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Shaping Arab Identity: Historical Evolution, Contemporary Perspectives, and Political Implications - A Jordan Case Study

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To Nayef, my Copernican revolution, for teaching me the world has no center and love knows no frontiers.

Notes on transliteration and terminology

This thesis 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 IJMES system. Proper names of contemporary figures have been rendered with their common transliteration (ex. Fahmy Jeda'an, Mohammed 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, Yathrib, Mashreq, 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 thesis are: *al-huwiyya al-ʿarabiyya*, *al-qawmiyya al-ʿarabiyya*, *al-'uruba*, *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 thesis, 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 al-ʿarabiyya*) 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 thesis 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] Adeed Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 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 if it coincides with territorial and economic sovereignty, in the West Asian region identity is often "incongruent with state boundaries," contributing to highly volatile regional framework. Supra-nation state identities (like Arabness and Muslimhood) interlace national identities and sub national identities (namely tribal affiliation). Failing in considering the unfolding of feelings of belongings can determine a faulty understanding of the political dynamic on both a domestic and regional level. Indeed, Telhami and Barnett affirm: "no student of Middle East international politics can begin to understand the region without taking into account the ebb and flow of identity politics."[3] Stemming from this awareness, this thesis focuses on the analysis of the different conceptualizations Arab identity assumed throughout history, in light of contingent social and political transformations.

The debate about Arab identity is often polarized between those who put the focus on linguistic and cultural elements, and those who place Islam above any other factor when defining Arabness. However, evidence from the World Values Survey

[2] Raymond Hinnebusch, "The politics of identity in Middle East International Relations," in *International Relations of the Middle East*, ed. Louise Fawcett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 148.

[3] Shibley Telhami and Michael N. Barnett, *Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2002), 2.

2011-2014 show that in Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan the feeling of belonging to an Arab union is strengthened when combined with a strong feeling of belonging to the country and to deep religious faith.[4] This evidence suggests that different identitarian belongings are not necessarily in competition, but rather can nourish each other. Thus, a more nuanced understanding of identity is needed when looking at the Arab world.

This project aims at exploring the conceptualizations Arab identity has assumed in different historical stages, in order to highlight the richness and diversity of both Arab identity and the debate in its regard. A methodological priority has been to rely on the contribute of Arab authors scarcely known outside a niche of academic specialists. Indeed, the thesis aims at understanding autochthonous views of identity in first place. This choice is resembled also in the case study (Chapter V), where three out of four key-informants are of Arab origin.

The case of Arab identity is a relevant field of investigation for many reasons. In first place, because the active intertwining between religious and political dimensions in Arab society, as configured since the eve of Islam, generated ambiguity regarding the roots of identitarian feeling, as will be better analyzed in the first chapter.

In second place, because of the overshadowing of the Arab debates about identity, especially of the self-critical and "secular" ones, operated both by the Arabs educational systems and by the international observers and academia.[5] As highlighted by Corm, the canonical narratives about Arab mind depict it as an invariant, rigid "theologico-political structure," labeling the Arab thought as irreversibly linked to religion and "resistant to the secular."[6] Besides the fact that this kind of narrative validates and fosters the development of forms of religious fundamentalism, it also excludes from the imaginary about Arab identity its complexity and diversity, expressed in the contribute of great lay thinkers that are marginalized *vis à vis*

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[4] Inglehart, R., C. Haerpfer, et al., World Values Survey: Round Six - Country-Pooled Datafile Version, 2014, https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV6.jsp. Madrid: JD Systems Institute.

[5] Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), XII.

[6] Georges Corm, *Arab Political Thought*, trans. Patricia Phillis-Batoma and Atoma T. Batoma (London: Hurst &Co., 2020), XII.

colleagues that place religion at the core of their reflection.[7] This overstressing of the religion-centered Arab intellectual production and of the link between Arab mind and religion distorts reality insofar as it misrepresents the plurality of Arab thought.

In third place, Arab identity is a peculiar case to investigate since, as noted by Kassab, it is subject to a "misplaced exceptionalism,"[8] result of the unilateral cultural confrontation with the West combined with the aforementioned process of overshadowing of Arab secular debates. In other words, Kassab stresses that the isolation from other societies' post-colonial debates generated a feeling of exceptionalism in the Arab self-consciousness, producing the conviction that Arab society is the sole suffering of a form of post-colonial "cultural malaise."[9] Thus, this investigation aims at normalizing the contents of Arab identitarian debates, in first place by contextualizing them historically, politically and sociologically.

The thesis argues that it is not possible to grasp the core of an identity by focusing on one of its components, neither by excluding one *a priori*, as it often happens in regard of Islam. In Maalouf words, "identity can't be compartmentalized."[10] 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 main aim of this research is to refute oversimplification and deconstruct the dichotomization of the religious element *vis à vis* the cultural one.

The first chapter focuses on the formation of Arab identity, briefly tracing a history of the pre-Islamic era, of the eve of Islam and of the Golden Age of Islam, in order to furnish historical premises to the assessment of themes such as: the issue of the beginning of Arab history; the distinction between Arabhood and Muslimhood; the concept of Islamic Umma and its influence on the Arab identitarian feeling; the role of language in the identitarian perception and its nexus with the Quranic

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[7] A noteworthy example in this regard is that of the al-Banna brothers. While Hassan al-Banna, founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, enjoys worldwide fame, more restricted is the popularity of his brother Gamal, a rationalist thinker that developed, a liberal, secular, and humanist interpretation of the Qur'ān.
[8] Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, 10.
[9] Ibid., 12.
[10] Amin Maalouf, *In the Name of Identity. Violence and the Need to Belong*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 2.

revelation; the Glorious Past syndrome; the relationships between Arab elites and other ethnic groups within Islamic Empires; the shift of power from Arab to Persians and Turks; and the decline of Arab cultural production during the Ottoman domination.

The second chapter explores the rich and diverse Arab modern and contemporary literature, starting from the pioneers of the Nahda, in order to grasp the different conceptualizations of identity proposed by authors with different national, religious, and ideological background. The first section will explore some of the main figures of the Nahda, in order to shed light on the flourishing secular and liberal critique that emerged during the awakening of Arab thought in the early 19th century. The second section will look at the emergence of Arab nationalisms. In this context, the word 'nationalisms' is intentionally plural as the section investigates not only Arab nationalism *stricto sensu,* in Arabic *al-Qawmiyya al-ʿArabiyya,* but also different form of country-based nationalism, *al-Wataniyya*, such as the Egyptian one, of which Ṭaha Ḥusayn was the main exponent. Lastly, one section is dedicated to the analysis of the rise of political parties in Egypt, Syria and Lebanon with a focus on how different parties mirrored different identitarian conceptualizations.

The third chapter is dedicated to the 20th century and how geopolitical developments in the region shaped identitarian perceptions. The section is chronologically organized and goes through the main historical *caesura* that interested the West Asian region in the 20th century: the Nakba, the 1956 Suez crisis, the Six Days War, the 80's and the emergence of political Islam as an alternative to the semi-secular models of nationalism. In reconstructing key events, this chapter aims at demonstrating the mutual relation between identity and politics, finally concluding that in the Arab world, the emergence of a predominant religious component at the expenses of a socio-cultural one has been a product of both domestic politics and international relations.

The fourth chapter is structured as a thematical chapter that explores Arab literature, mostly contemporary one, to investigate the contribution of authors who refused to endorse the narrated dichotomy between Arabness and Muslimhood. The chapter assesses themes such as the issue of historicization of Arab-Islamic history; the necessity for recognition and celebration of the religious, ethnic and linguistic

plurality that characterizes Arab countries; the possibility of a liberal, human-centered, and eventually secular interpretation of Quranic teachings and Islamic values; the urgence, detected by authors like Aziz al-Azmeh and Bassam Tibi among others, to emancipate Arabs both from the colonial-imperial cultural domination and from the mythicization of their own past, which hold them back from evolving unedited, modern and cultural-specific approaches to modernity.

This general overview about the formation and conceptualization of Arab identity shows that although Arab nationalism (*Qawmiyya*) as a political project has substantially failed, Arabness remains a rooted feeling that produces forms of transnational engagement and solidarity among Arab people. It seems possible to conclude that Arab identities are plural and articulated on many levels. The feeling of belonging to a Pan-Arab community coexists with different forms of country-based nationalisms and tribalism. In particular, national sub-identities are assuming a central role since, as a result of the establishment of the nation-state model enacted by colonial powers, the State is now responsible for the satisfaction of people's basic needs, for the implementation of rights and for the management of crisis.

In order to grasp how transnational Arab identity is conjugated with national sub-identity and other components, the case of Jordanian identity building will be analyzed. The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan is a meaningful example because of its peculiar political, social and demographic setting. The case study is built on the contributions of four key-informants interviewed in Amman in the period between September and December 2023. The interviews focused on the analysis of multiple factors affecting identity building processes, such as: the tribal and Bedouin identitarian roots of the local population; Hashemitism as a political and religious bond with the royal family; the integration of a significant amount of refugee population within the social fabric; the status of religious and ethnic minorities in the country. The content of the interviews has been organized in thematic units and has been reported in order to highlight similarities and differences between each informant's perspective. The study will highlight how different identitarian components contribute to the shaping of national identity, exposing the plurality and multilayeredness of individual and collective identities.

I. The formation of Arab identity: pre-Islamic era to Ottoman decline

The process of formation of Arab identity can be traced back to the pre-Islamic era. Although in this context tribal identities were prominent and a collective political identity was not defined yet, Arabs seem to be bonded by a common set of values, a shared language and a similar lifestyle. The advent of Islam, introducing the concept of Umma and elevating Arabic to the status of sacred language, posed the basis for a defined political identity among Arabs throughout Arabia. However, due to the rapid pace of expansion, the concept of Arabness stretched to encompass people who were not ethnically Arab. This implied complex processes of redefinition of identity, with Islam serving as catalyst for social cohesion. Since the Abbasid caliphate, military, administrative and intellectual non-Arab élites emerged, and the heart of the empire shifted eastwards. While cultural contaminations contributed to the peak of Islamic civilization during the Golden age, power gradually shifted from Arabs to non-Arabs, namely Persians and Turks. In the multicultural framework of Ottoman empire, Arab consciousness persisted latently – thank to the link between Arabic language and Islam. However, a renewed Arab cultural and national identity was soon to emerge, spurred by Ottoman decline and European influence.

1. At the origins of Islam

In order to clarify the ambiguous relationship between Arabhood and Muslimhood, the issue of historicization of Arab history is crucial. According to Corm, placing the beginning of history at the birth of Islam implies identifying the history of Arabs with the history of Islam, therefore overlapping the concept of Arabhood with that of Muslimhood.[11] This conceptual operation has been largely perpetrated, contributing to the generation of the Arab-Muslim nexus that poorly represents the multi-faceted nature of Arab identity. Surely, as will be outlined in the next paragraphs, Islam deeply contributed to the shaping of Arab identity. However, this thesis argues that it

[11] Corm, *Arab Political Thought*, 213.

is possible to understand the intertwining between Arab and Muslim identities without identifying Arabness with Muslimhood.

Thus, this chapter will propose an overview of the status of Arab identity before and after the birth of Islam, through the historical reconstructions and interpretations provided by authors like Francis Edward Peters, Robert G. Hoyland, Fred M. Donner, Albert Hourani. In their contributions, the authors provided various insights on how Arab identity evolved before, alongside and thanks to Islam and Muslimhood. The chapter intends to highlight the key shifts in identitarian conceptualizations as influenced by social and political factors, to provide insights into the process of formation of collective identity in the Arab world as a premise to the unfolding of identity in modern and contemporary times.

a. The pre-Islamic era

According to Hoyland, the term *'arab* is first mentioned in Biblical and Assyrian texts dating back to the IX century BC and it refers to "nomadic pastoralists inhabiting the Syrian desert."[12] Roman accounts speak of Arabs in terms of "Saracens" or "Ishmaelites," with reference to the supposed descent from the biblical figures of Sarah and Ishmael, considering Arabs a sect of Christianity. Although "the connection of the Arabs with the biblical story of Ishmael (Genesis 17:20, "I shall raise a great nation from him") was widespread in early Judaism and Christianity," it remained substantially "unknown to most of the Arabs of Arabia."[13] Since *'arab* is the term that appears to be used cross-culturally to indicate the population of the Arabian Peninsula at the time, scholars agree in considering it the term used by Arabs to identify themselves.

According to the sources, although the pre-Islamic Arab society shared a common cultural and linguistic basis, it was highly fragmented and with limited self-consciousness as a single ethnic group. As explained by Hourani, the bond between

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[12] Robert G. Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs*, (New York: Routledge, 2001), Introduction, https://www.perlego.com/book/1614224/arabia-and-the-arabs-from-the-bronze-age-to-the-coming-of-islam-pdf.

[13] Francis Edward Peters, *The Arabs and Arabia on the Eve of Islam*, (New York: Routledge, 2017), XIII, https://www.perlego.com/book/1496997/the-arabs-and-arabia-on-the-eve-of-islam-pdf.

human beings in the pre-Islamic Arabia was based on kinship. There is mutual agreement among scholars in recognizing the tribe as the first catalyst of identitarian belonging among the Arabs.[14] 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.[15]

A more 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."[16] 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. Nonetheless, Hoyland argues that the existence of a community with shared language, faith and calendar is suggested by Arab-Christian inscriptions. Interestingly, Hoyland notes that in antique inscriptions testify the existence of a clear racial distinction between Arabs and the people of Yemen. Indeed, due to its pronounced topographic diversity the Peninsula was inhabited by a variety of people of different ethnic backgrounds. Starting from the first century BC, commercial exchanges triggered a process of cross-cultural contamination, resulting in the "inexorable Arabisation of Arabia, though at the same time the Arabs were being shaped by the cultural traditions of south and east Arabia."[17] Only later, in the early Islamic era, a more comprehensive conception of Arab identity was developed and retrospectively applied to all people of pre-Islamic Arabia. Therefore, it is possible to affirm that Arab identity has been, since its formation, a kind of ethnic

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[14] Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age: 1798-1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 6.

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

[16] Peter Webb, *Imagining the Arabs*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 353.

[17] Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs*, Introduction.

(socio-cultural) boundary rather than a strictly racial one. A ninth century AD passage well describes this conceptualization of Arab identity:

> *The Arabs have come to constitute a unity assimilated to one norm in regard to their native soil, language, temperament, ambition, pride, zeal, manners and disposition, fused into a single body and all cast alike into a single mould. And the parts of that unity are so concordant and the constituent elements so harmonious that, whether one considers broad outline or detail, similarities or dissimilarities, the resultant entity is more integrated than are, in some cases, groups which have real genealogical affinity. (Jahiz, Atrâk 11)*[18]

b. An Arab Revelation

Late-antique Arabia presented itself as not only socially fragmented, but also as religiously diverse. Various forms of polytheism were coexisting with the slow but inexorable spread of monotheism. Judaism was widespread in the Peninsula with Arab Jewish communities spread all over the area,[19] and Christianism was present in Yemen as well as in the eastern and northern part of the Peninsula, while its diffusion in Hijaz is disputed.[20] However, monotheistic faiths in pre-Islamic Arabia were not limited to the organized churches. There was a galaxy of Judeo-Christian movements, for instance the Nazari one, and there are traces of "a prophetic tradition that is purely Arabian, even while it links on to the Jewish and Christian traditions."[21]

The bond between Islamic religion and Arabic language is out of the ordinary. This nexus is important to be taken into consideration as long as it has meaningful

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[18] Ibid., chap. 9.
[19] Particularly in city-oasis such as Tabuk, Tayma, Khaybar and Yathrib and in Yemen. Fred M. Donner, *Maometto e le origini dell'Islam*, (Torino: Einaudi editore, 2011), 32.
[20] Ibid., 32-33.
[21] Peters, *The Arabs and Arabia on the Eve of Islam*, 271. Notable examples are the figures of Mani, the founder of Manichaeism, (Donner, 2011) and that of prophet Musaylima from al-Yamama, competitor of Muḥammad in his first phases of his preaching, who also claimed to have received a revelation called Qur'ān. Greg Fisher, *Rome, Persia, and Arabia*, (New York: Routledge, 2019).

consequences in the conceptualization of identity. The exceptionality of the relation between Classical Arabic (*fuṣḥā*) and Quranic revelation emerges with more clarity if the Quranic revelation is compared with other religious traditions. As noted by Wild, the Biblical text "in no way connects its divine origin to the Hebrew language,"[22] neither to the Aramaic one. Furthermore, compared to Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism and Confucianism, Islam is the only religion whose sacred language's structure remained substantially the same throughout centuries and is still recognized as the official language of nation states.

In a highly fragmented context such as pre-Islamic Arabia, masses used to speak a multiplicity of dialects and the oral transmission was dominant. Quranic Arabic assumed the role of communicative medium and fostered social and political unification, therefore becoming a crucial element in the identity building process. Nevertheless, Arabic soon became the language of power, as the masses were largely illiterate and it was the elites, namely the religious one, to have the monopoly of language. In addition, Classical Arabic soon became "the vital element in preserving the link between past and present"[23] and it still is one of the main coagulation factors among the second largest religious community in the world.[24]

As noted by Suleiman, it is necessary to make a distinction between *fuṣḥā* and the variety of dialects, *'āmiyya*, that characterize the practice of Arab spoken language. While the first is deeply connected to the Revelation, the other reflects the inner diversity of Arab society. However, the sacred connotation assumed by 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.

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[22] Stefan Wild, *Self-referentiality in the Quran*, (Göttingen: Hubert&Co, 2006), 136.
[23] Yasir Suleiman, ed., *Language and Identity in the Middle East and North Africa*, (New York: Routledge, 2013), Divided Loyalties: Language and Ethnic Identity in the Arab World, https://www.perlego.com/book/1680522/language-and-identity-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa-pdf.
[24] Pew Research Center, "The Global Religious Landscape," accessed February 2, 2024, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec/

c. *The Islamic* Umma *and the formation of an Arab political identity*

As argued in the first section, there is evidence of an artistic, cultural and linguistic common identity among the people of pre-Islamic Arabia. However, there is no proof it was related to any form of political unity before the rise of Islam. This section aims at highlighting the role of Islamic *Umma* in shaping an Arab political identity. In first place, it is necessary to clarify that in the Qur'ān itself there is no mention of a collective identity other than the community of the Believers. Furthermore, this concept is strictly related to the shared faith and to the adherence to religious teachings in terms of behaviors, therefore it does not have any correlation with ethnic, cultural or "national" affiliation.

The Quranic revelation, despite being intertwined with the linguistic element as explained in the previous section, manifests a universal character insofar as it potentially addresses any human being. In fact, the Qur'ān exclusively mentions *a'rāb* (nomads) with negative tones and never refers to *'arab* (Arabs) themselves.[25] Some scholars interpret the rise of Islam as an answer to the desire of establishing a political entity that could represent a latent Arab collective identity. However, Donner labels these historical reconstructions that look at Islam as an Arab political movement as misleading, since they imply the previous existence of an Arab political identity, which has no grounding in the historical context previously described. Instead, Donner interprets the stemming of an Arab political identity as an unforeseen outcome of the Believer's movement. In other words, the unexpectedly successful religious movement, with his strong relation with the Arab language, led to the emergence of a unitary political project in the mind of Arab elites. In this context, the linguistic element remained crucial especially during the expansion of the Islamic empires into non-Arabic speaking territories. In fact, the historiography of the conquests often reports the battles against Persians and Byzantines in terms of clashes between *'arab* and *a'ājim* (non-Arabic speakers).[26]

[25] Donner, *Maometto e le origini dell'Islam*, 229.
[26] Ibid., 230.

Despite God's will to create harmony among different tribes and human beings is clearly stated in Sura 49:13,[27] it is important to note that the emergence of a unitary Arab political identity never replaced the original feeling of tribal belonging. In fact, tribal affiliation has never lost its primary role in the definition of identity of most of the Arab population, despite the numerous attempts of unification that can be identified throughout history on a religious, nationalist, and transnational base. In this regard, the creation of Islamic *Umma* is, perhaps, the first attempt to unify Arabs beyond tribal affiliation. The historical roots of Islamic *Umma* are to be found in a set of agreements stipulated by prophet Muḥammad with different clans of Yathrib, including the powerful Jewish ones, at the time of the Hijra (622 AD). Such agreements went down in history as "Constitution of Medina" or "Pact of Medina" although scholars argue they should more accurately be defined as "municipal charter,"[28] or considered as a security pact. What is most relevant to this analysis is the fact that the Constitution defines the contours of a trans-religious community.

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. A clarifying example of this can be found in the Quranic Sura 3:67, that refers to Abraham as a *ḥanīf* (true monotheist) *muslim* (pious or devoted).[29]

In conclusion, the most relevant consequence of the rise of Islam in terms of identity building in the Arab world is the push towards unification. This manifested in first

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[27] Sura 49:13, Al-Ḥujurāt, recites: "O humanity! Indeed, We created you from a male and a female, and made you into peoples and tribes so that you may ˹get to˺ know one another. Surely the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous among you. Allah is truly All-Knowing, All-Aware." https://quran.com/49

[28] Terminology adopted by Julius Wellhausen. Saïd Amir Arjomand, "The Constitution of Medina: A Sociolegal Interpretation of Muhammad's Acts of Foundation of the Umma", *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 41, no. 4 (November 2009): 555.

[29] Donner, *Maometto e le origini dell'Islam*, 73.

place on the linguistic sphere, with the sacralization of Arabic language as medium of the revelation, which also contributed to the crystallization of Classic Arabic *vis à vis* the dialect's fragmentation. In second place, it entailed the political dimension, since the establishment of shared rules among clans paved the way for the overcoming of tribal competitiveness. This unifying process soon translated into the emergence of Islamic Caliphate run by an exclusively Arab leadership, that soon expanded inside and outside Arabia, opening a new chapter of the history of Asia, Africa and Europe.

2. The Glorious Past

After the death of Muḥammad, occurred in 632 AD, two main processes interested the community of the Believers. Firstly, the issue of succession, where the tension between tribal affiliation and Islamic *Umma* reemerged; secondly, the beginning of a period of sensational expansion, known as "Islamic conquests" and sometimes controversially labeled as "Arab conquests." As noted by Bobrick, Islam has been a militant church from the beginning of its history. Under Muḥammad's guise, the community used to carry on raids on the northern borders of the Byzantine's empire.[30] Furthermore, in 630 Muḥammad took control of Mecca and Ta'if, establishing his political power and gaining the respect, as well as the fear, of many groups living in the Peninsula, who started to send their representatives to Medina. The conquest of Mecca and the consequent establishment of Muḥammad's power opened a new chapter of the history of the community, whose fluidity was progressively limited. Muḥammad no longer tolerated allegiance pacts with *mushrikūn*. The observation of religious values, as well as the payment of taxes, was required in order to obtain the status of member of the community.[31] Simultaneously, the community engaged in an open war against paganism, providing ideological legitimation to further conquests. However, the inclusive trait of early Islam was never totally contradicted, since the Prophet's itself relied on converted *mushrikūn* that proved to have appropriate

[30] Benson Bobrick, *The Caliph's Splendor: Islam and the West in the Golden Age of Baghdad*, (New York: Simon & Schuster 2012), https://www.perlego.com/book/780238/the-caliphs-splendor-islam-and-the-west-in-the-golden-age-of-baghdad-pdf.
[31] Donner, *Maometto e le origini dell'Islam*, 97.

managerial skills to administrate the expanding community.[32] Entrusting new members with strategical positions was a strategy deliberately enacted by the Prophet in order to strengthen their affiliation to the community, as testified by the inclusion of late converted Quraysh in the administration of Mecca. Immediately after the Prophet's death, the community's internal rivalries violently exacerbated due to the lack of Muḥammad's unifying charisma. Tribal identities emerged under the homogeneous umbrella of the new faith, primarily manifesting themselves on a political level.

a. Well-Guided Caliphs

In the first stage, the power vacuum was solved peacefully through the appointment of Abū Bakr, Muḥammad's close friend and councilman, as new guide of the community.[33] According to Donner, the first title assumed by the new leaders was that of *Amīr al-mu'minīn*, which was substituted by the term *khalīfa* only one century later, despite the later Islamic tradition attributes the title of *khalīfa* to all Muḥammad's successors, starting from Abū Bakr.[34] Right after his investment, Abū Bakr engaged in the Ridda Wars, imposing his domain all over the Arabian Peninsula within one year (632-633AD).[35] For the purposes of this thesis, it is important to note that this set of clashes established for the first time in history a homogeneous political domain over the traditionally fragmented Arab tribes.

It is also interesting to look at the hierarchical structure of the newly established society. According to Donner, the original community of the Believers was placed at the top, holding the command of the army and the administration of the three core urban centers: Mecca, Medina and Ta'if. The second level was occupied by those who, during the Ridda war, did not oppose the conquerors. For the recently converted, the payment of *ṣadaqa* was required in order to take part in the

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[32] Ibid., 98.
[33] Claudio Lo Jacono, *Il Vicino Oriente Da Muhammad Alla Fine Del Sultanato Mamelucco* (Einaudi, 2015), chap. II.1, https://www.perlego.com/book/3427561/storia-del-mondo-islamico-viixvi-secolo-volume-primo-il-vicino-oriente-da-muhammad-alla-fine-del-sultanato-mamelucco-pdf.
[34] Donner, *Maometto e le origini dell'Islam*, 102.
[35] Ibid., 105.

community. The third and last level included those tribes that opposed the Believers' expansion. These people were treated as slaves by the central administration, although there are examples of social redemption, such as in the case of Khawla bint Ja'far, who became concubine of 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib and mother of the great Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥanafiyya (637-700).[36]

Another aspect to consider is the status of Christian and Jewish communities. The fluid confessionalism of early Islam allowed Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians to easily integrate in the community as *ahl al kitāb*.[37] Some sources even suggest that Believers used to pray in Christian churches when arriving in new territories.[38] Documents of the time report that Christians and Jews were free to maintain their faith, although they were obliged to pay differentiated taxes: *jizya* and *kharāj*.[39] While Christian sources of the time report a "violent conquest model,"[40] archeological findings show little evidence of destruction. In the Syrian territory, the most archaeologically explored, there is evidence of churches that continued to function after the conquest and others that were built in its aftermaths. This suggests that the issue was not of religious tolerance, and that most of the populations affected by the conquest accepted it rather than fighting, avoiding violent repercussions.

Under ʿUthmān (third of the Well-Guided Caliphs, in charge from 644 to 656) the Believer domain was extended eastwards to include most of the Iranian plateau, Armenia, northern Mesopotamia and Cyrenaica.[41] Together with their political, economic and religious domain, the Believers' movement exported the use of Arabic language in the recently conquered territories. Arabic was probably partially diffused since the pre-Islamic era in the areas interested by this first wave of expansion.[42] According to Donner, the Believers maintained a sort of "linguistic isolationism"[43]

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[36] Ibid., 106.
[37] Lo Jacono, *Il Vicino Oriente Da Muḥammad Alla Fine Del Sultanato Mamelucco*, chap. II.5.
[38] Donner, *Maometto e le origini dell'Islam*, 120.
[39] Lo Jacono, *Il Vicino Oriente Da Muḥammad Alla Fine Del Sultanato Mamelucco*, chap. II.3.
[40] Donner, *Maometto e le origini dell'Islam*, 110-111.
[41] For the historical reconstruction of the Islamic conquests see Bobrick, *The Caliph's Splendor*, chap. 1.
[42] In southern Syria and Iraq it was coexisting with forms of Aramaic; in northern Syria Greek was largely spoken; and in eastern Egypt Arabic was diffused although most of the population spoke Coptic. In the Iranic plateau, people spoke galaxy of Iranian dialects, except for the Arabic-speaking provinces of Istakhr, Shiraz and Marv.
[43] Donner, *Maometto e le origini dell'Islam*, 146.

from the conquered populations, at least in the first phases of expansion. Such isolationism reflected the perception of moral and confessional superiority of the original Believers. Moreover, it fostered the development of a specific Arab-Islamic culture where the linguistic element was crucial. In fact, Arabic became not only the mother language of the commanders and the language of worship, but also the medium of the newly exported Arab Islamic culture.

b. Umayyads

Despite Islam's role in the establishment of an Arab political entity, the path towards a solid Arab self-consciousness continued to unfold in the following decades, crossing the history of the Umayyad and the Abbasid Caliphates. This section will focus on how structural changes occurred during the Umayyad caliphate impacted on Arab identity building. In particular, the section focuses on the Arabization of power and on the role of *mawālī* in the evolving Islamic *Umma*.

