirakiyya al-‘arabiyya,” 309.

⁹⁴ ‘Aflaq, “al-Ba‘th al-‘arabi huwa al-inqilāb,” 66.

⁹⁵ ‘Aflaq, “al-Waḥda ... wa-l-ishtirakiyya,” 60.

according to ʿAflaq. He explains his integral prescription, weaving together all of the problems facing the Arab homeland, noting that while socioeconomic factors are a major concern, the real task at hand is something deeper:

We consider the real problem to be resurrecting the spirit [*al-rūh*] of our nation. To return to the Arab and the nation [*al-umma*] as a whole this integral, willful, positive, and active position ... the position of mastery [*al-saytara*] over destiny, the mastery of the Arab over his destiny, the nation's knowledge for the justifications of its existence, the purpose of its existence, and the ability of realizing this purpose.

...
[W]hen we call our countrymen to battle, destroying these corrupt conditions is not the only goal, but rather the goal—especially so—is the people recovering their awareness of their authentic values and the purpose of their true existence in this serious struggle.⁹⁶

ʿAflaq maintains that this struggle “must be understood in its broadest meaning,” as simultaneously against external forces such as Zionism and colonialism, as well as the internal corruption plaguing the Arab homeland.⁹⁷ The key aspect in this light is ʿAflaq's emphasis on affirmation of a positive and active approach to nationalism. Rather than defining oneself against one's enemy by what one is not, he calls for asserting Arabness in the face of those who stand against this anticolonial struggle. Corruption engendered by capitalism, colonialism, and the politics of old have undermined the Arab nation and resultantly its national spirit.

ʿAflaq does not merely see colonialism alone as a problem to be overcome, but also the issues of the collaboration and corruption of local elites, and, even beyond that, internal class structures which facilitate exploitation. His political metaphysics confronts the very manner in which his countrymen understand and experience being Arab and how that must be redefined, reinvigorated, and spiritually constituted in the path of resurrecting the nation. This, in turn, explains why ʿAflaq characterizes the Arab Baʿth as “a positive spiritual movement” (*ḥaraka rūḥiyya ijābiyya*).⁹⁸ Such an outlook cannot but be one that seeks to be a part of the larger world. As ʿAflaq states, “our goal is simply the return of the Arab nation to participation in human civilization [*al-ḥadāra al-insāniyya*] anew.”⁹⁹ Yet, in order to realize such a goal, the Arab nation must overcome fragmentation and be unified once again. Indeed, the prerequisite for such flourishing and participation in universal human endeavors is unity (*al-waḥda*), the final concept of ʿAflaq's political metaphysics to which this article now turns.

⁹⁶Ibid., 60–61

⁹⁷Ibid.

⁹⁸Aflaq, “al-ʿArab bayn māḍihim wa mustaqbalihim,” 166.

⁹⁹Aflaq, “al-Waḥda ... wa-l-ishtirākiyya,” 70.

Unity (*wahda*)

‘Aflaq’s concept of unity remains far more than a political aspiration to unite the fractured Arab states into one single polity. While this was an important aspect, the ‘Aflaqist concept of unity, much like rest of his theoretical tapestry, ought to be understood as a metaphysical arrival. Kerr, commenting on the formation of the UAR, avers that the aspiration towards Arab unity was “a mystery that neither Arab nor western historians have satisfactorily explained.”¹⁰⁰ The ‘Aflaqist concept of unity can be understood as a process of overcoming a particular form of alienation: the fragmentation of the Arab self.¹⁰¹ Such events have led to “an estrangement between the consciousness of the Arab nation and life itself.”¹⁰² A state of oppression in being is a state of oppression materially, as, without unity of faith and belief in the Arab nation, its material spatial arrangement will remain fragmented. Through a reading of important sections of ‘Aflaq’s intellectual corpus dealing with unity, his formulation reveals an aspiration that saw the unity of the Arab nation as one step towards a greater unity for humanity.

