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NOTES ON TRANSLITERATION AND TERMINOLOGY

This paper adopts the International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES) transliteration system (Appendix A). The letter *tā' marbūṭa* (ة (has been transliterated as a in isolation and at when in iḍāfa constructions. The *alif maqṣūra* (ى (has been rendered a. The letter *hamza* (ء (has been transliterated as an apostrophe (') and omitted when in the initial position. Proper names of the classic and modern age have been transliterated according to the IJMES system. Proper names of contemporary figures have been rendered with their common transliteration (ex. Fahmy Jeda'an, Mohammaed Arkoun, Fathi Triki, Zayd Eyadat). Arabic words and concepts have been transliterated (ex. *turāth*, *Qur'ān*, *'arabī*), while geographic names and the name of dynasties were not transliterated (ex. Mecca, Abbasid, Umayyad). The Arabic article was rendered as "al-" even when it precedes lunar letters (ex. *al-sha'b*, *al-tārīkh*). When Arabic names or terms are quoted, they have maintained the transliteration system of original references. In citations of Arabic volumes and articles, the first occurrence includes the original Arabic title followed by the English translation in square brackets. For subsequent citations, only the English translation is provided for clarity and readability. In Arabic, there is a wide galaxy of terms that can be ascribed in the semantic galaxy of Arab identity. The most relevant to this research are: *al-huwiyya al-ʿarabiyya* (Arab identity), *al-qawmiyya al-ʿarabiyya* (Arab nationality), *al-'uruba* (Arabness), *al-waḥda al-ʿarabiyya* (Arab unity), *al-ittiḥād al-'arabī* (Arab union). The concept of Arabness is here used as English translation of *'uruba*, Throughout the paper, the term is used with reference to the feeling of being Arab, thus to Arab collective and individual identity. Remarkably, some cited scholars (among which the four key-informants), use the term Arabness and Arabhood interchangeably. Reference to the ideological product of Arabness (in Arabic *al-qawmiyya alʿarabiyya*) is done through the terms

Arab nationalism and pan-Arabism, used interchangeably since "the desire for, as well as the pursuit of, political unity for the Arabs, which is how Western literature has defined and portrayed pan-Arabism, is incorporated, […] in the very definition of Arab nationalism itself."[1] The term Arabism is used throughout the paper according to the definition provided by Dawisha (2016) meaning the feeling of belonging to a common cultural space, to constitute a wider "Arab public" beyond territorial boundaries. In other words, as the shared cultural – and to some extent political – identity of Arabs, that preceded and survived the Arab nationalist parabola.

[1] A. Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2016, chap. 1, https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/739521/0.

Everybody cherishes identity
Everybody searches for origin
And I am teaching orphan knowledge.
Abdelkebir al-Khatibi

Introduction

According to Hinnebusch, "If there is anything special about the international politics of the Middle East, it is the power of identity."[2] While identity can facilitate the construction of stable and legitimate nation states when coinciding with territorial and economic sovereignty, in the West Asian region identity is often incongruent with state boundaries, contributing to a highly volatile regional framework. In a context where macro identities (like Arabness and Muslimhood) interlace national identities and sub-national identities (namely tribal affiliation), tracing the unfolding of feelings of belongings is crucial to the understanding of the political dynamic on both a domestic and regional level.

The case of Arab identity is a relevant field of investigation for many reasons. First, the active intertwining of religious and political dimensions in Arab society, shaped since the eve of Islam, has generated ambiguity regarding the roots of identitarian feelings. Second, as highlighted by Corm, there is an abundance of literature that depicts the Arab mind as a rigid "theologico-political structure," irreversibly linked to religion and "resistant to the secular,"[3] which excludes the complexity and diversity of Arab identity from the discourse. Third, Arab identity is subject to a "misplaced exceptionalism"[4] stemming from a unilateral cultural confrontation with the West and isolation from other postcolonial debates. This has led to the erroneous belief that Arab society suffers from a unique form of post-colonial "cultural malaise"[5] manifested in a struggle for identity. Finally, the modern and contemporary debate on Arab identity is often polarized between those who emphasize linguistic and cultural elements and those who prioritize Islam above all else when defining Arabness, generating what can be referred to as the Arab-Muslim axiom.

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[2] R. Hinnebusch, *The politics of identity in Middle East International Relations*, in *International Relations of the Middle East*, ed. L. Fawcett, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013, p. 148.
[3] G. Corm, *Arab Political Thought*, trans. P. Phillis-Batoma and A. T. Batoma, Hurst &Co., London 2020, p. XII.
[4] E. S. Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective*, Columbia University Press, New York 2009, p. 10.
[5] *Ivi*, p. 12.

Evidence from the World Values Survey[6] shows that in Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan the feeling of belonging to an Arab union is strengthened when combined with a strong feeling of national belonging and with deep religious faith. This evidence suggests that different identitarian catalysts are not necessarily in competition, but rather can enhance one another. Thus, a more nuanced understanding of identity is needed when looking at the Arab world.

This paper argues that it is not possible to grasp the core of an identity by focusing on one of its components, nor by excluding one *a priori*, as it often happens in regard of Islam. In Maalouf's words, "identity can't be compartmentalized."[7] Instead, cultural identities are to be understood as a composite and dynamic perception of exclusion and inclusion of identitarian components. Such perception emerges in the interaction between actors (individual or collective) and factors, such as language, religion, ethnicity, rites and political orientation. Therefore, a priority of this research is to refute oversimplification and deconstruct the dichotomization of the religious element *vis à vis* the cultural one, promoting a comprehensive approach to the understanding of identity in the Arab world. Another methodological priority in conducting this research has been to rely on the contribution of Arab authors scarcely known outside a niche of academic specialists. Indeed, the paper aims at understanding autochthonous views of identity in the first place, while flexibly putting them in dialogue with international perspectives on the same matter. This choice is resembled both in the bibliography and in the case study, where three out of four key-informants are scholars of Arab origin.

According to this framework of analysis, the paper explores the development of Arab identity throughout history and its relation to other relevant macro and particular identities. Through the historical analysis, a set of recurrent themes, objects of decades old debates, emerges. Thus, the second section attempts at addressing such topics through an overview of critical and seldom overshadowed Arab thinkers. Resulting from the literature review is the need for a comprehensive, dynamic and multi-layered approach to the understanding of identity, especially in a macro-society as culturally, ethnically and religiously diverse as the Arab world. Lastly, the case study on Jordanian identity aims to provide a concise yet

[6] Inglehart, R., C. Haerpfer, et al., *World Values Survey: Round Six - Country-Pooled Datafile Version*, 2014, https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentation WV6.jsp. Madrid: JD Systems Institute.

[7] A. Maalouf, *In the Name of Identity. Violence and the Need to Belong*, trans. Barbara Bray, Penguin Books, New York 2000, p. 2.

comprehensive overview of how different identitarian components interact within a national framework, emphasizing the role of political and social factors in shaping fluid dynamics of inclusion, exclusion, and overlap. The research is based on data gathered from semi-structured interviews with four key-informants, conducted in Amman between September and December 2023. Through the interviewees' insights, the case study illustrates the nuanced nature of identitarian conceptualizations at the individual level. Most importantly, it demonstrates the relevance and suitability of a comprehensive approach to identity studies in the Arab world.

1. Historical framework

In order to clarify the ambiguous relationship between Arabhood and Muslimhood, the issue of historicization of Arab history is crucial. As explained by Corm, placing the beginning of history at the birth of Islam implies identifying the history of Arabs with the history of Islam; in other words overlapping the concept of Arabhood with that of Muslimhood.[8] This assumption dominates the public opinion in the Arab world as well as Arab and international academia. The so-generated "Arab-Muslim axiom" poorly represents the multi-faceted nature of Arab identity, yet continues to inform historical interpretations, domestic and international politics and ultimately identitarian conceptualizations. While Islam's role in the development of Arab identity can't be overlooked, this paper seeks to understand the intertwining between Arab and Muslim identities as distinct socio-cultural constructs. Thus, the following section proposes an overview of how Arab identity evolved before, alongside and thanks to Muslimhood and other particular identities.

1.1. THE FORMATION OF ARAB IDENTITY: FROM THE PRE-ISLAMIC TO THE MODERN ERA

The social fabric of the pre-Islamic Arabia was highly fragmented and the tribal component was functioning as the main identitarian catalyst.[9] The Arabic word *'aṣabiyya*, that Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1407) placed at the core of his theory of social development, expresses this feeling of mutual solidarity based on tribal identity, that characterized the social fabric of pre-Islamic Arabia.[10]

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[8] Corm, *Arab Political Thought*, p. 213.

[9] A. Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age: 1798-1939*, Cambridge University Press, New York 1983, p. 6.

[10] For an overview of the attributes of the term *'aṣabiyya*, and its relation to the concept of Islamic
Umma, see A. A. Halim, "Ibn Khaldun's Theory of Asabiyyah and The Concept of Muslim Ummah", 2014, *Journal of Al-Tamaddun*, vol. 9, no. 1, pp. 1-12. https://jummec.um.edu.my/index.php/JAT/article/view/8666.

A controversial question is to what extent the sense of Arab unity could transcend tribal belonging. Skepticals about the existence of a comprehensive Arab consciousness in pre-Islamic Arabia, like Peter Webb, argue that "in the pre-Islamic era… 'Arab' was a label without a people, it was the property of outsiders who used the word without close consideration of the actual status of Arabian communities."[11] In contrast, scholars like al-Azmeh and Hoyland underline the importance of pre-Islamic poetry as evidence of artistic cultural unity, which is a crucial factor in the identity building process.[12]

Donner, among others, argues that only the advent of Islam posed the basis for a defined common political identity among Arabs throughout Arabia.[13] Indeed, the rise of Islam enhanced unification around the worship of a monotheist faith, offering the ideological basis for the overcoming of tribal and kinship ties. Furthermore, the sacred connotation assumed by Classic Arabic in the Qur'ān implied a conceptual and factual nexus between the membership to the linguistic community and the embracement of the religious community, lifting the latter from any eventual racial or tribal connotation. Through the Constitution of Medina (AD 622), Mohammad gave rise to a trans-religious political entity (where monotheist belief marked the status of insider or outsider) with shared goals and values.[14] However, the tension between Islamic universalism and tribal belonging was never resolved. This tension became pronounced after the death of Muḥammad, as internal rivalries within the community intensified around the complex issue of succession, ultimately leading to the schism between the Sunni and Shi'a branches of Islam.