Remarkably, during Umayyad rule the Caliphate continued its rapid expansion and a major part of the Believer's community was settling outside Arabia, for the first time in history. Thus, a broader identitarian criterion to define the growing community was required. Both Donner and Webb agree in attributing to caliph 'Abd al-Malik (685-705) the decisive redefinition of the ecumenical Believers' movement into a Muslim "exclusive confessional identity."[44] Muslimhood played as common identity catalyst for a broad plethora of peoples including Byzantine and Persian new converts (*mawālī*). However, under Umayyads, Arab identity continues to affirm among the original inhabitants of Arabia, as a product of political and administrative reforms as well as a reaction to the contact with non-Arab populations. As noted by Ayubi, "By extending the "conflict" outside Arabia a certain element of cohesion and integration is imparted for the first time to all the inhabitants of Arabia - who are no longer merely members of this or the other tribe but who are basically 'Arabs' fighting the cause of the new religion."[45] Isolated in the *amṣār*, military camps, the Believers

[44] Webb, *Imagining the Arabs*, 140.
[45] Nazih N. Ayubi, *Over-stating the Arab State. Politics and Society in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1995), 55.

draw a cleavage between a non-Arabian "them" and an Arabic-speaking "us". Historical evidence shows that the conquerors largely used the term *muhājirūn*, emigrants, to define themselves.[46] However, in this historical phase terminology remained fluid. In fact, during the VII century, 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*).[47] The cohabitation of people belonging to different Arab groups within the context of the *amṣār* fostered the blending of slightly different costumes, traditions and Arabic dialects. Cohesion among Arabs was also fostered by economic and religious factors. From an economic point of view, the conquerors shared the status of winners and, as such, the benefits coming from the taxation imposed on conquered territories. The process of Arabization is testified by major reforms introduced by caliph 'Abd al-Malik. The caliph introduced a new coin minting style, which replaced the human figures on the coins with the *shahāda*. As noted by Hourani, this is a strong symbol in terms of power and identity building.[48] 'Abd al-Malik also imposed the use of Arabic in the administration and initiated a process of centralization of power. In the same period, Arabic poetry started to make open, undisputable references to Arabness, testifying that the contours of both the Muslim and the Arab identities were being defined, even if they kept a strict correlation one to the other. In this regard, Pizzingrilli argues that under Umayyads "the umma grew up to be an ethno-religious community where Islam and Arabhood were impossible to disentangle."[49]

The affirmation of a leading Arab elite translated into the discrimination of *mawālī*, who despite representing a large part of the Empire's population, "were banned from any task involving authority and […] could not act as imams, judges or governors."[50] However, it is noteworthy that the contact with Persian, Byzantine and Amazigh societies "largely contributed to the development of Arab and Bedouin

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[46] Greek and Syriac sources would support this hypothesis since the terms *Magaritai* and *Mhaggrāyē* are respectively used to refer to the early Arab-Islamic community. Webb, *Imagining the Arabs*, 142.
[47] Webb, *Imagining the Arabs*, 143.
[48] Albert Hourani, *Storia dei Popoli Arabi. Da Maometto ai giorni nostri*, trans. Vermondo Brugnatelli, (Mondadori, 2017), chap. II, https://www.perlego.com/book/3296176/storia-dei-popoli-arabi-da-maometto-ai-nostri-giorni-pdf.
[49] Odetta Pizzingrilli, "State and Legitimacy within an Arab-Muslim context: Understanding the identity criteria in Jordan and Kuwait" (PhD diss., Luiss Guido Carli University, 2019), 32.
[50] Ibid., 32.

society."[51] Umayyad administration largely adopted Byzantine and Persian practices that oriented the process of institutionalization of 'Umayyad administration and politics.[52] The contribution of non-Arab *mawālī* to the Empire is also embedded in the role of Amazigh in the conquest of north Africa and Spain.[53] The new converts constituted a major front of opposition to the Umayyad dynasty due to the high level of discrimination they faced. The contestation of Arab primate was embedded in the literary movement of *Shu'ubiyya*, that reclaimed full equality among Muslims in accordance with Quranic dictate and remained active under the Abbasid dynasty.[54] The disappointment was particularly pronounced in Iran, where the *Shu'ubiyya* was particularly diffused. 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.[55]

c. Abbasids

After the murder of the last Umayyad caliph, Marwān II, in 750 AD, the Abbasid revolution established Abū al-ʿAbbās (722-754) as new Caliph and moved the center of power from Damascus (where the population was hostile to the new dynasty) to Iraq, initially to the city of Kufa[56]. In 762, the city of Baghdad was founded by caliph al-Manṣūr (714-775) to be the new Abbasid capital, located in the premises of the ancient city of Babylon. Thanks to its strategic location, Baghdad soon evolved into a flourishing, rich and diverse city, named by al-Manṣūr *Madīnat al-Salām*. In identitarian terms, the most important shift from Umayyad to Abbasid is that the latter produced a plural society, where Arabization made room for the emergence of a non-Arab élite involved in bureaucracy, administration, and cultural production. In his al Muqaddimah, Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406) stated: "Non-Arab rulers seized power. The

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[51] Francesca Maria Corrao, *Islam, Religione e Politica: Una piccola introduzione*, (Luiss University Press: Roma, 2015), chap. 1.3, Kindle.
[52] Byzantine administrative law was assimilated after their compatibility with Quranic principles was attested and were called *qanun*. Ibid.
[53] Memorable is the conquest of Gibraltar guided by the Berber Tariq (711). Ibid.
[54] Webb, *Imagining the Arabs*, 246.
[55] Corrao, *Islam, Religione e Politica*, chap. 1.3.
[56] Hourani, *Storia dei Popoli Arabi*, chap. II.

identity of the caliphate was lost."[57] Caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd (d. 809) started the trend of appointing non-Arabs governors and commanders alongside Arab ones, overcoming the traditional exclusive Arabness of the elite. Furthermore, most of Abbasid caliphs, except three, were born from non-Arab concubines. As a result, within ruling elites, "the pure Arab element receded into the background."[58] The power shift from Arab to non-Arab elites is also shown in the military. Since the victory of al-Maʾmūn (786-833) – backed by Eastern Iranians over the brother al-Amīn (787-813) – who was supported by Arab tribes, Arab tribal elites were marginalized. With the rise of al-Muʿtaṣim in 833, the military balance of power was shifted furtherly in favor of non-Arabs through the creation of troops composed of Berbers and Turks. The term *mamlūk* (slave) – later reclaimed by the Mamluk dynasty that took control over Egypt in 1260 – was used to indicate those slaves, specifically Turks, trained to become soldiers. Reports of the time testify that Caliph al-Muʿtaṣim (796-842) mobilized up to twenty thousand 'slave-soldiers' during his reign, therefore creating a professional army and a powerful military class. As reported by contemporary sources cited by Webb, in a few decades "these soldiers would become known as the 'Turks' (*atrāk*) who rapidly monopolized power in the Caliphate" by adopting the most influencing positions.[59] Nonetheless, the relocation of the capital in Samarra due to the unpopularity of the new army, geographically incarnates the shift eastwards. Webb argues it is possible to affirm that the aftermath of the Fourth Fitna "eroded the value of Arabness in the Caliphate's power structure."[60] Remarkably, the Arabian Peninsula underwent a phase of exceptional separation from the centers of power. The century following the death of al-Rashīd was characterized by systematic caliphal neglect towards, and subsequent decline of, the peninsular networks. As life conditions deteriorated in Arabia, Bedouins engaged in raids of pilgrims' caravans. Since the caliphal Turk armies struggled to contain Bedouin unrest, Arabia entered a phase of anarchical warfare that started around 845 and persisted until 920s. As a result, not only pilgrimage became extremely dangerous if not impracticable, but also

[57] Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah. An Introduction to History*, trans. Franz Rosenthal (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 193.
[58] Bobrick, *The Caliph's Splendor*, chap. 3.
[59] Webb, *Imagining the Arabs*, 272.
[60] Ibid.

Arabia was unprecedentedly isolated and outcasted from historical record. Arabness was "infused with an embarrassing stigma of barbarous outsider."[61] Under 'Abbasid rule, due to administrative delocalization that allocated wide power to local *wazīr*, the role of the Caliph assumed prominent religious functions, as sponsor of religious dogma.[62] Starting from the mid-9th century, the Abbasid empire experienced a process of political fragmentation due to the lack of economic and military means to reverse centrifugal tendencies. Local dynasties, along with culture-specific administration systems started to emerge. Central military power was undermined to the point that Abbasid caliphs maintained direct authority exclusively in central Mesopotamia. Since the 10th century, caliphs had to be protected by the Buyds, a Shia Persian emirate that took control of the area covering actual Iraq and southern Iran. In an attempt to simplify of the intricate power dynamics, Hourani divides the Abbasid Islamic world into three centers of power. The first covers the eastern area, the Iranian plateau and Iraq, including Baghdad. Initially, this area was controlled by the Seljuq Sultanate, a Turk Sunni dynasty formally loyal to the Abbasid while *de facto* maintaining administrative and political power. The second Includes Egypt, Syria and western Arabia controlled firstly by the Shia Fatimids and then by the Sunni Ayyubids; while the third includes the Maghreb and Southern Spain, which was ruled by the Umayyad Caliphate of Cordova until the early 11th century.[63]

Finally, it is noteworthy to consider the evolution of identity under a cultural perspective. The plural setting of Abbasid empire is illustrated by the process of cross-cultural fertilization that is observable in these centuries, representing the peak of Arab-Islamic Golden Age. In line with the hadith reciting: "the ink of a scholar is more holy than the blood of a martyr," caliph al-Rashīd fostered the development of arts and sciences. Literary masterpieces were translated into Arabic and from Arabic to Greek, Persian, Latin, and other main languages of the time. Various poetical genres developed. As noted by Stetkevych, poetry played a pivotal role in shaping the long-lasting myth of the Arab-Islamic Golden Age.[64] The presence of non-Arab

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[61] Ibid., 276-277.

[62] Francesca Maria Corrao, *Islam, Religione e Politica*, chap. 1.4.

[63] Hourani, *Storia dei Popoli Arabi*, chap. III.

[64] Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych, "Abbasid Panegyric: Badīʿ Poetry and the Invention of the Arab Golden Age", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 44, no.1, (2017): 48-72.

components within the society also triggered research and codification of Arabic grammar and lexicography. Interestingly, the first compendium on Arabic language was written by a Persian grammarian, Sībawayhi (d. 793).[65] Webb argues that in the Iraqi cultural and political elites, the demand for a wide-embracing notion of Arab identity outweighed ethnic rivalry, driven by the practical advantages associated with being identified as an Arab. As a result, the Iraqi cultural producers engaged into a creative process meant to write an Iraqi Arab Past that could justify their inclusion in Arab history and identity. One further identitarian process that occurred during the late Abbasid era is what Webb calls Bedouinisation of Arabness. [66] In fact, starting from the late VIII century, linguists started to be interested in the pre-Islamic form of Arabic language in order to achieve the most original interpretation of the Qur'ān. The investigation of pre-Islamic Arabic language widened to the general pre-Islamic context and developed into the creation of narratives about al-Jāhiliyya. As in the case of the Arabization of Iraqi history, such narrative privileged aspects functional to the 9th century discourses rather than complete historical objectivity. This reconceptualization of Arab identity based on the idealization of its Bedouin roots is important as it produced the moral archetype of Arabness still vigorous nowadays. A peculiar set of values was associated with Arabness: "'noble' (sharīf), 'generous' (karīm) 'forbearing' (halīm – the opposite of jāhil) and of 'innumerable virtues."[67] In sight of the appeal and influence this imaginary still exerts nowadays, it is important to underline that, even though the social and cultural context of Arabia certainly carries the influence of Bedouin culture, the complete identification of Arabness with Bedouin-ness is the product of an *a posteriori* process rather than an objective reconstruction of pre-Islamic history.

It seems paradoxical that the idealization of Bedouin Arabia peaked during the X century when central Arabia was almost inaccessible because of Bedouin raids. However, according to Webb, locating the source of perfect Arabic language in an isolated and inaccessible physical place enabled intellectuals, such as al-Fārābī (d. 951), to produce a totally idealized archetype which evidence couldn't contradict. In

[65] Hourani, *Storia dei Popoli Arabi*, chap. III.
[66] Webb, *Imagining the Arabs*, 331.
[67] Webb, *Imagining the Arabs*, 268.

particular, the Bedouin way of life, which appeared timeless and unchanging from an urban perspective, was functional to reinforce the narrative about the integrity of Arabic language. According to Webb, the Bedouinisation of Arabness *de facto* separated Arabness from Islam. Arab as an identitarian label was disused among Iraqi, Syrian and Egyptian communities in the latest phases of Abbasid rule: "Whereas the aʿrāb Bedouin were, since the earliest Arabic writings, depicted on the outside of the Muslim community, in contrast to the Arabs on the inside, the merging of Bedouin with Arab did not bring the Bedouin inside, but rather cast the Arabs outside too."[68]

By contrast, Hourani argues that by the end of the 11th century there was a strong identification between Arabness and Islam.[69] However, he highlights that identity was articulated in a plurality of layers, or concentric circles. In fact, individual daily life was still strongly centered around belonging to family, tribes, and clans. The persistence of kinship as an identitarian marker is testified by the several attempts toward a codification of Arab genealogy.[70] Intertwined with kinship was affiliation to a local dynasty or religious branch on an intermediate level. Meaningful in this regard is the example of Egypt, that always maintained a specific cultural identity, rooted back in its ancient Pharaonic past. That said, it is undeniable that since the 10th century Islam constituted the broad framework of reference among which people administered their lives. In fact, besides being a faith, Islam contributed to define space, through the distinction between *dār al-Islām* and *dār al-Ḥarb*; time, through the five daily prayers and the specific Islamic calendar; and interpersonal relations, through the set of Islamic principles that orient the lifestyle of faithful believers. Thus, it is possible to affirm that during Abbasid rule Islam was the unifying catalyst, *vis à vis* ethnic, linguistic, status, and power cleavages.

3. Arab self-consciousness in the post-classical age

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

[68] Ibid., 339.
[69] Hourani, *Storia dei Popoli Arabi*, chap. III.
[70] Webb, *Imagining the Arabs*, 188-223.

lands were under Turkish control. This section aims at grasping how Arab identity coped with the loss of political protagonism. In doing so, it reconstructs the main historical steps of the shift of power from Arab to Persians and Turks. Subsequently, it investigates Arab self-consciousness within the Ottoman cultural and linguistic melting pot, underling the role of Arabic language in the preservation of Arab cultural identity. Finally, it describes the awakening of Arab identity during the early phases of Ottoman decline, to introduce the cultural humus of Nahda and Arab nationalism, which will be assessed in detail in the next chapter.

a. The shift of power from Arabs to Persians and Turks

Looking at the core of the Abbasid caliphate, Baghdad and its premises, it is important to mention that since the mid X century it was controlled by the Shia Buyd Amirs, then overthrown by the Turkoman Seljuk dynasty in the mid-11th century. Both these dynasties recognized the Abbasid Caliph as the head of the Islamic community and offered him protection, although *de facto* detaining political power. In the XII century the Abbasids gained new strength and temporarily regained control of the capital, just to be defeated by the Mongols once century later. The siege of Baghdad, in 1258, not only indicates the end Abbasid domain, but is also recognized as the approximate end of the Golden Age, since Mongols largely destroyed the city, in particular the House of Wisdom. In the meantime, Egypt started to emerge as the most relevant cultural and political center of the Arab-Islamic world. As mentioned above, the first dynasty to control the area was the Fatimid one, which established a Shia Caliphate by developing eastwards, from the Western shore of North Africa to Egypt, the Hijaz and part of Sudan at its peak. The Fatimids ruled Egypt from 969 to 1172, when the Ayyubid dynasty took over, and were responsible for the foundation of Cairo as the new capital, together with al-Azhar Mosque. Under their rule Cairo quickly developed as a cultural center of reference for the Arab-Islamic World. After the Ayyubid Sultanate, who reinstated Sunnism in Egypt, the Mamluks rose to power in 1260. Mamluks were ethnically Turk and Circassian, but culturally strongly bonded to the Arab-Islamic heritage of the Abbasid empire. Contextually, a new regional hegemon was rising. In the Anatolian peninsula, divided among a plurality of Beyliks,

the leadership of Osman I (d. 1323), Bey of Bithynia, strengthened. After the death of Osman I, the early Ottoman army started to engage in successful clashes against the neighboring Byzantines, Serbians, and Bulgarians, extending its control over the Balkans and southern Anatolia. Since 1453, thanks to the conquest of Constantinople led by Mehmed the Conqueror (d. 1481), the Ottoman Empire entered its period of expansion, which imposed the Ottoman as the dominant power in the region. During the first decade of the 16th century, the Ottomans expanded southwards by defeating both the Safavids and the Mamluks.

With the Ottoman conquest of Egypt in 1517, the center of regional power was definitely shifted from the Arab world to the Turkish one. After the end of the Golden Age, Arab culture, and therefore Arab cultural identity, entered a phase of latency meant to last at least until the 18th century. Nonetheless, academic literature about Arab identity during the Ottoman rule is scarce comparing to the previous and the following period. However, this thesis aims at not overlooking at the centuries of Ottoman domination and tries to identify some relevant developments in terms of identitarian perceptions that preluded to the Nahda and to Arab nationalisms.

b. Identitarian perception in a multiethnic context

As noted by Hourani, after the conquest of North Africa and Persia the Ottoman Empire represented, to some extent, the legacy of centuries of political, military and administrative development of the Islamic community[71]. Like the previous Islamic empires, it was based on a ruling class, distinguished from the others by some privileges, in particular financial ones. The core of the ruling class, exempted from tax obligations, was composed of both the descendants of ’Osman, and of a military élite. In the Ottoman context, ethnicity was not relevant in terms of identity and belonging to the community if compared to political loyalty and religious affiliation. Hourani highlights how religious loyalties played a pivotal role in shaping the Sultan’s allegiances. The Ottoman Sultans did not reclaim the title of Caliph until the late XVIII century. However, representing the highest global Sunni leadership legitimized their power among a large part of the *umma*, Arabs included. As testified by the

[71] Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, 25.

scholar Al-Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī (1732-91), even if the Sultan was not a Caliph, he was entitled to religious allegiance based on "the divine right of those who had established their effective power and used it in the interests of Islam[72]" since all his actions were in conformity with the *sharī'a*.

Hourani and Hataway argue that the Ottoman Empire should be understood as a network of communities, articulated by regional, religious, linguistic and functional ties. In this mix, Hourani highlights two cleavages, the first between *'askar* (exempt from taxation) and *ra'ya* (taxpayers); the second between Muslims and non-Muslims. It is possible to affirm that the Ottoman Empire was a Sunni "state" since only Sunnis were considered full members of the political community, regardless of their origin. However, the presence of all kinds of religious minorities, other from Sunnis, is largely documented throughout the territories of the Empire. The Shia communities, located in modern-day Turkey, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen, were subjected to the highest level of marginalization, primarily due their association with Persian Shia dynasties, which were the main Ottoman's competitors in the region. On the other side, Christian and Jews communities enjoyed a formal recognition as minorities and were granted the freedom to govern personal status according to their own religious canons. Although most Christians and Jews resided in urban areas and predominantly worked in trade, certain families held influential positions, such as Armenian and Jewish bankers in Constantinople and Baghdad respectively.

The relationship between Ottoman power and Arab provinces is certainly peculiar. Asserting Ottomans authority over traditionally independent cities that had historically been the pivot of great empires, such as Baghdad, Damascus and Cairo, was particularly challenging.[73] Indeed, both in Syria, Egypt and Yemen, the process of Ottomanization was neither peaceful nor linear.[74] However, after a first phase of

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[72] Ibid., 27.

[73] Notably, each Ottoman province possessed a distinct legal code, the *kanunname*. In the case of Egyptian lands, it is interesting to note that the code is significantly longer, testifying the higher degree of resistance that Ottoman rule met in the territory. Jane Hathaway, *The Arab Lands under Ottoman Rule*, (New York: Routledge, 2019), chap. 3.1. https://www.perlego.com/book/1522889/the-arab-lands-under-ottoman-rule-15161800-pdf.

[74] In Syria the pardoned Mamluk Jān-Birdī al-Ghazālī (d. 1521) took advantage of the death of Selim I (d.1520) to rebel to Ottoman control and claim jurisdiction over the sacred cities of Islam. In Egypt there were attempts of re-establishing the Mamluk rule, while in Yemen the Zaydi Shia revolt (1567-1568), led the Ottomans to the "second conquest of Yemen".

open conflict, the scarce proximity of Arab lands to the center led to the progressive decentralization of power. As reported by Hourani, North African territories started to administrate autonomously, *de facto* maintaining only financial ties with the Sultan.[75] Similarly, Lebanon, northern Palestine, and present-day Iraqi Kurdistan were left in control of local dynasties who ruled independently except for being subject to tribute payment. In contrast, the provinces of Syria and Iraq never attained a comparable level of independence due to their strategic locations, which rendered them highly valuable to the Sultan in terms of trade and security.

Since ethnicity does not appear to be a meaningful cleavage in the Ottoman context, describing the overall condition of Arabs within the empire becomes particularly challenging as sources focus on the status of religious, rather than ethnic, communities. Hence, the most significant considerations can be done in terms of the evolution, or persistence, of Arab identitarian awareness through the linguistic element. In fact, within the Ottoman melting pot, a different role was attributed to each language spoken within the Empire, and to some extent, to each linguistic group. While Turkish was the language of the governance and of the military, and Persian that of "polite letters,"[76] Arabic was the language of religion, of sciences and of law. The pride and prestige generated by Arabic language centrality in the Qur'ān can be accounted as the catalyst of Arab identity during the Ottoman empire. According to Hourani, the specificity of Arabs was recognized also in force of their unique role in Islamic history: "Wherever Islam exists, there exists an awareness of the special role of the Arabs in history."[77] Furthermore, Arab centrality was fostered by the authority of the *ʿulamāʾ* and by the prestige of Al-Azhar and Al-Zaytuna mosques and by the privileges reserved to the descendants of the prophet (*sharīf*). Finally, the authority exerted by powerful Arab families, who were directly in charge of some local administrations, prevented the loss of Arab traditions and costumes. All these factors contributed to the preservation of Arab identitarian self-awareness, which powerfully re-emerged in concomitance with the decline of the Ottoman empire, foreshadowing the Nahda.

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[75] Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, 31.
[76] Ibid., 33.
[77] Ibid.

c. *The specificity of Ottoman rule and its decline*

Since the end of the 16th century, the Ottoman empire entered the declining phase of its parable. It is possible to resume the situation as a conjunction of negative factors: lack of a strong and illuminated leadership, internal power struggles, decay of the administration, and erosion of the loyalties that were binding Janissaries[78] and *ʿulamāʾ* to the Sultan, all aggravated by an economic crisis. This situation fostered centrifugal forces and even local authorities appointed by the Sultan became a potential threat to the Empire as they could take advantage of the limited control exerted by the central authority.

Since the seventeenth century, central Arabia has been through crucial transformations. New tribes were challenging the supremacy of older ones, who tolerated Ottoman rule, by cutting trade routes and raiding pilgrims. The situation led the Arab provinces to become semi-autonomous, under the rule of Mamluks in Cairo, Baghdad, and Sidon; and by local families in Damascus and Mosul. However, in the XVIII century Arabia emerged as a challenge to the Ottoman's existence. The partnership between the Saud dynasty and Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb (1703-1787) constituted a meaningful challenge to Ottoman rule. Even though the foundation of the Saudi state was Islamic solidarity, Hourani affirms that it was "Arab in consciousness[79]" both due to its location and to the constant reference to the first days of Islam. Therefore, the new State was posing a twofold challenge to the Ottomans: on one side, the territorial threat, and on the other the religious-ideological defiance.

On the other hand, the Empire was being challenged by the rampant European industrial revolution of the 17th century. The blowout of European industry, especially in terms of warfare, determined an asymmetry that fatally contributed to Ottoman decline. Furthermore, European consulates were giving protected and privileged status to Ottoman Jews and Christians, establishing a special relation with influential religious minorities, such as the Maronites in modern Lebanon. Communities such as

[78] Elite trusted unit of the Sultan's troops, composed by infantry subtracted from Christian Balkan territories and converted to Islam.
[79] Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, 38.

the Armenians, the Greek and the Arabic-speaking Syrian Christians started to gain wealth and prestige, together with "communal consciousness."[80] Taking advantage of their privileged positions, Christians assumed a pivotal role in managing trade and diplomatic relations with European states, emerging as a highly educated class. Hourani stresses the importance of the Christian middle-upper class in posing the basis for an Arab cultural awakening: "In the early eighteenth century a number of Christians in Aleppo set themselves to master the sciences of the Arabic language," becoming "founders of the literary renaissance of the Arabs."[81] However, it must be noted that the cultural ferment interesting the 18th century Arab world was not limited to Christian communities. In this regard, it is necessary to consider the pivotal role of the Egyptian Rifāʿa Rāfiʿ Al-Ṭahṭāwī (1801-1873), who not only established the first school of translation of Western literature into Arabic, but initiated the publication of the first Arabic newspaper.[82]

Attempting to counter the decline of the Empire and face the challenges posed by the European model, the Ottoman Sultans engaged in a period of reform starting from the late 18th century, in correspondence with the treaty of Kücük Kaynarca that posed conclusion to the 1768–74 Russo-Turkish War.[83] The long path of reform, that continued throughout the 19th century investing the army, bureaucracy and law, peaked between 1826 and 1876. In this period, through the Tanzimat the Sultans attempted to overcome the *millet* system in favor of the concept of Ottoman citizenship.[84] Ayubi defines the Tanzimat as a "defensive modernization"[85], aimed at maintaining authority over the provinces and limiting European penetration within them. However, such reforms not only failed in reducing European influence in the area, but also fueled the debates about modernity and tradition, secularism and Islam. In the 19th century European colonialism stepped into the power dynamics of the region. In most cases, such as in Egypt, European powers approached the local governments as partners, including them in the capitalist system and therefore

[80] Ibid., 40.
[81] Ibid., 56.
[82] Francesca Maria Corrao, *Islam, religion and politcs* (Roma: LUISS University Press, 2016), 77.
[83] Ibid. 76.
[84] Marcella Emiliani, *Medio Oriente: Una Storia dal 1918 al 1991* (Urbino: Editori Laterza, 2012), 8.
[85] Ayubi, *Over-stating the Arab State*, 87.

exerting economic, political and cultural soft power. Only in the second stance there was an official appropriation of power and control, through the establishment of protectorates. In sum, the period between the 18th and 19th centuries witnessed slow but structural transformations. As will be better detailed in the next chapter, since the 19th century, European colonialism, the fading Ottoman rule, and the rising Arab political and cultural awareness have been intertwined. In such a background, the Arab world cultural and political expression reached its modern peak, generating two parallel phenomena addressing the seek for an identitarian definition: literally, the Nahda; politically, the multiple conceptualizations of nationalism.