‘Aflaq sought both to deepen Arab nationalism and simultaneously to move beyond existing conceptions of what constitutes the nation. Notions of historical contingency that understand the nation as mere social reality were contested by ‘Aflaq. In a clear rejection of historical materialism, ‘Aflaq emphasizes that unity does not emerge from “historical development ... gratuitously,” but in fact necessitates “daily creation and nourishment, clarification, cultivation, and organization.”¹⁰³ Unity, as with other ‘Aflaqist notions, is realized through a committed and impassioned process of becoming linked to a deep fidelity to the Arab past. This was not a mere political question for ‘Aflaq, as he explicitly emphasizes that there is a difference in kind between “true unity”—which is “the unity of the spirit” (*wahdat al-ruh*)—and “political unity” (*al-wahda al-siyasiyya*).¹⁰⁴ Arab unity, then, is a far higher-stakes endeavor than just a sociopolitical reordering—it was an ethical commitment tied to the process and struggle of resurrecting the national spirit and redefining what it meant to be Arab. For someone like ‘Aflaq, this reconciliation of fragmentation must happen both in terms of the Arab states themselves, and on the level of the individual, psychologically and spiritually. As mentioned previously, the problem of fragmentation (*al-tajzi’a*) is a recurring theme in ‘Aflaqism, and it is through unity that the psychology of fragmentation (*nafsiyyat al-tajzi’a*) can be overcome.¹⁰⁵

‘Aflaq thought in terms of the broader Arab experience not limited to any single regional locale. A major reason for this can be understood by the spatial arrangement of the Syrian and other Arab states left behind by European colonialism. Part of completing an anticolonial nationalist revolution would entail overcoming such

¹⁰⁰Kerr, *Arab Cold War*, 1.

¹⁰¹In a similar register, Diagne notes how, “For Senghor, the cosmic movement of shaking free from all alienation—which is to say, going toward *more-being*—is what brings about the creative human.” See Souleymane Bachir Diagne, *Postcolonial Bergson*, trans. Lindsay Turner (New York, 2019), 48–9.

¹⁰²‘Aflaq, “al-Wahda ... wa-l-ishtirakiyya,” 60.

¹⁰³Michel ‘Aflaq, “Lā budda li-l-wahda mawqif thawrī wa-niḍāl yawmī” (A Revolutionary Position and Daily Struggle Is Necessary for Unity) (1962), in ‘Aflaq, *Ma’rakat al-Maṣīr*, 224–7, at 226.

¹⁰⁴‘Aflaq, “al-Ba’th al-‘arabī huwa al-inqilāb,” 67.

¹⁰⁵‘Aflaq, “Wahdat al-niḍāl,” 234, 236.

vestiges of the colonialist past. ‘Aflaq puts forward a clear rejection of regionalist (*quṭrī*) thinking in favor of a nationalist (*qawmī*) perspective.¹⁰⁶ He asserts that unity “is a revolution that arrives in order to eliminate distortion, change reality, discover the depths, and release the restrained forces [*al-quwā al-ḥabīsa*] and the unimpaired view.”¹⁰⁷ Unity as a revolutionary force that allows the hidden depths of the Arab nation to arise is in keeping with the other features of ‘Aflaq’s thought. For ‘Aflaq, the lack of unity derives from the spiritual effects of fragmentation. He remains uninterested in an independent state that manifests solely as a partial entity, and believes that the Arab experience speaks to the already existing nationalist sentiments that lie hidden, waiting to be awakened. For ‘Aflaq, fragmented regionalist states have led to a fragmented regional subjectivity—embracing a more capacious national form simultaneously with a national consciousness would instantiate a national subjectivity.

At this point, ‘Aflaq’s integration of unity with socialism (*al-ishtirākīyya*) and freedom (*al-ḥurriyya*) can now be more substantively elucidated. He argues that “the Arab issue needs to be taken as an integral whole, and treated on this basis.”¹⁰⁸ ‘Aflaq insists that narrowly focusing on unity separately from its connection with nationalism and socialism, or considering it as a mere stage in a political process, undermines the Arab cause—this is emblematic of a “fragmentarian perspective” (*wujhat naẓar tajzī‘īyya*).¹⁰⁹ As mentioned earlier, he understands colonialism to be an effect (*natīja*) rather than the cause (*sabab*) of the existing spiritual and intellectual stagnation.¹¹⁰ The path of the Ba’th must be greater than a mere response—it must be an affirmation based on a positive process of spiritual invigoration, not on defining itself by what it is not. ‘Aflaq emphasizes this notion of affirmation as key to his project. He frames anticolonialism as merely “the negative objective” (*al-ghāliyya al-salbiyya*), emphasizing that “the positive objective” (*al-ghāliyya al-ijābiyya*) of the Arab nation in achieving progress, peace, and its humanist message must be the driving force of struggle.¹¹¹ He further argues that “the hatred of the foreigner and ... the desire to be free of foreign rule” remain insufficient for struggling peoples to step onto the stage of world history.¹¹² Taking the long view, ‘Aflaq emphatically rejects the assertion, whether explicit or implicit,

