

## REVIEW ESSAY

### The Resurgence of *The Arab Cold War*

Fred H. Lawson  
Mills College

#### Abstract

Malcolm H. Kerr's classic study *The Arab Cold War* appeared in print in a circuitous way, which can be traced using archival materials that have previously been inaccessible to scholars. More important, the primary analytical themes of the book continue to be fundamentally misrepresented, despite the frequent appropriation of the book's title by students of regional affairs in the wake of the 2010–11 uprisings.

**Keywords:** inter-Arab relations, Egypt, Syria, Nasir, Malcom H. Kerr

In 1965 a smallish book was released by Oxford University Press under the auspices of the Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House) that bore the provocative title *The Arab Cold War: A Study of Ideology in Politics* (1965). The book was penned by Malcolm H. Kerr, an associate professor of political science at the University of California, Los Angeles, who had previously taught at the American University of Beirut and held a one-year fellowship at St. Antony's College, Oxford. Kerr had completed his doctoral dissertation at The Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies under the supervision of Majid Khadduri, but had worked primarily—he told me later—with the distinguished Oxford Orientalist Hamilton, A. R. Gibb, who was by then on the faculty of Harvard University.<sup>2</sup>

Kerr had been approached by the Royal Institute in the fall of 1962 to compose a 30,000-word monograph on the subject of Arab socialism, as part of a new series called Chatham House Essays on International Affairs. As early as January 1954, the list of prospective topics and authors for the series included a volume that was tentatively entitled “Arab Unity and the Cold War,” with Kerr's name alongside.<sup>3</sup> The suggestion to solicit a manuscript from the young scholar appears to have come from Professor Bernard Lewis of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.<sup>4</sup> In the minutes of the December 1962 meeting of the Research Committee, there is a check mark beside Kerr's name for a study of “Arab Socialism” on

the list of titles for which authors were actively “being sought.”<sup>5</sup> After the subsequent committee meeting, at the end of April 1963, it was reported “that the following essays have been commissioned since the last meeting: Arab Socialism by Malcolm Kerr.”<sup>6</sup> The contract for the project commits Kerr to produce “an objective and systematic investigation of Arab socialism,” to be completed by the end of June 1963.<sup>7</sup>

There exists no record in the Chatham House archives of further correspondence between the Research Committee and the author, but a subtle shift evidently occurred in the focus of the project between June 1963 and April 1964. According to the minutes of the 82nd committee meeting, “the provisional programme for publication [of Essays] in the first half of 1965 includes ...an essay on ideological factors in the external relations of the Arab world by Malcolm Kerr.”<sup>8</sup> By July 1965, the book had been sent to press under the title *The Arab Cold War*, after being approved for publication by three expert readers: Albert Hourani of St. Antony’s College, Elie Kedourie of the London School of Economics and Political Science, and Lewis.<sup>9</sup>

Review copies of *The Arab Cold War* were dispatched to twenty-one journals in the United States, as well as to a Mr. White at the independent northern California radio station KPFA.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, the book was not reviewed in *The American Political Science Review*, nor in *Political Science Quarterly*, *The Western Political Quarterly*, *The Journal of Politics*, the *Review of Politics*, the *Journal of International Affairs*, *The Muslim World* or *The Journal of Modern History*. Weighing in at a trim 139 pages, the book evaded the radar of almost all of the leading American journals of politics and international relations. It did receive a three-line notice in *Foreign Affairs*, which calls its treatment of the topic at hand “authoritative” (Roberts 1966). *The Middle East Journal* published a more fulsome assessment by Enver Khoury (1966), who observes astutely that Kerr’s study “examines in depth the struggles between the Egyptian [political] elites and the Ba‘th leaders [of Syria].” “The outstanding merit of the book,” Khoury continues, “is to re-emphasize the urgency of the question of Arab unity for all Arab leaders and to remind concerned students of the centrality of this issue.”