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This first chapter provides a historical overview of how Arab identity evolved since the pre-Islamic era until the post-classical age. In doing so, the chapter took in consideration how Arabness intertwined with other identitarian catalysts, namely tribal affiliation, and Islam. In pre-Islamic Arabia the main identitarian criteria were kinship and, to some extent, religion. Whether or not pre-Islamic Arabs where conscious of shared collective identity is debated. While it is possible that awareness of a common cultural identity was present among tribes, there is no sign of a defined political identity. The rise of Islam enhanced unification and, through the Constitution of Medina, gave rise to a trans-religious political entity (u*mma*) with shared goals. However, the tension between Islamic universalism and tribal belonging was never defused. The rapid pace of conquest led Arabs to establish outside the Arabian Peninsula. At first, the confrontation with otherness stimulated cohesion among the early believers, that isolated themselves from the conquered populations. In Umayyad time, the perceived superiority of the Arab conquerors translated in the Arabization of power, while the recent converts maintained a lower status. However, the non-Arab component gained traction due to demographic reasons, leading to the downfall of Umayyads and the rise of Abbasid in 750. During Abbasid Caliphate the center of power was shifted eastwards, in Baghdad, and the Persian and Turk influence became predominant. Due to the marginalization of the Arab component, Islam imposed as identitarian catalyst. The intertwining of different cultures in the Baghdad court

triggered the developments of arts and sciences, generating the peak of the Golden Age. In this context, the Arabian Peninsula was territorially and culturally outcasted. Paradoxically, in the cultural center of Baghdad, an idealized imagery of Arabia and the Bedouin pre-Islamic past emerges, generating the process of "Bedouinisation of Arabness." In the meanwhile, the decentralization of power led to the emergence of several local dynasties within the territories of the Empire, until the complete downfall of Abbasid rule after Mongol invasion. In the multi-cultural and multi-religious context of the Ottoman empire, communities were identified based on religious affiliation. Arabness as a cultural identity survived latently thanks to the special role attributed to Arabic language in the management of religious and legal affairs. In the late phase of the Ottoman empire, administrative decentralization and European influence on Christian minorities created the premises of an Arab cultural revival.

II. Arab identity in modern and contemporary thought

In modern times, identity emerged as a protagonist of the cultural and political scene. The chapter assesses in first place the thought of intellectuals of the Nahda, concerned with the issue of cultural reform; with the posture to adopt *vis à vis* the growing European influence in the region; and with the issue of the future of the Caliphate. In second place, the chapter analyses different types of nationalism that arose as a consequence of both Ottoman decline and European colonialism. In particular, it is possible to distinguish between nationalisms based on Islamic identity, nationalisms based on Arabness and specifically on Arab language as identitarian criteria, and nationalisms based on particular territorial belonging. Each type of nationalism reveals a different identitarian conceptualization and, thus, the intertwining between identity and politics. In light of this relation, the chapter explores the formation of political parties in three pivotal countries, Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon. Within these countries, different parties embodied different conceptualizations of identity, testifying the existence of diverse and controversial feelings of belonging even within a narrow social and spatial context.

1. The awakening of Arab thought

With the waning Ottoman control, the Arab provinces of the Maghreb region experienced a greater level of autonomy from the central authority. Consequently, their history diverged further from that of the Empire, and their struggles increasingly became localized in nature. The European powers, particularly France and Great Britain progressively engaged in the area, first with the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt (1798-1801), then with the French occupation of Algeria (1830-1962), Tunisia (1881-1956) and Morocco (1912-1956). Egypt, before falling under British occupation in 1882, affirmed itself as the new cultural center of the Arab world, thanks both to the premises generated since the time of Abbasid rule and to the rule of Muḥammad Ali Pasha (d. 1849), who governed the country from 1805 to 1849. His main contribution can be resumed in the consolidation of the Egyptian military and administrative apparatus, in order to consolidate its independence from Ottomans. Nevertheless, he

incentivized the circulation of new ideas by fostering programs of education abroad, and ensured Egyptian society a grater margin of freedom from Ottoman censorship comparing to other Arab provinces. The conflation of these factors rendered Egypt the pulsing heart of Arab thought's awakening, the Nahda.

As noted by Pizzingrilli, the term *Nahda*, Arabic for renaissance, has a tortuous history that reflects the complexity and the diversity of the time.[86] In this thesis it is used to denote the debates and movements that enlivened the Arab world from the mid-19th to mid-20th century, a period of great transformations in the Arab world. In fact, the Nahda covers the ultimate declining phase of the Ottoman empire, with the emergence of proto-nationalist movements and the period of European colonization and the consequent emergence of nation-states, together with the demand for post-Ottoman and post-colonial visions of the Arab world. Naturally, this period of great political and social transformations deeply affected the identitarian sphere, modifying existing perceptions and boosting unedited ones. Religion's contribution to identity was questioned and differently assessed by authors according to their religious and educational background.

As resumed by Kassab, the main themes of the Nahda entailed the rise and fall of civilizations, political justice, science, religion, and gender.[87] On these topics, a plurality of authors from all over the Arab world produced different opinions, although all of them were inspired by the quest for Arab answers to the questions posed by modernity, by the political developments of the time and by the European challenge to self-determination. One interesting aspect is that a great portion of the authors who contributed to the Nahda's intellectual production were Christians, due to the emergence of a Christian highly educated class mentioned in section I.3.c. Inevitably, most of the Nahda debates fostered a "secular" view of Arab identity, inclusive of religious minorities even if seldom totally detached from the religious dimension. This section investigates some of the main figures of the first Nahda, in order to provide insights into their conceptualizations of Arabness and their contribute to Arab self-consciousness *vis à vis* Islam, Ottoman heritage, and European colonialism.

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[86] Pizzingrilli, "State and Legitimacy within an Arab-Muslim context," 11.
[87] Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, 20-21.

a. Nahda's pioneers

Since the latest phase of Ottoman rule, a fervid Arab literary and philosophical production started to emerge. The pioneering generation of the Nahda includes intellectuals born in the first two decades of the 19th century, many of which were Christian in origins. Those authors are fundamental as they first assessed the themes of modernity and secularism, while providing critical views of the Ottoman empire, shedding the basis for the development of the movement in a libertarian guise.

The peculiar position of Christians of Arab provinces in the late Ottoman empire triggered the flourishing of an intellectual production that deeply entails identitarian dynamics. In fact, as noted by Kassab, their minority status combined with their privileged relations with European powers kept them in a liminal space between East and West.[88] According to Hourani's distinction among a first and second generation of intellectuals, secularism was already discussed by the Arab Christians of the first generation, but the debate spread among Arab Muslims only later, while both maintained their peculiarities in the approach to secularism.[89] However, even among Christian secularist pioneers, different authors offer very diverse elaborations of this liminality in identitarian terms: while some stressed the bond with Europe and even alienated from their native environment, others focused preeminently on the Arab component. In both cases, secular views of society stem from the production of these intellectuals.

The first generation of pioneers includes Nāṣīf al-Yāzijī (1800– 1871), Aḥmad Fāris al-Shidyāq (1804– 1887), and Buṭrus al-Bustānī (1819– 1883).[90] The Lebanese Greek Catholic Al-Yāzijī contributed to the recovery and elaboration of Arab literary heritage, emulating the classical style and contributing to the translation of the Bible started by al-Bustāni. "Awake, O Arabs, and arise!" is the incipit of his famous ode to Arabism, *Tanabbahū wa-stafīqū* [Awake and Arise] of 1868[91]. This line, then

[88] Ibid., 31-32.
[89] Bingbing Wu, "Secularism and Secularization in the Arab World", *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (in Asia)*, 1 no. 1 (2007): 57.
[90] Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, 32.
[91] Martin Kramer, "Arab Nationalism: Mistaken Identity," *Daedalus* 122, no. 3 (1993), 171.

reported by the Lebanese writer George Antonius in his book *The Arab Awakening*, represents in a few words the impetus towards independence from the Ottoman rule of the early nationalist stances and the fervent cultural landscape.

Aḥmad Fāris al-Shidyāq, also from Mount Lebanon, moved first to Beirut and spent most of his life in exile after the brother was arrested for supporting Protestantism under the order of the Maronite Patriarch. Al-Shidyāq moved among great cultural capitals, such as Cairo, London, Paris, and Istanbul. Mārūn ʻAbbūd, his disciple, remembers him as a Westernized intellectual, that criticized the contradictions of both East and West[92]. The experience of the brother strongly oriented his ideas, making him a convinced secularist. Indeed, he argued for privatization of religion and overcoming of sectarianism in Lebanon. However, like many intellectuals of his era, he wasn't devoid of religious beliefs. He advocated for the supremacy of the State over religious institutions and promoted religious tolerance. Yet, he believed that principles of justice and equity, common to all religions, should serve as the guiding principles for governance.[93]

Buṭrus al-Bustānī is one of the key figures of the Nahda, remembered as the father of the movement, together with his wife Raḥīl ʼAtā, "the mother of the Nahda."[94] In his set of pamphlets, "The Clarion of Syria," Bustānī makes constant reference to the distinct concepts of religious, moral and civil sphere, and openly argues for a separation of religion and politics:

> *Anyone who studies the histories of religious communities and peoples knows the harm visited upon religion and people when religious and civil matters, despite the vast difference between them, are mixed. This mixing should not be allowed on religious or political grounds.*[95]

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[92] Fawwaz Traboulsi, "Ahmad Faris Al-Shidyaq (1804–87): The Quest for Another Modernity," in *Arabic Thought beyond the Liberal Age: Towards an Intellectual History of the Nahda*, ed. Jens Hanssen and Max Weiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 177.
[93] Ibid., 182.
[94] Christine B. Linder, "Rahil ʼAta al Bustani: Wife and Mother of the Nahda," in *Butrus al Bustani: Spirit of the Age*, ed. Adel Beshara (Melbourne: Phoenix Publishing, 2014), 52.
[95] Butrus Al-Bustani, *The Clarion of Syria: A Patriot's Call against the Civil War of 1860*, (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019), 95-96.

Besides his proto-secularist views, Bustānī's legacy in terms of diffusion of knowledge and modernization of Arabic language is immense, thanks to his encyclopedic compilation, his translation of the Bible, and the foundation of *al-Jinān* periodical, which argued for political justice as basis of civilizations.[96] His efforts in the promotion of Arab culture, freedom of thought and secularism contributed to the cultural renaissance at the basis of a renewed Arab identity.

The second generation of authors was strongly focused on science, freedom and criticizing the despotic forms of government. It includes, among the others, Fransīs Marrāš (1836– 1873), Shiblī Shumayyil (1850– 1917), Jurjī Zaydān (1861– 1914), and Faraḥ Anṭūn (1874– 1922). Shibli Shumayyil was a Lebanese Greek Catholic educated in medicine at the Syrian Protestant College of Beirut. Darwinist, argued against despotism and for the separation of state and religious power. He is often mentioned together with Faraḥ Anṭūn, who also was a Lebanese Christian that introduced secularist views in the Nahda's debate. Despite his anti-clerical attitudes, Anṭūn was not an atheist. Instead, he argued faith should merge with rationalism and science in a humanist perspective.[97] Anṭūn's reflection strongly invested identitarian issues. His conceptualization of collective identity (*umma*) is inherently liberal, in fact it is not based on religious or imperial affiliation, but rather on the concepts of citizenship, political rights and patriotism (*waṭaniyya*). Nonetheless, he was an Ottomanist, critical of both Arab and Turkish nationalism. In terms of self-perception, he identified as an "Easterner", meaning an intellectual who struggled to define a new social contract for Levantine people, just like al-Bustānī and al-Afghānī. Although vaguely, he elaborated a conception of Eastern solidarity which combined with Ottomanism could, in his view, prelude to a form of liberal nationalism.[98]

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[96] Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought,* 32.
[97] Wael Abu-ʿUksa, "Liberal Tolerance in Arab Political Thought: Translating Farah Antun (1874–1922)," *Journal of Levantine Studies* 3, no. 2 (Winter 2013): 153.
[98] Ibid., 154.

b. *Views of Europe*

The relationship between the Arab world and Europe became a source of deep reflection and introspection for both sides. In particular, in the Arab world, the confrontation with a different reality, following a different path towards modernization raised contrasting feelings. By one side, admiration and prolific cultural exchange; on the other, the feeling of being threatened by the influence of a troublesome neighbor and the need to resist its growing influence. In cultural terms, especially in the late 19th and early 20th century, it is possible to affirm that such confrontation stimulated interesting critique and reflections that largely entailed the identitarian dimension. In fact, as noted by Abu Zayd (d. 2010) "the other" functions as a mirror of the "self."[99] This section aims at reviewing the contribution of some of the authors that made the relation with Europe a core topic of their reflection, in order to understand the perceptions of Europe and how those evolved according to the geopolitical developments.

Rifāʿa Rāfiʿ Al-Ṭahṭāwī (1801-1873), educated in al-Azhar, took part to the first mission sent by the Muḥammad ʻAlī Pasha to study in Paris, where he stayed from 1826 to 1831. In Paris, Ṭahṭāwī plunged himself into the Enlightment thought, becoming familiar with the works of Voltaire, Montesquieu and Russeau.[100] Most importantly, he absorbed the concepts of active participation of people in government, of rule of law, of *amour de la patrie* as basis of political virtues.[101] Ṭahṭāwī tried to unravel the reasons behind European success while searching, albeit questionably, for parallels with the Islamic tradition.[102] He remained a critical observer that felt free to appreciate and dislike different aspects of French society. In this regard, Hourani writes:

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[99] Nasr Abu Zayd, "The other as mirror of self-understanding," interview by Reset DOC-Dialogues on civilizations, February 21, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5lfuHCUN63E.
[100] Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, 69.
[101] Ibid., 70.
[102] He found that justice was a shared aspect, while he identified French patriotism's counterpart as Islamic solidarity. Moreover, he observed that reason, prominently used in Western science, was also applied in jurisprudence, the most conventional Islamic field of study.

> *The French, he thought, were nearer to avarice than to generosity, and their men were slaves of their women—but he found much to praise: cleanliness, the careful and prolonged education of children, love of work and disapproval of laziness, intellectual curiosity ('they always want to get to the root of the matter'), and above all their social morality*[103]

As noted by Hourani, Ṭahṭāwī's view of power and state remains overall notably conservative and sticks to Islamic conventionalism. Although he was familiar with the concept of popular political participation, he continued to pursue the ideal of an Islamic autocracy inspired by the Islamic principles of justice and solidarity. However, his position appears relevant as it shows how, during his generation, Europe and the Arab-Islamic world were not conceptualized as two colliding realities, but rather as cultural universes with shared roots that could communicate, diverge and inspire one another. In Ṭahṭāwī's view, European progress was regarded as something to be inspired by, rather than an upcoming threat, but the rapid development of the political scene within the next two generations was meant to irreversibly change such perception, as will be exemplified by the analysis of the next author.

Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (1838– 1897) has been another crucial figure of the Nahda. His mysterious biography sees him travelling across Asia and Europe. His huge contribution to Arab-Islamic liberal thought is particularly remarkable in terms of rejection of the growing European influence in the Arab world. While many first-generation scholars were tolerant or even supportive of European interference, al-Afghānī 's reflection is a milestone in the critical view of Europe which later inspired other thinkers, namely Moḥammad 'Abduh.[104] In al-Afghānī's view, European powers were not inherently stronger than Islamic States. He recognizes science as a universal good regardless of what civilization plays a leading role in developing new knowledge: "this true ruler, which is science, is continually changing capitals.

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[103] Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, 71.

[104] Indeed, al-Afghānī witnessed the crucial shift in the balance of power among Ottoman empire and Europe that occurred starting from the late '70s of the 19th century, with the Treaty of Berlin (where Otto von Bismark leaded the reshaping of Ottoman influence over the Balkans), and French and British occupation of Tunisia and Egypt respectively.

Sometimes it has moved from East to West, and other times from West to East."[105] In this sense, he does not reject the scientific and technological revolution coming from Europe. Instead, he believes that Muslims, who have led the path of scientific discoveries for centuries, needed to "reactivate" the principle of rationality to face the European threat. In his fragmented theorization, he even admits that Islam, like any other religion, can impede the freedom of thought and therefore be inimical to science.[106] Although al-Afghānī's intellectual production lacks systematicity, his critique of political leaders, be they Arab or European, and his resolute opposition to the impending European colonialism constitutes the red thread of his thought. His view of collective identity is strongly related to such ideal of resistance against colonial interference. In fact, he argues for Islamic unity beyond national boundaries, emphasizing the belonging to the *umma* over ethnic and national sub-identities. Such unity is considered an essential asset *vis à vis* European power. Although he recognizes the greatness of Arab heritage, the conceptualization of identity that can be evinced by his contribution goes beyond Arabness, insofar as it is centered around the call for Pan-Islamic unity:

> *When men recognize the existence of the Supreme Judge... they will leave it entirely to the possessor of sacred power to safeguard good and repel evil. No longer will they have any need for an ethnic sentiment which has lost its purpose and whose memory has been erased from their souls; judgment belongs to Allah, the Sublime, the Magnificent. That is the secret of the aversion which Muslims have for manifestations of ethnic origin in every country where they live. That is why they reject all clan loyalty with the exception of Islamic sentiment and religious solidarity. The believers in Islam are preoccupied neither with their ethnic origins nor with the people of which they are a part because they are loyal to their faith; they*

[105] Sayyid Jamal Al-Din Al-Afghani, "An Islamic Response to Imperialism," in *Islam in Transition: Muslim Perspectives*, ed. John J. Donohue and John L. Esposito (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 14. https://archive.org/details/islam-in-transition-muslim-perspectives/mode/2up
[106] Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, 26.

have given up a narrow bond in favor of a universal bond: the bond of faith.[107]

As mentioned above, Afghānī deeply influenced the reflection of following intellectuals. Among them, his disciple Moḥammad ‘Abduh became extremely influential in the context of reformist Islamic thought. ‘Abduh (1849–1905) was a prominent Egyptian scholar and a central figure of the Nahda movement. His primary focus was on reconciling Islam with modernity during a time of rapid social transformation. His most significant contribution lies in crafting a “conciliatory” approach to Islam, where religious beliefs and jurisprudence embrace reason, science, and progress. Because of his reformist views, he was exiled to France, where he got in contact with his main mentor, al-Afghānī. Once he was repatriated in 1888, ‘Abduh wrote: “I went to the West and saw Islam, but no Muslims; I got back to the East and saw Muslims, but not Islam.”[108] This quote exemplifies ‘Abduh’s view according to which some core values are universal, and remands to the issue of cultural and spiritual decay that was already addressed by al-Afghānī. The conciliatory path suggested by ‘Abduh hinges on interpreting sacred texts through modern lenses. Consequently, he vehemently rejected the uncritical imitation of both traditional Islamic practices and European modernity. However, just as his mentor, ‘Abduh was criticized by other contemporaries and later intellectuals as a conservative. Indeed, ‘Abduh never abandoned the idea of an Islamic state nor the belief that laws should be codified “out of the Sharia and not in independence.”[109]

Regarding the foundation of the civil state (*dawla madaniyya*), ‘Abduh engaged in a debate with the secularist Anṭūn. The core divergence among the two views is that, while ‘Abduh thought of religion as the founding element of political life and collective identity – although at certain reformist conditions, Anṭūn was convinced of the impossibility of creating a competitive and modern political system based on religion. The search for cross-religious common values, the quest for tolerance, the concept of rule of law are common to both Anṭūn and ‘Abduh. The

[107] Al-Afghani, “Islamic Solidarity,” 17.
[108] Ahmed Hasan, “Democracy, Religion and Moral Values: A Road Map Towards Political Transformation in Egypt,” *Foreign Policy Journal*, July 2, 2011.
[109] Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, 257.

notion of tolerance took a central stage in the political and religious discussions concerning the "civil state" (*dawla madaniyya*) and the membership of the political community.[110] Tolerance, as well as *madaniyya*, was embraced by both the liberalist and the Islamist intellectuals: both aimed at realizing a civil state, except the former, like Anṭūn, believed the *madaniyya* was necessarily secular, while the seconds, here represented by ‘Abduh, interpreted it as the political embodiment of the true religious values. The debate highlights how, during the Nahda, the internal transformations as well as the European challenge raised important questions that directly involved the identitarian sphere. As noted by Abū ’Uksa, Anṭūn’s secularism based on individual citizenship and rights was posing an existential challenge to Islamic reformists such as al-Afghānī and ‘Abduh, who were trying to develop a new political culture within an Islamic framework:

> *The idea of individualizing religious belief and, in so doing, individualizing membership in the religious umma, was perceived as a direct threat to the sacred ties of Islam and its superiority as a collective identity and religious faith. Furthermore, combining the conflicting components of the concept of the civil state with the concept of religion was unendurable.*[111]

As will be clarified later, the issues raised in the context of the debate among ‘Abduh and Anṭūn affirmed as recurrent thematic patterns within the Nahda framework as well as in the nationalist debate. In this regard, ‘Abduh represented a crossroad for the later Islamic critique. In fact, two currents of thought stemmed from his reflection. While the first will emphasize the secular component and develop moderate approaches, the other will accentuate the Islamic stances and erupt into the elaboration of political Islam.

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[110] Wael Abu-ʿUksa, “Liberal Tolerance in Arab Political Thought,” 155.
[111] Ibid., 154.

c. *Rethinking the Caliphate*

As the Ottoman Empire crumbled, not only did nationalist sentiments arise; so did also the reflection around the destiny of the Caliphate. Such institution represented the political structure that governed the *umma* for centuries. As discussed in Chapter I, the initial Arab-Islamic identity revolved around the Caliphate. As Ottoman leaders sought to legitimize their waning power by assuming the title of Caliph, their downfall implied the decline of those holding the role of *umma* leaders. Given these circumstances, rethinking the Caliphate in the context of the Ottoman decline and contemporary challenges became incredibly urgent and relevant to the identitarian sphere. Furthermore, the prospect to reinstate religious authority in the Arab world was considered an opportunity to restore the ancient prestige of the Golden Age and liberate Arab territories from foreign occupation. This section examines the perspectives of two authors, 'Abd al-Rahman al-Kawākibī (1848-1902) and ‘Ali ‘Abd al-Rāziq (1888–1966), who present differing views but share common concerns about the future of the Caliphate. By comparing their contributions, we can highlight key arguments surrounding the Caliphate.

Al-Kawākibī’s contribute is particularly significant when looking at conceptualizations of Arab identity. In fact, he is considered one of the precursors of Arab nationalism.[112] Al-Kawākibī’s reflection stems from the radical critique of tyranny and despotism, that he identifies as the main cause of cultural and social decline. In his masterpiece, *The nature of Tyranny*, he analyzed the interrelation of tyranny and religion, knowledge, honor, wealth, ethics, and progress. He believed that true Islam is based on freedom and justice, but true faith was corrupted by the instrumentalization of tyrants to justify their oppression: “every political tyrant adopts some sacred adjectives alongside God, or assumes a position related to God. Tyrants always surround themselves with clergymen supporters to help them in suppressing

[112] Born in Aleppo in 1848, Kawākibī was a prolific journalist who published several articles in important Arab newspapers such as al-Manār and al- Ṣaḥba, strongly opposing Ottoman domain and arguing for freedom and reform. Persecuted by the Ottoman regime, he moved between North Africa and India just to settle in Cairo in 1898, where he was assassinated in 1902. Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, 35-36.

people in the name of God."[113] In order to overcome despotism and achieve a political and religious reform, Kawākibī focuses on Arab identity. In his view, expressed in his work *Umm al-Qurā*, the Caliphate should be specifically a religious and spiritual institution and its center should be placed back to Mecca. The return of religious power, embedded in the Caliphate, to the Arab world is a core argument of Kawākibī's reflection. According to the author, the quest for the return of power to Arabs is motivated by some intrinsic characteristics of the Arabs, which are connate to their Bedouin roots, making them the most eligible for detaining religious power: on the one hand, the Bedouin tradition is centered around the values of pride, solidarity, and freedom, which are natural antidotes to tyranny. On the other, the special role that Arab culture and language historically played in the revelation, in the codification of the Qur'ān and in the Islamic expansion makes Arabs the direct inheritors of the guide of the *umma* throughout a phase of very needed reform after centuries of corrupted Turk domination.[114] His conviction that Ottomans should maintain the political power, while Arabs should reappropriate of the religious one, suggests a secularist trait within his reflection. More precisely, in his view the linguistic/cultural element and the religious one are functional to one another. In fact, the renewed Islamic Caliphate under Arab guise would be a means for Islamic reform but also for reaffirming Arabic language and culture: to this extent, Kawākibī is considered as "one of the early proponents of a Pan-Arabism stemming from Pan-Islamism."[115] In this sense, he can be included among the precursors of Arab nationalism, although he never advocated for a political independence of Arab lands from the Ottoman empire.

Two decades later the issue of the relocation of the Caliphate gained new traction due to the abolition of the institution by Kemal Ataturk in 1924. One year later, the Egyptian thinker 'Alī 'Abd al-Rāziq, in his *Al-Islam wa Uṣul al-Ḥukm* [Islam and the Principles of Governing] approaches the matter from a divergent point of view comparing to Kawākibī, revealing different views of Arab identity. Rāziq

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[113]Abdul Rahman Al-Kawakibi, *The Nature of Tyranny: And the devastating effects of oppression*, trans. by Amer Chaikhouni (London: Hurst Publishers, 2021), chap. 2, https://www.perlego.com/book/3127651/the-nature-of-tyranny-and-the-devastating-results-of-oppression-pdf.

[114] Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, 36.

[115] Ibid.

questions the concept of Caliphate itself, as a religious and political institution, arguing that there is no element in the Qur'ān nor in the history of Islam that suggests the necessity of the Caliphate.[116] Instead, he believes that such necessity is purely a perception, that originates from a confused way of interpreting the early phases of the issue of succession to the Prophet. As the first leaders of the *umma* were virtuous, or *rāshidūn*, the idea of a merged religious and political leadership consolidated. However, corrupt rulers gained power and instrumentalized religion to their ends, at the expense of people's freedom and critical thinking: "in the name of religion they betrayed them and snuffed out their intelligence in such a way that they could find no recourse other than religion even in questions of simple administration and pure politics."[117] Rāziq's affirmations raised violent criticism, with some accusing him of promoting Western dominance by undermining the strength of Islam. This was attributed to his assertion of a division between the spiritual and political aspects, a concept considered foreign to the Islamic context. However, according to Kassab, Rāziq did not overcome the concept of Islamic Caliphate. Instead, he understood it as "democratic and free, based on consultation, deriving its legitimacy from the community of believers and not from God independently from this community."[118]

Kawākibī and Rāziq's theories of the Caliphate are interesting to analyze and compare because they implicitly reflect their identitarian conceptions. Although neither of them excludes the religious dimension from their reflection, they privilege the Arab component when thinking about identity. In Kawākibī's thought, identity revolves around the pursuit of independence and unification. In this sense, empowering the common cultural heritage of Arabs, together with its distinctive values, is the key to achieving independence while encompassing social and cultural reform. In other words, he highlights the Arab component in order to create a narrative of unity, self-reliance, and pride, exhorting Arabs to undertake a path toward progress and prosperity while reaffirming their own roots. Al-Rāziq is also concerned about finding an Arab path towards modernity. He does so by stressing the need to

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[116] Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, 40.
[117] Ali Abdel Raziq, "The Caliphate and the Bases of Power," in *Islam in Transition: Muslim Perspectives*, ed. John J. Donohue and John L. Esposito (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 31. https://archive.org/details/islam-in-transition-muslim-perspectives/mode/2up
[118] Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, 41.

liberate the political domain from religious influence, and in this sense his conceptualization of identity is preeminently secular. He emphasizes that the Caliphate, as a governing structure, evolved because it was functional to the Arab society at the time. By doing so, he rejects the necessity of linking the social and political identity with the religious one, which prevents equal treatment for all Arabs. In his perspective, religion should be a personal matter but not intervene in public governance, allowing society to achieve unity and progress by relying on the rich and diverse Arab heritage.