¹⁰⁶For an overview of the formation of the regionalist (*quṭrī*) faction in the Syrian Ba’th Party see Nikolaos van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society under Asad and the Ba’th Party* (1979) (London, 2011), 22–4.

¹⁰⁷‘Aflaq, “As’ila wa-ajwiba,” 221. As Salem explains, ‘Aflaq insisted that for “the vital potential of the nation” to be realized, “the Arab nation must live and breathe as a unitary organic whole.” Salem also details how ‘Aflaq rejected, as a template for Arabs, the German unification process led by Otto von Bismarck (1815–98) often referenced during the “Germanophile interwar years,” as he calls them, which further distinguishes ‘Aflaq’s nationalist vision from that of figures like Saṭī‘ al-Ḥuṣrī (1880–1968). See Paul Salem, *Bitter Legacy: Ideology and Politics in the Arab World* (Syracuse, 1994), 65–6.

¹⁰⁸‘Aflaq, “al-waḥda ... wa-l-ishtirākīyya,” 59.

¹⁰⁹*Ibid.*, 61.

¹¹⁰Michel ‘Aflaq, “al-Mā raka bayn al-wujūd al-saṭḥī wa-l-wujūd al-aṣīl” (The Battle between Superficial Existence and Authentic Existence) (1955), in ‘Aflaq, *Ma’rakat al-Maṣīr*, 46–52, at 48.

¹¹¹Michel ‘Aflaq, “Tajribat al-‘arab ‘unṣur asāsī fi takwīn al-‘ālam al-jadīd” (The Experience of the Arabs Is a Fundamental Element in the Formation of the New World) (1957), in ‘Aflaq, *Ma’rakat al-Maṣīr*, 188–90, at 188.

¹¹²*Ibid.*, 188–9.

that Western powers would have had more agency in the preceding era of colonialism. In doing so, he allows a way out of the current predicament for his countrymen, and asserts that through a metaphysical awakening, the people who make up the rising Arab nation are the motor of history.

Importantly, the struggle to which ‘Aflaq speaks does not just exist in a vacuum for Arabs alone. The unity of the Arab homeland allows for a more unified world. Thus there are global implications in such a process, which is why any analysis of ‘Aflaq that reduces him to an anti-internationalist presents a facile view of his thought. He explains precisely why proper thought—or rather, a foundational metaphysics—is so crucial in an anticolonial nationalist struggle joined to a larger humanist aspiration, noting how “people who know what it is to be deprived of liberty and justice will consider other peoples’ right to these things as sacred as their own” and that “the motivating element in the Arab world is suffering; this is the guarantee that we will not ourselves become aggressive or narrow in our nationalism.”¹¹³ ‘Aflaq’s aspiration is decidedly not a militaristic triumph. Rather, he formulates the Ba’th project as bringing about a chance for true equality among nations. When asked about how the example of the Zionist colonization of Palestine points to the manner in which nationalism can indeed become aggressive, he counters that supporters of Zionism “want to inflict on others the suffering they have themselves undergone. We do not.”¹¹⁴ Time after time, ‘Aflaq professes an ethical commitment that explicitly rejects vengeance or violent retribution. ‘Aflaq refers to the formation of the UAR, for example, not only as having “revived our confidence in ourselves,” but also as a major step in the process of the Arab people’s “reconciliation with the world” (*muṣālahatunā ma’a al-‘ālam*).¹¹⁵ This reconciliation seems to be how he understands the process of decolonization as being truly realized. He even displays concern not only for fellow Arabs and other oppressed peoples of the Third World, but for those of Europe as well. Noting the manner in which the Arab and broader anticolonial struggles remain interconnected “with the progress of European peoples as well,” he cautions that “the continuation of colonialism in our countries” will isolate Europe from “the current of revolution” (*tayyār al-thawra*), and as a result of this Europe will remain stagnant and no longer contribute “its civilizational participation.”¹¹⁶ Thus ‘Aflaqist Ba’thism, while asserting the relevance and unique aspects of the Arab nation, readily welcomes the participation of other nations and their cultural production on the world stage. Indeed, he affirms that “every nation enriches other nations” when