*The Arab Cold War* was reviewed in the pages of Chatham House’s in-house journal *International Affairs* by John B. Kelly, the most prominent historian of British imperialism in the Gulf. Kelly remarks that *The Arab Cold War* offers a dispassionate analysis of recent events in the Arab world, and asserts somewhat imperiously that “from [Kerr’s] pages the Ba‘thist leaders, Salah al-Din al-Bitar, Michel ‘Aflaq, Akram al-Hawrani et al., emerge in an unflattering light as opportunists and incompetents.” Kelly (1966) goes on to observe that the work explores the primary “struggle” that preoccupied

the Arab world during the early 1960s, namely, “the tripartite talks on unity among Syria, Egypt and Iraq,” and notes that Egypt’s President Gamal ‘Abd al-Nasir managed “at every stage” to outmaneuver the Ba‘thist leadership in Damascus. “Perhaps the strongest conclusion that emerges from Professor Kerr’s account of the unity negotiations,” Kelly adds, “is that the Egyptian president will brook no rivals for the leadership of the Arab world,” and Cairo can be expected to do its best to parry any further challenge to its regional predominance from Damascus or Baghdad.

*International Affairs* reviewed *The Arab Cold War* alongside two books dealing with the practice and principles of Arab nationalism, and when a revised edition appeared in 1967, Kerr’s study once again received second billing—this time to Henry Cattan’s 1969 polemic in support of Palestinian rights entitled *Palestine, the Arabs and Israel*. The new review was penned by Roger Owen of St. Antony’s College, who makes three bullet points: 1. *The Arab Cold War* provides “far and away the best short analysis in English of the efforts made to establish a union between Egypt, Syria and, at some periods, Iraq;” 2. the book demonstrates “how the old division between ‘revolutionaries’ and ‘reactionaries’ reasserted itself” during the course of 1965–66; and (a bit contradictorily) 3. the analysis shows that “the Egyptian and Iraqi Governments have never been able to work together in such a way as to provide a more moderate front against Syrian adventurism” (Owen 1970).

It appears that the impetus for a revised edition came not so much from events in the Middle East as from the exigencies of international bookselling. Copyright regulations strictly limited the number of copies of any given title that could be imported into the United States, and in order to retain the American rights, Oxford University Press found it necessary to reprint the book through its New York office. Chatham House thus proposed to Kerr that he update the study by adding additional material equivalent to “15 pages or a little less for mechanical reasons,” since the press insisted that the new edition consist of no more than 152 total pages.<sup>11</sup> On 20 March 1967, Kerr wrote to say that the revisions were almost completed, but with a minor hitch: “One reason it has taken so long to finish this is that I found as I went along that I had much more to say than expected. The [additional] chapter as it now stands will bring the total number of pages in the book up to close to 168 pages rather than 152—in fact, I have to do a little pruning to make sure it doesn’t run over 168.” Kerr continued, “I realize this will mean a higher selling price [than the original \$1.50]; however I think the extra length will be justified by the material that is included—at least I hope so.”<sup>12</sup>

Before the revised version could hit the shops, disaster struck. In the days immediately following the June 1967 war, Kerr contacted Andrew

Palmer at Oxford University Press in New York to decide how best to deal with the unexpected developments on the ground. Kerr eventually dictated a paragraph to be appended at the end of the text, which Palmer inserted without prior authorization from London. "I was well aware that this paragraph should have been approved by Chatham House before it was put in the book," Palmer wrote to Kay Jerrold. "If we had taken the time to send it over and get approval, however, the printing of the book might have been delayed by several months because most of the printers here in New York all close down and go on holiday at the beginning of July. This produces an unbelievable tangle with any books that get behind their production schedule just at this point. I hope that you and Mr. Shonfield [the Director of Studies at the Institute] will understand."<sup>13</sup> That same day, Palmer informed Kerr that "the paragraph that you dictated by phone has been included on page 169 and the book is now printed and at the binder. Actually, the book was printed at the time that you were dictating the paragraph on the phone. The sheets had not been folded, however, and it was possible to run the final large sheet through press again and insert the final paragraph at a cost that was not impossible at all. Of course," Palmer added, "this is carrying the up to the minute idea beyond even the 'stop the press' type of thing that used to be so popular in the movies."<sup>14</sup>