2. Contours of Allegiance: Exploring Varied Strains of Nationalisms

The phenomenon of nationalism in the Arab world is incredibly multifaceted. This section aims to provide an overview of different nationalist stances, revealing the strict link between nationalisms and conceptualizations of identity. As Corm notes: "The importance of identity comes from the fact that it forges political and social allegiances, and no power can be indifferent to this."[119] Indeed, the question of Arab identity emerged in concomitance with the so-called first Nahda, when the region was affected by European influence, before, and colonialism, after, and by the progressive disaggregation of the Ottoman Empire. Furthermore, the European nation-state model, previously observed by Arab intellectuals during their European stays, then imposed by the colonial powers, sharpened the urge for such identitarian reflection. The identitarian issue involved the prioritization of the feeling of belonging to one specific community and the organization of territories and populations accordingly. To that end, the Islamic *umma*, the Ottoman Empire, the Arab community and the emerging country-based national identities were engaged in complex dynamics of exclusion and integration. Therefore, different nationalist perspectives emerged. This section aims at considering the phenomenon of nationalism in its plurality.

In the next paragraphs, such perspectives will be illustrated referring to three categories, for the sake of clarity. The first will include those views that conferred to the religious element the status of funding element of the community, placing

[119] Corm, *Arab Political Thought*, 104.

themselves in continuity with the reflection of al-Afghānī and ‘Abduh. The second will examine approaches that place the linguistic element at the core of identity and nation building, in line with what is defined as Pan-Arabism and Arab nationalism, (*qawmiyya* in Arabic). The third will briefly explore the contribution of those intellectuals that argued for a “country-based nationalism,” or *waṭaniyya*.

a. Religion as identitarian catalyst

Looking at identitarian conceptualization through geopolitical lenses, it is possible to affirm that Pan-Islamism in the modern era was first used by the Ottoman Empire as a natural response to the need of identitarian affirmation *vis à vis* European expansion. Indeed, as the Sublime Porte was facing cultural, economic and strategic pressure from the West, it was needed to strengthen the interior front, which happened to be extremely diverse both in ethnic and religious terms. The strategy adopted by the Sultans was then to use Islam as a catalyst of collective identity, drawing a distinction between the Christian Europe and the Islamic East. As observed by Corm, the image of Europe was largely linked to Christianity, due to the intensive migration of Catholic and Protestant missionaries to the Arab and Turkish lands. Therefore, Islam emerged as a common distinctive element that could include transversally Arabs and Turks[120].

During the Nahda, it is possible to observe a line of thought, composed mainly by scholars gravitating around Al-Azhar, who found in Islam the catalyst element of collective identity. In this sense, such thinkers are located under the broad category of Pan-Islamists. Corm remarks that, in this first phase, Pan-Islamism (late 19th - early 20th centuries) was strongly committed to assess the issue of cultural decline, conciliate Islam and modernity, and forge a prolific dialogue with Europe. In general, it can be described as progressive, reformist and anti-imperialist. Contrary to the later elaboration of Pan-Islamism that functioned as a backbone to trans-nationalist Islamist movements of the 20th and 21st century, during the Nahda the religious environments

[120] Corm, *Arab Political Thought*, 107.

have been pivots of an enlightened Islam and the breeding ground of a prolific critique.[121]

Among the thinkers that placed belonging to the Islamic *umma* at the core of their reflection there are of course the abovementioned al-Afghānī, ‘Abduh, and al-Kawākibī. In addition, it is necessary to look at the contributions of Aḥmad Amīn (1886-1954) and Rashīd Ridā (1865-1935). The first was an Egyptian scholar educated in Al-Azhar, remembered for his extensive history of Islamic civilization in eight volumes.[122] Amīn’s contribution is exemplificative of the openness that characterized the Nahda period even within the religious environments. He was critical of his predecessors and found the abandonment of the Mutazilite doctrine in the 9th century as one of the crucial moments of the history Islamic civilization, that condemned it to decline. His view of identity is strictly connected to his progressist stances regarding education and gender equality. He advocated for a renewed society that could rely on the contribution of education as a catalyst of progress. Through education, it would be possible to build a modern society aware of its cultural heritage. At the same time, he saw the empowerment of women through education, equal rights and opportunities as fundamental for a flourishing Arab society. In such context, Islam was to be harmonized with modernity in order to avoid traditionalism and fulfil the goal of a healthy Arab society responsive to the modern circumstances.

The second figure, that of Rashīd Ridā, gained popularity among scholars of the second half of the 20th century as his thought became the basis for the Islamist reflection of Ḥasan al-Bannā and Sayyid Quṭb. Originally from present-day Lebanon, he met ‘Abduh in Tripoli and became one of his closest disciples. Some of the intellectuals gravitating around ‘Abduh, such as Qāsim Amīn and ‘Abd al-Rāziq, focused on the reformist element and emphasized the need for modernization, opening their reflection to partially secular views. Ridā, on the opposite, is representative of a different line of thought that emerged from ‘Abduh’s reflection. He prioritized the Islamic element and identified the early phase of Islam as the inspiring model to face the challenges posed by modernity and moral decline.[123] The lack of unity within the

[121] Ibid., 107 and 114.
[122] Ibid., 117.
[123] Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, 29.

umma is, for all the thinkers here analyzed, a fundamental issue. According to Ridā, solution can be found only by resorting to the Islam of the origins or of the "Elders" (*salaf*). As Hourani summarizes, "the Islam of the 'Elders' is that of the first generation who had known Muḥammad, and the only *ijmā'* which is valid is that of this generation."[124] Ridā's thought, although inspired by 'Abduh, went further in the rigid elaboration of the *salafiyya*. Remarkably, he defined Islam "the religion of the Arabs."[125] However, by analyzing Ridā's view of the Caliphate, it is possible to affirm that his conception of *umma* and political identity is prominently based on the Islamic component rather than the Arab one. In fact, after the decline of the Ottomans, he argued for a collaboration and unification of Arabs and Turks as members of the *umma* in order to restore the Caliphate. He believed Arabs were the only ones to master Arabic language and therefore able to preserve the true spirit of Islam, on the other hand Turks had a solid tradition of political cohesion and leadership that was crucial to the unification of the *umma.*[126] Interestingly, Ridā wondered how a renewed Islamic Caliphate could impact on the status of religious minorities. Looking at the aftermaths of the Young Turks' revolution of 1908, he concluded that Jews and Christians would enjoy a better position in an Islamic State rather that a secular one. His argument is based on the distinction between justice (foundation of an authentic Islamic state) and natural solidarity (basic principle of a secular nation). According to Ridā, the latter could not create a true link among communities, so hatred and persecution would emerge. Justice could, instead, constitute the foundation of a political and moral system where everybody enjoyed rights and freedoms.[127]

b. Language as identitarian catalyst

As explained above, the concept of nationalism in the Arab world is plural. However, when speaking of Arab nationalism, we refer to a specific political movement and ideology, that al-Ḥakm Durūzaand Ḥamīd Jabūrī described as follows:

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[124] Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, 230.
[125] Citation of al-Manar, xxviii (1927-8), 1 ff, in Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, 232.
[126] Ibid., 241-242.
[127] Ibid., 244.

> *Arab nationalism is that distinctive communal characteristic of a group of people which is given the name 'Arab' or the 'Arab nation', or more succinctly, it is a sense of the total historical, linguistic, cultural and social realities of life including shared customs, traditions, interests, aims, experiences and established truths. It is this that makes the Arab nation a discrete single social and historical unit based on the interaction of numerous national ties which it has in common. Every person who speaks Arabic and traces his origins to Arab history or is proud of that history and internalizes it belongs to Arab nationalism. Such a person belongs to Arab society and the Arab homeland which extends from the Atlantic in the west to the Arabian Gulf and the Iranian highlands in the east, from the Taurus mountains and the Mediterranean in the north to Yemen and the southern coast of the Arabian Peninsula on the Indian Ocean and the African Sahara in the south.*[128]

As expressed in this detailed definition, within the context of Arab nationalism several factors contributed to the shaping of identity: the common historical background; the shared costumes, traditions, and beliefs; the linguistic element and the territorial one, alongside with awareness and pride towards such heritage. Among those elements, the linguistic one is of particular interest since many thinkers of the past and the present find in it the red thread that crosses all Arab societies despite of their multifaceted diversity. In this regard, Hourani's definition of Arab nationalism is exemplificatory: "those who speak Arabic form a 'nation', and […] this nation should be independent and united."[129] This definition shows that, as the first wave of Islamic thinkers assumed Islam as the catalyst of common identity and the base of a possible Pan-Islamic "state", Arab nationalists placed language at the core of their identitarian consciousness, and therefore, at the base of the potential Pan-Arab nation. Among

[128] Al-Ḥakm Durūza, and Ḥamīd Jabūrī, *Qirāʾāt fī-l-fikr al-qawmī* [Readings on the Nationalist Idea], cited in Ali, Abdulrahim et al., eds, *The Different Aspects of Islamic Culture*, Vol. 6 Part I (Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 2016), 239-240.
[129] Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, 260.

those, Sāṭi‘ al-Ḥusrī and Zakī al-Arsūzī are two of the main scholars to underline the role of shared Arabic language in shaping a common Arab identity.

Sāṭi‘ al-Ḥusrī (1880-1968)[130] was a scholar of Syrian descent, born in Yemen and educated in Istanbul "more as a Turk than an Arab."[131] He is one of the most lucid and influential proponents of a secular Arab nationalism. Ḥusrī's view was not only influenced by the English and French approaches to nationalism, that are bonded to the concept of state, but most relevantly by the cultural nationalism of German thinkers such as Herder and Fichte.[132] Indeed, Ḥusrī criticized the Renanian idea of a nationalist belonging based on the individual will, arguing that the national belonging, or identity, is based on objective factors. In particular, firstly language and secondly historical background determine national belonging: "a man is, or is not, an Arab whether he wants to be or not"[133] and "the Arab nation consists of all who speak Arabic as their mother-tongue, no more, no less."[134] Therefore, the nation is, in its essence, predetermined and eternal.[135] Remarkably, Ḥusrī disentangles national identity from the State adopting Herder's conceptualization of nation, wherein the nation holds a sacred and everlasting essence, while the state merely functions as its administrative machinery.[136]

Another author that, similarly to Ḥusrī, placed language at the basis of national identity is the Alawite Zakī al-Arsūzī (1899-1968), founder of the Ba‘athist doctrine together with Michel ‘Aflaq.[137] In his first publication, significantly titled *The Genius*

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[130] Ḥusrī's idea of nationalism was deeply influenced by the European experience and by the cultural and political environment of the Young Turks. After Ottoman downfall, he joined King Fayṣal's government as Minister of Education, first in Damascus and later in Iraq. In Iraq he influenced the formation of an Arab self-consciousness. After being exiled from Iraq, he moved to Beirut and to Cairo, where he served in the Arab league. His contribution on Arab nationalism, which he published at an advanced age, contains the ideas elaborated throughout his years of public service.

[131] Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, 312.

[132] Adeed Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016) chap. 3, https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/739521/0.

[133] Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, 313.

[134] Translation from Husri, *Ara' wa ahadith fi'l-wataniyya wa'l-qazvmiyya*, p. 44, cited in Ibid.

[135] Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, chap. 3.

[136] Pizzingrilli, "State and Legitimacy within an Arab-Muslim context,"78.

[137] Arsūzī was an Alawite philosopher from Alexandretta, present day Turkey despite its mostly Arab population at the time of annexation (1938). Together with the most notorious Michel ‘Aflaq, Arsūzī is one of the founders of the Ba‘athist doctrine, however, his life and thought having been overlooked by scholarship, especially in the West. He studied in France and after the failure of his struggles to make Alexandretta part of the Arab Syria, he was exiled to the South, where he kept grieving for the loss of

of Arabism Is In Its Language, Arsūzī exposes the core arguments of his ideology, which is, at least in this phase, influenced by Ḥusrī and the German cultural nationalism.[138] He believes that each nation is defined by a "spirit" or "genius", which is unique and determines its values and world view. Such spirit is given by a metaphysic entity, possibly God, and is experienced at its purest during the early phase of a nation's life. In such primordial phase, the national spirit is uncorrupted and vital, therefore the nation undergoes its Golden Age, achieving military conquests and cultural development. Nonetheless, in such phase people's cultural identity is created. Through time, the original spirit can be jeopardized by other cultures' influence, causing the nation's decline and eventually the erosion of national identity.[139] Arsūzī attributes the decline of Arab culture to the assimilation of non-Arab population at the time of Islamic expansion. As a philosopher of cultural renewal, he argued for the necessity a modern education system that could enhance the knowledge of Arabic language and history: in his view, language was the sole tool apt at constructing a national Arab identity. He also provides an elaborate analysis of the Arabic language and its derivational and onomatopoeic structure originated from elements of nature.[140] An example of such derivative feature can be found in regard of the word nation itself, that Arsūzī defines as *umma*:

> *The terms nation ('umma) and mother ('umm) derived from the same root, and the mother is the living image of the nation, and like subjects of the society is the mother with its sons, and above all the nation is the fountainhead of customs and public institutions.*[141]

According to Arsūzī, the derivative feature of Arabic language testifies its direct link with the metaphysical sphere: "The fact that Arabic words are not symbols, but determinants of their own meaning, signifies a divine plan which created the

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his homeland. Saleh Omar, "Philosophical Origins of the Arab Ba'th Party: The Work of Zaki al-Arsuzi," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (Spring 1996), 23.

[138] Rahaf Aldoughli, et al., "Revisiting Ideological Borrowings in Syrian Nationalist Narratives: Sati 'al-Husri, Michel 'Aflaq and Zaki al-Arsuzi." *Syria Studies* 8, no. 1 (2016): 26.

[139] Omar, "Philosophical Origins of the Arab Ba'th Party," 24.

[140] For a detailed description of Arsuzi's analysis of Arabic language, see Ibid., 27-29.

[141] Aldoughli, "Revisiting Ideological Borrowings in Syrian Nationalist Narratives," 27.

Arabic language and its speakers for a predestined purpose."[142] Unlike Ḥusrī, Arsūzī introduces the element of racial superiority when referring to Arab peoples, based on kinship, arriving to the point of condemning interracial marriages. It is worth mentioning that after the failure of the United Arab Republic experiment, Arsūzī reconsidered his positions about nationalism. Clearly, Arsūzī's view of the nation evolved from an entity responsible for Pan-Arab unity to that of a political institution oriented towards the well-being of society. In fact, he admits:

> *When I came back from Paris I had a racial orientation in my feelings of brotherhood for the human race which exists in all human beings… When I reached this stage – the stage in which the divisive limits between individuals and communities fall – I became a refuge for all and strived for our highest ideal to establish a state which would guarantee to its citizens freedom and dignity, be they Armenians, Kurds, or Turks.*[143]

The linguistic aspect remains a consistent and prominent thread that continues to emerge when examining various interpretations of Arab identity, up to the present day. Even authors that did not place language at the core of identity as univocally as Ḥusrī and Arsūzī recognized its significance. Among these, Qunsṭanṭīn Zurayq, Ṭaha Ḥusayn, Sayyid al-Marṣafī, Michel 'Aflaq, Muḥammad Mazāli and Adonis.

c. Country-based nationalism

The Pan-Arabist project was further declined in different movements and political experiments, among which the Nasserist one in Egypt, the Ba'athist one in Syria and Iraq and the Arab Nationalist Movement.[144] Concurrently, during the interwar period, a different form of nationalism emerged in the Mashriq. This form, characterized as territorial-patriotic nationalism or country-based nationalism (*waṭaniyya*), gained

[142] Omar, "Philosophical Origins of the Arab Ba'th Party," 30.
[143] Ibid., 29.
[144] Corm, *Arab Political Thought*, 150.

prominence. Arab intellectuals across the region developed nationalist perspectives that centered around the notion of *waṭan*, emphasizing a territorially defined identity.[145] One of the most prominent examples of *waṭaniyya* can be found in Egypt, and it is embedded in the thought of Ṭaha Ḥusayn. However, Bashkin underlines how the two types of nationalism were, to some extent, in dialogue and the ideas elaborated in the context of Egyptian *waṭaniyya* by impactful thinkers such as Ṭaha Ḥusayn also influenced *qawmī* reflections.[146]

Ṭaha Ḥusayn (1889-1973) was born in rural Egypt and affected by blindness at the age of two. Nevertheless, he managed to be educated at al-Azhar and Cairo University and became one of the most influential thinkers of the Nahda and of Egyptian nationalism.[147] His reflection about Egypt moves from the belief that the country enjoyed a unique history and cultural heritage comparing to the rest of the Arab world, and therefore it belonged to the European-Mediterranean cultural basin rather than to the Arab-Islamic one.[148] Influenced by Ibn Khaldūn and by the French positivists, such as Comte, Renan and Durkheim, Ḥusayn argued for a Europeanization of Egypt in order to accelerate its political, economic and cultural development and extinguish the perception of inferiority among the Egyptian people:

> *Believe me, dear reader, our real national duty, once we have obtained our independence and established democracy in Egypt, is to spend all we have and more, in the way of strength and effort, of*

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[145] 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 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," 19-22.

[146] Orit Bashkin, "Hybrid Nationalisms: Watanī and Qawmī Visions in Iraq Under Abd Al-Karim Qasim, 1958–61," *Internal Journal of Middle East Studies*, 43 (2011), 294.

[147] 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 autobiographic volumes and, most importantly to this analysis, the publication *The future of culture in Egypt* (1938). Corm, *Arab Political Thought*, 119.

[148] Mohammed Hashas, "Arab Mediterranean Islam: Intellectual and Political Trends," in *States, Actors and Geopolitical Drivers in the Mediterranean*, eds. Francesca Maria Corrao and Riccardo Redaelli (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2021), 151.

> *time and money, to make Egyptians feel, individually and collectively, that God has created them for glory not ignominy, strength and not weakness, sovereignty and not submission, renown and not obscurity, and to remove from their hearts the hideous and criminal illusion that they are created from some other clay than Europeans, formed in some other way, and endowed with an intelligence other than theirs.*[149]

Ḥusayn downplayed the significance of language and religion in the nation-building process, contending that they are not the primary elements of a national identity. Instead, he focused on the territorial feeling of belonging. According to Hourani, a more relevant role is the one attributed to the Arabic language. Despite Ḥusayn's attempt to distance Egypt from the rest of the Arabic-speaking countries, he acknowledged the importance of Arabic in the construction of Egyptian civilization. Furthermore, he regards Egypt as the pivot of Arab culture and as the only country that maintained Arab culture alive *vis à vis* Turkish occupation. Thus, he believed the country had the mission of spreading modern knowledge in Arabic.

Within the galaxy of Egyptian *waṭaniyya*, other authors, such as Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm, assumed even more radical positions regarding the preeminence of Egyptian identity over the Arab one. For instance, in his *'Awdat al-Rūḥ* (The Return of the Soul), Ḥakīm argues that Egyptian's spirit and mindset did not resemble the Arab one, by contrasting "the basic decency of the Egyptian with the militant bellicosity of the Arab Bedouin."[150] Generally speaking, Dawisha affirms that in the interwar period, although Pan-Arabism had fervent supporters in Egypt, country-based nationalism was the most popular ideology, while Arab identity "was depicted as spiritually bankrupt and intellectually backward."[151]

Another country interested by territorial nationalism was Syria. The evolution of the concept of a Syrian nation stretches through history and among scholars of different orientation, to an extent that it is not possible to resume it in this dissertation.

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[149] Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, 330.
[150] Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, chap. 4.
[151] Ibid., chap. 4.

However, forerunners of the Syrian nationhood are Bustānī, Jurjī al Zaydān, Khalīl al-Khūrī, Khalīl Jibrān and many others. Among them, Anṭūn Sa'ādeh, who in 1932 founded the Syrian Popular Party (*al-ḥizb al-sūrī al-qawm*)[152], is considered "the architect of Syrian nationalism *par excellence*"[153]. Sa'ādeh argued that Syria was affected by a national impoverishment due to centuries of foreign occupation: the Arab-Islamic conquest first, then the Ottoman empire domain and lastly the French protectorate established through the Sykes-Picot agreements. That considered, the ruling class embraced the Arab cause, primarily drove by religious motifs, as it was popular and reflected the social, economic and political structure, fossilized in tribalism, religious sectarianism and feudalism. In his view, the lack of a clear national identity, jeopardized by a system of fluctuating loyalties, was the ultimate cause of the failure of Syrian independency after the fall of the Ottoman empire. Thus, one of the most pressing matters for Sa'ādeh is to define a new common image of Syria, that could lead to political reforms and modernism, with the ultimate goal of independence. He elaborates his image of Syria based on five main features. The first point regards the perception of Syria as a diverse melting-pot that included, in its historical stages, Akkadians, Canaanites, Chaldaeans, Assyrians, Aramaeans, Ammorites and Hittities. Rejecting the "Syrian race theory", he finds in this diverse social fabric the reason of cultural advancement and he places the creation of Syrian identity before the Arab conquest. Another aspect he emphasizes is the territorial one, stating that Syria enjoys a unique continuity of land and clear-cut borders that played a role in developing a specific national identity. Another element is that of Arabness. Similarly to Ḥusayn in Egypt, Sa'ādeh recognizes the importance of Arabism in Syria and the role it played in shaping the cultural and social landscape: in his view, "Syria is *an* Arab nation, but not necessarily *the* Arab nation or *part of* an Arab nation."[154] However, resembling the elaboration that can be found in Ḥakīm's pharaonism and in the Lebanese phoenicianism, he argues that "The Arab mind remains in its state of simple nature and is far from grasping compound organizational phenomenon,"

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[152] Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, 317.
[153] Adel Beshara, ed., *The Origins of Syrian Nationhood*, (New York: Routledge, 2012), chap. 17, https://www.perlego.com/book/1684558/the-origins-of-syrian-nationhood-histories-pioneers-and-identity-pdf.
[154] Ibid.

suggesting a state of inferiority compared to the Syrian indigenous mind. Lastly, another common element with Ṭaha Ḥusayn's thought is Mediterraneanism:

> *The myth that Syria is an Eastern nation has long been discarded. The Syrian nation is not an Eastern nation nor has an Eastern soul, but a Mediterranean nation that has the soul of modern civilisation whose foundations were laid in Syria.*[155]

Another type of country-based nationalism that bears some resemblance to the Egyptian and the Syrian is the Lebanese one. Lebanese nationalism arose in the 1940s and its exponents, among which Charles Corm, Michel Chiha, and Sa'īd 'Aql, were usually educated in Europe and deeply influenced by European political thought. Those thinkers believed in the existence of a separate Lebanese nation with Phoenician origin, that evolved until the present day. The constituent factors of such a nation were, first, the territorial one, characterized by the mountains that made it impregnable; second, the demographic one. In fact, they believed in the continuity of a population that flourished in ancient times and continued to exist, although nourished by the consistent and persistent migration that affected the area throughout centuries. Such a population is, therefore, unique and can only be defined in its own terms, as it does not properly fit in the categories of Arabism, Semitism, Syrianhood. In this regard, Chiha writes:

> *Nous dirons pour notre part, avec des arguments plus décisifs encore, que la population du Liban est libanaise, tout simplement, et que réserve faite de naturalisations très récentes, elle n'est pas plus phécienne qu'égyptienne, egéenne, assyrienne ou médique, grècque, romaine, byzantine, arabe, avec ou sans consanguinité, ou européenne par les alliances, ou turque par exemple.*[156]

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[155] Ibid.
[156] Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, 320.

In this perspective, Hourani defines Lebanon as an intrinsic paradox, neither fully Arab nor Mediterranean, a society with deep common roots alongside a deep diversity. In particular, "Since the Islamic conquest it has been divided into religious communities, each a closed society claiming the first loyalty of its members; hence a diversity not only religious but social and intellectual as well". Thus, in Lebanese nationalist views, political freedom and independence is not only instrumental to the society's well-being but necessary to its existence in the first place.

One last type of country-based nationalism, which is worth mentioning in sight of the case studies on identity building in Jordan, is that based on allegiance to royal families. It is the case of Alawites in Morocco, the Hashemites in Jordan, the sultanate of Oman and of course, the Saudis in Saudi Arabia. In these cases, the national identity is preeminently shaped around the allegiance to the family, and even the cult of the personality of the king and his relatives. Such strategy of consolidating identity around a charismatic leadership, that often relies on some sort of religious legitimation (such as the bond with Wahhābī doctrine in the case of Saudis, the title of *amīr al mu'minīn* of the Moroccan king and the role of protector of the sacred place of the King of Jordan) proved to be incredibly effective in ensuring stability and durability to the regimes. As noted by Corm, some republics resorted to similar processes in order to achieve support and build a shared identity among strongly divided countries. That is the case of the Asad dynasty in Syria, Mu'ammar Gaddafi in Libya, 'Alī 'Abdallah Sāleḥ in Yemen and Ḥosnī Mubarak in Egypt.[157] However, those cases proved to be less effective in the long term and experienced a strong reaction against the iron fist approach used to ensure allegiance, that did not thrive *vis à vis* the recent revolt of 2011.

3. Identity in the formation of political parties

The path towards *ḥizbiyya* (multi-party system) has been unique in each Arab nation-state as it is expression of a country's particular history, society and identity. In this sense, it is worth focusing on the process of formation of political parties in three

[157] Corm, *Arab Political Thought*, 166-167.

pivotal countries of the Arab world, namely Egypt, Syria and Lebanon. As these countries developed a pronouncedly plural party system, it is interesting to shed light on how the most relevant partisan formations conceptualized national identity, especially in light of the competitive coexistence of country-based nationalism and other broader identitarian criteria.

The advent of authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes in the Arab world, especially after the '50s, hindered the process of party formation or instrumentalized it, preventing *ḥizbiyya* from rooting itself and becoming expression of the citizens' active participation in politics. In fact, as noted by Hamid, "To the extent that citizens wished to become involved in politics, they tended to join civil society organizations, professional associations, and […] religious movements"[158] rather than political parties. A dominating trend in hybrid regimes has been that of instrumentalizing the party system in order to legitimate the political order with democratic resemblance. In other words:

> *As inconsequential as they may have seemed, political parties still served a purpose under some semi-authoritarian regimes. Rather than eliminate dissent altogether, the ruling regimes hoped to manage and contain it. Political parties provided the illusion of freedom and pluralism. […] The better, less costly way to subdue the opposition was to give it just enough room to breathe, but little more. Elections gave regimes a chance to "legitimize" their rule and employ the language of democracy for authoritarian ends.*[159]

However, as testified by the three cases here analyzed, the history of the Arab world is not empty of meaningful processes towards *ḥizbiyya*.