¹¹³Michel ‘Aflaq, “Forum Interviews Michel Aflaq,” *Middle East Forum* 33/2 (1958), 8–10, 33, at 10.

¹¹⁴Ibid.

¹¹⁵Michel ‘Aflaq, “Hādhihi al-waḥda thawra ‘arabiyya wa-thawra ‘alamiyya wa-ḍamānatuhā fi istimrār thawriyyatihā” (This Unity Is an Arab and World Revolution and Its Guarantee Is in the Continuation of Its Revolutionary Spirit) (1958), in ‘Aflaq, *Ma’arakat al-Maṣīr*, 196–7, at 197. In an interview with Charles Saint-Prot during the latter years of his life, ‘Aflaq would once again insist upon this principle, in articulating the inclusivity of Arabism as opposed to the religious fanaticism and exclusivity that characterizes Zionism. Saint-Prot maintains that “Ba’thist nationalism is the affirmation of an integral humanism [*humanisme intégral*].” See Charles Saint-Prot, *Le nationalisme arabe: Alternative à l’intégrisme* (Paris, 1995), 71.

¹¹⁶‘Aflaq, “Tajribat al-‘arab,” 189.

they draw from their own particular experiences.¹¹⁷ World revolution can only emerge from nations being equal partners, and there exists no contradiction between universalism and nationalism, as “[n]ationalism is a part of universalism. It is its incarnation within the boundaries of any one people.”¹¹⁸ Against chauvinism, ‘Aflaq’s humanist anticolonial nationalism aspires for the Ba’th to set an example as the best of humanity.

This is in part why ‘Aflaq calls for the integration of unity with socialism. Noting the impossibility of unity without socialism, he insists that unity must emerge “in its proper place” at “the popular level” (*al-ṣa‘id al-sha‘bī*) in which only the Arab people collectively can realize it.¹¹⁹ The existential stagnation wrought by colonialism and internal structures aligned with capitalism have facilitated the dissolution of Arab unity. Here ‘Aflaq provides one of his more expansive diagnoses of and attendant prescriptions for the societal issues and unavailing ways of thinking standing in the way of the Arab nationalist cause. He formulates that the Ba’thist integration of socialism and unity gives form to unity and that in a sense “socialism is the body, and unity is the soul.”¹²⁰ The spiritual and integral unity of the Arab homeland (*tawḥīd al-waṭn al-‘arabī*) is the greater goal of the Ba’th, but this is not the final goal—that aspiration remains the Arab nation undertaking “its mission in life.”¹²¹ According to ‘Aflaq, the Arab people must reach collectively into the hidden depths of their beings in which lies a force capable of changing not only history, but reality as well. This collective effort is what will allow the realization of unity; however, that unity remains inextricable from a socialist cause. Thus ‘Aflaq’s concept of unity “nourishes” freedom and socialism and concomitantly receives “nourishment” from them, in true integral fashion.¹²² The nationalist and class struggles are joined together as a single movement seeking to overturn any and all forms of exploitation that exist in the Arab homeland.