Due to the rapid pace of territorial expansion of the "community of believers"[15] and the prevalence of the monotheist religious belief as an identitarian marker, the concept of Arabness stretched to encompass people who were not ethnically Arab, namely the Persian communities residing in

[11] P. Webb, *Imagining the Arabs*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2016, p. 353.
[12] R. G. Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs*, Routledge, New York 2001, Introduction. https://www.perlego.com/book/1614224/arabia-and-the-arabs-from-the-bronze-age-to-the-coming-ofislam-pdf.
[13] F. M. Donner, *Maometto e le origini dell'Islam*, Einaudi editore, Torino 2011, p. 229.
[14] As argued by Donner, "the Believer's movement" was confessionally open to whoever respected its basic principles, namely monotheism and pious behavior, which happened to be common to both Judaism and Christianism. The cleavage was therefore between Muslims and Mushrikūn, but among not the Believers of different monotheistic faiths, which are often mentioned in the Qur'ān itself as *ahl al kitāb*, People of the Book. Only subsequently, when the need of defining the contours of Islam as a separate cult emerged, the word muslim assumed a more specific meaning, restricted to those who observed Quranic law.
[15] Donner, *Maometto e le origini dell'Islam*, p. 229.

nowadays Iraq and Iran. This implied complex processes of redefinition of identity, with Islam affirming as ultimate identitarian catalyst. During the 7th century, the term *ʿarabī* would be used by Muslims from the Arabian Peninsula to distinguish themselves as privileged members of the community *vis à vis* the new converts (*mawālī*).[16] The new converts constituted a major front of opposition to the Umayyad dynasty due to the high level of discrimination they faced.[17] Unsurprisingly, in Khorasan, where mawālī's resistance combined with Khariji and 'Alid opposition, Abū Muslim (d.755) formed the army that led to the fall of Umayyad dynasty.[18]

Since the Abbasid caliphate, military, administrative and intellectual non-Arab élites emerged, and the center of power shifted eastwards as the capital was moved from Damascus to Baghdad (AD 762). Referring to this transition, the historian Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406) writes in his al Muqaddimah: "Non-Arab rulers seized power. The identity of the Caliphate was lost."[19] The progressive overshadowing of Arab leadership during the Abbasid empire culminated in the fall of the Caliphate and the opening of an Ottoman era, where Arab lands were under Turkish control.

In the multicultural framework of the Ottoman empire, Arab consciousness persisted latently – thanks to the link between Arabic language and Islam: Arabic was the language of religion, of sciences and of law. In this sense, the pride and prestige generated by the Arabic language's centrality in the Qur'ān can be accounted as the catalyst of Arab identity during the Ottoman empire. However, a renewed Arab cultural and national identity was soon to emerge, spurred by Ottoman decline and European influence.

The phenomenon of Nahda[20] was infused with identitarian reflections, since it addresses key issues such as the cultural decay, the possible pathways towards cultural renovation, the role of religion in societies and

[16] Webb, *Imagining the Arabs*, p. 143.

[17] The contestation of Arab primate was embedded in the literary movement of *Shu'ubiyya*, that reclaimed full equality among Muslims in accordance with Quranic dictates and remained active under the Abbasid dynasty. The disappointment was particularly pronounced in Iran, where the *Shu'ubiyya* was particularly diffused.

[18] F. M. Corrao, *Islam, Religione e Politica: Una piccola introduzione*, Luiss University Press, Roma 2015, chap. 1.3, Kindle.

[19] Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah. An Introduction to History*, trans. Franz Rosenthal, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2005, p. 193.

[20] As noted by Pizzingrilli, the term *Nahda*, Arabic for renaissance, has a tortuous history that reflects the complexity and the diversity of the time. In this paper it is used to denote the debates and movements that enlivened the Arab world from the mid-19th to mid-20th century. O. Pizzingrilli, "State and Legitimacy within an Arab-Muslim context: Understanding the identity criteria in Jordan and Kuwait", PhD diss., Luiss Guido Carli University, Rome 2019, p. 11.

the relation with "the other," namely Europe. Different authors provided different answers to such questions, revealing the existence of plural conceptualizations of identity. Among the first wave of intellectuals, al-Bustānī and others emphasized Arab cultural heritage, freedom of thought and secularism.[21] In the second wave, Anṭūn proposed a liberal conceptualization of *umma*, based on citizenship, political rights and patriotism.[22]

The relation with Europe was at the core of the thought of important thinkers as al-Ṭahṭāwī, al Afghānī, and 'Abduh, who share a strong Islamic identity. While Al-Ṭahṭāwī[23] promoted cultural exchange with Europe to enhance Egypt's modernization, al Afghānī and 'Abduh saw European colonialism as an impending threat and found in Pan-Islamic unity the pathway towards liberation.[24] The tension between secular views and Islamic reformism was reflected also in different conceptualizations of nationalism. While Amīn and Ridā proposed a form of unity centered around Islamic identity, al-Ḥusrī and al-Arsūzī's views of nationalism revolved around linguistic unity, posing the basis for Arab nationalist ideology. Alongside, a different type of nationalism (*watanī*, or country-based) was codified by exponents such as the Egyptian Ḥusayn,[25] the Syrian Sa'ādeh, and the Lebanese Chiha.[26] The complex galaxy of nationalist movements of different territorial scope, that can not be exhaustively illustrated in this paper, was reflected in the development of *ḥizbiyya*, the party system, starting from the late 19th century. Both *waṭanī* and *qawmī*[27]

[21] B. Al-Bustani, *The Clarion of Syria: A Patriot's Call against the Civil War of 1860*, University of California Press, Oakland 2019, p. 95-96.
[22] W. Abu-ʿUksa, "Liberal Tolerance in Arab Political Thought: Translating Farah Antun (1874– 1922)", 2013, *Journal of Levantine Studies*, vol.3, no. 2, p. 153.
[23] Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, pp. 69-71.
[24] Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, p. 26.
[25] His extensive contribution covers an exceptional variety of topics, among which the early Islamic history, the bibliography of great Arab poets, pre-Islamic poetry, several translations, novels and essays, two autobiographical volumes and, most importantly to this analysis, the publication *The future of culture in Egypt* (1938). Corm, *Arab Political Thought*, 119.
[26] E. Samy, "I Partiti e le Associazioni Politiche in Siria e nel Libano Visti da Un Siriano (1921–1939)", 1941, *Oriente Moderno*, vol. 21, no. 3, p. 104, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25810848.
[27] The term *waṭan* recurs since the Umayyad period with different connotations since it has been highly subject to personal interpretation. Its use spams from the poetic allusion to a beloved homeland to the interchangeability with terms like *dār* (home) or *bilād* (country) in the prophetic tradition. Since the 19th century, the term has become politicized, assuming the current nationalist connotation that relates to a territorially defined entity. From this characterization of the word *waṭan* stems the concept of *waṭaniyya*, meaning nationalism and patriotism focused on a spatially determined

visions declined in different political agendas are resembled in the party formation process in Egypt, Syria and Lebanon.

1.2. ARAB IDENTITY AND MODERN GEOPOLITICS

In the Mashriq of the 20th century, the interplay of geopolitics and identity assumed exceptional relevance, due to the magnitude of the events and their ability to provoke a radical shift in identitarian self-consciousness. As Dawisha notes, pan-Arabism (as an identity and a political project) developed significantly during the 1940s, supported by a series of political developments, among which the establishment of the Arab League.[28] Although gaining strength, at the dawn of the Nakba, Arabness was still competing with religious and subnational identities. Experts have divergent views of the short-term impact of Nakba on the political narratives towards Pan-Arabism.[29] However, in its medium-term impact, the Nakba ultimately acted as a significant catalyst for the resurgence of Arab nationalism during the 1950s. In this phase, the Palestinian struggle underwent a process of "pan Arabization" that was already initiated before the official establishment of Israel.[30] The process is two-sided: on one side, Palestinian identity remained strongly linked to the Arab one at least for the two decades following the Nakba; on the other, Arab identity assumed saliency by incorporating the Palestinian struggle among its priorities. As a result, the Palestinian struggle started to delineate as an Arab struggle and Arab unity emerged as the most convincing way to address the Zionist threat.

During the '50s, Arab identity triumphed in its political dimension. In this framework, Egypt emerged as the pivot of Arab nationalism under Nasser guise. Remarkably, the struggle for liberation from the colonial domain represented the common denominator between Arab and Egyptian nationalist stances. Only the events of 1956 marked the crucial shift that

territory versus the people-centered concept of *qawmiyya* that will constitute the core of Nasserist ideology. Pizzingrilli, "State and Legitimacy within an Arab-Muslim context," pp. 19-22.

[28] Dawisha, Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century, chap. 3, https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/739521/0.

[29] While Khalid al Rashidi argues that in the pre-1967 phase self-critical narratives about the Nakba were limited compared to the extent of triumphalist narratives, Hasso highlights that strong criticism and discontent towards disunity and "backwardness" arose alongside such triumphalism. F.S. Hasso, "Modernity and Gender in Arab Accounts of the 1948 and 1967 Defeat," 2000, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, n. 32, p. 493.

[30] M. Mi'ari, "Transformation of Collective Identity in Palestine," 2009, *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, vol. 44, n. 6, p. 583.

made Pan-Arab identity prevalent in the narrative of Egyptian leadership. In the words of Dawisha: "It was in this essentially anti-imperialist stance that Arab nationalism found its most vibrant voice. One is almost tempted to say that Nasir slid into Arab nationalism through the back door of anti-imperialism."[31] As noted by Emiliani, with the Suez crisis the Arab region entered fully in the Cold war dynamics and Nasser successfully emerged from the conflict as the political leader of Arab nationalism.[32]

By the end of 1956, pan-Arabism affirmed not only as a dominant political ideology but also as a reflection of a renewed popular self-consciousness. The expression *al-Umma al-'Arabiyya min al Muḥīṭ al-Aṭlasī ilā al-Khalīj al-'Arabī* [the Arab nation from the Atlantic Ocean to the Arabian Gulf] became increasingly famous both as a slogan used by the crowds and as a formula used in speeches and articles by nationalist intellectuals and politicians.[33] Nourished by the anti-imperialist sentiment and by Nasser's charisma, the romanticized idea of a united Arab nation emerged even as a tangible political project. In this sense, the United Arab Republic, established in 1958, was a natural product of the pan-Arabist wave that crossed the Arab world between the late '50s and the '60s. The unity of Nasserist Egypt with Ba'athist Syria was surely highly symbolic, and the pace of its realization testifies the enthusiasm around Arab nationalism at the time. Overall, the long-term political relevance of the UAR experience was limited, as testified by its early disruption in 1961.