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[158] Shadi Hamid, "Political Party Development Before and After the Arab Spring", in *Beyond the Arab Spring: The Evolving Ruling Bargain in the Middle East*, ed. Mehran Kamrava (Oxford University Press: New York, 2014), 133.
[159] Hamid, "Political Party Development Before and After the Arab Spring", 133.

a. Egypt

Egypt in particular has been a pivot in the development of political parties since it was pioneer of the evolution of a functioning party system in the first half of the 20th century. The first main party to arise in Egypt was *Al-Ḥizb Al Waṭani* (National Party), which finds its roots in the fusion between the pivotal military secret society founded by Aḥmad ʿUrābī in 1876. The party was officially established in 1907 by Muṣṭafā Kāmil, and later fell under the leadership of Muḥammad Farīd.[160] On an identitarian level, the party assumed a prominent nationalist stance, advocating for the complete independence of Egypt from British interference. However, it maintained strong ties with the Ottoman establishment, as Kāmil was a strong supporter of Khedive 'Abbas. In the party's view, the Egyptian identity was part of a broader Ottomanist belonging, and the independence from colonial rule was to be realized within the framework of the Ottoman empire. Much has been written on whether Kāmil's nationalism could be ascribed in the Pan-Islamic galaxy. As Nadia Fahmy notes: "Kamil saw no contradiction between his nationalism and his call for an Ittihād Islami.[161] He believed the second was necessary to safeguard the first. Prompted by his love for Egypt, he actively promoted solidarity between Egypt and the Ottoman Empire."[162] In fact, in Kāmil's identitarian conceptualization of Egyptian nationalism, religious identity is complementary to the nationalist one, as the love for religion nourishes and shapes devotion to the *waṭan.* This view will be strongly criticized by Aḥmad Luṭfī Sayyid, Egyptian intellectual who participated in the foundation of *Ḥizb al-Waṭan* but ultimately became a prominent figure of *Ḥizb al-Umma*.[163]

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[160] Majid Salman Hussain, *British Policy and the Nationalist Movement in Egypt, 1914-1924: A political study* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 80-84.

[161] In the Encyclopaedia of Islam, Ittihad is defined as "verbal noun of the VIIIth form of the root w-ḥ-d. The first form *waḥida* and *waḥuda* means to be alone, unique; the VIII *ittaḥada*, means to be united, associated, joined together." In this sense, Itthad Islami is the pan-Islamic unity. Nicholson, R. and Anawati, G.C., "Ittiḥād", in: Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition, Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs. Consulted November 30, 2023. http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0398.

[162] Nadia Fahmi, "Mustafa Kàmil: Nationalism and Pan-Islamism," (MA's diss., McGill University, 1976), 72.

[163] Israel Ghershoni, "Depoliticization and Denationalization of Religion: Ahmad Lufti al-Sayyid and the Relocation of Islam in Modern Life," in *Religious Responses to Modernity*, ed. Christoph Yohanan Friedmann (De Gruyter: Berlin, 2021).

The year 1907 was crucial in the development of Egyptian *ḥizbiyya*. In fact, in that same year the *Ḥizb al-Umma*, and *Ḥizb al-Iṣlaḥ ʿala al-Mabadiʾ al-Dustūriyya* were founded, followed by *al-Ḥizb al-Waṭani al-Ḥurr* and *al-Ḥizb al-Miṣrī* in 1908. *Ḥizb al-Umma* (The People Party) generated from the General Assembly of *al-Jarīda* Company and collected members of the "Western-educated bureaucratic class."[164] As it was declared a party by Ḥassan Pāshā ʿAbd al-Rāziq, Aḥmad Luṭfī Sayyid became its Permanent Secretary. The party refuted Egypt's identification with the Ottoman Empire and understood the confrontation with Britain in secular rather than religious terms. As noted by Angrist: "Ḥizb al-Umma saw the United Kingdom much less as an outright enemy and more as a formidable force that Egyptians needed to learn from, cooperate with, and then negotiate with to achieve independence."[165]

Luṭfī Sayyid has been one of the most influential figures in the Egyptian political scene and the editor of *al-Jarīda* newspaper, around which the political activity of *Ḥizb al-Umma* is based.[166] His political ideology, that strongly reflected in the political stance of the party, was based on strong criticism towards Pan-Islamism and colonialism, which he interpreted as two phenomena that mutually fueled each other. In fact, he described the first as a "delusion" and "fairy tale" that originated from colonial interests and was nourished domestically.[167] Luṭfī concentrated his efforts on the affirmation of Egyptianness over religious, ethnic or linguistic sub- and macro-identities. His perception of national identity is exclusive, in fact it does not overlap with Pan-Islamic, Ottoman nor Arab identity. The separation between Arabness and Egyptianness in Luṭfī's thought appears evident as he describes the Arab Peninsula (*bilād al- ʻarab*) in terms of otherness comparing to the motherland Egypt. For Luṭfī, Arab is not Egyptian and Egyptian is not Arab.[168] While he appreciates the ancient values of generosity and bravery he observes in *bilād al-ʻarab*,

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[164] Michele Penner Angrist, *Party Building in the Modern Near East*, (University of Washington Press: Washington, 2006), 65.
[165] Ibid.
[166] Jacob M. Landau, *Parliaments and Parties in Egypt* (Routledge: New York, 2016), Part II, Chap. V, https://www.perlego.com/book/1643054/parliaments-and-parties-in-egypt.
[167] Ghershoni, "Depoliticization and Denationalization of Religion," 91.
[168] Ibid., 83.

Luṭfī considers its characteristics as distant from the Egyptian reality.[169] In his view, Egyptian is one who knows no homeland other than Egypt and works for its benefit and greater good. This definition of Egyptian identity refers to Luṭfī's conceptualization of national identity. In fact, in 1912 he writes: "The history and the natural condition of humanity determine that benefits and interests are the sole foundation that unifies people into a shared collective."[170] His critique of *al-Ḥizb al-Waṭanī*'s conceptualization of identity is clear as he states that those whose nationalism is split between Egyptian identity and Ottoman or Islamic identity are not true patriots, as their nationalism "is partially or completely invalid, because it mixes religious identity with national political identity."[171] This utilitarian view of identity paves unedited ways for a de-romanticization of nationalism and the exclusion of unity of religion or kinship from the identitarian discourse, providing the basis for the development of a liberal nation state where citizens enjoy equal rights as long as they collaborate for the greater good *(manfaʿa*) of the nation.

Other Egyptian parties that are interesting to mention for their identitarian views are *al-Ḥizb al-Waṭanī al-Ḥurr* and al *al-Ḥizb al-Miṣrī*. The first was founded around the entourage of the journal *al-Muqaṭṭam* and was strongly influenced by the anti-Ottomanist views of Syrian and Egyptian intellectuals that gravitated around the journal. The anti-Ottomanism led to a circumstantial support for British occupation. In fact, intellectuals such as Maqaryūs and Muḥammad Waḥīd stressed the benefits of British occupation over Egyptian society and held friendly relations with Cromer and Gorst.[172] Similarly, *Al-Ḥizb al-Miṣrī*, founded in 1908 by Akhnūkh Fānūs among wealthy and politically engaged Copts, advocated for the independence of Egypt but the maintenance of good relationships with Britain. Interestingly, on an identitarian point of view, the party called for an expansion of the term "Egyptian" to include those who had been naturalized alongside those with Egyptian origin.[173]

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[169] Ahmad Lufti Sayyed, "A Week In Illuminated Medina," Part 4, *Al-Jarida* (1911), cited in Ghershoni, "Depoliticization and Denationalization of Religion," 83.
[170] Ahmad Lufti Sayyed, "Ilā-l-shabība: al Idtirab fi-l-ra'y al-ʿāmm" (1912), cited in Ghershoni, "Depoliticization and Denationalization of Religion," 91-92.
[171] Ibid., 87.
[172] Cromer was Consul General of Egypt until 1907, followed by Gorst in 1908.
[173] Hussain, *British Policy and the Nationalist Movement in Egypt, 1914-1924*, 88.

When talking about the political parties in Egypt it is impossible not to mention the *Wafd*. The "delegation party" was born in 1918 by the convergence of members of *Ḥizb al-Umma* and *al-Ḥizb al Waṭanī* to demand peaceful and complete independence for Egypt. The party soon became the leading one in Egypt and maintained such primacy until the 1952 revolution and the subsequent rise of Nasser to power. According to Hussain, it represents "the most important party in Egypt throughout its political history."[174] Thank to Zaghlūl's popularity, the party managed to affirm itself across religious and class cleavages, although not without opposition. In this sense, the *Wafd* experience has to be considered as crucial in spreading national consciousness and a political collective identity among Egyptian people that had previously been excluded from political participation.

b. Syria

In Syria, the early parties can be divided among the ones that held a soft or collaborative position *vis à vis* French mandate (moderates) and those that strongly opposed it (nationalist bloc).[175] In the first group the most relevant are the *Ḥizb al-Iṣlaḥ al-Sūrī* (Syrian Reformist Party),[176] the Liberal Constitutional Party[177] and the Syrian Liberal Party. The Syrian Liberal Party, founded in Aleppo by Shakīr Ni'mat al-Sha'bānī in the early years of French occupation, rooted itself particularly in the North. The party program included Syrian independence through a treaty with France, Syrian unity and Syrian entrance in the Society of Nations.[178] Through the collaboration with Barakāt, al-Sha'bānī, an Ottoman official, achieved to carry out a negotiation of Syrian independence in 1932. However, due to the lack of a strong

[174]Ibid., 94.
[175] E. Samy, "I Partiti e le Associazioni Politiche in Siria e nel Libano Visti da Un Siriano (1921–1939)." *Oriente Moderno* 21, no. 3 (1941): 104. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25810848.
[176] The Syrian Reformist Party, headed by Ḥaqqi al-'Azm, was founded in Damascus in 1929 by former Ottoman officials. The short-lived party demanded a constitutional transition towards independence, but lost appeal and ended its activities in 1939.
[177] Founded by Ṣubḥī Bey Barakāt in Aleppo, it achieved a strong influence over the parliament in 1930 thank to the popularity of its leader in the northern regions and the French support.
[178] Samy, "I Partiti e le Associazioni Politiche in Siria e nel Libano," 104-105.

political strategy and the ties with the Mandate authorities, the moderates did not achieve significant results in the long term.

The Syrian nationalist stance was represented by a variety of parties that present interesting traits from an identitarian perspectives.[179] However, the nationalist parties presented themselves as divided and scarcely effective until the formation, fostered by the charismatic Ibrāhīm Hanānū, of the Nationalist bloc starting from 1928. The Nationalist Bloc had the purpose to merge together the nationalist experiences and parties developed until then and homogenize them into a single political entity in order to increase their political relevance and overcoming the geographical and programmatic fragmentation that saw Aleppo and Damascus competing as pivotal centers.[180] The Nationalist Bloc represented the independentist stance against France occupation until the 40's.[181] In this sense, Hinnebusch compares it to the Egyptian Wafd.[182] Following the general trend of establishment of parties of notables, the party was composed primarily of landowners and merchants and asked for a liberal constitution, the formation of a representative government, and the normalization of Syria-France relations following independence, together with economic reforms to benefit the interests of the merchant class it mainly represented.[183] Thanks to its anti-imperialist stance, the party achieved a parliamentary majority in 1936 and 1943. However, its effort to unite a socially diverse support base around the sole issue of independence led to the factionalization of the party shortly after the achievement of independence, and to the subsequent resurgence of the Damascus-Aleppo competition represented by the the Damascus-centred *Waṭanī* and the Aleppo-centred *Shaʿb* parties.[184]

In the early 1933, the Communist party roots its activity in Syria around the newspaper *al- al-Fajr al-Aḥmar*, although communist embryos started developing

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[179] Among them *Ḥizb al-Shaʿb al-Sūrī* (Syrian Popular Party), founded in 1925 by ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Shahbandar, is remarkable for assuming a realist political orientation. In fact, it abandoned the quest for an independent Syrian State within its "natural borders," in the attempt of opening a breach for collaboration between nationalists and French authorities.

[180] Samy, "I Partiti e le Associazioni Politiche in Siria e nel Libano," 107.

[181] Angrist, *Party Building in the Modern Near East*, 62.

[182] Raymond A. Hinnebusch, "Political parties in MENA: Their Functions and Development", in *Political Parties in the Middle East*, ed. Siavush Randjbar-Daemi, Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi and Lauren Banko (Routledge: New York, 2020).

[183] Angrist, *Party Building in the Modern Near East*, 62.

[184] Raymond A. Hinnebusch, "Political parties in MENA: Their Functions and Development", chap. 2.

secretly since 1924 under the guide of Fu'ād al-Shamālī.[185] The party demanded the end of imperialism, freedom for Syrian workers and independence of Syria, merging Christians, Muslims, Armenians of diverse extraction. For its strong independentist stance, it aligned with the Nationalist Bloc.[186] The transnational nature of the Communist ideology enhanced the dialogue among the French Popular Front and the Syrian Communists. This functioned in favor of the Syrian Communist Party, that gained support and visibility, but also strengthened the independentist cause through the support of French Communists.

On the Arabist side, *'Uṣbat al-'amal al-qawmī* (League of National Action) is a pivot. The party was established in Damascus in 1935 by Ṣabrī al-'Asalī. The party agenda is focused on Arabism, secularization and anti-communism. The party believed that *vis à vis* social unrest, colonialism and the rise of communism, the Arab countries had to reunite and reorganize themselves socially and economically. On a political level, it proposed a pan-Arab union as the solution to pursue towards independence, assuming a radical line that Samy resumes with the slogan "Arabism above all."[187] It rejected a national identification with Islam and any other religion: it called for separation of religion from the public sphere and demanded the nationalization and laicization of education. Despite the harsh competition with the Nationalist Bloc, under the guide of Zakī al-Arsūzī the party achieved rapid and passionate popular support.

Lastly, it is necessary to introduce the Pan-Syrian *al-Ḥizb as-suri al-qawmī* (Syrian Nationalist party), founded in 1932 within the entourage of Anṭūn Sa'ādeh in the American University of Beirut.[188] The pan-Syrian ideology of Sa'ādeh has been briefly explored in the previous section on country-based nationalism, however, it is relevant to describe the party agenda, that reflects Sa'ādeh 's thought. The party, being still active nowadays, is one of the oldest political forces in the Middle East. It relies on a strong base in Syria and Lebanon and took part to both minor and major

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[185] Hanna Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of Its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 118.
[186] Samy, "I Partiti e le Associazioni Politiche in Siria e nel Libano," 109.
[187] Ibid., 110.
[188] Christopher Solomon, *In Search of Greater Syria: The History and Politics of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party* (I.B. Tauris: London, 2022), chap. 1, https://www.perlego.com/book/2852103/in-search-of-greater-syria-the-history-and-politics-of-the-syrian-social-nationalist-party-pdf.

conflicts by deploying its own militia. Acclaimed by pan-Syrian nationalists, the party is seldom described as a terrorist or fascist organization.[189] Since its foundation, the backbones of SNP have been anti-colonialism, secularism and pan-Syrianism in opposition to pan-Arabism, pan-Islamism and Lebanese independentism. The identitarian characterization of the party is resumed by Samy in the motto: "Syria to Syrians and Syrians constitute a wholehearted nation."[190] In the party's ideology, the core of Syrian identity is to be found in the complex social entity that Syria is since its pre-historical roots. Despite its broader belonging to the Semite and Arab world, the party affirms the strong characterization of historical Syria (meaning the conglomerate of modern-day Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine) above other macro and sub identities. Posing Syrian interests above any other, the party demands independence, unity, popular sovereignty. Considering the interference of religion into politics as the highest limitation of national sovereignty, the SNP calls for a process of secularization. Since 1936, the party quickly developed across Lebanon and Syria but suffered from the firm opposition of the Lebanese government, culminating in Sa'ādeh incarcerations and ultimately, in its execution. However, the resilience of the party across decades of confrontation is remarkable and even gained strength from the "martyrdom" of its leader.[191] As highlighted by Solomon, pan-Syrianism and the notion of Greater Syria existed before SNP and proved incredibly endurable. The merit of Sa'ādeh was to translate it into an organized ideology and subsequently into a structured political party.[192]

c. Lebanon

As can be evinced by the brief analysis of Syrian early party politics, the political developments of Lebanon and Syria in this transitional phase between Ottoman rule, colonial domain and national independence are impossible to disentangle. In Lebanon, the development of parties is strictly related to the sectarian social fabric and to the issue of the relation with Syria. Previously to the artificial separation operated by the

[189] Ibid.
[190] Samy, "I Partiti e le Associazioni Politiche in Siria e nel Libano," 111.
[191] On Sa'ādeh's martyrdom and cult of personality, see Solomon, *In Search of Greater Syria*.
[192] Ibid., chap. 3.

French mandate, Lebanese and Syrian identities were scarcely politicized and where rather fluid and complementary concepts. The quest for independence from French colonization arose the matter of whether to reincorporate Lebanon in a broader geographical and political identity (what Thuselt calls "contextualism") or pursue a separatist and independentist stance (in Thuselt words, "exceptionalism").[193] Of course, the issue entailed different identitarian criteria: in fact, not only Lebanese and Syrian identities were at stake, but also their placement within the broader framework of Arab and Islamic identities as well as of sectarian sub-identities that characterized the social and political arena, especially in the Lebanese case. In general, while the Maronite Christians supported an independent exclusivist Lebanon, the Sunni advocated for the establishment of an Arab Syrian state under the Hashemite King Fayṣal. Such identitarian dispute is observable since the earliest parties, among which the Lebanese Union Party and the Progressive Party. The first, founded in 1909, opposed Ottoman rule and contemplated the possibility of obtaining independence from it through the incorporation into the Hashemite Kingdom of Syria. On the opposite, the Progressive Party opposed the inclusion of Lebanese territory into Greater Syria.[194]

Small leftist communist parties emerged in the early '20s, starting with the General Party of Work in 1921, followed by the Lebanese Communist Party in 1924 and the Party of the Lebanese People in 1936. The communist line rooted among Shia communities; however, sectarian discourse was consciously avoided by the party leaders as the Greek Orthodox group was also attracted by leftist stances. In 1931, the leftist Republican Independence Party was established, succeeded by the Pan-Syrian Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) in 1932. In the meanwhile, Arab nationalism spread in Lebanon, giving birth to the League of National Action in 1933 and the Arab Nationalist Party in 1935. In 1936, the Arab nationalist *Najjādeh* and the Lebanese Phalanges Party emerged on the political scene.

In the mid-30s, the competition among the Maronite President Bishāra al-Khūrī and his counterpart Émile Eddé gave birth to, respectively, the Constitutional

[193] Christian Thuselt, *Lebanese Political Parties: Dream of a Republic* (Routledge: New York, 2021), 29.
[194] Ibid., 27-28.

Bloc and the National Bloc. The first advocated for complete independence from France and from Syria, but also sought to deepen relations with the neighbor Arab countries. Advised by Michel Chiha, al-Khūrī assumed a "cooperativist" line regarding the relation between Lebanese and Arab identities. In fact, while affirming the Phoenician and Mediterranean character of Lebanon, it recognized the unifying potential of Arab identity and acknowledged Lebanon's Arabism, although without any desire of achieving a geographical or political unity with other Arab countries. His opponent Eddé, also a Maronite, followed a stricter "exclusivist" line, emphasizing the Phoenician and Mediterranean nature of Lebanese identity. He strongly refused to acknowledge the existence of an Arab identitarian component in Lebanon, and such refusal culminated in the suggestion of a population transfer that would have moved the Muslim population in the Muslim-majority regions of Beqaa, Tripoli, and Southern Lebanon to subsequently return such lands to Syria, in order to turn Lebanon into an exclusively Christian State.[195]

On the Arabist side, the Arab nationalist movement was exercising increasing influence in the intellectual circles, stemming from the political activism of Qunsṭanṭīn Zurayq at the American University of Beirut. The party *Najjādeh,* founded in 1936, is one of the most relevant among the Arabist parties. Born as a paramilitary organization, *Al-Najjādeh* primarily called for independence and for the affirmation of the Arab nature of Lebanon. In doing so, it addressed the masses of students and low-middle class workers, differentiating itself from the Ba'ath party, also Arabist, that collected its adepts among intellectuals and upper-class.[196]According to *Al-Najjādeh*, Arab nationalism constitutes an act of self-consciousness towards an historical factuality: Arabism has latently existed across centuries of foreign domination. This nationalist ideology, despite being intertwined with the history of Islamic civilization, does not completely overlap with it.

In response to the growing Arabist stance, the Phalanges (*ḥizb al-katā'ib al-lubnāniyya*) emerged as a militant party of fascist inspiration in 1936. Aiming at affirming a pure Lebanese identity *vis à vis* the broader Syrian and Arab one, the party was composed mainly by Christian youngsters but did not exclude *a priori* other

[195] Ibid., 29.
[196] Minganti, "I Partiti Politici Libanesi Nel 1958 Secondo I Risultati Di Una Recente Inchiesta," 329.

religious denominations. The party's doctrine can be resumed in "Lebanon first."[197] As their activities intensified, they also opposed the French Mandate, as testified by the rally carried out in 1937.[198]

Once again, this brief analysis of partisan developments sheds light on the multifaceted nature of identity in Arab countries. This trait is historically rooted and emphasized with the advent of modern challenges and debates. Nonetheless, it is important to observe how different identities engage with each other, sometimes following creative mechanisms of assimilation or mutual complementarity, other times by dynamics of radical opposition and dichotomization. In last stance, to the purpose of this thesis it is necessary to underline how social and political conditions intersect the identitarian discourse, orienting it towards one solution or another. This aspect became particularly evident since the 20th century, when the geopolitical asset of the Arab region entered a phase of unprecedented instability due to both internal and external factors. In light of this awareness, the next chapter will attempt to reconstruct how geopolitics influenced the composite Arab identitarian galaxy and, *vice versa*, how identitarian self-consciousness oriented policy making and public opinion in the most recent history of the Arab world.

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This second chapter illustrates the emergence of an Arab self-consciousness in modern times. Such consciousness is resembled in the thought as well as in politics. The phenomenon of Nahda is infused of identitarian reflection, since it addresses key issues such as the cultural decay, the possible pathways towards cultural renovation, and 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 emphasized Arab cultural heritage, freedom of thought and secularism. In the second wave, Anṭūn proposed a liberal conceptualization of *umma*, based on citizenship, political rights and patriotism. The relation with Europe is at the core of the thought of al-Ṭahṭāwī, al-

[197] Ibid., 332.
[198] Thuselt, *Lebanese Political Parties*, 35.

Afghānī, and ‘Abduh, who share a strong Islamic identity. While Al-Ṭahṭāwī 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. The issue of pan-Islamic unity is related to that of the Caliphate, that is thesis addressed by comparing the views of al-Kawākibī and al-Rāziq. The first, considered a proponent of pan-Arabism stemming from Pan-Islamism, advocated for the relocation of Caliphate (with exclusively religious functions) in Mecca. In his view, that would enhance Islamic revival through Arab values and would restore the lost Arab prestige. Opposingly, al-Rāziq saw the Caliphate as an institution that evolved according to historical contingency, now to be overcome in favor of a secular system apt at providing equality for Arabs despite religious affiliation. The tension between secular views and Islamic reformism is 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) arose. In this regard, the chapter explored the thought of Ḥusayn, Sa‘ādeh, and Chiha. Finally, the cases of party formation in Egypt, Syria and Lebanon were addressed, illustrating how different nationalist conceptualization developed within the same territorial context. Indeed, all the three countries show both *waṭanī* and *qawmī* visions declined in different political agendas.

III. The implications of geopolitics on Arab self-consciousness

As was highlighted in the first and second chapter, identity is continuously related to geopolitical developments as the two intersect and dynamically influence one another. However, in the Mashriq of the 20th century, the interplay of geopolitics and identity is of exceptional relevance, due to the magnitude of the events and to their ability to provoke a radical shift in identitarian self-consciousness. Thus, the chapter provide an analysis of key phases in the history of the 20th century from an identitarian perspective. The analysis highlights how Arabness emerged as a major identitarian catalyst in the first half of the century, as resembled by the triumph of pan-Arabist ideology in the 50s. Notwithstanding, the religious component assumed prominence and in the 80s prevailed over the failed Arabist ideology. Finally, the chapter engages with contemporary identity politics in the Arab world, highlighting the persistence of trends like the affirmation of country-based national identity, and their intersection with broader and narrower identitarian criteria.

1. 1948: *al-Nakba*

At the end of the First World War the geopolitics of the area was undergoing a major transformation due to the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, the emergence of national independent claims and the colonial machinations of Great Britain and France. As is well known, the Sykes-Picot agreement (1916) redrew the map of the Mashriq, not only partitioning the area among the two imperial powers, but also drawing unedited (and unnatural) national borders resulting in the Balkanization of the area.[199] The agreement betrayed the promises made by Britain to the Hashemi King Faysal I for the creation of a unified Arab Kingdom. In fact, Britain ultimately supported the Saud dynasty in the Hijaz as a deterrence for the affirmation of the Hashemites, dangerous advocates of pan-Arab nationalism. In order to meet the Hashemite claims and establish an enduring allegiance, Britain created Transjordan and placed it under the rule of King Abdallah I, while Iraq was ruled by Faysal after

[199] Corm, *Arab Political Thought*, 81-82.

his defeat in Syria (1926) on Behalf of the French army. It is interesting to note that the previous year Faysal was elected King of the Arabs by cheering crowds in Damascus, but the army could not compete with the French military power in the battle of Khan Massayloun.[200]

In addition, despite the opposition of local populations, the Balfour declaration of 1917 legitimized Zionist migration towards Palestine, creating the basis for the establishment of the State of Israel over the territory that the previous agreements assigned to an international condominium.[201] After the Balfour declaration, Jewish immigration towards Palestine continued and tensions arose among the local and the incoming communities. Violence escalated, with Jews terrorist movements, such as the Irgun and the Lehi, gaining strength and targeting both Arab civilians and British authorities. On the other side, Arabs targeted Jewish communities such as in the case of the Hebron Massacre of 1929. Resistance against British rule and Jewish migration culminated in the 1936-1939 Arab Revolt, that ended as a failure, setting a pattern for the following conflicts. On the one hand, British military force prevailed, on the other internal divisions weakened the cause. However, as noted by Dawisha, the 1936 Revolt "brought the conflict fully into Arab consciousness, making Palestine a foremost Arab issue"[202]. In fact, by urging Arab leaders to speak out in support of Palestine, the events enhanced solidarity among Arab governments. The participation of all members of the newborn Arab League to the London Conference of 1946-1947 further reinforced the sense of unity among the Arabs, highlighting their common stand *vis à vis* the Palestinian cause. In Egypt, Syria, Iraq, the people fiercely expressed support to the Palestinians, contesting the British and supporting the anti-Zionist guerrilla.[203] The concern with the creation of a Jewish state was therefore spread throughout the Arab world, as it was clear that, beyond ideology, it would have affected the whole balance of power and economy of the area.