‘Aflaq invokes an ethic of struggle carried out with positive affirmation towards bringing about a newly invigorated existential experience. Through this, he seeks to achieve an entirely new politics, necessarily overcoming the politics-as-usual which he castigated. For ‘Aflaq, unity is not “an artificial process of collection” nor the joining together of the “correct pieces” resulting from fragmentation.¹²³ Unity arrives as a creative, dynamic process in the midst of the Arab nation undergoing the throes of resurrection due to the energetic force and potentiality of nationalism. For ‘Aflaq, nationalism is the means through which the Arabs can realize their message—which is a spiritual message (*risāla rūḥiyya*).¹²⁴ This marks one of the most crucial contributions of ‘Aflaq’s thought to understanding decolonization and the reason behind his emphasis on the cardinal aim of *waḥda*. Such a concept is

¹¹⁷Michel ‘Aflaq, “al-Ba’th huwa al-inbī‘āth al-dākhil” (The Resurrection Is the Internal Revival) (1957), in ‘Aflaq, *Ma‘rakat al-Maṣīr*, 139–42, at 141.

¹¹⁸‘Aflaq, “Forum Interviews,” 9–10.

¹¹⁹‘Aflaq, “al-Waḥda ... wa-l-ishtirākiyya,” 61–2.

¹²⁰*Ibid.*, 62.

¹²¹*Ibid.*, 63.

¹²²‘Aflaq, “As’ila wa-ajwiba,” 220.

¹²³*Ibid.*, 221.

¹²⁴Michel ‘Aflaq, “al-Tafkīr al-mujarrad” (Abstract Thought) (1943), in ‘Aflaq, *Sabīl al-Ba’th*, 4th edn, 139–45, at 143–4.

radically different from, and far more dynamic than, the developmentalist paradigms often associated with postcolonial nation building, as unity is an active and creative force that must be what drives any individual part “as a vital necessity” before there can exist any relationship of solidarity or cooperation.¹²⁵ Likewise, “unity does not cause the part to lose its personality, but rather affirms [its personality] and deepens it, and provides it its truth, its authenticity, and creativity when [unity] places the part in its living place as a component of a whole.”¹²⁶ The realization of the Arab self is thus linked to the becoming of Arab unity. Individual Arabs themselves would be fundamentally transformed simultaneously as their lands—splintered and ripped apart by capitalism, colonization, and spiritual stagnation—become whole as one Arab nation. For ‘Aflaq, not only is the realization of unity more than the “numerical sum” of its individual parts—unity is a deepening that allows each individual part to reach its full potential, creating something “different in kind.”¹²⁷ Furthermore, an Arab country’s individual struggle for freedom cannot itself produce unity; rather, each country must struggle for unity in order to become truly free.¹²⁸ Hence the necessity that Arabs must practice the “struggle of unity” (*niḍāl al-waḥda*) in order to manifest the “unity of struggle” (*waḥdat al-niḍāl*).¹²⁹ Therefore unity of the Arab homeland is in fact both the undoing of fragmentation and the ultimate constitution of the Arab self.

In the final analysis, one cannot emphasize enough that the active, creative realization of unity is far more than a political aspiration in ‘Aflaqism. In the simplest sense, politics must serve the interests of the wonders and mysteries of life itself, not the other way around.¹³⁰ Together, unity, freedom, and socialism open up for ‘Aflaq his more expansive aims in formulating Ba‘thism, emphasizing that the overcoming of colonialism and internal corruption remains only the “means for the genius [*‘abqariyya*] of this nation to burst forth towards creation [*al-ibdā‘*], towards the earnest participation in the carrying of the burdens of humanity [*ḥaml al-a‘bā‘ al-insāniyya*].”¹³¹ Overcoming the readily apparent obstacles to the Arab nationalist project is merely the surface of the deeper goal of becoming a beacon of humanist aspiration for the world to witness. As ‘Aflaq unceasingly insists, “Arab nationalism does not mean closing off from human civilization, but it is, on the contrary, in continuous interaction with it.”¹³² Grasping the universal aspirations of ‘Aflaq’s thought thus necessitates a thorough understanding of the metaphysical contours of his theoretical tapestry. The material aspect of decolonization marks just one part of the larger quest for the universal of the Arab people and nation. This

¹²⁵ ‘Aflaq, “As‘ila wa-ajwiba,” 221.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ ‘Aflaq, “Waḥdat al-niḍāl,” 236.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 236–7.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 238.

¹³⁰ Here I have in mind the observation of Charles Péguy (1873–1914) that everything “begins in mysticism and ends in politics,” emphasizing the necessity that “mysticism be not devoured by the politics to which it gave birth.” Charles Péguy, “Politics and Mysticism,” in Péguy, *Basic Verities: Poetry and Prose* (1943) (Providence, 2019), 31–5, at 34.