On 12 March 1968, Oxford University Press wrote to Kerr to say that the Chatham House Essays in International Affairs was going to be discontinued. Consequently, any third edition of the book would appear as part of the general series Oxford Paperbacks on International Affairs.<sup>15</sup> Kerr replied a week later, "So much has happened since April 1967, which was in effect the end of the period covered by the second edition, that I think offhand that even two additional chapters might not be excessive if I am to do a proper job."<sup>16</sup> Catherine Linnet of the Press suggested that three chapters of sixteen pages each be added, plus an index and bibliography.<sup>17</sup> Kerr agreed to have the additional chapters ready by September 1969, but expressed reservations about keeping the existing title. The third edition, he noted, "might either be called simply *The Arab Cold War*, without reference to dates, as in the first two editions, or it might be called something altogether different in view of the fact that inter-Arab relations covered in the latter chapters will not so much emphasize a conflict situation among the Arab states as have the earlier chapters in the first two editions."<sup>18</sup>

Kerr wrote to Linnet in July 1969 to say that he would be unable to meet the September deadline. When Linnet asked in mid-December whether the manuscript might be ready by 1 February 1970, he responded that "I cannot foresee any likelihood of finding any time to devote to it during the present

school year, the ways [sic] things are going. As it happens,” he pointed out, “I will be on sabbatical next year, and if it would still be of interest to you to receive copy for a third edition as late as a year from now, I would like to plan on this.”<sup>19</sup> Yet when Linnet in early November 1970 asked once again for a firm completion date, Kerr told her that it would not be possible before mid-March 1971.<sup>20</sup> As that date approached, Kerr returned to the question of the title: “I am willing to stick with the one used in the first two editions, updated: ‘The Arab Cold War, 1958–1970. A Study of Ideology in Politics.’ My main reservation is that it is not especially about ideology, in fact it is, if anything, more concerned with Machiavellian skullduggery. But that’s not crucial. An alternative title which I have dreamed up is: ‘The Arab Cold War. Gamal Abd al-Nasir and his Rivals, 1958–1970.’ This I would prefer, because it mentions Nasir, who is the main character of the story.”<sup>21</sup>

Then Kerr makes a comment that must have caught Oxford University Press as unprepared—to use his famous metaphor—as the Egyptian air force. The changed title “has one fault which you can judge much better than I—that Nasir is spelled Nasir instead of Nasser, as everyone is accustomed to. I fear it may look prissy or pedantic spelled that way on the cover of a supposedly popular-style book. (Chatham House people forced this spelling on me in the text of the first edition six years ago, and I have always regretted it.)”<sup>22</sup> There is no correspondence in the Institute’s archives related to the transliteration system that was adopted at the outset of the project. We can only suppose that someone at Chatham House decided to use technically accurate renderings for such terms as ‘Abd al-Nasir and the Ba‘th Party, instead of the more common spellings.

Kerr’s comment about the transliteration of the Egyptian president’s name caused a stir back in London. Staff members at Chatham House discussed the question of whether or not to alter the transliterations that had been used in the first two editions, and the Director of Studies expressed sympathy for Kerr’s preference that Nasser be adopted in place of Nasir in the new edition. What ended up being the deciding factor was the expense associated with combing through the entire text and making the requisite changes. In the end, amending the transliterations was determined to be too costly, and the existing spellings were retained.

By the mid-1970s, *The Arab Cold War* had become recognized as a scholarly classic (Zartman 1980; Henry 1980; Brown 1984, 291). It remained in fact the only detailed exploration of inter-Arab politics that was, as Roger Owen would say, available in English until the close of the twentieth century. Alan Taylor attempted a similar exercise in 1982, under the title *The Arab Balance of Power*. Compared to *The Arab Cold War*, however, Taylor’s analysis comes

across as a bit thin and rather too pat. Moreover, for the years prior to 1970 it relies heavily on the third edition of *The Arab Cold War*, along with George Lenczowski's more expansive overview of *The Middle East in World Affairs* (1980). Unlike Kerr's study, *The Arab Balance of Power* cites not one Arabic-language source.

What is it that makes *The Arab Cold War* so impressive almost half a century after it initially appeared in print? I think that it is two things. First, Kerr explores the dynamics and patterns of relations among the Arab states independently of the actions and interests of extra-regional powers. Every other study of Middle Eastern diplomacy connects whatever happens to transpire directly to the machinations and purported motivations of outside actors.<sup>23</sup> *The Arab Cold War*, however, takes a markedly different tack, and looks at inter-Arab affairs much the same way that Tom Stoppard's scintillating *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* looks at *Hamlet*—by directing our attention to what goes on after the high and mighty exit the stage.