As a response, the British authorities established the Peel commission to investigate causes and viable solutions to the unrest. The commission would suggest the partition of Palestinian territory between Palestinians and Jews, as was then

[200] Ibid., 82.
[201] Emiliani, *Medio Oriente: Una Storia dal 1918 al 1991*, 19.
[202] Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, chap. 5.
[203] Ibid.

proposed by the United Nations Partition Plan of 1947. Such plan provoked the strong reaction of Palestinians, leading to violent clashes all over the area. While the British mandate was set to expire, in May 14th, 1948, Ben Gurion declared the establishment of the State of Israel. That event led to the beginning of the first Arab-Israeli war, which saw Palestinian authorities, supported by Jordan, Iraq, Egypt and Syria, fight against the newly established state. The conflict ended with the defeat of the Arab allegiance and led to the affirmation of Israel in the region, as well as to the expulsion of over 700,000 Palestinians from their native land.[204] The magnitude of the military defeat, together with the trauma of the expulsion, the loss of land and the death of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians had an extraordinary impact on the narratives about Palestinian and Arab identity. The nationalist intellectual Qunsṭanṭīn Zurayq, in his *Ma'nā al-Nakba* (The meaning of the Disaster) established the use of the term *Nakba* (catastrophe) to relate to the events of 1948. In his analysis of the *Nakba*, he recognizes the strategical strength of the newly established state, while adopting self-critical lenses. The weakening of Arab collective identity is, in his analysis, both a cause and a consequence of the events:

> *The very being of the Arabs has never before known such fragmentation and collapse as in this battle. In addition to the material collapse is the collapse of values which is shown in various ways. [It is shown] by the doubt of the Arabs in their governments and by their accusations of their leaders and rulers, even by the doubt of many of them in themselves and in their potentiality as a nation. [It is also shown] by the despair in their breasts, by their refusal to meet the danger, and by their shrinking before the magnitude of the blow. Indeed, this moral and spiritual relapse is more important than the material loss, no matter how great the latter might be: for if the resolution of a people crumbles and its confidence in itself is lost, it loses the best that it possesses*

[204] Frances S. Hasso, "Modernity and Gender in Arab Accounts of The 1948 And 1967 Defeat", *Internal Journal of Middle East Studies*, no. 32 (2000): 493.

and is impotent to rise after a fall or to shake from itself the dust of humiliation and defeat.[205]

Far from passively justifying the huge seatback, Zurayq argues that, although the battle was lost, it is possible to find a remedy and to reverse the path of history. In order to do so, he elaborates an "immediate remedy" and a "fundamental solution". He calls for unity among Arabs as a fundamental pillar of his comprehensive remedy:

No doubt this unification is, as we have already said, limited by the general situations in these states and by their own interests, ambitions, and fears. It will not be possible to bring about this unification in any real sense unless there are far-reaching, comprehensive changes. Unification, therefore, enters into the sphere of the fundamental solution of the Palestine problem (and of the Arab problem in its entirety).[206]

Other key aspect of Zurayq's proposed "immediate remedy" are popular participation to the resistance and the Arabs' will to sacrifice their particular interests in order to negotiate with international actors. Remarkably, while these issues are relevant in terms of identity, they remain very actual nowadays. He criticizes the submissiveness of Palestinians in front of the occupation, which contrasted with the core values of bravery and sacrifice in battle that characterize Arab people. Most importantly, he requires a change in the Arab mind and lifestyle. It is when writing about the "fundamental solution to the Palestinian problem"[207] that the issue of Arab unity and collective identity emerges in all its urgency. Zurayq states: "Only a united, progressive, Arab national being will avert the Zionist danger."[208] However, in his view, the path towards a rooted, flourishing and self-aware Arab nation is still long. Differently from Zionists, who do not have the elements to create a nation (being

[205] Qustantin Zurayq, *The meaning of the disaster*, trans. Bayly Winder (Beirut: Khayat's College Book Cooperative, 1956), 8, The Meaning of the Disaster / Constantine K. Zurayk : Qustantīn Zuraiq : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive.
[206] Ibid., 29.
[207] Ibid., 34.
[208] Ibid.

united only by religion and grief), Arabs dispose of a fatherland, common language, and the potential of becoming a nation. However, they lack unity and a mind oriented towards progress, which is essential to the achievement of development in all domains.

In identitarian and nationalist terms, Zurayq's contribution is representative of the evolution that interested Arab nationalism, and could be inferred, Arab identity, in the *Nakba*'s aftermath. As Dawisha notices, pan-Arabism developed significantly during the 1940s, supported by a series of political developments, among which the establishment of the Arab League.[209] However, at the dawn of the *Nakba*, pan-Arabism as an identity and a political project, although gaining strength, was still competing with the religious and subnational ones. Mi'ari notes that starting from 1917 a specifically Palestinian identity, embedded in the Palestinian Arab National movement, started to emerge *vis à vis* the British mandate and the Zionist immigration. The movement foresaw the creation of a Palestinian state (for the first time detached from the concept of Greater Syria) that could guarantee equal rights to Muslims, Jews and Christians. However, the emerging Palestinian national identity was undermined in its foundations by localism and tribalism. In particular, the conflict between the Nashāshībī and the Hussaynī clans regarding the attitude towards Zionism and the British mandate, with the first being more open to compromise and the second one assuming more radical stances, jeopardized not only the emergence of a strong Palestinian identity but also the response towards such issues.[210] As a result, Arabness gained a prominent role over particular belongings, establishing a sort of political "dependency" of Palestine towards the other Arab states. The latter, as noted by Al-Budairi, "since the mid-thirties, became the decision maker regarding issues of Palestine Arabs."[211]

According to Dawisha, in the short term the 1948 defeat did not reinforce Arab unity and solidarity. In fact, it implied the defeat of an Arab unionist project due to its

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[209] Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, chap. 5.
[210] Mahmoud Mi'ari, "Transformation of Collective Identity in Palestine," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 44, n. 6 (2009): 582-583.
[211] M. Al-Budairi, "al-Filistiniyyoun Bayna al-hawiyya al-Qawmiyya wa al-Hawiyya al-Wataniyya" [The Palestinians between Arab National Identity and Palestinian National Identity], *Majallat ad-Dirasat al-Filastiniyya [Journal of Palestine Studies]* 21(Winter 1995): 3–27 (in Arabic), cit. in Mi'ari, "Transformation of Collective Identity in Palestine," 583.

internal fragility. In fact, the disillusionment of the defeat came together with the awareness that specific sub-national interests jeopardized the success of the Arab-Palestinian cause. The ambitions of the Hashemites as well as of Nasser created divisions and jealousies among Arab leaders, whose commitment to the Palestinian cause was questionable at best. In this regard, Dawisha affirms:

> *It was not surprising that in the immediate aftermath of the war, Arab nationalism was dealt a substantial blow. It was not that the idea lost its appeal, rather it was merely the recognition that contemporary political structures in the Arab world were not only incapable, but also, and more dishearteningly, unwilling to realize Arab nationalist aspirations. It was not difficult for Arab populations to see that on the whole it was political ambitions and competition, not fidelity to Arab national interests, that dictated the war effort.*[212]

Experts have divergent views of the short-term impact of *Nakba* on the political narratives towards Pan-Arabism: while Khalid al Rashidi argues that in the pre-1967 phase self-critical narratives about the *Nakba* were limited comparing to the extent of triumphalist narratives,[213] Hasso highlights that strong criticism and discontent towards disunity and "backwardness" arose alongside such triumphalism. Indeed, in this phase the identitarian dimension in the Arab world appears multilayered and fluctuating. Nonetheless, it should be underlined how King Abdullah I, in the aftermath of the defeat, conducted negotiations with the newly established Israeli state about the annexation of the West Bank (at the time occupied by the Jordanian army). Although this stance was largely condemned by Arab league members, especially Egypt and Iraq, Abdullah I of Jordan proceeded with the annexation, despite the prohibition of carrying out negotiations stated in 1950, triggering the reaction of Egypt. Such dynamic reveals how the intertwining of

[212] Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, chap. 5.
[213] Hasso, "Modernity and Gender in Arab Accounts Of The 1948 And 1967 Defeat," 491.

particular interests under the umbrella of Arabism was deeply rooted and dangerously divisive.

However, if considered in its long-term impact, the *Nakba* generated completely different stances. In fact, despite initially undermining the Arab unionist project and ideal, the conflict in Palestine ultimately acted as a significant catalyst for the remarkable resurgence of Arab nationalism during the 1950s. Due to the absence of a strong Palestinian identity and to the territorial and demographical fragmentation produced by the 1948 defeat, the Palestinian struggle underwent a process of "pan-Arabization" that was already initiated before the official establishment of Israel. The process is bidimensional: 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.[214] 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.

2. 1950s: Triumph of Arabism

During the '50s Arab identity triumphed in its political dimension. That is a result of a profound redefinition of global power dynamics marked by the onset of the US interventionist era, the decolonization process, and the interweaving of Cold War power dynamics with West Asian politics. In this framework, Egypt emerged as the pivot of Arab nationalism under Nasser guise. Gamal Adel Nasser came to power in 1954 after the pro-western king was deposed by the Free Officers' military coup in 1952.[215] As it is possible to understand by Nasser's declarations following the *Nakba*, his political view was first and foremost concentrated on the liberation of Egypt from its colonial ties:

> *We were fighting in Palestine, but our dreams were in Egypt. Our bullets were directed at the enemy lurking in the trenches in front of*

[214] Mi'ari, "Transformation of Collective Identity in Palestine," 583.
[215] Emiliani, *Medio Oriente: Una Storia dal 1918 al 1991*, 96.

us, but our hearts were hovering round our distant mother country, which was a prey to the wolves that ravaged it.... We spoke of nothing but our country and how to deliver it.[216]

Indeed, he saw in the Palestinian cause a representation of the Egyptian struggle, which constituted its first priority. His nationalism, therefore, revolved in the first place around the Egyptian national identity rather than the Arab one. This does not happen casually: in fact, as explained earlier, in Egypt a strong sub-national identity affirmed and inspired the nationalist movements alongside the Arabist one. All considered, Dawisha notes that "the Arab ideological trend had gathered momentum in Egypt, especially after the 1936–1939 Arab revolt in Palestine; it is equally true, however, that Arab nationalism did not achieve ideological primacy in Egypt."[217] Even according to the Syrian Ṣalaḥ al-Dīn Bīṭār and to the Egyptian Haykal, Arab nationalism did not prevail in Egypt until the mid '50s, and always competed with a much more rooted Egyptian identity.[218] It is then interesting to analyze how Nasser's political parabola turned him into the leader of pan-Arab nationalism.

British presence in Egypt permeated the politics of the country, depriving it of its self-determination. Therefore, the primary goal, common to both the Arab and Egyptian nationalist stances, was to get rid of external influences. The events of 1956 represent the crucial shift that led Pan-Arab identity to become 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."[219] Such anti-imperialist feeling resonated particularly with the educated middle-class, that was rising together with the disappointment towards the monarchy, perceived as deeply colluded with the Western intruder. According to Dawisha, Nasser's Egypt embraced the Arab nationalist ideology in force of the

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[216] Quoted in Patrick Seale, *The Struggle for Syria: A Study of Post-War Arab Politics, 1945–1958* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1986), 192.
[217] Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, chap. 6.
[218] Seale, *The Struggle for Syria: A Study of Post-War Arab Politics*, 311.
[219] Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, chap. 6.

awareness of having little chances of liberating itself from Wester influence as far as the colonizers kept their influence on other Arab countries politics. It is then interesting to underline that the push factor that triggered Arab identity affirmation on the political sphere was resistance against Western imperialism, rather than an unconditional sense of unity among Arab countries. In 1961, referring specifically to the Egyptian case, Haykal, Nasser's close confidant, stated:

> *In Egypt, the Arab people had not reached the stage of complete mental readiness for Arab unity. The centuries of Ottoman tyranny had isolated the Arab people to the west of the Sinai (Egypt and North Africa) from the remaining Arab people to the east of the Sinai (the Fertile Crescent and the Arabian Peninsula). After the awakening which occurred during Napoleon's rule, Egypt, overwhelmed by this awakening was unable to shift its attention from its own soil so that it can look across the Sinai and discover its Arab position.*[220]

Notwithstanding, many factors conflated in making Egypt the cultural pole of the Arab world during the '50s: its geographical position that bridged the two poles of the Arab world; the cultural prominence that it gained throughout history thanks to its institutions; the emergence of newspapers and a film industry that was directed towards other Arab states; its unparalleled poetic and musical production; its early contacts with the West since the Napoleonic era; and not lastly the demographic factor, that made it the most populous country of the Arab world in the '50s. Still nowadays it is possible to observe the influence of Egyptian cultural production in the Arab world, starting from the music of the iconic Umm Kulthūm which resonates in the streets and cafes of Jordan, Lebanon, and the rest of the Mashriq. The emergence of a common popular culture was conveyed also by the Egyptian radio station *The voice of the Arabs*, which transmitted in several neighboring countries. Such radio was instrumental to Nasser in order to reach other countries' populations, especially

[220] Al-Ahram (Cairo), November 3, 1961, cit in. Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, chap. 6.

youth, and to spread his anti-imperialist and anti-establishment propaganda. *The Voice of the Arabs* played an important role especially in concomitance with the Baghdad Pact (1955) that bonded Iraq and Turkey in a political and military understanding with Britain and the US.

Nasser's decision to make an arm deal with Czechoslovakia in order to receive Soviet weapons marks not only the entrance of Cold war in the Arab world, but an unprecedented anti-western stance. The deal was celebrated across the Arab world. The squares of main cities like Damascus, Baghdad and Amman filled with people who, galvanized by the Voice of the Arabs' radio communication, felt like the deal was not only in favor of Egypt and its own independence but a step towards the independence of the whole Arab world. That comes together with the participation to the Bandung conference (1956), where the non-aligned movement arose under the joint efforts of Nehru, Sukarno and Nasser. The non-aligned movement represented an international arena for Nasser to express its criticism towards colonialism and announce his Three Circles Theory. Accordingly, Egypt was meant to be the natural leader of the Arab world (first circle), of the African continent (second circle) and of the Asian, African and Latin American countries that achieved liberation from colonial ties (third circle)[221].

The same feeling inspired Nasser's decision to nationalize the Suez Canal, opening a crisis that affected Cold war dynamics as well as anti-colonialist ones. The Egyptian's leader primary goal was to build the Aswan Dam, which would enable the irrigation of large portions of otherwise unusable land, in order to drive Egypt's towards energetic independence. While France, Great Britain and US offered to fund the project in exchange for the World Bank's control on Egypt finances, Nasser's political and diplomatic steps, such as the arm deal with Czechoslovakia, the support to Algerian FNL, and the recognition of People's Republic of China (1956), were leading towards an increased anti-imperialism and anti-westernism. As Western funds were retired, Nasser reacted vigorously with the nationalization of the Suez Canal Company on July 26th, 1956. The strategic and military dynamic of the Suez crisis are not crucial to this thesis. However, it is worth to briefly mention that Britain, alongside France and Israel, led a "tripartite conspiracy" against Egypt that found

[221] Emiliani, *Medio Oriente: Una Storia dal 1918 al 1991*, 104.

Nasser unprepared. While Nasser's regime was about to fall under joint Israeli, French and British attacks, Cold War wider dynamic intervened. In fact, with the aim of avoiding escalation and the definitive alignment of Egypt with the Eastern bloc, US President Eisenhower played a decisive role in halting the hostilities.[222]

As noted by Emiliani, with the Suez crisis the Arab region entered fully in the Cold war dynamics. The Arab states, freeing themselves of colonial ties, under the pressure of Eisenhower's doctrine on one side and the Shepilov plan on the other, had to align either with one bloc or the other.[223] The scenario produced since the late '50s would of course change over time but still influences geopolitics and, therefore, identity politics in the Levant until nowadays. For instance, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan's alignment with the Unites States marked the beginning of a pattern that is still ongoing. Nonetheless, the Suez crisis revealed the inconsistency of European colonialist domains, with the imperialist powers unable to impose their will and resist the decolonization processes. Indeed, within a decade, Middle Eastern countries would free themselves of historical colonial ties.

Not surprisingly, Nasser successfully emerged from the conflict as the political leader of Arab nationalism. Everywhere he was cheered by the people as a "symbol of Arab steadfastness against the forces of imperialism"[224] and Arab governments largely supported Egypt, with Jordan and Syria offering to send troops and Saudi Arabia and Syria cutting relations with Britain and France. 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.[225] 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.

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[222] Federico Romero, *Storia della Guerra Fredda: L'ultimo Conflitto per l'Europa* (Giulio Einaudi Editore: Torino 2009), 114-116.
[223] Emiliani, *Medio Oriente: Una Storia dal 1918 al 1991*, 110.
[224] Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, chap. 7.
[225] Ibid., 7.

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 symbolical, and the pace of its realization testifies the enthusiasm around Arab nationalism at the time. The newly founded state proposed a mix of pan-Arabism, nationalism and socialism, also due to the support provided by the Soviet Union. It is important to note that Nasser’s nationalism, despite its socialist inclination, found its own way of conceptualizing the role of religion within this only apparently secular ideology. Indeed, Nasser was himself a Muslim, was aware of the impossibility of cutting Islam off the ideological equation without losing popular support and believed in the unifying potential of Islam across the diverse Arab nation. However, the Arabist discourse was dominant, while the religious one remained in a marginal position. Overall, the long-term political relevance of the UAR experience was limited, as testified by its early disruption in 1961.[226] In Nasser’s nationalism parabola, UAR places itself at its peak, immediately preceding the beginning of the decline.

Remarkably, UAR is not the only failed attempt of unification among Arab states. In 1958 the Kingdoms of Jordan and Iraq, both ruled by the Hashemite cousins Husayn and Fayṣal II, united in the Arab Federation in response to the creation of the UAR. However, the experiment was abruptly interrupted by the Iraqi revolution, that bloodily eradicated the monarchy in favor of the republic, under the guise of general ‘Abd al-Karīm Qāsim. While Nasser attempted to enlarge the UAR to the newfound Iraqi republic, Qasim’s focus was on Iraq and his political appetites prevented him from associating with the most powerful leader of the Arab world. As here exemplified, even with Arab nationalism was at its peak, internal divisions among Arab states did not disappear. Instead, they intertwined with the Cold War fractures in defining a fragmented scenario where opposing interests were at stake. If the Arab nationalist discourse was appealing to the masses, on an institutional level there was not such homogeneity. In addition to the Iraqi case, the Sa‘ūd and the Hashemites were neither keen to embrace Nasser’s revolutionary ideology, which threatened their

[226] Corrao, *Islam, Religione e Politica: Una piccola introduzione*, chap. 2.4.

status quo, nor to twist against the Western allies that provided economic and political stability to their regimes.[227]

In the '60s, the revolutionary wave crossed the Arab world from the Maghreb to the Mashriq, leading to the establishment of regimes that would shape the future of their countries. Meanwhile, poverty was prevalent in the rural areas and the discrepancies between the Arab socialist discourse and reality gave rise to sentiments of perpetrated injustice. 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.[228] However, since 1954, Nasser outlawed the movement and repressed it as an ideological antagonist. Paradoxically, during the peak of Arabness as an identitarian catalyst in modern times, the upcoming shift in identitarian perception was preparing. The Muslim Brotherhood was 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 social orientation of the Islamic movement, which designed it as a bottom-up political movement, together with the violent repression experienced during the nationalist era, shed the basis for its future emergence in the Egyptian and Arab political landscape.

3. 1967: Post-defeat Criticism

The Six Days War, 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 the destruction of the Arab army arose questions about the reasons of such an overwhelming defeat, implying strong repercussions on identitarian perceptions. This thesis argues that 1967 is crucial in determining the involution of Arab nationalism as a political project and as an ideology. In fact, as argued by Hinnebusch, "the

[227] Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, chap. 8.
[228] Annette Ranko, "The Muslim Brotherhood and its Quest for Hegemony in Egypt: State-Discourse and Islamist Counter-Discourse" (PhD diss., University of Hamburg, 2012), 64.

immediate driver of the 1967 war on the Arab side was identity, - namely, the competitive struggle among Arab states for pan-Arab legitimacy – contingent on being seen to champion the Palestinian cause."[229] In order to fight Israeli occupation of Palestine, the Arab leaders of Egypt, Syria and Jordan joined on the wave of the dominant pan-Arabist ideology. Unsurprisingly, the three major states that formed the Arab coalition had a rooted background when it comes to pan-Arabism: Egypt was under Nasser's leadership, Syria was Ba'athist and Jordan's Hashemite royalty had historically been a beacon of pan-Arabism.[230] However, the case of Jordan is far more complex. Indeed, the reluctancy of the Hashemites to engage in an open war with Israel are largely documented and are still reflected in the Kingdom's current foreign policy. However, as noted by Hinnebusch, Arab identity was a driver of top-down decisions in the context of the 1967 war. Indeed, the widespread Arab self-consciousness and the consequent support for the Palestinian cause on a popular level proved to largely influence King Husayn's decision to join the anti-Israeli coalition in 1967.[231]

In light of the strong identitarian connotation of the conflict itself, it is possible to better understand the disruptive magnitude of 1967 defeat. Contrary to the *Nakba*, the Six Days War jeopardized the trust towards Arab leadership, the enthusiasm around Arab nationalism and, at least partially, the faith in the feasibility of an Arab union. The inability to attain a goal of utmost significance, such as the liberation of Palestine, instigated an intellectual discourse aimed at dissecting the underlying causes. Among the intellectuals that nourished the debate, Ṣādiq al-'Aẓm emerges as a lucid, disenchanted and self-critic analyst. Al-'Aẓm's most significant contribution likely lies in his ability to expose the myths and beliefs that led Arab society astray from rationality, hindering the concrete attainment of its fundamental objectives. The discussion of *Self Criticism After the Defeat* (Beirut, 1969) is built around the comparison between the Russian-Japanese war and the Arab-Israeli one. Al-'Aẓm argues that the Arabs, just like the Russians, made the first mistake of underestimating the Israeli threat, disdaining the extent of its military power. Alongside that, Arab

[229] Hinnebusch, "The Politics of Identity in Middle East International Relations," 165.
[230] Despite its anti-revolutionary stance drew a fracture in respect of the modern Ba'athist and Nasserist revolutionary ideologies, oriented towards Arab socialism.
[231] Hinnebusch, "The politics of identity in Middle East International Relations," 165.

elites and popular strata's approaches towards Israel were significantly inconsistent, as masterfully expressed by Abdullah Laroui's description of Arab expectations:

> *On a certain day everything would be obliterated and instantaneously reconstructed and the new inhabitants would leave, as if by magic, the land that they have despoiled; in this way will justice be dispensed to the victims, on that day when the presence of God shall again make itself felt.*[232]

As Ajam explains, the crowds were unprepared for the possibility of the defeat: "No one had prepared that 'Arab street' for the possibility of defeat: the armies were big, bloated institutions, and the hero-leader, Gamal Abdel Nasser, cast his spell over the crowd. There was no reason, no sober analysis, amid the crowd, only passion and belief."[233]

The second major criticism that al-'Aẓm moves toward Arab elites and society is the incapability of a fruitful self-reflection around the causes of the defeat and how to overcome them. In his opinion, the defeat is a reflection and expression of the "prevalent economic, cultural, scientific, and civilizational conditions in the Arab nation."[234] Instead of pursuing social renovation through rational self-criticism, Arabs resorted to myths and creeds following what al-'Aẓm calls "logic of exoneration." The defeat was thus framed as a result of religious decay, producing the axiom "political failure because of religious corruption." Such axiom echoed the narratives about the end of the Golden age and provided legitimation to the Islamist ideology that was soon to gain *momentum* in response to nationalism's failure. According to Al-'Aẓm, the term *Nakba* embodies the logic of exoneration:

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[232] Abdullah Laroui, cited by Fouad Ajami in the "Foreword" of Sadik Al-Azm, *Self-Criticism after the Defeat*, trans. George Stergios (London: Saqi Books, 2011), https://perlego.com/book/569427/selfcriticism-after-the-defeat-pdf/?utm_medium=share&utm_source=perlego&utm_campaign=share-book.
[233] Al-Azm, *Self-Criticism after the Defeat*, Foreword.
[234] Ibid., 1.

> *Our use of the term "nakbah" [disaster] to indicate the June War and its aftermath contains much of the logic of exoneration and the evasion of responsibility and accountability, since whomever is struck by a disaster is not considered responsible for it, or its occurrence, and even if we were to consider him so, in some sense, his responsibility remains minimal in comparison with the terror and enormity of the disaster. This is why we ascribe disasters to fate, destiny, and nature, that is, to factors outside our control and for which we cannot be held accountable.*[235]

Al-'Aẓm touches a variety of topics, that cover Arab society's laxist attitude towards goal commitment, the deep conservatism of revolutionary youth, and the attitude towards science and technology. He reveals how the Arab armies were strategically prepared for the confrontation with Israel, but lost their advantage due to the scarce organizational capacity and traditional formalities among the armies' personnel, that hindered an efficient response. In his disillusionment, al-'Aẓm concludes its critique with a prediction: "The Arabs will have to wait a long time for the eruption of new revolutionary powers from an Arab nation whose leadership becomes finally committed to the causes of the great majority of the individual members of the Arab people."[236] This statement is interesting for its prophetic accuracy: Arab nationalism's momentum was coming to an end, despite sporadic flare-ups.

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*. Of course, as previously highlighted, the interests of single Arab countries (*Awṭān*) always coexisted, and eventually conflicted, with the appealing yet fragile concept of the unified Arab nation even before the defeat. However, as noted by Dawisha, the 1967 War "irretrievably rob Arab nationalism of the crucial element of unification,"[237] paving the way for country-based interests to prevail over common goals.

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[235] Ibid.
[236] Al-Azm, *Self-Criticism after the Defeat*, chap. 6.
[237] Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, chap. 10.

Nonetheless, the quest for Palestinian national liberation took a more autonomous trajectory, as demonstrated by the early political stance of Fatah.[238] Another first index of the prevalence of "statist" priorities was the acceptance, by Nasser, of the Roger Plan, which included the beginning of peace talks between Israel and Egypt within the UN framework.

Another crucial turning point in this sense has been the 1970 Black September in Jordan. During 1967 War, Jordan lost its control over the West Bank and a further wave of migration came from the Palestinian Occupied Territories. The Palestinian component became increasingly relevant from a demographic but also political point of view, especially since the headquarters of PLO were moved from Cairo to Amman. The increased migration after 1967 started to raise concerns over the control that the *fedayeen* of the PLO exercised inside the country and the possibility of a coup.[239] In September 1970, after attacks to royal convoys and the establishment of a "popular government" in the city of Irbid, King Husayn violently repressed the Palestinian revolt with the support of the Jordanian tribes and part of the Palestinian population. The repression was followed by the "Jordanization" of all institutions and a deep change of course regarding migratory policies towards Palestinians. Beyond Jordan, the Black September constituted an enormous issue for other Arab leaders such as the Algerian Boumedienne and Nasser. As far as they empathized with Jordanian concerns over internal stability, they also confronted the overwhelming support of the crowds for the Palestinian cause and its symbolic value in the Arab nationalist stance.[240] As a result of the mediation efforts between King Husein and the PLO, Nasser's credibility as a nationalist leader was seriously affected.[241] The leader died contextually, on September 28th, 1970, leaving the Arab world possibly more divided than before its rise to power. In fact, on an identitarian level, the Black September is crucial insofar as it opens, or rather reveals, fractures within the Arab peoples. Not all Arabs were truly willing to sacrifice stability for the Palestinian cause, and not all Palestinians were aligned on how to manage their resistance against the Israeli

[238] Siavush Randjbar-Daemi, Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi & Lauren Banko, "Introduction to political parties in the Middle East: historical trajectories and future prospects," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 44, no. 2, (2017), 155-158.
[239] Emiliani, *Medio Oriente: Una Storia dal 1918 al 1991*, 189-190.
[240] Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, chap. 10.
[241] Emiliani, *Medio Oriente: Una Storia dal 1918 al 1991*, 192-193.

occupation and their relationship with the hosting countries. Most importantly, the Palestinian fedayeen were labeled as a threat to the stability of the States they were hosted by. The Palestinian cause, that in the *Nakba* aftermath functioned as a unifying factor, became one of the main elements of division and discomfort among Arab peoples and governments, setting a long-term pattern that is still observable nowadays.

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. Sadat, after a first Pan-Arab phase, ended up embracing a full-fledged Egyptian *Waṭaniyya*, as testified by the adherence to Kissinger's plan regarding the Suez Canal in 1975.[242] 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. While some optimist Arabists, such as Arab Lague's UN representative Clovis Maksoud, looked at the indignation generated by Sadat's political move as a proof of Arab nationalism existence and resistance, most saw in this act a further confirmation of Arab nationalism's death. A more balanced and realistic interpretation of the outcome of Arab nationalism's involution is provided by the Egyptian scholar Hassan Nafaa (b.1947). In his critic of Ajam's view, Nafaa states the importance of not distinguishing between the ideology and its political implementation:

> *The idea of 'one Arab nation with an immortal mission' has never been translated into a viable political project. It is still a slogan, like that of the Communist Manifesto: 'Workers of the world unite!' To say that Pan-Arabism has died because it failed to achieve the one Arab nation is like saying Marxism does not exist anymore because it failed to unify the workers of the world!*[243]

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[242] Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, chap. 10.
[243] Elie Chalala, "Arab Nationalism: A Bibliographic Essay" in *Pan-Arabism and Arab Nationalism: The Continuing Debate*, ed. Tawfic E. Farah (Routledge: New York, 2019).