Remarkably, while the pan-Arabist discourse was appealing across the Arab masses, the institutional level is more controversial. For instance, the Sa'ūd and the Hashemites were neither keen to embrace Nasser's revolutionary ideology, which threatened their status quo, nor to twist against the Western allies that provided economic and political stability to their regimes.

The Six Days War (1967), also remembered as the June war, represents an important caesura not only in the unfolding of the Israeli-Palestinian matter, but more broadly in the parabola of Arabism. The conflict had unprecedented geopolitical consequences, with the definitive imposition of Israel as a regional power. The striking speed of destruction of the Arab army raised questions about the causes of such an overwhelming defeat, implying strong repercussions on identitarian perceptions. According to this analysis, 1967 seems crucial in determining the involution of Arab nationalism as a political project and as an ideology. Contrary to the Nakba, the Six Days War jeopardized the trust towards Arab leadership, the

[31] Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, chap. 6.
[32] M. Emiliani, *Medio Oriente: Una Storia dal 1918 al 1991*, Editori Laterza, Urbino 2012, p. 110.
[33] Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, chap. 7.

enthusiasm around Arab nationalism and the faith in the feasibility of an Arab union. Since the Six Days War, it is possible to observe a trend towards the affirmation of *al-huwiyya al-waṭaniyya* over *al-huwiyya al-qawmiyya*. As noted by Dawisha, the 1967 War "irretrievably rob Arab nationalism of the crucial element of unification,"[34] paving the way for country-based interests to prevail over common goals.

The 1973 war between Israel, Sadat's Egypt and Asad's Syria reinforced this 'statist' pattern. In fact, rather than for the sake of the Palestinian cause, the war's aim was to achieve Egypt's and Syria's military goals of strategic importance. The Camp David agreement of 1978 sealed the end of an era. In fact, for the first time an Arab state, and specifically Egypt, the beacon of Arab nationalism, was concluding a peace agreement with Israel, recognizing it as a State and openly turning its back from the Palestinian cause in favor of national interests. However, as stressed by Dawisha: "Arabism was not lost as an identity; […] While Arabs, in whatever state they lived, continued to recognize their membership in the cultural space called 'the Arab world,' a recognition shared by rulers and subjects alike, they no longer truly believed in the viability of organic political unity."[35]

Although it is evident that Arabism as an identitarian element was not radically eliminated, the Arab world's political scene as well as Arabs' identitarian self-consciousnesses were undergoing radical changes. On one side, the overwhelming emergence of *Waṭaniyya* on a political level was meant to reshape expectations and desires of the masses, establishing and reinforcing the post-Ottoman borders. On the other, the unifying stance of political Islam grew stronger. A galaxy of Islamic movements was gaining momentum as an alternative to the corruption of the nationalist and socialist establishment, that little had achieved in terms of pan-Arab solidarity, economic development and social justice.[36] On an international level, the hostage crisis of 1979 strongly revealed how the Islamist ideology could function as a strongly anti-imperialist and anti-Westernist alternative. The magnitude of the regime change in Iran exceeded the country's borders, nourishing the popular belief in an Islamic alternative to

[34] Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, chap. 10.
[35] *Ibid*.
[36] In Egypt the persistent poverty of the masses gave rise to sentiments of perpetrated injustice and of detachment from the Arab socialist discourse. Such political stances, silenced by Nasser's regime, were embraced by the Muslim Brotherhood. The movement grew its political influence over the '40s and supported the Free Officers coup, because of the shared anti-imperialist view. However, in 1954, Nasser outlawed the movement and repressed it as an ideological antagonist. Despite the repression, the Muslim Brotherhood continued expanding its roots in Egypt under the leadership of Sayyid Quṭb, who was executed in 1966 under the accuse of conspiring against the state and for the attempted murder of Nasser.

the secularist ideologies imposed by both the American and the Soviet sides during the Cold War.

In the meanwhile, the instrumentalization of religious militias for political goals, started by Carter and incremented by Regan in the Afghan context, set a dangerous pattern for the future of the USA and the Arab world. In fact, American leaders saw in the demagogic power of Islam a strategic tool to generate instability and weaken both Iran and the anti-imperialist regimes of the Arab and Islamic world. The strategic support to religious actors inside and outside the Arab world fueled the emergence of a plethora of movements which, despite having Islam as a common element, reflected particular identities – and interests – that the Arab unionist project failed to overcome.

Despite Islam's traditional push towards universalism and unity under the broad umbrella of *umma*, its prominence in the regional political arena after 1979 did not correspond to a newfound cohesion.[37] The fragmentation had been particularly significant in the Sunni world, where the lack of a clerical establishment favored the emergence of competing entities and political jeopardization.

On a cultural level, the Islamist revival was supported by the petroleum-producing monarchies, especially Saudi Arabia, that financed the spread of the works of Ibn Taymiyya, Quṭb and Mawdūdī, while discouraging the spread of reformist stances, banned by Riyadh.[38] In the meanwhile, not only progressive thinkers (such as ʻĀdel Husayn, Tāriq al-Bishrī and Hasan Hanafī) turned towards stricter interpretations of religion, but even secular or lay thinkers started to focus their reflection around Islam. As observed by Corm, this indicates the beginning of the trend of assimilation of the concept of Arabness with that of Muslimhood: "Suddenly, Arab societies were perceived and studied through the lens of Islamic 'religious fact'."[39] In this sense, the stressing of the religious component over every other aspect of Arab identity provoked its impoverishment and the ascription of the Arab person to the model of "Homo Islamicus".[40]

[37] The unionist aim is visible for instance in the agenda of the Muslim Brotherhood, as formulated by the Hasan al-Bannā in 1928: "building the Muslim individual, the Muslim family, an Islamic society, an Islamic government, an Islamic state, and an Islamic umma." M. Hashas, "Arab Mediterranean Islam: Intellectual and Political Trends," in *States, Actors and Geopolitical Drivers in the Mediterranean*, eds. F.M. Corrao e R. Redaelli, Palgrave MacMillan, Cham 2021, p. 142.
[38] Corm, *Arab Political Thought*, p. 202.
[39] *Ibid*.
[40] *Ivi*., p. 213.

Starting from the late 70's, as a product of the dynamics described above, the identitarian struggle between Arabness and Muslimhood gained unedited relevance. Without presumption of exhaustivity, it is argued that it is possible to observe three main, interrelated trends that contributed to the shaping of the actual identitarian landscape of the region since the '80s.

The first consists in the destabilization of secular regimes, and is attributable to both internal and external factors. Domestically, "secular regimes" failed in ensuring the well-being of the populations from both an economic and a political perspective. This issue is observable in Egypt under Nasser; in Saddam's Iraq, which saw the violent repression of opposition and the centralization of petrol-generated national income; in Gaddafi's Libya, where instability broke out due to popular dissatisfaction with the regime; in Asad's Syria, where the popular uprising of 2011 against the regime led to a spiral of violence that is still ongoing. Contextually, the destabilization of secular regimes responds to the American strategic approach towards those nationalist regimes that opposed Western influence in the region. Foreign intervention not only led to the jeopardization of any path towards state formation and eventual bottom-up democratization in the interested countries, but also produced power vacuums that triggered a popular turn towards political Islam as identitarian catalyst.

The second trend is the consolidation of country-based nationalism, which underwent a process of legitimation and institutionalization in the large majority of the Arab countries. The affirmation of specific national identities and their related interests started with the establishment of borders through the Sykes-Picot agreement, persisted during Arab nationalism's momentum and continued after its decay. It is observable, for instance, in the above mentioned Black September and Lebanese war of 1982, where particular interests of the dominant elites prevailed over the solidarity towards Palestinians; in the context of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, which led to the detachment of Kuwaiti people from the Arabist sentiment in favor of a strong national identity; in the broad framework of the Palestinian struggle, which saw a progressive but relentless affirmation of a strong Palestinian national identity. One of the latest and most significant manifestations of such a trend is the process of normalization of diplomatic relations with Israel by several countries of the Arab world. Initiated first by Egypt in 1979, followed by Jordan in 1994, the recognition process has found new fuel in the Abraham agreements mediated by the Trump administration, which led to the normalization of relations between Israel and UAE, Bahrein, Sudan and Morocco in 2020. National identities

and interests paradoxically rooted themselves alongside the crisis that the nation-states system itself is facing. In fact, as noted by Hassanein Ali:

> *The Arab states are currently experiencing a real structural crisis. There are states that are threatened in their presence as political entities such as Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Iraq. There are other states such as Lebanon, Sudan, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Mauritania, and others that do not face the risk of failure and disintegration but suffer from a state of weakness that makes them unable to carry out their main functions effectively and efficiently.*[41]

The crisis of national states, in its endogenous dimension, is largely due to the fact that "the ruling elites failed in many cases to build a legitimate and effective state that can include the societal pluralism (religious, ethnic, sectarian, and tribal) within the framework of a national identity."[42]

The third and last trend that this paper takes into consideration is the affirmation of Islamic identity in the political arena in the shape of post-Islamism after the Arab revolts of 2012. The mass mobilizations generated in the squares of the Arab world were pregnant with coexisting identitarian stances. First, they promoted a short but intense revival of what Lynch defines as a "new kind of pan Arabist identity"[43] that, contrarily to the pan-Arabist nationalism of the mid 20th century, stemmed from the bottom-up and was inspired by a shared set of values: *Ḥurriyya* (freedom), *ʻAdāla ijtimāʻiyya* (social justice), and *Karāma* (dignity).[44]

Alongside that, particular identities, such as the tribal and ethnic ones, emerged during and after this large-scale mobilization phase, especially in those States, like Libya, Iraq, Yemen and Syria where the central power was effectively undermined. Nonetheless, such particular identities have become the object of external influence from regional and international powers and represent conflicting political and economic interests. This implies that the conflicts that erupted in those countries after 2011 are

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[41] H. Ali, "Post-Arab Spring: The Arab World Between the Dilemma of the Nation-State and the Rise of Identity Conflicts," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Ethnicity*, ed. S. Ratuva, Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore 2020, p. 3.
[42] Ali, "*Post-Arab Spring*", p. 3.
[43] M. Lynch, *The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East*, Public Affairs, New York 2012, p. 8.
[44] M. Mahdavi, "Whither Post-Islamism: Revisiting the Discourse/Movement After the Arab Spring," in *Arab Spring Modernity, Identity and Change*, ed. E. Mohamed & D. Fahmy, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham 2020, p. 16.

particularly hard to settle unless the identitarian component is also pacified and collective identities cease to be so pronouncedly politicized.