Second, Kerr gives us a broadly sympathetic view of local states people. By this I do not mean that he is an advocate or apologist for their pet projects, but rather that he never looks down his nose at them. He does not try to second-guess them, and consistently gives them the benefit of the doubt. In *The Arab Cold War*, Arab politicians are never evil, stupid, or crazy. They are of course not always right, nor do they always do things that turn out to be in their own best interest. But they are assumed to act in a reasonable way, given the circumstances they face.

There are two other important analytical lessons that one learns from engaging with *The Arab Cold War*. First (or perhaps third, if one is keeping track here), Kerr shows that the axes of conflict and cooperation throughout the Arab world during the turbulent 1950s and 1960s did not congeal neatly into a grand contest of radicals versus conservatives. Oddly enough, such a simplistic view of regional rivalries is now routinely associated with the book. This unfortunate fact indicates not merely that most scholars who cite Kerr's study have never actually sat down to read it, but more tellingly that few readers even make it through the preface, at least the famous opening pages of the third edition. At the very outset, Kerr states that "I have sought to dispel [the] notion, according to which [inter-Arab politics] can be understood simply in terms of 'revolutionary' and 'conservative' ideologies.... Certainly revolution is a great issue among the Arabs; but it is a many-sided issue, and in practice it gets mixed together with personal ambition, tactical convenience, and a capacity for worldly realism which the Arabs have often preferred to obscure in their outward words and action" (Kerr 1971, vi).

So second (or fourth), *The Arab Cold War* demonstrates that abstract doctrines and ideologies have been much less crucial in driving regional affairs than struggles over power and prestige. Arab leaders who might be expected to agree on basic principles tend to clash with one another over concrete divergences of interest. Kerr explicitly rejects “the habitual inability of those [analysts who are] afflicted with ideological fixations to perceive or accept the complications, ambiguities, tensions, rivalries, contradictions, uncertainties and contingencies that are inherent in practical politics everywhere” (Kerr 1971, 23).<sup>24</sup>

Since the momentous winter of 2010–11, the term Arab Cold War has re-emerged with a vengeance in academic writing about the Middle East. Nabeel Khoury (2013) contends that a New Arab Cold War has taken shape, one that pits conservative monarchies against both “transitioning republics” like Tunisia and Egypt and “non-state Islamist” movements, some of which are closely aligned with the Islamic Republic of Iran. Khoury opines that the current incarnation of the Arab Cold War “does not offer even the clarity or the more obvious fault lines of the original model,” a notion which he attributes to Kerr (Khoury 2013, 86).<sup>25</sup> Curtis Ryan claims in a similar vein that “the main difference [between the Arab Cold War of the 1950s and 1960s and the one that exists today] is that the 2012 version... does not array revolutionary republics on one side” (2012, 28). On the other hand, “the greatest similarity to the earlier cold war is the mobilization of conservative monarchies attempting to block another wave of change across the Arab regional system” (Ryan 2012, 28).<sup>26</sup> Ryan cannot be blamed for failing to anticipate that the two most active “conservative monarchies,” Qatar and Saudi Arabia, would quickly fall out with one another, but he might well be faulted for missing the key point that the “revolutionary republics” hardly ever worked together during the Nasir era.

Morten Valbjorn and Andre Bank (2012, 5) posit that what is distinctive about the present regional order is the re-emergence of a collective “Arab” sensibility among a wide range of otherwise disparate political actors. Even the Islamic Republic of Iran, especially during the years in which it was led by President Mahmud Ahmadi-Nejad, can be considered to be pursuing an ostensibly Arab foreign policy, most notably vis-a-vis the struggle against Israel. It is the active participation of Tehran in Middle Eastern affairs that gives weight to the otherwise rickety “radical” alliance of Hizbullah, HAMAS, the Egyptian Muslim Brothers, and Syria, which in turn poses a serious threat to the “anti-radical” coalition of Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and (pre-2011) Egypt.