Dawisha interestingly remarks the need for a distinction between the identitarian sentiment that underpins Arab nationalism and its feasibility as a political project. In his *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth century*, he repeatedly stresses:

> *Arabism was not lost as an identity; it continued to set general parameters Arab regimes would be loath to transgress. And Arab leaders knew that the policies they devised for their states would be scrutinized and judged beyond the confines of their territorial boundaries by a wider "Arab public." But what continued to live on was Arabism not Arab nationalism. Arabism was merely the remnant of Arab nationalism, what the Arabs were left with after Arab nationalism hit the deck in June 1967. […] 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.*[244]

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-consciousness 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 within the intellectual circles as well as the public opinion throughout the decades as an alternative to Arab nationalist secularizing claims. As a result of the reiterated setbacks suffered by Arab nationalism and the lack of a strong leadership to lead the movement, the Islamic alternative was soon to emerge as "the solution" to Arab world's problems.

[244] Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, chap. 10.

4. 1980s: "Islam is the solution"

The 80s in the Arab region opened with the killing of Anwar al-Sadat on behalf of some Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) militants on October 6th, 1981. Stating that the murder of the President was motivated exclusively by the rage generated by the Camp David Agreements of 1979 would be incorrect. In fact, Egypt's lower classes were suffering the effects of a fragile economy since Nasser's rule and the situation exacerbated in 1977 with the beginning of the *Intifāḍat-al-Khubz,* or bread riots, which were violently repressed by the government.[245] However, it is undeniable that Camp David triggered the rage of both the population and other Arab governments, leading to Egypt's temporary expulsion from the Arab League.[246] The fact that Sadat was murdered by militants of the EIJ is relevant to this thesis for its symbolical value. In fact, a galaxy of Islamic movements was gaining momentum as an alternative to the corruption of the nationalist and socialist establishment, that much had promised to the Arab people but very little had achieved in terms of pan-Arab solidarity, economic development and social justice. As explained by Redaelli: "Islamic activism was the answer to the failure of decolonization and the instrument for fighting against economic and political inequality, in the name of human freedom and social justice."[247]

Since the '40s, Islamic movements had started to respond to the frustration of marginalized lower classes, both in the rural areas and in poor industrialized peripheries, tackling the absence of a welfare system with their assistance services. Alongside providing assistance, the Islamic movements also participated in the process of decolonization. The example of Algeria, where the FIS and the GIA played a massive role in the war of independence, is exemplificative. Through its efforts, Islamic activism spread traditionalist propaganda in opposition to both Western liberalism and communist secular ideologies. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood grew its charity networks, with the support of Islamic banks, to the point of turning

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[245] Emiliani, *Medio Oriente: Una Storia dal 1918 al 1991,* 218.
[246] Corrao, *Islam, Religione e Politica: Una piccola introduzione,* Chap. 2.7.
[247] Riccardo Redaelli, "A Geo-Historical Compass for the 'New Mediterranean'", in *States, Actors and Geopolitical Drivers in the Mediterranean,* ed. Francesca Maria Corrao and Riccardo Redaelli (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 55.

mosques into reference points for the poor and unemployed. The religious discourse entered the sphere of entertainment, too, through tv-shows such as the one led by Shaykh al-Sha'arāwī (1911-1998) who talked about Islamic teachings, proper behaviors and moral corruption in the country, attracting a wide audience.[248]

On the Shia side, temporary cohesion was achieved in opposition to the corrupted Shah Reza Pahlavi leading to the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini. 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 the secularist and foreign ideologies that were imposed by both the American and the Soviet sides during the Cold War.

In the meanwhile, the *mujāhidīn*, funded by the United States and Saudi Arabia in anti-Soviet function,[249] led the resistance against URSS occupation of the Afghan territories starting from 1979. 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. Saudi Arabia, competing for hegemony against the new founded Iranian Republic, strived to reinforce its regional relevance as American ally and as leader of the Islamic world, in force of the presence inside its territory of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. As a result, the funds strategically allocated by the two powers to religious groups 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. The strengthening of these non-state actors soon became one of the key causes of regional instability. In addition, the competition for hegemony in the region, especially between the Iranian and the Saudi pole, became increasingly urgent and intersected with foreign interests in the Cold war framework. The First Gulf War between

[248] Corrao, *Islam, Religione e Politica: Una piccola introduzione*, Chap. 2.7.
[249] Emiliani, *Medio Oriente: Una Storia dal 1918 al 1991*, 387.

Saddam Hussein's Iraq and the Iranian Islamic Republic in 1980 can be regarded as a clear example of such dynamic.

In Lebanon, the 1975-1990 civil war sharpened internal fractures within the complex Lebanese society. In occasion of the 1982 Israeli invasion, the movement Hezbollah, born from the fracture of the Shia party Amal, emerged as the strongest antagonist of Israel, in opposition to the acquiescence of other parties, and specifically the Christian Maronites who had conducted the Shabra and Shatila massacres with Israeli complacency.[250] As a result, the Islamist militia gained strength and respectability, placing itself as the Lebanese paladin of the Palestinian cause and the guarantor of Lebanese security from the Israeli threat. For instance, in 1991, Bassām Hāshim, a sociology professor, authored an anonymous article in *al-Waṭan al-ʿArabī*. The piece argued that Hezbollah ought to be seen as the "Lebanese patriotic Shia" because of their role in combatting Israeli forces in Southern Lebanon.[251] The 1982 War also led to the expulsion of PLO leaders from Lebanon, that were moved to Tunis,[252] demonstrating the growing disengagement of Arab states from the Palestinian cause. In this regard, it is worth reporting William Brown's meaningful comment:

> *The attack was directed specifically against the Palestinians, symbols of the Arab nation. Yet no Arab leader responded to Arafat's appeals. Moreover, most Arab governments initially refused to provide haven for the PLO fighters. Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, and Tunisia provided limited hospitality. The Sudan, Syria, and the two Yemens also opened their doors. But in every case, the Palestinian guests have been isolated and carefully watched. Everyone uses them, but no one trusts them. As symbols of the Arab nation, they are inimical to the interests of an Arab state*[253]

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[250] Antonio Varsori, *Storia internazionale: Dal 1919 a Oggi* (Il Mulino: Bologna, 2015), 328.
[251] Thuselt, *Lebanese Political Parties*, 128.
[252] Corrao, *Islam, Religione e Politica: Una piccola introduzione*, Chap. 2.7.
[253] William R. Brown, "The Dying Arab Nation," in *Pan-Arabism and Arab Nationalism: The Continuing Debate*, ed. Tawfic E. Farah (Routledge: New York, 2019).

Despite Islam's traditional push towards universalism and unity of the *umma*, its prominence in the regional political arena after '79 did not correspond to a newfound cohesion. On the contrary, not only the emergence of Islamic movements generated a further degree of conflict and competition within the domestic and regional spheres, but also implied conflict and competition among different Islamic-oriented groups. 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. Such paradox is visible for instance in the case of the Muslim Brotherhood, founded by al-Bannā in 1928 with a clear, yet broad, six-goals agenda: "building the Muslim individual, the Muslim family, an Islamic society, an Islamic government, an Islamic state, and an Islamic umma (al-khilāfa)."[254] However, the Muslim Brotherhood failed in its struggle for unity: in 1939 the radical wings Muhammad's Youth and Special Apparatus detached from the Brotherhood for opposing positions regarding the use of violence and the dialogue with the nationalist government. In the early '50s, the work of Sayyid Quṭb draw the premises for the formation of radical Islamist groups, generating a fracture within the Islamist galaxy which opposes moderate reformists and radicals. Such division was meant to keep widening throughout the decades.[255] Starting from the '70s, a further rupture emerged among reformists and conservatives. While the former have been keener to take part in politics, the seconds aimed at maintaining the focus on providing social services.[256] The divide sharpened after Sadat's assassination as the Muslim Brotherhood sought to distance itself from radical Islamist groups and to reconcile with governmental institutions. In other words, the Brotherhood attempted at working within the legal and institutional framework rather that against it. The conciliatory process was two-sided. In fact, with Mubarak, Egyptian politics entered in a whole new phase of "tolerance" towards the moderate wings of Islamism, which ultimately entered the institutions through the 1984 electoral coalition with the historic Wafd Party.[257]

Naturally, the Islamist revival spread through intellectual elites as well as through popular and political dimensions. The petroleum-producing monarchies, especially

[254] Hashas, "Arab Mediterranean Islam," 142.
[255] Corrao, *Islam, Religione e Politica: Una piccola introduzione*, Chap. 2.7.
[256] Hashas, "Arab Mediterranean Islam," 143.
[257] Ranko, "The Muslim Brotherhood and its Quest for Hegemony in Egypt", 82.

Saudi Arabia, financed the spread of the works of Ibn Taymiyya, Quṭb and Mawdūdī, while discouraging the diffusion of the thought of reformist thinkers, who were banned by Riyadh. Some of the most progressive thinkers in Egypt and Lebanon, such as ʻĀdel Husayn, Tāriq al-Bishrī and Hasan Hanafī turned towards different form of religious-oriented thought. More significantly, even secular or lay thinkers started to publish works concerning Islam and its relation to social, political or legal matters. 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'."[258] Corm argues that the primacy 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.*[259] He also denounces how this narrow understanding of Arab identity led to the emergence of theologico-political movements that engaged in tragic terrorist acts.

5. Contemporary identity politics in the Arab World

This thesis argues that starting from the late 70's, as a product of the dynamics described above, the identitarian struggle between Arabness and Muslimhood gained unedited relevance. This debate affects the individual self-consciousness as well as collective identities; national formation and consolidation as well as regional and global politics. These two macro identities maintained prominence in the history of the region, alternating and overlapping according to time, space and political needs. In fact, as during the pan-Arabist momentum Islamist movements begun to rise, during Islamic triumph Arabist stances survived and overlapped with religious components. This is the case for instance of the so-called "secular regimes," such as the one of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, that of Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad in Syria, that of Habib Bourguiba in Tunisia and, to some extent, of the Libyan experience under Gaddafi.[260] These leaders firmly fought the affirmation of Salafi Islam and elaborated ideologies permeated by the Arab identitarian component. Saddam Hussein particularly exposed himself as a

[258] Corm, *Arab Political Thought*, 202.
[259] Ibid., 213.
[260] Hashas, "Arab Mediterranean Islam," 133.

possible leader for the Arab nation, through its vigorous opposition against Israeli occupation and the nationalization of mineral resources which had been sold at favorable price to neighboring countries, and especially to the Jordanian ally. However, his political line juxtaposed the Arab component to the cult of personality and to Islamic narratives, which he ultimately needed to embrace to ensure legitimization.[261] A similar overlapping of secular and religious components can be noticed in the political stance of the Libyan leader Gaddafi, who was influenced by Nasser's socialist and pan-Arabist thought. He focused on the nationalization of resources; on the Palestinian cause through the financing of resistance movements; and on the religious side on the consolidation of control over the domestic religious apparatus through the affirmation of his own interpretation of Islam in the framework of the *Jamāhīriyya.*[262]

For the sake of brevity, the key historical and geopolitical developments from the '80s to present day will be analyzed through identitarian lenses. 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. The first consists in the destabilization of secular regimes; the second in the consolidation of country-based nationalisms at the expense of the macro, transnational identities; the third in the affirmation of Islamic identity in the political arena under a plurality of forms and conditions.

The first trend is due to a multiplicity of causes. On the one hand, the aforementioned "secular regimes" failed in ensuring the well-being of the populations from both an economic and a political perspective. This issue is observable since the Nasserist period, where Arab nationalism proved to be a demagogic ideology that fascinated the masses but poorly responded to their needs, generating the economic and social marginalization of the working class despite its supposed socialist inclination. The same pattern is present 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

[261] Massimo Campanini, *Islam e Politica* (Il Mulino: Bologna, 2015), 199.
[262] Emiliani, *Medio Oriente: Una Storia dal 1918 al 1991*, 264-271.

regime; in Asad's Syria, where the popular uprising of 2011 against the regime led to a spiral of violence that is still ongoing.

On the other hand, the destabilization of secular regimes mirrors international dynamics and interests in the region. In particular, it is a result of the American paradoxical strategic approach in the Middle East, and more broadly in the global geopolitical arena. As explained earlier, the US have pursued a strategy of destabilization towards those nationalist regimes that opposed Western influence in the region. Unsurprisingly, all of these states have been involved in bloody proxy wars that resulted in their downsizing, their punishment through economic sanctions, or the complete devastation of their political systems and military apparatuses in violation of international law by NATO countries. 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 particular and religious identities. It is precisely in the context of such power vacuums that radical and terrorist groups, namely Daesh, rooted themselves in the disrupted social fabric, which tragic consequences for the local populations and for regional and global security.[263]

The second trend refers to the consolidation of country-based nationalism, which underwent a process of legitimation and institutionalization in the large majority of the Arab countries, exception made for the obstacles posed to it by vast conflicts, which generated more complex scenarios in terms of identitarian self-consciousness among the populations. The exception is applicable for instance to the cases of Iraq, Libya, Syria and Lebanon, where tribal, ethnic and sectarian identities reemerged alongside the fractures generated by the harsh conflicts that interested such countries, competing with the country-based national identity. However, 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 a detachment of

[263] Redaelli, "A Geo-Historical Compass for the 'New Mediterranean'," 55-56.

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.[264] One of the latest and most significative manifestations of such 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 root themselves alongside the general 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.*[265]

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."[266] Therefore, these sub-identities have become a big challenge to the state from below (religious, sectarian, ethnic, and tribal communities) and above (Islamic movements that reject the nation-state and rise the slogans of the Islamic state)."

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[264] E. G. H. Joffé, "Arab Nationalism and Palestine," *Journal of Peace Research* 20, no. 2 (June 1983): 167.
[265] Hassanein 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. Steven Ratuva (Palgrave Macmillan: Singapore, 2020), 3.
[266] Ibid., 2.

The third and last trend that this thesis takes into consideration is the affirmation of Islamic identity in the political arena in the shape of political Islam, Islamism, and post-Islamism. When speaking about Islamism and its offsprings, reference is made to a multifaceted modern phenomenon, that in Abu Rabi's definition consists in "a social/political movement, which adopts a religious ideology with the primary aim of bringing the whole of society under the rule of the Sharı'ah."[267] It seems important to underline the modern nature of Islamism. In fact, contrarily to what the Orientalist literature and the Islamist narrative itself advocate, "Islamism is a modern phenomenon. Islamism is a form of traditionalism; it does not represent the tradition, it reinvents the tradition."[268] As Ibrahim Abu-Rabi' highlights, the causal link between European/Western modern imperialism, the failure of Arab nation states to embrace protest movements in their political systems and the rise of Islamism,[269] testifies the modern nature of Islamist political phenomenon.

Starting from the Iranian revolution in 1979, the trend of affirmation of political Islam has interested both the Shia and the Sunni world, generating especially in the latter a plurality of experiences with diverse outcomes. Adopting Hashas definitions, the term "political Islam" refers to a broad umbrella of political experiences that imply "the use of the religious reference in politics and political competition for the sake of restoring a partial or full classical political system that was substantially – though not fully – religious in worldview and praxis."[270] A meaningful aspect is how Islamic movements developed within the framework of a nation state. In fact, seldom Islamic movements evolved into political parties, as in the case of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt (Freedom and Justice Party), Iraq (Iraqi Islamic Party), Jordan and Lebanon (Islamic Action Party), Libya (Justice and Construction Party), Yemen (Congregation for Reform), Syria, Kuwait. Not uncommonly, such movements relate to, coincide with or give birth to an armed wing (militia). Remarkable are the cases of Hezbollah, a party that is also a militant group (currently

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[267] Mojtaba Mahdavi, "Whither Post-Islamism: Revisiting the Discourse/Movement After the Arab Spring," in *Arab Spring Modernity, Identity and Change*, ed. Eid Mohamed & Dalia Fahmy (Palgrave Macmillan: Cham, 2020), 18.
[268] Ibid., 17.
[269] Ibrahim Abu-Rabi', *Contemporary Arab Tought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History* (London: Pluto Press, 2004), 17.
[270] Hashas, "Arab Mediterranean Islam," 141.

the best equipped army of Lebanon); and of Hamas, the militant group later constituted a party which won elections in the Gaza strip in 2006.[271]

Other movements turned towards pronounced political and religious radicalism, undertaking a violent path of opposition to national and international order. Those constitute the multifaced and fluid galaxy of Islamist movements, that is not possible to explore in detail in this thesis. However, it is important to underline how the Islamic terrorist activity, which increased and diversified since the '70s, influenced deeply the mediatic coverage of events in the Arab and Islamic world, especially in the West. Indeed, it nourished the Orientalist myth of Islamic exceptionalism, that implies an irreducible difference between Muslims and 'the others' and the supposed immunity of Islam to secularization.[272] The magnitude of this process, especially since 9/11, is incommensurable if considered how the 'war on terrorism' narrative has influenced geopolitics and how the focus on Islamism and terrorism has monopolized the narrative around the Arab world, reinforcing the *Homo Islamicus* paradigm described by Corm.[273] The advent of Daesh in 2013 ultimately consolidated this pattern.

Finally, in the aftermath of the revolts erupted between 2011 and 2012 in many Arab States, the post-Islamist stance arose, opening wide debates about the possible role played by political Islam in a democratic, or more precisely hybrid, regime. Arab revolts are recognized to be a crucial chapter of the history of the Arab world, which implied powerful identitarian developments. In fact, the mass mobilization generated in the squares of the Arab world were pregnant of coexisting identitarian stances.

First, the Arabist component is visible in the fact itself that the revolts expanded from country to country within the contours of the Arab region. In the words of Gregory Gause: "If any doubts remain that Arabs retain a sense of common political identity despite living in 20 different states, the events of this year should put

[271] Al Jazeera News, "Hamas wins huge majority," published January 26, 2006. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2006/1/26/hamas-wins-huge-majority
[272] Mahdavi, "Whither Post-Islamism," 18.
[273] Corm, *Arab Political Thought*, 213.

them to rest."[274] Nevertheless, as explained by Amro and Lynch, the protests drew a narrative that opposed corrupted state forces against a compact popular front unified by the call for *Ḥurriyya* (freedom), *ʻAdāla ijtimāʻiyya* (social justice), and *Karāma* (dignity)[275], and "a deeply felt sense of shared destiny."[276] This phenomenon promoted a short but intense revival of what Lynch defines as a "new kind of pan-Arabist identity"[277] that, contrarily to the pan-Arabist nationalism of the mid 20th century, stemmed from the bottom-up.

Alongside that, particular identities, such as the tribal and ethnic ones, emerged during and after this large-scale mobilization phase. As noted by Hassanein Ali, identity conflicts have escalated in many Arab countries in light of the transformative force of Arab revolts.[278] States like Libya, Iraq, Yemen and Syria have undergone a process of state disintegration with the consequent emergence of particular sectarian and ethnic identities as points of reference for their populations. Nonetheless, such particular identities have become the object of external influence from regional and international powers and represent conflicting political and economic interests. This process implies that the conflicts that erupted in those countries after 2011 are particularly hard to settle unless the identitarian component is also pacified and collective identities cease to be so pronouncedly politicized.

Lastly, Islam has worked as a fundamental identitarian catalyst, to the point that the rise to power of Islamist (or post-Islamist) groups have constituted the dominating trend after the Arab revolts. In fact, 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."[279] In such 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

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[274] F. Gregory Gause, "Why Middle East Studies Missed the Arab Spring," *Foreign Affairs* (July/August 2011). https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/north-africa/2011-07-01/why-middle-east-studies-missed-arab-spring. Cited in Amro Ali, "Unpacking the Arab part of Identity, Spring, and World", *Med Dialogue Serie* no.35 (February 2021), 5.
[275] Mahdavi, "Whither Post-Islamism," 16.
[276] Marc Lynch, *The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East* (New York: Public Affairs, 2012), 8.
[277] Ibid.
[278] Ali, "Post-Arab Spring," 3.
[279] Ibid., 9.

has been developing since the Nahda. The study conducted in Libya and Egypt by Ahmed Al-Abdin et al., is an interesting starting point to introduce the role of religion as identitarian catalyst in the framework of the Arab revolts. In fact, the interviews conducted among young Libyans and Egyptians show "dialogic tensions between the sacred and profane"[280] within the popular self-consciousness. This tension is very well exemplified by the abstract of one of the interviews included in Al-Abdin's study:

> *I do not want Libya to become a completely sharia ruled state but at the same time I do not want it to become too liberal either. We are not a western country and we never have been so we should try and maintain our morals and traditions and achieve some kind of balance between the way we behave and act in society and make sure that it reflects our history.*[281]

The reaction to this push toward a liberalization on the Western model finds its expression in what Shadi Hamid calls "Islamism without Islamists."[282] This expression can be useful to explain the fact that Muslim populations might sympathize with Islamist stances, especially in reaction to cultural, political and economic imperialism and against top-down oppression, without necessarily being Islamist. Of course, most of the Muslim population around the world is not Islamist,[283] but rather finds in Islam a powerful individual and collective identity which engages with multiple sentiments of belonging in the broader framework of a multilayered identitarian construct. The roots of the rise of post-Islamist movements in many Arab countries after the Arab uprisings lie precisely in this phenomenon. Two of the most significant experiences are that of Egypt, where the Freedom and Justice Party won the 2011 elections bringing Morsi to power and that of Tunisia,

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[280] Ahmed Al-Abdin, Dianne Dean, John D. Nicholson, "The transition of the self through the Arab Spring in Egypt and Libya," *Journal of Business Research* 69 (2016): 52, http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2015.07.019.
[281] Ibid.
[282] Mahdavi, "Whither Post-Islamism," 21.
[283] Ibid., 25.

where the Ennahda party led by Rāshid al-Ghannūhi has been democratically elected in 2011.[284]

The historical analysis conducted in these first chapters highlights the existence of a galaxy of identitarian components that engage and interact with one another, which are often overshadowed by the so-called Arab-Muslim axiom. This thesis wants to highlight 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.

Since the Nahda, and even more intensely after the 1980s, mainstream Arab thought has focused on explaining the relation among these two categories. While the first is usually associated with secularism and modernism, the second is linked to conservativism and radicalization, especially after 9/11. 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',*[285] a hybrid concept that fuses together the idea of Arab and Muslim assuming they are perfectly coincident. The trend of dichotomization is equally uneven. Moving from the liberal paradigm elaborated in the West since the Enlightenment on the basis of the state-church historic rivalry, it presumes the necessity of secularization on a Western model. This perspective requires the Arab-Muslim individual to either base his identity exclusively on the religious component, or to relegate it at the remote corners of its private life, if not renounce it. In doing so, it disregards the fact that religious identities are a part of the complex identitarian constructs that shape individual and collective self-consciousnesses. It is evident how both attempts towards simplistic categorization provide limited tools to understand the Arab world in its multilayered identitarian nature. This thesis argues that a more comprehensive understanding of the plural identitarian galaxy included in the Arab social fabric is a necessary premise to the elaboration of policies that can prioritize human security in

[284] Hashas, "Arab Mediterranean Islam," 146.
[285] Corm, *Arab Political Thought*, 213.

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. Thus, the following chapter explores the enlightening contributions of contemporary Arab intellectuals who narrated and embraced the rich diversity that is at the core of Arab history and society.

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This chapter provided an overview of the crucial identitarian shifts in the 20th century. This historical period appears as particularly dense and significant to the shaping of contemporary collective and individual identities in the Arab world. In particular, the emergence of the Palestinian question has highlighted the intertwining of geopolitics and identity. After 1948, the Palestinian cause became a shared struggle among Arabs, fostering the rise of Pan-Arab ideology in anti-imperialist function since the early 50s. However, particular interests and identities continued to thrive, jeopardizing Pan-Arab struggle towards unity. The 1967 defeat marked the failure of Pan-Arabist project and the affirmation of *al-huwiyya al-waṭaniyya* over *al-huwiyya al-qawmiyya*. This trend is reflected in following events, like the Black September in Jordan and 1973 Egyptian-Israeli war, where Sadat strategically privileged Egypt's interests. Alongside the *waṭani* trend, popular disillusionment with Pan-Arabism made room for the emergence of political Islam. The rise of a religious ideology as an alternative to "secular" Arabism was facilitated by what al-'Aẓm calls "logic of exoneration," according to which the defeat was a result of religious decay. Following the success of the Iranian Revolution, in the 80s Islam (declined in a plethora of political movements and ideologies) emerged as a major identitarian catalyst. However, the struggle for unity remained an open question, since the Islamic galaxy appeared as ideologically fragmented as the Arab nationalist experiment. Recent history is characterized by three main trends: the destabilization of secular anti-western regimes; the consolidation of country-based nationalisms; the affirmation of Islamic identity in the political arena. In this regard, the chapter highlights how these trends are not only a product of internal dynamics, but of foreign interference. The conflation of different interests and the politicization of religion have produced

controversial approaches to identity: on one side, the dichotomization of Arabness and Muslimhood; on the other, the assimilation of these two identitarian components. The chapter concludes with a critic of both approaches, arguing that the Arab-Muslim axiom needs to be deconstructed in favor of a comprehensive understanding of identitarian multilayeredness in the Arab world.

IV. Beyond the Arab-Muslim axiom

The previous chapter has highlighted how the intertwining of identity and politics gave rise to instrumentalizations and manipulations of identity leading to the configuration of a postulated Arab-Muslim axiom at the expenses of a comprehensive understanding of identitarian multilayeredness. In particular, the religious component has assumed centrality: as an identitarian catalyst for fragmented societies; as tool of legitimation of authoritarian regimes; or declined in the discourse of radical ideologies and of orientalist observers. Proposing an overview of the thought of several contemporary Arab intellectuals, the chapter suggests a comprehensive understanding of individual and collective identities, detached from political orientation. The chapter unfolds in thematic sections that resume different critiques. Starting from the issue of historicization, it highlights how the relation with cultural heritage and historical interpretations can impact identitarian consciousness. In second place, the chapter explores the intrinsic ethnic and religious diversity of the Arab world, arguing it contributed to the shaping of individual and collective identities. In third place, a brief overview of the thought of secular Arab-Muslim thinkers is proposed. Their insights, in which intimate faith does not hinder rational critique, manifest the possibility of combining the secular Arab component with religious belonging. Finally, the chapter introduces the reflections of thinkers that made openness to plurality a constitutive element of their identitarian conceptualization.

1. The issue of historicization

In his *Quaderni dal Carcere* (Prison notebooks), cited by Edward Said, Gramsci states:

> *The starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is 'knowing thyself' as a product of the historical process to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of*

traces, without leaving an inventory, therefore it is imperative at the outset to compile such an inventory.[286]

Indeed, historical consciousness and elaboration is one of the key factors in the shaping of individual, collective, and cultural identity. As the interpretation of one's history determines much of the relation with his cultural heritage, and therefore with his own identity, it is relevant to understand how Arab thinkers codified and interpreted history and how they related to Arab past and heritage (*turāth*). The issue of historicization, here understood as the way history is conceptualized, organized and narrated, has been largely debated in the Arab world, due to what Campanini calls "retrospective utopia,"[287] or in other words the sacralization of the early Islamic past as Golden Age, set as a model to pursue in the present. This section briefly explores part of the available contributions and the insights gathered through the set of interviews conducted for this thesis, to provide a simple but meaningful framework of the debate about Arab past, historicization and *turāth*.

The issue of historicization is at the core of a multi-folded discourse. The question of the placement of the beginning of Arab history – before or after Islam – is still object of debate and is of primary importance to mark the distinction between Arabness and Muslimhood. Georges Corm in his "Arab political thought" 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.[288] Interestingly, during the interviews carried for

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[286] Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 25.