Ultimately, Islam has worked as a fundamental identitarian catalyst, to the point that the rise to power of Islamist (and post-Islamist) groups have constituted the dominating trend after the Arab revolts. Remarkably, Islamist views often carry a strong anti-Western sentiment. Shadi Hamid captures in the phrase "Islamism without Islamists"[45] the fact that many Muslims sympathize with Islamist stances as a reaction to cultural, political, and economic imperialism, as well as oppressive regimes without necessarily identifying as Islamist themselves. As noted by Hassanein Ali, the Arab world has witnessed "a sharp polarization between the forces of political Islam on one hand, and civil forces of nationalists, liberals, and leftists on the other hand."[46] In such a context, a strong "politicization of religion" has been put in place, determining the regeneration of the immense debate about the place of religion in the state, which has been developing since the Nahda.

[45] Mahdavi, "Whither Post-Islamism", p. 21.
[46] Ali, "*Post-Arab Spring*", p. 3.

2. Beyond the Arab-Muslim axiom

The historical analysis highlighted the existence of a galaxy of identitarian components that engage with one another and how the interplay of such identitarian components (which relate to religious, linguistic, ethnic, municipal, tribal belongings) is much more significant and explicative of the construction of individual and collective identities in the Arab world than the categories of Arabness and Muslimhood alone. The debate, inside and outside the Arab world, around Arabness and Muslimhood as identity catalysts tends either to radically dichotomize the two elements, or to assimilate one to the other.

The trend of assimilation between Arabness and Muslimhood is particularly spread in the West, where it generated the spurious cognitive construct of the *Homo Islamicus*, by postulating the coincidence of Arabness and Muslimhood. Equally uneven, the trend of dichotomization, inspired by the concept of secularization as elaborated by the West, requires the Arab-Muslim individual to relegate his religious identity at the remote corners of its private life, disregarding the fact that religious identities are a crucial part of the complex identitarian construct that shape individual and collective self-consciousnesses. It is evident how both attempts towards simplistic categorization provide limited tools to understand the Arab society in its multilayered identitarian nature. This paper argues that a more comprehensive understanding of the plural identitarian galaxy embedded in the Arab social fabric is a necessary premise to the elaboration of policies that can prioritize human security in the region. In this sense, the deconstruction of the Arab-Muslim axiom is as urgent as the enhancement of autochthonous paths towards a redefinition of the role of religion in the public sphere. The chapter proposes an overview of key themes that impact the identitarian conceptualization through the thought of selected contemporary Arab intellectuals, suggesting a comprehensive understanding of individual and collective identities, detached from political orientation.

2.1. THE ISSUE OF HISTORICIZATION

The issue of historicization, here understood as the way history is conceptualized, organized and narrated, is crucial to the development of

individual and collective identities. Exploring historicizations opens to a multi-folded discourse. Firstly, the question of the placement of the beginning of Arab history – before or after Islam – is of primary importance to mark the distinction between Arabness and Muslimhood. Corm highlights how the trend, diffused in Orientalist academia as well as in Arab critique, to converge the history of Islamic civilization and thought with that of the Arabs, despite the first being subsequent to the latter, produced a conflation between Arab identity and adherence to Islam as a religion.[47]

Furthermore, as noted by Adonis in his four volumes study "The Immutable and the Transformative: A Study in Conformity and Innovation Amongst the Arabs" (1973-1978), the cognitive impasse generated by a static understanding of identity based on a past centered view of the collective Self misled Arab thought towards an exaggeration of the relevance of the past and to its sacralization, posing the basis for the emergence of religious traditionalism (*salafiyya*) and for the subjugation of the Arab thought to the past models, causing a "intellectual retardation in Arab society."[48]

As noted by Mohammad al-Jabri[49] and Fouad Zakariyya,[50] the past needs to be assimilated in order to become constitutive element of the present self consciousness without continuously interfering in the unfolding of subsequent cultural developments – in al-Jabri's words, in order to avoid the "cultural rumination"[51] phenomenon. In the same direction goes the reflection of Qustantin Zurayq, who in his essay *Nahnu Wa al-Tārīkh* [We and History] argues that historiography needs to produce a critical awareness of the Self, rather than mystifying the past to escape the present.[52] Mohammed Abed al-Jabri largely deals with the issue of historicization in his masterpiece "The Formation of Arab Reason" (1980). He points out how, in the Arab mind, the interplay between past and present timeframes, in his words the "intersection of cultural times," is based on a logic of "accumulation" rather than of "synchronic contiguity."[53] This implies an active competition between these two realms in the shaping of present self-consciousness, to the extent that the past can appear "to be

[47] Corm, *Arab Political Thought*, p. 31.
[48] Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, p. 131.
[49] M. A. al-Jabri, *The Formation of Arab Reason: Text, Tradition and the Construction of Modernity in the Arab World*, trans. Center for Arab Unity Studies, I.B. Tauris & Co, London 2011, p. 44.
[50] F. Zakariyya, "Al-Takhalluf al-Fikrī wa Ab'āduhu al-Ḥaḍariyya" [Intellectual Retardation and Its Civilizational Dimensions], *Al-Ma'rifa*, vol. 148, 1974, pp. 60–82.
[51] Al-Jabri, *The Formation of Arab Reason*, p. 51.
[52] Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, p. 71.
[53] Al-Jabri, *The Formation of Arab Reason*, p. 45-48.

the 'present' itself."[54] In order to escape such impasse, according to al-Jabri "the history of Arab culture needs to be rearranged," since "Arab cultural time has yet to be documented, defined and identified."[55]

2.2. ISLAM WITHIN A SECULAR ARAB IDENTITY

In the last two centuries, the debate around Islam and its compatibility with the West, modernity, democracy, human rights and, ultimately, secularization has been ongoing. Far from looking for a definitive answer to impelling questions, this section aims at exploring some of the key reflections of these thinkers, to highlight how an understanding of Islam as the religious component of a more articulated "secular" or "composite" identity is not only possible, but already existing.

In a 2010 article about Islamophobia in the West, the Egyptian scholar Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd (1943-2010) condemns the reductionist attempts towards identitarian conceptualizations of "constructed identities":

> *Egyptian Arab Muslim means that I carry in my blood multiple cultural components, Pharaonic, Greek, Roman, and Coptic as well as Arabic and Islamic. I studied and taught in the United States and Japan and now I live in Europe. Who am I? Am I an Egyptian, an Arab, a Muslim or a European immigrant? I am all of these components and should not reduce my identity into only one. There is a need to deconstruct the simple one-dimensional notion of identity, such as European and Muslim, in favor of a complex, multi-dimensional identity.*[56]

Condemning the Islamist manipulation of identity, oriented towards the affirmation of an essentialist understanding of Arab heritage as exclusively Islamic, the Syrian scholar Aziz al-Azmeh (b.1947) explains:

> *An individual – or a society – does not have a single, exclusive, permanent and unalterable identity that perpetuates itself without internal differentiations. The assertion that a society has an exclusive single identity is not a description of its nature; it is a political move aimed at taking control of the society and dominating it in crushing fashion in the name of this alleged identity, something that*

[54] *Ivi*, p. 44.
[55] *Ibid*.
[56] N. Abu Zaid, "Religions: From Phobia to Understanding," 2010, *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* VIII, no. 2, p. 9.

> *has already happened in Iran and Sudan and is threatening to happen in other Arab countries.*[57]

Other reflections deconstruct the identitarian overlapping of Arabness with Muslimhood, emphasizing the possibility of a "secular" understanding of Islam. In this sense, Abu Zayd conducted his exegesis of Qurʾān from a neo-Mutazilite perspective, stressing the role of human reason in the interpretation of the Holy text, as testified by his bold statement "I think, therefore I am Muslim."[58] In the same direction goes the contribution of the Syrian Mohamad Sharhur (b. 1938), author of the controversial The Book and the Qur'an: A Contemporary Reading (1990), where he proposes a "radically new interpretation of Allah's Book (al-kitāb) which fundamentally questions the so-called sacred certainties of Islamic theology and the so-called fundamentals of Islamic jurisprudence."[59] By affirming that the Qurʾān should be read "as if it was revealed last night," Sharhur invites interpreters to look at the text from a renewed contemporary perspective.[60] Similarly to Sharhur and Abu Zayd, the Algerian Mohammed Arkoun engaged in an intellectual "battle" against both "the mythologization and ideologization of Islam proclaimed by militants of all sorts" and the "static and fragmented portrayal of Islam that the great Western experts in Islamology continue to elaborate."[61] Arkoun's critique of Islamic reason merges anthropology, philosophy, history and linguistics in a cognitive approach oriented towards dismantling the barriers of the "unthought" and "unthinkable" in Islamic thought, following reason and logic.