¹³¹ ‘Aflaq, “Ṭumūḥ al-ba‘th,” 48.

¹³² Michel ‘Aflaq, “al-Qawmiyya al-‘arabiyya wa-l-naḥariyya al-qawmiyya” (Arab Nationalism and Nationalist Theory) (1957), in ‘Aflaq, *Sabil al-Ba‘th*, 179–83, at 182.

“bursting forth” of which ‘Aflaq speaks derives from his metaphysical understanding of time and temporality—by embracing the sacrifices required of the Ba‘th movement, the power of Arab history itself is unleashed. The past joins hands with the present moment and the future emerges from the depths of the Arab nation and its reinvigorated national spirit. For ‘Aflaq, such a metaphysical awakening serves the interests of the entire world, as the Arab nation sets an example for others to follow and turns towards humanity, in all of its manifestations, eager to bear witness and take up a universal humanist responsibility.

Conclusion

In closing, this article has endeavored to bring ‘Aflaq and the Ba‘th into a wider historiographical scope through explicating the universalist implications of his thought. Beyond the confines of political questions of sovereignty, policy, and the writing of constitutions, ‘Aflaq sought to articulate an altogether different political metaphysics. Through such an intensive labor, this metaphysics would link the Arabs of his day to their past as the universal ambitions of the Ba‘th propelled them to the future. What has been continually emphasized throughout this article is the manner in which one must read ‘Aflaq on his own terms if one truly seeks to understand the questions he asked and the answers he provided. Thus this work has embraced the dialogical approach of LaCapra, who reminds us that “the reconstruction of the dialogues of the dead should be self-consciously combined with the interpretative attempt to enter into an exchange with them,” as well as “the importance of understanding as fully as possible what the other is trying to say.”¹³³ In this regard, ‘Aflaq sought to express that the resurrection of the Arab nation and people derives from faith in each other and their cause, which in turn is infused by the spirit towards realizing a comprehensive unity in being and land. Even nationalism itself would remain inadequate for ‘Aflaq without such a metaphysical reckoning in which the Arab soul and spirit hang in the balance.

That ‘Aflaq’s highest aims went unrealized during his lifetime does not foreclose their future possibility. One might say that while ‘Aflaq did not live to see the crisis of his day overcome—as the problem of fragmentation which he diagnosed persists—his thought bears witness to the danger of the further spiral of such a crisis if left unresolved. In speaking to his rejection of the Schmittian politics of enmity, the Ba‘th Party founder sought to prevent further entrenchment of conflict in the midst of a war-torn century, charting out a path that would bring about “peace for the world” (*al-silm li-l-‘ālam*).¹³⁴ ‘Aflaq’s nationalist goals cannot be separated, then, from his emphasis on the Arab nation’s commitment to the world and to humanity writ large. Much as the revolution begins as an internal spiritual struggle, this universalist commitment to rejecting the logic of conflict “realizes internal peace and does not open the door to civil war.”¹³⁵ Unfortunately, despite such noble aspirations, ‘Aflaq would find himself exiled from Syria following the 1966 *coup d’état* by the military faction of the Ba‘th

¹³³Dominick LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History*, 50.

¹³⁴‘Aflaq, “Fi al-ḥiyād al-ijābi,” 350.

¹³⁵*Ibid.*, 351.

Party, to be followed a year later by the crushing defeat of the 1967 War. Moreover, less than a decade later, in 1975, the Lebanese Civil War (1975–90) would break out, organized along the sectarian lines and political factionalism which ‘Aflaq sought to overcome in his vision of national resurrection. This externalization of violence was quite apart indeed from the internal spiritual struggle as articulated by ‘Aflaq. In short, when one understands the higher ambitions of the Ba‘th, another path is revealed, that while not taken previously, might still one day be traveled. Scholars have much to learn from the intellectual history of anticolonial nationalism and decolonization in the Arab context in this regard. ‘Aflaq’s project, then, sought not only the resurrection of the Arab nation, but the resurrection of human togetherness in which every nation has a message to contribute in seeking universality.

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