All of these later studies do precisely what Kerr’s classic treatment set out to avoid. They emphasize ideology and discourse over practical politics. And

they lay down the lines of inter-state cleavage in advance of the empirical analysis, rather than explicating the subtle dynamics that sometimes lead radical regimes to work together, but at other times—in fact more frequently than not—put revolutionary leaderships at loggerheads with one another. At a moment in history when revolutionary actors who champion broadly paralleled principles have once again seized the helm all across the Middle East and North Africa, there is much to be gained from a careful re-reading of *The Arab Cold War*.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>An appreciation prepared for “The Legacy of Malcolm H. Kerr: Perspectives on the Impact of American Education in the Middle East,” convened at the University of California, Los Angeles, on 8 April 2014 to mark the 30th anniversary of Professor Kerr’s death.

<sup>2</sup>For Kerr’s assessment of the contribution of the classical Orientalists, see Kerr 1980b.

<sup>3</sup>Extract from the Minutes and Agenda of the 81st Meeting of the Research Committee held on 11 December 1962, Appendix dated 1 January 1954, General Correspondence October 1956 to 1966, Chatham House Memoranda and Essays, File 18/1a, Archives of the Royal Institute of International Affairs, Chatham House, London (hereafter RIIA Archives).

<sup>4</sup>Extract from the Minutes and Agenda of the 80th Meeting of the Research Committee held on 9 October 1962, File 18/1a, RIIA Archives.

<sup>5</sup>Extract from the Minutes and Agenda of the 81st Meeting of the Research Committee.

<sup>6</sup>Extract from the Minutes and Agenda of the 82nd Meeting of the Research Committee held on 30 April 1963, File 18/1a, RIIA Archives.

<sup>7</sup>Memorandum of Agreement between Royal Institute of International Affairs and Malcolm H. Kerr, File 18/29, RIIA Archives.

<sup>8</sup>Extract from the Minutes and Agenda of the 86th Meeting of the Research Committee held on 21 April 1964, File 18/1a, RIIA Archives.

<sup>9</sup>Extract from the Minutes and Agenda of the 91st Meeting of the Research Committee held on 20 July 1965, File 18/1a, RIIA Archives.

<sup>10</sup>Extract from the Minutes and Agenda of the 94th Meeting of the Research Committee held on 7 July 1966, Appendix C/2, File 18/1a, RIIA Archives.

<sup>11</sup>Andrew E. Palmer to Malcolm H. Kerr, 20 January 1967, File 18/29, RIIA Archives; Palmer to Kerr, 2 March 1967, File 18/29, RIIA Archives.

<sup>12</sup>Kerr to Palmer, 20 March 1967, File 18/29, RIIA Archives.

<sup>13</sup>Palmer to Kay Jerrold, 15 June 1967, File 18/29, RIIA Archives.

<sup>14</sup>Palmer to Kerr, 15 June 1967, File 18/29, RIIA Archives.

<sup>15</sup>Catherine C. Linnet to Kerr, 12 March 1969, File 18/29, RIIA Archives.

<sup>16</sup>Kerr to Linnet, 19 March 1969, File 18/29, RIIA Archives.

<sup>17</sup>Linnet to Kerr, 29 March 1969, File 18/29, RIIA Archives.

<sup>18</sup>Kerr to Linnet, 29 March 1969, File 18/29, RIIA Archives.



<sup>19</sup>Kerr to Linnet, 23 December 1969, File 18/29, RIIA Archives.

<sup>20</sup>Kerr to Linnet, 18 November 1970, File 18/29, RIIA Archives.

<sup>21</sup>Kerr to Linnet, 3 March 1971, File 18/29, RIIA Archives.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>It goes without saying that Kerr had the talent to shed new light on the policies of the great powers. See Kerr 1967; Kerr 1973a; Kerr 1973b; Kerr 1980a. While composing a critique of current scholarship on connections between the People's Republic of China and the Gulf, I even stumbled across an essay of his on Beijing's ties to the Middle East that is remarkably insightful (Kerr 1966).

<sup>24</sup>The subtlety involved here was grasped by David Thomson (1966), who observes that "relations between the Arab states would seem to be a particularly good example of power-relations governed by tactical and personal calculations and a dense cloud of myths, rather than by any definable ideology." Looking back, I wish that I had asked Kerr whether the book's original subtitle—*A Study of Ideology in Politics*—was intended to be ironic. It would not at all surprise me if it were.

<sup>25</sup>See also Salloukh 2013, 33 and 43; and Ayoob 2012, 1.

<sup>26</sup>See also Nte 2013.

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