The hermeneutical and epistemological reflections of the mentioned authors share the goals of countering obscurantist understandings of religion by promoting rationality and cultural pluralism. In doing so, they reveal the possibility of reconciling religious identity with the "ethnic, political, linguistic, and tribal affiliations that a person might have."[62]

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[57] A. Al Azmeh, *Islams and Modernities*, Verso, London 2009, chap. 3, https://www.perlego.com/book/3785667/islams-and-modernities-pdf.
[58] Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, p. 194.
[59] M. Sharhur, "Introduction," in *The Qur'an, Morality and Critical Reason: The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, ed. A. Christmann, Brill, Leiden 2009, pp. 2–3.
[60] A. Christmann, ed., *The Qur'an, Morality and Critical Reason. The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, Brill, Leiden 2009, p. 149.
[61] M. Arkoun, *Rethinking Islam. Common Questions, Uncommon Answers*, trans. and ed. R. Lee, Routledge, New York 2019, Introduction. https://www.perlego.com/book/1477048/rethinking-islam-common-questions-uncommon-answers-pdf.
[62] M. Sharhur, "Conclusion," in *The Qur'an, Morality and Critical Reason. The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, ed. A. Christmann, Brill, Leiden 2009, p. 498.

2.3. ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

As noted by one of the case study's interviewees, prof. Eyadat, "Arabs in the Arab world are almost 400 million. When you look at them from a transnational perspective they might look like the most homogeneous society, but if you look more closely they are going to appear as the most diverse mosaic."[63] Although diversity is historically rooted in the region, coexistence among different religious, ethnic or linguistic identities has not always been peaceful. However, the system of integration of religious communities displayed since the birth of the *umma* and developed throughout the centuries up to the Ottoman empire has been a significant experiment of peaceful coexistence that hardly finds competitors in the rest of the world.

As a result of the Arab-Islamic expansion registered between the 7th and the 9th centuries, the concept of Arabness got stretched beyond the limits of ethnicity to include a variety of ethnic groups that adopted (more or less forcefully) Arabic as their language and, eventually, Islam as their religion. In this sense, prof. Zayd Eyadat affirms that Arab identity is nothing less nor more than "a socio-cultural construct."[64]

It is possible to affirm that Arab cultural identity and heritage is the product of continuous dynamics of assimilation, imitation, inspiration among a multiplicity of cultures: eastwards, the interplay between Arab and Persian and Turk civilizations played, especially since the Abbasid period, a crucial role in the shaping of Arab history, culture and politics; westwards, the dialogue with other Mediterranean civilizations impacted the thought, science and philosophy of the Arab world during the so-called Golden Age as well as during the Nahda period. In this regard, it is remarkable that the peaks of progress in sciences and arts registered in the history of the Arab world (with reference to both the Golden Age and the Nahda) correspond to periods of pronounced exchange - more or less peaceful - between different cultural systems.

Various attempts have been made to cancel and homogenize such diversity. Abi Chedid remarks how the colonial partition of Ottoman territories marked the traumatic shift from a "multi-ethnic and multi religious Empire" to nation-states whose borders were "delimited on the basis of outside colonial interests,"[65] regardless of the ethnic and cultural

[63] Prof. Zayd Eyadat, October 26th, 2023.
[64] *Ibid*.
[65] D. S. Abi Chedid, "The Armenian Christian Minority in Greater Syria and The Arab Spring," in *Middle Eastern Minorities and the Arab Spring. Identity and Community in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. K. Scott Parker & T. E. Nasrallah, Gorgias Press, Piscataway 2017, p. 81.

fluidity that characterized the area. Furthermore, the "divide and conquer" logic employed by European mandates instrumentalized minorities to undermine nationalist processes. In response, Arab nationalist movements of Iraq and Syria suppressed particular identities in favor of a nationalist unification. Other colonial legacies are the "racialization of religious differences"[66] (adopting Robson's terminology) operated by the British in regard to Copts, Assyrians and Armenians, as well as the nationalization of Jews religious identity,[67] which legitimized the relocation of European Jews in Palestine. Furthermore, as noted by the Saudi literary critic Abdallah al-Ghadhdhami (b.1946), too often the perception of cultural unity and identity has been conceptualized in a way that cancels plurality.[68]

Strong voices advocating for pluralism come from the Maghreb. Moroccan thinkers Abdelkebir al-Khatibi (1938-2009) and Mohammed Bennis (b. 1948) criticize how the application of monistic theology in Islam across various domains of life contributes to an authoritarian and centralized mindset that denies plurality.[69]

The Tunisian Fathi Triki (b. 1947) stands out for its large contribution on topics such as transcultural democracy, justice, and intercultural dialogue. In his speech "Vivre ensemble dans la diversité," Triki highlights the deep meaning of the Arabic word *Karāma* Arabic, and the link between the concepts of dignity and generosity, that assume centrality both in the religious and in the cultural tradition. Triki poses the concept of *Karāma* as foundation of plural togetherness in diverse societies *vis à vis* rhetoric of alterity.[70] An alternative view is that of Mohammad Dahir (b. 1994), who with the aim of developing a "critical liberating consciousness,"[71] recalls the secular political experiences that marked the history of the Arab world – in particular the leadership of Mohammed Ali and Nasser – suggesting that the identitarian crisis between secularist current and Islam should find its solution in a form of "open Arab nationalism," where pluralism is embraced and both ethnic and religious minorities are included.[72] The Moroccan thinker Abdelkebir al-Khatibi offers valuable insights into pluralism, focusing on the Maghreb as a cultural hybrid. He advocates for a

[66] L. Robson, *States of Separation. Transfer, Partition, And the Making of The Modern Middle East*, University of California Press, Oakland 2017, p. 10, https://www.perlego.com/book/552770/states-of-separation.
[67] *Ivi*., p. 12.
[68] Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, p. 352.
[69] *Ivi*, p. 249.
[70] Fathi Triki et al., *Vivre-Ensemble Dans La Dignité*, L'Harmattan, Paris 2015, 37. https://www.perlego.com/book/3097628/vivreensemble-dans-la-dignit-thtre-antoine-vitez-ivrynovembre-2015-pdf.
[71] Corm, *Arab Political Thought*, p. 254.
[72] *Ivi.*, p. 257.

decolonizing "other thought" that moves away from both Western cultural imperialism and the Arab quest for an "immaculate identity". His deconstructionist approach recognizes plurality and diversity in the Arab world, rejecting reductionist views and describing identity as a "perpetual becoming."[73]

Interesting is Mohamad Jaber al-Ansari's critique of the spirit of conciliation. In his view, Arabs remained trapped in the effort of conciliating opposites, namely the secular and Western influxes with the religious teachings and tradition. To escape this alienation, al-Ansari urges individuals to explore their existential void and fill it creatively. Using al-Ansari's words as translated by Corm, it is necessary for today's Arab(s):

> *To rely on his personal torment, his being, his woes, his desires, and his unique position in time and space to make of this the only base value for determining what to accept from both tradition and modernity, rather than having his personality subjected to duality in both space and time… Because heritage, in reality, is present in each one of us, either positively or negatively, and modern civilization is the most obvious truth of our time. We can neither deny one or the other, nor we can abandon them, because what would remain of Arab identity? It is better, therefore, to discover the essential void within each one of us [Arabs] and to fill this void through authentic creativity rather than remain continually torn between two contradictions.*[74]

In this sense, emphasizing particularity appears as a tool to overcome the reductionist dualism that absorbs diversity in the Arab-Muslim axiom. As remarked by Leila Ahmed, few obligations are more crucial to the Arab intellectual or to external observers than the one to reiterate that "if anything is authentically and intrinsically part of our [Arab] heritage, it is the very fact of its ethnic and religious plurality, preserved through

[73] S. Cherribi and M. Pesce, "Khatibi: A Sociologist in Literature," in *Vitality and Dynamism: Interstitial Dialogues of Language, Politics, and Religion in Morocco's Literary Tradition*, ed. Kirstin Bratt, Youness Elbousty and Devin Stewart, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam 2014, p. 180. https://doi.org/10.1515/9789400601857-fm180.

[74] M. J. Al-Ansari, *Al-Fikr al-ʿarabī wa sirāʿ al-aḍḍād* [Arab Thought and the Conflict of Contraries], al-Muʾassasa al-ʿarabiyya li'l-dirāsāt wa'l-nashr, Beirut 1996, p. 645.

millennia—a heritage which should be among our own most cherished and guarded legacies to the future."[75]

[75] L. Ahmed, "Arab Women: 1995," in *The Next Arab Decade. Alternative Futures*, ed. Hisham Sharabi, Routledge, New York 2019, chap. 13. https://www.perlego.com/book/1481007/the-nextarab-decade-alternative-futures.

3. Qualitative Case Study: the multiple components of Jordanian identity

This chapter presents a case study on contemporary Jordanian national identity, exploring how various identity "layers" intersect without necessarily leading to mechanisms of exclusion. Based on documentary research and four semi-structured interviews with experts in identity politics and history, the study compensates for the lack of statistical data by selecting key informants with diverse perspectives. One interviewee, an outside observer with extensive regional experience, remains anonymous as “Interviewee 1.” The other participants include Prof. Zayd Eyadat, director of the Center for Strategic Studies of the University of Amman; Prof. Amer al-Hafi, expert in comparative theology and academic advisor at the Royal Institute for Interfaith Studies; and historian Ali Mahafzah, all Jordanian citizens. Interviews were conducted in Amman from September to December 2023, coinciding with the onset of the Gaza war, which reshaped feelings of belonging in the region.

The focus on Jordan reflects the dominance of nation-states in the Arab world, as noted by Prof. Eyadat: “These nation states, Jordan for example, are now more than 100 years old […] I think the nation state has proven itself to be the mechanism through which people express their identities and hope.”[76] Jordan's pronounced diversity and multilayered identity make it a pertinent case study, especially being an example of political equilibrium between Arabism and Westernism. Furthermore, the country's long-standing stability allows for a clearer examination of its identity landscape, free from the polarization seen in other Arab nations, while still navigating regional instability and foreign interference.

3.1. TRIBALISM AND HASHEMISM: FOUNDING COMPONENTS

While tribalism in Jordan might not be evident at a first glance, a deeper look into Jordanian society will easily capture the relevance of this social structure in the country’s politics, economic fabric, value system, and identity. The tribe is the most rooted social institution in the country and

[76] Prof. Zayd Eyadat, October 26th, 2023.

maintained its cruciality after the constitution of the nation state. At the time of Jordanian independence, in 1922, "virtually everyone was identified by family, clan and tribal affiliation, forming a social organization which had been created by lack of urbanization and distance from centers of power or economic influence."[77] The importance of tribalism was recognized unanimously by the interviewees. Interviewee 1 stated: "Jordanian identity is tribal. Even the minorities have tribal leagues and tribalism is *the* umbrella that comprehends all of the components."[78] Prof. Eyadat pointed out that, alongside the significant political influence of tribes, the legacy of tribalism on Jordanian identity is primarily related to the value system it enforces:

> *When we talk about tribalism we talk about two things in Jordan as part of the component of identity: the value system associated with the tribes (in its positive and negative aspects) and that's the culture, that is the identity; and then the role in politics which means Jordanian tribes are the backbone of the state.*[79]

Prof. al-Hafi reflected on the most recent developments of the tribal structure of Jordanian society *vis à vis* modernization and urbanization:

> *Now we embraced the city model, not the village model or agricultural model. […] The idea of citizenship became stronger. People left the place of the tribes, for instance in Tafileh, Ma'an, Irbid, and became citizens of the Madina, of Amman. […] This made the community less connected with the tribal system. Individuality became stronger.*[80]

As explained by prof. al-Hafi, tribal affiliation is progressively losing grip in big urban centers, despite remaining the main identitarian reference in more peripheral areas. Nonetheless, tribal identity was a key driver in the process of formation of the Jordanian nation state and still concurs to the legitimacy criteria of the ruling monarchy.[81] The intersection between

[77] B. Milton-Edwards and P. Hinchcliffe, Jordan. A Hashemite Legacy (New York: Routledge, 2009), chap. 1, https://www.perlego.com/book/1607795/jordan-a-hashemite-legacy-pdf.
[78] Interviewee 1, September 25th, 2023.
[79] Prof. Zayd Eyadat, October 26th, 2023.
[80] Prof. Amer al-Hafi, December 18th, 2023.
[81] The Hashemite dynasty currently in power descends from Sharif Hussein of Mecca (al-Ḥusayn bin ʿAlī al-Hāshimī, 1853-1931), head of the Hashemite clan from the Quraysh

tribalism, Arabness and religion is crucial to the Hashemites. Being a branch of the Quraysh tribe, the clan Banu Hashem[82] claims descent from Mohammad.[83] Such interplay of components is well captured in the words of prof. al-Hafi:

> *The Hashemi family was one of the big Arab tribes before Islam, they were a very unique tribe in Mecca. They had this kind of uniqueness as Arabs before becoming Muslims. They have this multi-identity. They are deeply Arab, yet they are deeply Muslims because they are the family of the Prophet.*[84]

Religious legitimacy is claimed by the King himself in public occasions, where the Hashemites present themselves as advocates of true Islam: "Jordan was founded on the religious legitimacy of the Hashemites, who advocate Islam in a way that presents to the world the true image of this religion as a faith of tolerance that rejects all forms of extremism and violence."[85] Speaking of moderatism, prof. al-Hafi stressed how Hashemites merge traditional components (like Arabness and Muslimhood) with a third element, that he defined as "open-mindedness"[86] towards different cultures and in particular the western one. It is worth highlighting that this third element both stems from and influences Jordan's posture in terms of international affairs.

3.2. IDENTITY DEFINITION IN A RECEIVING COUNTRY

Due to a coincidence of geopolitical factors, Jordan has become the destination for several migratory flows from surrounding territories. Among these, particular attention is given to the influx of populations from Palestine, Syria, and Iraq. The Palestinian case is particularly relevant because the massive influx of Palestinians into Jordan has transformed it into a "substantially binational society."[87] Additionally, before the 1922

tribe and "hereditary custodian of the Muslim holy Places of Mecca and Medina." Milton-Edwards and Hinchcliffe, *Jordan*, chap. 1.

[82] Literally meaning "Hashem's sons."

[83] Through both Fāṭima (daughter of the Prophet) and Hāshim ibn ʿAbd Manāf (464-497), progenitor of the Banu Hashem clan and the Prophet's great-grandfather. Pizzingrilli, *State and Legitimacy within an Arab-Muslim context*, p. 118.

[84] Prof. Amer al-Hafi, December 18th, 2023.

[85] King Abdullah II website, "Remarks on the Occasion of Jordan's Independence Day," May 24, 2016, https://kingabdullah.jo/en.

[86] Prof. Amer al-Hafi, December 18th, 2023.

[87] N. Köprülü, "The Interplay of Palestinian and Jordanian Identities in Re/Making the State and Nation Formation in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan," in *State Formation*

partition, the territory of modern-day Jordan and Palestine was envisioned as a single unit. Although strong distinct Palestinian and Jordanian identities are largely affirmed, the two identities remain uniquely bonded both in popular discourse and in the academic and political arenas. In this sense, prof. al-Hafi particularly emphasized that "maybe 50 % of the Jordanians are of Palestinian origins" and maintain a "deep relation with the part of their families still in Palestine."[88]

However, the Palestinian and Jordanian identities have also produced conflict and mechanisms of exclusions of one another.[89] Prof. Eyadat significantly resumed the complexity of Jordanian-Palestinian relations:

> *I would say the main divide in Jordan today is between Jordanian-Jordanian and Jordanian-Palestinian. These Palestinians presence in Jordan triggered the natives' sense of identity, of who we can call "East Bankers" or "native Jordanians." [...] In the 90s, we raised the major question, "Who is Jordanian?" referring to whether the Jordanians from Palestinian origin are Jordanians or not.*[90]

The affirmation of a Jordanian national identity, reflected in the shift from the open-door policy to "administrative disengagement" in 1988, generated heterogeneity in the status of Palestinians and in their identitarian perception. The impact of the legal status on Palestinian-Jordanians' identity was explored by Interviewee 1:

> *There are Palestinians that are university professors in Jordan University. They came in '48. They have a high social status, a villa in Dabouq… they feel Jordanian. Who wouldn't?[...] Sometimes I speak with Gaza refugees that arrived in Jordan as newborns. They tell me: "I arrived in Jordan when I was 40 days old." [In their case] Palestinianess is hard like a stone. And this is even more surprising if you think that Palestine for the majority of these people is only an idea. It's only a narrative, a place to dream*

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and Identity in the Middle East and North Africa, ed. K. Christie and M. Masad, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2013, https://www.perlego.com/book/3489500/state-formation-and-identity-in-themiddle-east-and-north-africa-pdf.

[88] Prof. Amer al-Hafi, December 18th, 2023.

[89] Tensions peaked in 1970, with the Black September and the consequent expulsion of the PLO and Palestinian resistance from Jordan.

[90] Prof. Zayd Eyadat, October 26th, 2023.

> *of. They may have never been there. In a way it is harder to destroy, because it has been idealized.*[91]

Moving to the Syrian and Iraqi fluxes, prof. al-Hafi and prof. Eyadat agreed that these most recent migrations did not trigger specific identitarian dynamics. The main argument raised is that these migrations rather represented demographic and economic challenges to a country that already suffers from economic stagnation, high unemployment and scarcity of resources, water in particular. Interviewee 1 noted that governmental propaganda instrumentalized this issue to provide justification of their inefficiency, further exacerbating Jordanians' tolerance towards the incoming communities. In this regard, Prof. al-Hafi stated: "It's not an identity problem. It's an economical problem. We don't feel that the Syrians are against our identity, but especially young Jordanians feel that they have less chances to find work and to get some money when there are some workers that came from Syria and can have their jobs."[92]

Interviewee 1 and Prof. Eyadat agreed that the first waves of Iraqi migration—prior to 2012—experienced a smooth integration into Jordanian society. On one hand, "people came with a lot of money,"[93] and their wealth contributed to Jordanian economy positively. On the other hand, Jordanian-Iraqi relations were flourishing under the pan-Arabist discourse developed by both the king and Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein, whose partnership has proven beneficial to Jordanian economy. In this context, Jordanians perceived Iraqis as "brothers in Arabhood"[94] and empathized with the struggle of the population during the Gulf War and the 2003 war.

In conclusion, although Iraqi and Syrians might be considered as "fellow Arabs" by Jordanians, their legal status hinders their complete assimilation into Jordanian society, as Jordanian citizenship can only be transferred patrilineally. However, Interviewee 1 reported interviewing a Palestinian-Jordanian who, referring to Syrians, stated: "as a Palestinian, I feel more Jordanian because there is now another other."[95] Remarkably, this affirmation suggests that another component has added to the identitarian landscape of Jordanian society.

3.3. ETHNO-RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY AND IDENTITARIAN BELONGING

[91] Interviewee 1, September 25th, 2023.
[92] Prof. Amer al-Hafi, December 18th, 2023.
[93] Interviewee 1, September 25th, 2023.
[94] *Ibid*.
[95] *Ibid*.

Ethnic and religious diversity is a constitutive element of modern Jordanian society. Christian presence in the land of present-day Jordan is historical and directly related to the origins of Christianity. The Christian community, established as a well educated and generally wealthy elite, is concentrated in the north provinces of Jordan. As Maggiolini underlines, before the establishment of the state, Christian communities of Transjordan have related to the Muslim ones through the prism of tribal affiliation rather than according to the institutional framework of the millet system. In modern Jordan, Arab and tribal identitarian components determined the inclusion of Christians as "integral part of the '(Trans) Jordanian family'."[96] This aspect was largely clarified by prof. Eyadat:

> *Among the Christians in Jordan, Christianity is not the main factor for identifying their identity. They are identifying themselves as being Jordanians before being Christians. […] Christians in Jordan are the most fully integrated and overrepresented among all Christians in the region. They're treated equally, even overrepresented. [….] They are fully incorporated in and fully creators of Jordan national identity.*[97]

Similar considerations have been brought up by the interviewees in regards of ethnic minorities, mainly Chechens and Circassians, that account for an estimated 1% of the population.[98] Circassians' strong Muslim identity fostered their affiliation to the Hashemites as descendants of the Prophet, and their high reputation among Jordanian society enabled them to develop a "dual identity" as Circassians and as Jordanians. Prof. al-Hafi addressed the issue of minorities by making a crucial premise about the complementarity of different identitarian components: "We have a main identity and the branches of such identity. Those branches are not

[96] P. Maggiolini, "Christian Churches and Arab Christians in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan: Citizenship, Ecclesiastical Identity and Roles in the Jordanian Political Field", 2015, *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, vol. 60, no. 171, p. 38.
[97] Prof. Zayd Eyadat, October 26th, 2023.
[98] The case of Circassians in Jordan is of peculiar interest due to their historical role in the state building process and in the army. Circassians have assumed a key role as warriors since Ottoman times, due to their loyalty to the Sultan. Their presence in Jordanian territory dates back to 1878, where they settled in the areas of modern-day Amman, Jerash, Wadi Seer, Russeifa among others. After the fall of Ottoman Empire, the trust relationship between Circassians and Ottoman Sultans was inherited by Abdullah I, who first appointed Circassians as leaders of the army and ministers, subsequently creating a Circassian unit of *al-jaīsh al-'arabī* (official name of the Jordanian army since 1923).

necessarily against the main identity. I can be Jordanian Chechen. It's not against my main identity. It's a kind of chemical relation. Identity can be lived in different ways."[99] This view was confirmed by prof. Eyadat, who stressed the privileged status of Circassians and Chechens within Jordanian society alongside their ability to develop a two-folded feeling of belonging:

> *Chechens and Circassians have been part of the Jordanian social fabric and the establishment of the country. These people came into Jordan after World War I, which means years before Jordan officially was established back in 1921. They became part of Jordan. They never lost their own national cultural identity, which the state also helped them to preserve, in terms of the cultural expression of their identity. But they have been fully incorporated into the Jordanian society. They never presented a threat or a "other" to Jordanians. […] They very quickly assimilated the Jordanian culture, customs and identity, they became Jordanian, and they have their own shares in almost every aspect of public life.*[100]

It seems relevant to conclude this section with the comments of prof. al-Hafi about the flexible and "stretchy" nature of Jordanian identity:

> *We have a lot of diversity in our community. […] We are very open. And one of the reasons why we are very open is because we are deeply Arab and deeply Muslims. We cannot stop and close our borders or not to receive those people. So, our nationality must be very wide to include the Armenians, the Christian Arabs, and all those different Jordanians who became Jordanians.*[101]

3.4. TOP-DOWN NARRATIVES AND IDENTITY POLITICS

Far from being a spontaneous phenomenon, the formation of a national identity in Jordan has been largely driven by top-down narratives with the aim of legitimizing the existence of the newly established state and facing the challenges to its unity and stability.

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[99] Prof. Amer al-Hafi, December 18th, 2023.
[100] Prof. Zayd Eyadat, October 26th, 2023.
[101] Prof. Amer al-Hafi, December 18th, 2023

Borrowing Blight and Hitman historicization, four stages can be identified in the development of nationalist discourse in Jordan. The first, from 1921 to 1951, corresponds to the primate of Arabness as catalyst of identity, dictated by the pursuit of a Greater Syria Hashemite kingdom by Abdullah I. Nonetheless, the Hashemite's identity itself was Arab – being the king from Hijaz – rather than Transjordanian. In this sense, this phase can be resumed with the slogan "We are all Arabs."[102]

During the following decade, between 1952 and 1963, King Hussein faced the need to elaborate a unifying ideology to secure Hashemite power through a national identity "Arab to the degree that all citizens would accept it and yet Jordanian enough to justify the separate existence of a Hashemite kingdom in an Arab world."[103]

The consolidation of this nationalist trend is observable in the period between 1963 and 1988. The year 1988, with the application of the policy of administrative disengagement from the West Bank, can be considered as the definitive watershed between "Arabism first" and "Jordan First." The king resorted to tribal, Bedouin and religious traditions as the main references of a strong local identity centered around tribal affiliation. To maintain order and support from Palestinians, the monarchy positioned itself as an advocate for a just resolution to the Palestinian issue.

In 2002, King Abdullah II officially made al *Urdun al-Awwal* [Jordan First] the slogan of his nationalist rhetoric. This translated into the division between a Jordanian national "us" – composed of East bankers and 1948 and 1967 Palestinians who "could find their places as loyal citizens of the East Bank Jordanian nation-state"452 – and a foreigner "them." The 1948 and 1967 Palestinian communities have progressively been "Jordanized" As noted by the interviewees, since the 2000s the main governmental initiatives have been oriented towards "promoting a cohesiveness, coexistence between Jordanian-Jordanian and Palestinian-Jordanian."[104] This is resembled by the replacement of the slogan "Jordan first" with the one *Kullunā al-Urdun* [We all are Jordan], that suggests a conciliatory and inclusive spirit. As Massad notes, Palestinian-Jordanians seem to be receptive to this state-sponsored national identity, despite refusing

[102] A. Bligh and G. Hitman, "Composite Nationalism Re-visited," in *The Palgrave Handbook of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan*, ed. P. Kumaraswamy, Springer Nature Singapore, Singapore 2019. https://www.perlego.com/book/3485740/the-palgrave-handbook-of-the-hashemitekingdom-of-jordan-pdf.
[103] Ibid.
[104] Prof. Zayd Eyadat, October 26th, 2023.

exclusivist attempts towards their de-Palestinization.[105] Prof. Eyadat clarified the latest developments of identity politics in Jordan:

> *If you review changes since 2000, we have initiatives called "Jordan first" and then "We are all Jordan," and then the national agenda. So, these initiatives are all about "We're all together," "We are all the same." They're trying to provide a solution for the possible perceived divide between Jordanian-Jordanians and Palestinian-Jordanians. I'm part of the team who's rewriting Jordan's curriculum, and we're actually promoting the concept of citizenship more than anything else, citizenship rather than national identity. This is the backbone of what national identity should be. If you base your contract with the people on citizenship, then you provide for equality and fairness, which means Jordanian-Jordanians and Palestinian-Jordanians and people of any other origin are all equal citizens before the law.*[106]

The latest frontier of this pluralist but unionist stance is the Comprehensive Jordanian Identity initiative, based on a strong but flexible national identity, embracing "all those, who, with dignity and pride in being Jordanian, believe in this country, cherish and defend it."[107] Although the establishment is committed, at least formally, to the democratization of the country through citizenship and state of law, this process is not free of contradictions. It is relevant to conclude with Interviewee 1 critical insights into the intent of this initiative as well as its reception by the public:

> *With last year's Comprehensive Jordanian identity, we go towards a Jordanization of identity because it provides a better image, it is what we need as a 21st century nation state. We need a unified country. […] But the situation is very hard for the middle-lower social classes in Jordan. This is maybe another reason why the new narratives have faced critics. The idea is: "We need jobs, to remake the roads, we are hungry, we don't need to talk about this now." People don't want to talk about identity. They don't have trust in the*

[105] J. A. Massad, *Colonial Effects. The Making of National Identity in Jordan*, Columbia University Press, New York 2001, chap. 5. https://www.perlego.com/book/775850/colonial-effects-the-making-of-nationalidentity-in-jordan-pdf.
[106] Prof. Zayd Eyadat, October 26th, 2023.
[107] King Abdullah II website, "Remarks on the Occasion of Jordan's Independence Day," May 24, 2016.

> *government anymore. Their trust is more in the security service, especially after Covid, because they handled the crisis. So, politically wise is going rightwards, people feel they need a strong leader. This is a direction that many countries take when there is a crisis.*[108]

3.5. ARAB IDENTITY IN JORDAN

When asked about Arab identity in Jordan, prof. al-Hafi stated: "In our constitution, we are an Arab state. […] In Jordan, it's obvious, we belong to the Arab nation. It's everywhere. We are Jordanians and we are Arabs, because of this historical and very strong rule of the Hashemite family."[109] Prof. Mahafzah, who among the interviewees is the most attached to the Arab identitarian component, reflected on the unitarian reaction of Arab people *vis à vis* political developments in the region:

> *We have Jordanian, let us say, subculture. But we are very much influenced by the other regional issues. If there is a problem in any Arab country, the Jordanians are very sensitive to this. They consider themselves as brothers of the people there. I remember, that was a long time ago, I think the first intifada. In Casablanca, the demonstrations took place at that time with 1 million people in it. Why do these people in Casablanca feel that they are the brothers of the Palestinians? Because we feel that we are one nation. It is not only a human reaction. It is a national reaction.*[110]

It seems clear that, almost 70 years after Arabism's momentum, Arab identity still endures. However, as clarified by al-Hafi, Arab identity has assumed emotional and moral connotation rather than political one: "It's a kind of emotional unity in this level of emotions and feelings, of the values we have, how we look at things in our life, the way we are feeling, the way we respect the people, the way we live. This identity now became more cultural, more emotional, more concerning the values, rather than politics."[111]

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[108] Interviewee 1, September 25th, 2023.
[109] Prof. Amer al-Hafi, December 18th, 2023.
[110] Prof. Ali Mahafzah, October 26th, 2023.
[111] Prof. Amer al-Hafi, December 18th, 2023.

Prof. Eyadat also stressed that values, in particular tolerance, acceptance, respect, recognition, *murū'a,*[112] coexistence, and *'aṣabiyya*[113] are the key legacy that unites Arab people together. Such values seem to represent the core pillar of popular Jordanian identity beyond institutional rhetoric. The origin of the key values of Jordanian society, "shared practice of Muslims and non-Muslims,"[114] is to be traced back to the rooted tradition developed in the social and territorial context of the Arab desert. They refer to the broader framework of Arab identity, or in al-Jabri's words, to the "Arab moral mind"[115] and interlace it Jordanianess. Furthermore, according to Eyadat, these represent the explanation and the foundation of Jordanian tradition of openness and hospitality:

> *In Arab tradition, if I'm sitting in my tent in the desert, and you come there, I don't know you, you don't know me, I don't know my guest. Yet, you're a guest. For the first 3 days, I host you, I feed you, I take care of you, and I ask you nothing. Then if you want to tell me your story, you do. So, you might be my enemy. And yet, I am obliged to host you because of the value system. Hospitality is key. It is part of the Arab values.*[116]

While prof. Eyadat himself recognized that the tribal Arab value system carries both positive and negative implications, he believes the values of generosity, solidarity, and respect can lead the way towards social cohesion and inclusion of diversity in Jordanian society. While this view might sound optimistic, it proposes an interesting example of how heritage could be declined in contemporaneity in a virtuous way. As tension, not only geopolitical but also identitarian, rises in the region due to the now one-year long Gaza war, the establishment of a strong inclusive national identity is more than ever crucial to the governability of the country. The open question is to what extent Arabness will emerge as an identitarian catalyst and orient Jordanian posture – both domestically and internationally, on an institutional and a popular level – *vis à vis* the latest developments in the region.

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[112] The ideal of manhood, comprising all knightly virtues, especially, manliness, valor, chivalry, generosity, sense of honor. "Levantine Dictionary," The Living Arabic Project., https://livingarabic.com/share/3709712-45b12e?locale=en.
[113] Arabic for solidarity.
[114] Prof. Zayd Eyadat, October 26th, 2023.
[115] Al-Jabri, *The Formation of Arab Reason*, p. 51.
[116] Prof. Zayd Eyadat, October 26th, 2023.

Conclusions

This paper argues that individual and collective identities are best understood as dynamic overlaps of various components that evolve over time. Arab identity is a multilayered socio-cultural construct that integrates diverse influences rather than excluding them. Historically, Arabness has encompassed different tribes, ethical systems, and religious communities, thriving through interactions with cultures like Byzantine, Persian, Latin, and Turkish.

The case study further demonstrated that multiple identitarian components can coexist harmoniously. For example, Jordanians of Palestinian origin maintain ties to both sides of the Transjordan Bank, while Circassians and Chechens embrace their Jordanian identity alongside their unique customs and languages. Interviewees noted that religious differences, when not politicized, do not create social divides, and belonging to a broader Arab or Muslim community can coexist with a strong national identity. Thus, attempts to separate these intertwined identities are unrealistic and fail to respect their complexity. This aspect is tackled by Amin Maalouf, with reference to his biographic experience of Christian Lebanese living in France: “Identity can't be compartmentalized. You can't divide it up into halves or thirds or any other separate segments. I haven't got several identities: I've got just one, made up of many components in a mixture that is unique to me, just as other people's identity is unique to them as individuals.”[117]

The historical analysis also highlighted how attempts of top-down conceptualization of identity tend to be driven by political interests, namely the need for legitimation of a given regime or political orientation. Although it is impossible to disentangle identity from politics, it is remarkable that when a hierarchization of identitarian components is artificially operated through political narratives, it generally triggers mechanisms of exclusion or marginalization. This process, that is resembled in the colonialist and Arab nationalist attempts to overshadow religion in favor of a “secular” identity, has the power to strengthen the catalyzing

[117] Maalouf, *In the Name of Identity*, p. 2.

potential of the marginalized identity. In the mentioned case, it fostered the emergence of religious fundamentalism, embodied in the different branches of political Islam. Maalouf speaks of the attempt of hierarchization of identity as a dangerous practice largely spread in contemporary society:

> *Sometimes, after I've been giving a detailed account of exactly why I lay claim to all my affiliations, someone comes and pats me on the shoulder and says "Of course, of course but what do you really feel, deep down inside?" For a long time I found this oft-repeated question amusing, but it no longer makes me smile. It seems to reflect a view of humanity which, though it is widespread, is also in my opinion dangerous. It presupposes that " deep down inside" everyone there is just one affiliation that really matters, a kind of "fundamental truth" about each individual, an "essence" determined once and for all at birth, never to change thereafter. As if the rest; all the rest a person's whole journey through time as a free agent; the beliefs he acquires in the course of that journey; his own individual tastes, sensibilities and affinities; in short his life itself counted for nothing. And when, as happens so often nowadays, our contemporaries are exhorted to "assert their identity," they are meant to seek within themselves that same alleged fundamental allegiance, which is often religious, national, racial or ethnic […]. Anyone who claims a more complex identity is marginalized.*[118]

In the Arab world, the search for an "immaculate identity," in other words the struggle for authenticity *vis à vis* colonial influence, has often translated into the overstressing of the religious component. Indeed, due to the peculiar bond between Arabs and Islam, resorting to an idealized "glorious past" has been functional to mark a distinction between the colonizing West and the Arab world. This trend is first visible in the thought of al-Afghānī and his disciples, and continued throughout the modern age with controversial outcomes.

The paper concludes that a comprehensive understanding of identity, respectful of the plurality of its components, is the key to a balanced understanding of the individual or the society in question. This aspect is particularly relevant to the Arab world's internal and external observers. In first place, because the postulated Arab-Muslim axiom needs to be

[118] *Ivi*, pp. 2-3.

deconstructed through the acknowledgement of complexity to develop credible analysis of the Arab socio-political context. In second place, because of the high number of existing identitarian catalysts that contribute to shaping the collective and individual identities of Arab people. In this regard, the case study has interestingly demonstrated that when not politicized, identitarian components tend to spontaneously combine and coexist, giving rise to peaceful relations and thus, stable societies. Therefore, it can be affirmed that it is the responsibility of policy-makers as well as researchers to develop frameworks where the peaceful coexistence of different identitarian components is presumed rather than questioned, facilitated rather than obstructed.

CHALLENGES

In the context of this study on Arab identity in Jordan, it is crucial to recognize the constraints and challenges that may have influenced the outcomes and interpretation of our findings. These limitations, while inherent to the research process, should be carefully considered to ensure a nuanced understanding of the study's scope and implications. The most challenging aspect of this research has been attempting to trace a comprehensive yet synthetic history of the formation and development of identity in the Arab world. In this regard, it is important to underline that this paper does not claim to be exhaustive, but aims to pave the way for further research in the field of identity politics oriented by the proposed comprehensive approach.

A second challenge we want to consider is what Bourke calls "positionality,"[119] in other words "the different 'positions' occupied by the researcher and the participants, often not part of the same cultural and social community and how this affects the research outcomes."[120] Throughout the process of research, I have reflected multiple times on my role as an outsider investigating intimate cultural aspects in a context that is not mine. I wondered about the value of my contribution as a foreign researcher, and in general about the ethnological approach to the study of foreign cultures as a "colonial method that must be, in a sense, de-colonized."[121] Should only Arabs speak for themselves, regarding their identity, their politics, their history, their religions? While this remained an open question during and after the conclusion of the research, it triggered

[119] B, Bourke, "Positionality: Reflecting on the Research Process," 2014, *The Qualitative Report*, n. 19, p. 1.
[120] Pizzingrilli, *State and Legitimacy within an Arab-Muslim context*, p. 119.
[121] G. Gobo, A. Molle, *Doing Ethnography*, SAGE Publications, London 2017, chap. 1, https://www.perlego.com/book/1431865/doing-ethnography-pdf.

some reflections that should be taken into account. In first place, the need to focus on the analysis of Arab literature and Arab perspectives on identity rather than outsider ones. This awareness informed the bibliographic choices as well as the selection of the key informants. The choice of including non-Arab voices is motivated by the added value that a symmetric exchange between local and foreigner perspectives can generate. The condition of "estrangement,"[122] natural for outside observers, provides unedited insights that can contribute to a valuable development of knowledge once local and foreigner perspectives engage in active collaboration and confrontation.

A further challenge was posed by the strong susceptibility to personal interpretation and the high degree of volatility of identitarian perceptions: as demonstrated by the interviews' results of the three Jordanian interviewees, views can vary sensibly according to age, educational path, status, life experiences, and a variety of other factors that contribute to the shaping of individual identity. Although quantitative methods would have limited the risk of personalization, their use was discouraged by the scarcity of reliable data regarding Arab societies' identitarian orientation and by the criticalities related to the definition of a statistically relevant sample, mindful of the multiple types of intersectionality existing in Jordanian society.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS AND FUTURE SCOPE OF RESEARCH

In concluding this paper, the most recent regional developments cannot be ignored. Since October 7th, the war in Gaza irreversibly affects the identities of Palestinians, Arabs, Muslims and humans around the globe.
In Jordan, the war triggered identitarian dynamics on many fronts, as prof. al-Hafi affirmed: "it is an explosion of our identity."[123] Many of these questions were directly related to individual, collective and religious identities. In determining its political stand *vis à vis* war in Gaza, the population of Jordan seems to find itself confronting contrasting feelings of belonging: the cleavages that differentiate religious, ethnic, social communities emerged.

While sympathy for the Palestinian cause is generally widespread and resembled on an institutional level – in force of both Arabness-centered and Muslimhood-centered discourses – controversies arose between interventionist and non-interventionist stances. If the firsts are expressed in the weekly manifestations and by the quest for opening borders (so that

[122] Gobo, Molle, *Doing Ethnography*, chap. 9.
[123] Prof. Amer al-Hafi, December 18th, 2023.

people can join their families and/or Palestinian resistance); the seconds are mirrored in institutional policy-making and by those Jordanians (either of East-banker or West-banker origins) that believe preserving Jordan's stability is the priority. However, this last stance does not necessarily conflict with rooted cross-state identities like the Arab or the Muslim one, confirming the possibility of coexistence of different identitarian components within individual identities, despite the conflict and contradictions they might generate. Furthermore, being Iran and Iran-backed religious militias the main resistance actors, while Arab nation-states have – more or less willingly – embedded cautious positions, the current war is further exacerbating the Arab-Muslim dichotomy, with religion-oriented actors affirming themselves as aladins of the Palestinian struggle and gaining traction among the masses, critical of the conciliatory positions assumed by Arab leaders.

Not lastly, it is interesting to note that the Palestinian resistance is being ascribed to a broader decolonial stance that has historically brought Arabs together. However, according to participatory observation, a plural understanding of Arab identity seems to be currently losing grip *vis à vis* religious-centered stances one year after the beginning of the war. While the long-term repercussions of war in Gaza on Arab self-consciousness are yet uncertain, they constitute a wide and open field for further research. Regardless of the war's outcomes, a lucid understanding of identity might, perhaps, constitute a crucial tool in imagining paths towards regional stability and human-centered policies for both Arab and international decision-makers. In sight of a potential regional escalation that would lead towards a deep re-definition of the balance of power in the area, developing a shared framework of analysis that refutes politicization of identity and reductionist attempts becomes more urgent than ever.

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