[287] Campanini uses this terminology to indicate the ideological development of a mystifying narrative of the historical period comprehending the early development of Islam until *al-Fitna al-Kubrā*, regardless of this period being profoundly troubled and far from idyllic in facts, as evidenced by the constant tensions within the *umma* as exemplified by the fact that, except for Abū Bakr, none of *the well-guided caliphs* died a natural death. This narrative, that can be widened to the concept of Golden Age settled in the apex of Umayyad and Abbasid empires, has strongly impacted both Islamic and Arab consciousness and political thought, producing a "reversed utopia" that "becomes retrospective" since the golden age is placed at the beginning of Arab and Islamic sacred history. This leads to a focus on the past rather than the future to achieve the ideal society, following a logic of imitation. Campanini, *La politica nell'Islam*, 115.

[288] To justify his discourse, Corm provides the examples of Hourani "A history of the Arab Peoples," Djait Hichem's "La personnalité et le devenir arabo-islamiques," and "La Grande Discorde. Religion et

this thesis, the majority of the interviewees declared that Arab history begins before Islam. Only one interviewee, prof. Mahafzah, strongly stated that Arab history begins with Islam: "All Arabs believe that their history from the beginning of Islam is a common history. The history of the Islamic legacy, beginning with Mohammad."[289] His view opposes, among others, that of prof. Eyadat, who stated: "It is a fatal mistake to believe that Arab history starts with Islam, it starts way before Islam. And actually, it is the Arab culture that shaped Islam, not *vice versa*. So, Arabism's impact on Islam is stronger than Islam's impact on Arabism."[290] A further interviewee, PhD graduate with a thesis on Jordanian and Kuwaiti national identities, provides an insight focused on the social-cultural implication of a past-centered understanding of history, affirming:

> *[this historicization] impacted the perception of time and space. So, the "best is yet to come" narrative that we [Westerners] have is not that present in the [Arab] region. Because […] now we are in the down peak of civilization. The best was before, is not yet to come, and this approach to life makes all the difference. I am not trying to improve, I am in a homogeneous empty time, which is a circle, not a line. This is also reflected in the direction of writing. How I move in time and space is affected by language and religious/cultural belief that makes me feel that I am either moving in the Islamic time, which is always and forever, or I am moving towards the worst things, while the good ones are behind. There is no room for improvement anymore.*[291]

These comments open the reflection around the perception of history as crucial to the shaping of the Self and the elaboration of *turāth,* a theme that in the thought of Arab thinkers has been intertwined with the quest for authenticity *vis à vis* the

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politique dans l'islam des origines," Mohammed Arkoun's "La Pensée Arabe." Corm, *Arab Political Thought*, 31.

[289] Prof. Ali Mahafzah, October 26th, 2023.

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

[291] Interviewee 1, September 25th, 2023.

European presence. On the quest for authenticity and its relation to the issue of historicization, the critique of the Moroccan Abdullah Laroui (b.1933) is remarkable. In his view, authenticity is to be found in the development of critical awareness of the Self and of the Other, dismantling recurrent traditional axioms, which reassuringly reduce reality into "hypostatized absolutes, such as an atemporal past, an essentialist self, and a static tradition."[292] Alongside the dependency on the West as a mean of comparison and therefore of definition, he points out the reliance of Arab traditionalist on the idealized past for constructing identity:

> *If in Arab ideology self-consciousness was first a consciousness of the West, it was also consciousness of the past. To define oneself is for the Arabs mostly to determine a permanence throughout history. But this is only true at the end of the process; it is when the self cannot be grasped anymore that one resorts to the past to guarantee one's identity; it is when authenticity is but a nostalgic quest that it is identified with a postulated continuity.*[293]

Continuously, he affirms, traditionalists sought dogmas - be they religious, cultural or linguistic - in order to ground their need for cultural authenticity on them. However, these dogmas hinder the actual authenticity of Arab identity insofar as they alienate it from history. Indeed, they need to be demystified through the elaboration of a critical historical consciousness:

> *For all objective observers, the true alienation is this loss of self in the absolutes of language, culture, and the saga of the past. The Arab intellectual blithely plunges into them, hoping thus to prove his perfect freedom and to express his deepest personality. Here, then, are found the inward chains binding him to a present he yet claims to repudiate. Historical consciousness alone will allow him*

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[292] Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, 83.
[293] Abdallah Laroui, *L'idéologie arabe contemporaine: Essai critique* (Paris: François Maspero, 1967), 73.

to free himself of them. Then he will see reality, perhaps for the first time.[294]

As noted by Mohammad al-Jabri[295] and Fouad Zakariyya,[296] 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"[297] phenomenon. In the same direction goes the reflection of Qustantin Zurayq, who in his essay *Nahnu Wa al-Tārīkh* [We and History], poses the pillar for a critical historiography. In Zurayq's view, historiography needs to produce a critical awareness of the Self, rather than mystifying the past to escape the present.[298]

Not lastly, the issue is relevant since the "retrospective utopia" is at the basis of the *salafiyya* and *neosalafiyya*, and fuels conservative and obscurantist doctrines that range from moderate political Islam to the most radical expressions of Islamism, claiming to restore a past condition that has little or no grounding in historical factuality. In his four volumes study "The Immutable and the Transformative: A Study in Conformity and Innovation Amongst the Arabs" (1973-1978), the Syrian American poet Adonis (b.1930) criticizes the dominant conception of *turāth*. He argues that Arab heritage is a collection of different and even antithetical cultural products that are informed by time-specific conditions. Therefore, heritage must be understood through the prism of history and society. In stating so, Adonis highlights the cognitive impasse generated by a static understanding of identity based on a past-centered view of the collective Self, which is recurrent in Arab thought. A static and predetermined identity, according to Adonis, hinders creativity, which is instead a human attribute: identity is, indeed, dynamic in its essence. Static conceptualizations of identity misled Arab thought towards an exaggeration of the relevance of the past

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[294] Ibid., 85.
[295] Mohammed Abed al-Jabri, *The Formation of Arab Reason: Text, Tradition and the Construction of Modernity in the Arab World*, trans. Center for Arab Unity Studies (London: I.B.Tauris & Co, 2011), 44.
[296] Fouad Zakariyya, "Al-Takhalluf al-Fikrī wa Ab'āduhu al-Ḥaḍariyya" [Intellectual Retardation and Its Civilizational Dimensions], *Al-Ma'rifa* 148 (1974): 60– 82.
[297] Al-Jabri, *The Formation of Arab Reason*, 51.
[298] Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, 71.

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."[299]

The Egyptian philosopher Fouad Zakariyya engaged in the debate, arguing that the sense of retardation and decline that crosses Arab self-reflection is due to the adoption of the glorious past as a model of reference to constantly confront with, rather than as a constitutive element of the present. If for Zakariyya the main issue in modern Arab thought's relation with the past is that it failed to generate continuity between modernity and *turāth* through critical elaboration of the latter, the Lebanese Mahdi Amil argues that Adonis and Zakariyya's idealistic historicization fails to take into adequate consideration the most recent colonial history, that is also the most explicative of the current asset of Arab society.[300] In fact, Amil criticizes the several attempts of historicization focused on reconstructing a comprehensive history that starts at some imprecise dawn of times, arguing they divert the attention from the present. The Lebanese political scientist Ghassan Salamé also criticized the attention gravitating around past and *turāth*, echoed by Mohammad Najm who points out the epistemological issue lying underneath the identification of *turāth* with Islamic legacy at the expenses of a more comprehensive understanding of the Arab past informed by social, scientific, and economic circumstances. Similar critiques can be found in the contributions of the Syrians Aziz al-Azmeh and George Tarabichi. The first argues:

> *[The] belief in an Arab or Muslim golden age which only needs to be restored and coaxed into a renaissance has been and still is a great weakness of Arab thought, Arab consciousness and Arab political discourse. I believe, furthermore, that the weight of this glorious past has resulted in an Arab politics based on passions, denial of reality and an erroneous way of thinking about public matters.*[301]

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[299] Ibid., 131.
[300] Ibid., 145-146.
[301] Aziz Al Azmeh, *Islams and Modernities* (London: Verso, 2009), chap. 3, https://www.perlego.com/book/3785667/islams-and-modernities-pdf.

In this regard, Tarabichi adopted a psychological approach to the matter in his 1991 *Al-Muthaqqafūn al-'Arab wa al-Turāth: Al-Taḥlīl al-Nafsī li 'Uṣāb Jamā'ī* [Arab Intellectuals and Tradition: A Psychological Analysis of a Collective Neurosis], speaking of the "contemporary fixation" with *turāth* that emerged as a reaction of the 1967 trauma.[302]

Mohammed Abed al-Jabri largely deals with the issue of historicization in his masterpiece "The Formation of Arab Reason" (1980). He points out the lack of a comprehensive system of historicization proper of the Arab cultural time, noticing how Arab history is normally partitioned using the European time frame – that subjugates Arab cultural time in two alien labels, that of Middle Age and that of Modern Age, omitting the placement of an Antique Age or the reference to dynasties (Umayyads, Abbasids, Fatimids and so on), which instead evocate more of a spatial transition rather than a temporal one marked by different phases of evolution. Al-Jabri adds that another common understanding of history is found in the distinction between the *Jāhiliyya*, the Islamic era and the modern era. However, these categories are perceived as separate "cultural islands" that live "simultaneously in contemporary Arab consciousness."[303] In fact, he speaks of "three beginnings" of Arab history, the first somewhere imprecise in the pre-history of Islam, one coinciding with the revelation, and the latter coinciding with the Nahda, each of them representing different "cultural islands."[304] Moreover, he remarks the "missing link" of Arab history, in other words the gap in knowledge, and therefore in consciousness, of the period between the 8th century of the Hijra – which represents the end of the Islamic era and the crystallization of the progressive shift of power from Arab to Turks explained in section I.3.a – and the 19th century AD, in correspondence with the Nahda.

The interplay between past and present timeframes, that al-Jabri calls "intersection of cultural times," is based on a logic of "accumulation" rather than of "synchronic

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[302] Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, 167.
[303] Al-Jabri, *The Formation of Arab Reason*, 44.
[304] In support of this thesis, al Jabri highlights the use of different calendars applied to the "Islamic era," where time commences with the Hijra; and the contemporary era, where time is gauged by the Western calendar, with the year zero corresponding to the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. Al-Jabri, *The Formation of Arab Reason*, 43.

contiguity."[305] 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 the 'present' itself."[306] In this regard, al-Jabri detects that "the history of Arab thought has not yet been written, that the history of Arab culture needs to be rearranged, that Arab cultural time has yet to be documented, defined and identified."[307] According to Shaker Mustafa, "Arabs seem to have a problem with time" as they seem "to live in the past more than in the present"[308] and to be overwhelmed by the richness of their heritage. He notes that, as the past has become a refuge *vis à vis* the technological and economic defeats inflicted by Western imperialism, historicization has translated into either religious or nationalist ideological constructs. Consequently, it is urgent to develop a "truly historical" understanding of the past, clear of any ideological interpretation, in order to understand present contingency. A similar view is shared by the Syrian Yasin al-Hafiz, who claims the necessity to remove ideological impurities from the writing of history, either they are a product of foreign interference or of internal elaboration. In both instances, the exaggeration of one aspect of history - in this case the idealized past - at the expenses of another in order to foster a specific discourse is anti-historic and a falsification of the truth. According to al-Hafiz, "worshipping the past is a barrier to the future."[309] Finally, it appears relevant to conclude this section by mentioning the reflection of the Jordanian thinker Fahmy Jeda'an in this regard. In his "The Foundations for Progress in Muslim Thinkers of the Contemporary Arab World," Jeda'an overviews the thought of over 40 Arab Muslim thinkers, to conclude by criticizing the de-centration of their focus towards the past. In the conclusion of his work, titled *Islam and the Future*, he writes: "All of this is about the past. But what about the future? Can we say something meaningful about a horizon that we do not see in reality?"[310] In Jeda'an's view, *turāth* is a spinous

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[305] Ibid., 45-48.
[306] Ibid., 44.
[307] Ibid.
[308] Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, 123.
[309] Yasin al-Hafiz, "Ḥawla Baʿḍ Qaḍāyā al-Thawra al-ʿArabiyya" [Regarding Some Issues Pertaining to The Arab Revolution], in *al-Aʿmāl al-Kāmila li-Yāsīn al-Ḥāfiẓ* (Beirut, 2005), 47.
[310] Fahmy Jeda'an, *Usus al-taqaddum ʿinda mufakkirī-l-islām fi'l-ʿālam al-ʿarabī al-ḥadīth* [The Foundations for Progress in Muslim Thinkers of the Contemporary Arab World] (Beirut: al-Muʾassasa al-ʿarabiyya li'l-dirāsāt wa'l-nashr, 1979), 554, https://archive.org/details/023_20201223/page/n1/mode/2up?view=theater.

matter, since it is "intertwined with a backward present."[311] He highlights how heritage shapes individual and collective identities and can lead towards enslavement in its limits or towards the liberation of the mind. As a neo-Mutazilite, he argues that *turāth* is deeply embedded in history and human comprehension, in contrast to revelation, which is an ahistorical phenomenon. This perspective suggests the necessity of distinguishing heritage, including its religious aspects, from faith. Only by recognizing its historical context can heritage be comprehended as a dynamic and creative process. This understanding is, in Jeda'an view, a necessary condition to its incorporation into a progressive future where the self is grounded, yet not rigid, in its interpretation of *turāth*.

2. Ethnic and religious diversity

As noted by 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 within a state-based perspective they are going to appear as the most diverse mosaic."[312] Indeed, what is today identified, although disputably, as the Arab world, may appear, on a generalizing glance, as linguistically and culturally homogeneous and characterized by an overwhelming religious uniformity around what Hashas calls "orthodox Islam."[313] However, a more attentive analysis reveals the high degree of religious and ethnic diversity that permeates the social fabric of the so-called Arab countries. In his "Minorities in the Arab world," Albert Hourani offers a broad overview of the principal minorities living in the region, dividing them along two lines: Sunni-not Sunni and Arabic speaker-not Arabic speaker.[314] Similarly, Rowe distinguishes between religious or ethno-religious groups and ethnic ones. Among the first category fit the Shia minorities in Sunni majority

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[311] Ibid., 562.
[312] Prof. Zayd Eyadat, October 26th, 2023.
[313] With this term, Hashas indicates the mainstream Sunni Islam, *ashʿarī* in creed, practiced by the majority of Muslim societies and communities worldwide, including the Arab ones, Orthodox Islam is related to "traditional views on certain issues related to social organization, family, including business or the economic sector." Hashas, "Arab Mediterranean Islam," 135.
[314] Albert Hourani, *Minorities in the Arab World* (London: Oxford University Press, 1947), 1-2, https://archive.org/details/MinoritiesInTheArabWorld-A.H.Hourani/page/n9/mode/2up

countries, Sufis, Kharijis, Ibadhis, Shabak, other heterodox branches of Islam such as the Alawites, the Druzes, the Baha'is; the Samaritans, the Mandaeans (or Sabeans), the Yezidis, Jews and the various Christian denominations among which Maronites, Copts, Catholics, Orthodox, Protestants. The second includes Assyrians, Armenians, Kurds, Chechens, Circassians, Turkomans and Amazigh of the Maghreb.[315] The concept itself of minority has been the object of scholarly debate. Benjamin Thomas White argues that the term was introduced in modern times and in concomitance with other conceptual constructs of European origin, namely the nation state, since during the Ottoman Empire the size of communities was not a relevant factor in their definition.[316] Furthermore, Quinn Coffey's problematization of the term "minority" highlights how the minority status can be seen as potentially threatening by the communities themselves (in his case study Palestinian Christians), "not only because it can potentially lead to what they view as unnecessary special treatment, but also because it can in some ways degrade the significant contribution that this community has made to Palestinian society."[317]

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. In fact, as noted in the first chapter, the very first essence of the *umma* was that of a trans-religious community (the *ahl al kitāb*), and the status of *dhimmī* evolved in a perspective of protection and tolerance of religious minorities rather than persecution. In Ottoman times, the system of *millet* generated a social model that, despite its imperfections, results particularly progressive if compared to contemporaneous settings, such as the European one. While some argue that *dhimmī* status has labeled religious minorities as "second class citizens," it is undeniable that it created the conditions for the preservation of diversity.

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[315] Pawl E. Rowe, ed., *Routledge Handbook of Minorities in the Middle East* (New York: Routledge, 2019), Introduction, https://www.perlego.com/book/1521234/routledge-handbook-of-minorities-in-the-middle-east-pdf.
[316] Ibid.
[317] Ibid.

Hourani dwells on explaining the root causes for pronounced diversity in the Arab region. He notes in first place the region's fertility in religious conceptions; in second place the fact that the region constituted "the center and terminous of movement,"[318] driven by both the expansionist aim of the Islamic empire and by strategic and commercial logics; in third place he notes the overlapping between tribal or sectarian divisions with religious ones; lastly, he highlights how remote geographical areas have produced specific forms of pronounced localism, as in the case of Lebanese and Kurdish mountains.

Hourani's second point is of particular interest to this thesis. The Arab-Islamic dramatic expansion registered between the 7th and the 19th centuries determined the processes of Arabization and Islamization described in the first chapter. As a product of such processes, 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."[319] 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. Nonetheless, the dialogue with other Mediterranean and Asian civilizations impacted the thought, science and philosophy of the Arab world during the so-called Golden Age as well as during the Nahda period. On these premises, it is then possible to affirm that Arab cultural identity and heritage is the product of continuous dynamics of assimilation, imitation, inspiration among a multiplicity of cultures. 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. As noted by Nasr Abu-Zayd in 2010:

> *Muslims [...] need to recognize the historical fact that the Arabs, the original carriers of the Islamic message into the world, could not have achieved the building of the great civilization of Islam*

[318] Hourani, *Minorities in the Arab World*, 15.
[319] Prof. Zayd Eyadat, October 26th, 2023.

alone. It was made possible due to the multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious composition of the Umayyad and the Abbasid Empires, not to mention the Fatimid dynasty in the East and the Andalusian dynasty in the West, in Spain. This composition enhanced the development of the philosophical, theological, mystical, legal, and cultural openness that characterizes Muslim civilization.[320]

As noted by Laura Robson in her "States of Separation", the internal diversity that characterizes the region has been strongly politicized during the 19th-20th centuries, as a product of the instrumentalization of linguistic, religious, and ethnic pluralism in favor of colonialist aims. 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."[321] Furthermore, the "divide and conquer" logic applied by the European mandates strongly relied on minorities to jeopardize nationalist processes. In fact, Rowe speaks of "Imperial patronage" to indicate the practice of treating "specific religious or ethnic groups as trusted client elites, "often based on the principle of co-religiosity."[322] In response, Arab nationalist movements of Iraq and Syria suppressed particular identities in favor of a nationalist unification. As a result, "the minority aspect was [...] denied for decades on behalf of national unity."[323] As noted by Abi Chedid, the case of Lebanon is a significant exception, since the sectarian social structure was incorporated in the parliamentary one.

Furthermore, Robson remarks the process of "racialization of religious differences"[324] operated by the British in regard to Copts, Assyrians and Armenians.

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[320] Nasr Abu Zaid, "Religions: From Phobia to Understanding," *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* VIII, no. 2 (Fall 2010): 5-6.
[321] Darina Saliba 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&Tony E. Nasrallah (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2017), 81.
[322] Rowe, *Routledge Handbook of Minorities in the Middle East*, Introduction.
[323] Chedid, "The Armenian Christian Minority in Greater Syria and The Arab Spring," 81.
[324] Laura Robson, *States of Separation. Transfer, Partition, And the Making of The Modern Middle East*, (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 10, https://www.perlego.com/book/552770/states-of-separation.

Indeed, these minorities were labeled as the true descendants of Egypt and the Mesopotamic region respectively, therefore as separate races "uncontaminated by intermarriage with Arabs and negroes." [325] In the same direction goes the nationalization of Jews religious identity, [326] that legitimized the relocation of European Jews in Palestine. The case of the Jewish religious minority in the Arab world is broadly investigated by Ella Habiba Shohat, Iraqi Israeli American scholar whose groundbreaking contributions merge decoloniality and feminism with a focus on the case of Arab Jews. As noted by Lital Levy, in the last three decades the case of Arab Jews has gained renewed interest, visible in the academia as well as other cultural domains. [327] The term "Arab Jew" itself was reclaimed, in favor of "Sephardic" and "Mizrahim," by scholars such Ella Shohat, Sami Shalom Chetrit, and Yehouda Shenhav as a challenge to "the binary opposition between Arabs and Jews in the Zionist discourse, a dichotomy that renders the linking of Arabs and Jews in this way unconceivable." [328] Shohat analysis' clearly highlights the link between colonialist strategy, Zionist narratives and the racialization of Jew's nationalist identity:

> *Zionist perspective privileged Sephardi Jewish relations with European Christianity over those with Arab Islam, projecting Eurocentric maps of Christians and Jews as West and Muslims as East and ignoring the fact that, at the time of the expulsion,*

[325] Robson, *States of Separation,* 9.
[326] Ibid., 12.
[327] To support this affirmation, Levy provides the examples of memoires and cookbooks among which: Sasson Somekh, Baghdad, Yesterday: The Making of an Arab Jew (Jerusalem, 2007); Marina Benjamin, Last Days in Babylon: The History of a Family, the Story of a Nation (New York, 2006); Chantai Calbrough, A Pied Noir Cookbook: French Sephardic Cuisine from Algeria (New York, 2005); Poopa Dweck, Aromas of Aleppo: The Legendary Cuisine of Syrian Jews (New York, 2007). In addition, he mentions a number of docufilms, including: Forget Baghdad: Jews and Arabe? The Iraqi Connection (dir. Samir, Switzerland, 2002); and Salata Baladi (dir. Nadia Kamel, Egypt, 2007). Lital Levy, "Historicizing the Concept of Arab Jews in the Mashriq," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 98, no. 4 (Fall 2008): 454.
[328] Yehouda A. Shenhav, *The Arab Jews: A Postcolonial Reading of Nationalism, Religion, and Ethnicity* (Standford: Stanford University Press, 2006), XI.

syncretic Jewish communities were flourishing within Muslim spaces.[329]

Nonetheless, the creation of Israel in 1948 further staged Arab and Jews identities as enemies. In these dynamics of manipulation of religious and ethnic identities, a "taboo"[330] was developed around that of Arab Jews, as the existence itself of Jews in faith but Oriental in cultural and ethnic terms constituted, and still constitutes nowadays, a threat to the Ashkenazi "Euro-Jews identity" and, ultimately, to the Zionist discourse as well. As a result, their Arabness was handled through erasure, in order to keep "intra Jewish ethnicity invisible."[331] While it is not possible to dig into the broad matter of Arab Jewish identity in the context of this thesis, it is interesting to introduce Shohat's reflection around the perspectives for a "comprehensive" peace in Palestine. Remarkably, Shohat argues that the matter goes beyond "the settling of political borders." In fact, a sustainable peace "would require the erasure of the East-West cultural borders between Israel and Palestine and the remapping of national and ethnic-racial identities against the deep scars of colonizing partitions."[332]

Shohat's reflection introduces the conclusion of this section dedicated to diversity. Indeed, her recognition of the need to rethink identities against the colonial politics of manipulation, erasure, and nationalization of identity coincides with the need to acknowledge the historical diversity that characterizes the region in both religious and ethnic terms. Various attempts have been made to cancel and homogenize such diversity, not only from the colonial side. As noted by the Saudi literary critic Abdallah al-Ghadhdhami, too often the perception of cultural unity and identity has been conceptualized in a way that cancels plurality.[333] Similar views are shared by the Moroccans Abdelkebir al-Khatibi and Mohammed Bennis, who criticize how the application of the monistic theology of Islam on several domains of life contributes to

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[329] Ella Habiba Shohat, *Taboo Memories, Diasporic Voices* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), 214.
[330] The term is repeatedly used by both Shohat and Shenhav with reference to the manifestation of Arab Jewish identity.
[331] Shenhav, *The Arab Jews*, 8.
[332] Shohat, *Taboo Memories, Diasporic Voices*, 214.
[333] Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, 352.

an authoritarian and centralized thought that refutes plurality. In their view, the idea of a uniform *umma*, that relegates religious, ethnic and social minorities to the margins, is a thing of the past: the concept of Arabness should be directly related to that of diversity and plurality.[334] In his *Age of Coexistence*, Ussama Makdisi argues that the "ecumenical framework"[335] consistently characterized Arab history and was particularly evident in the struggle against colonialism and Zionism. He brings the examples of the Palestinian Christian George Habash's role in the Movement of Arab Nationalists; of the Alawi Zaki al-Arsuzi's contribution to Arab nationalism, of the inclusion of Chaldeans, Armenians, Kurds, Alawis and Jews in the Iraqi communist party, and of the Christian Michel Aflaq as cofounder of the Baath Party.[336] In the post-1967, the idea of Arabism as a unifying political force was shaken, and with it the "ecumenical framework," while sectarian conflicts and particular identities affirmed themselves. However, such a framework survived, despite the challenges posed by authoritative Arabist regimes and political Islam, throughout the post-colonial era. Makdisi remarks that it is embodied in the mass mobilizations of 2010-2011 and in the "ongoing Palestinian quest to secure freedom on the basis of secular equality,"[337] directly linked to the reaffirmation of an Arab Jewish identity.

Adonis argues that the elaboration of the concept of citizenship - implying the recognition of the Other as equal regardless of sectarian, tribal, ethnic, religious differences – is a primary condition for democratic governance.[338] Similar views are brought up by two interviewees,[339] in particular by prof. Zayd Eyadat, who explained:

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[334] Ibid., 249.

[335] With "Ecumenical framework" Makdisi refers in particular to the modern form of interfaith and interethnic coexistence developed during the transition from late ottoman Empire to nation states. In Makdisi's words: "I adapt the term 'ecumenical' here to capture the shared sense of the universal, transcendent ideal of a modern political community in which explicit religious differentiation was transformed from being a marker of imperial culture to being a crucial aspect of national culture." Ussama Makdisi, *Age of Coexistence. The Ecumenical Frame and The Making of The Modern Arab World* (Oakland: California University Press, 2019), 7.

[336] Makdisi, *Age of Coexistence*, 204.

[337] Ibid., 217.

[338] Ibrahim Zabad, *Middle Eastern Minorities. The Impact of the Arab Spring*, (New York: Routledge, 2019), Chap. 1, https://www.perlego.com/book/1496084/middle-eastern-minorities-the-impact-of-the-arab-spring-pdf.

[339] Interviewee 1, September 25th, 2023. and Prof. Zayd Eyadat, October 26th, 2023.

> *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.*[340]

While scholars such as Karatnycky, Horowitz and Roeder think of ethnic and religious diversity as an obstacle to stability and democratization,[341] this thesis argues that in such a diverse and plural context as the Arab region, embracing diversity is not only a mandatory step towards social well-being, but also the natural prosecution of the region's tradition of multi-ethnic and religious coexistence in contemporary times.

3. Islam within a secular Arab identity

In the last two centuries, the debate around Islam and its compatibility with the West, modernity, rationality, democracy, science, human rights and, ultimately, secularization has been ongoing. While some criticize the obsessive attention put onto Islam by both Western and non-Western intellectuals, the issue continues to gain traction in correspondence with historical events that stir up discussion. The debate about Islam and modernity can be traced back to the 18th-19th century, when colonization implied exportation of knowledge, technology, ideas from the West to the East, triggering the reflections that merged in the Nahda. The Egyptian scholar Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd (1943-2010) argues that the West exported an essentialist conceptualization of identity in the Muslim world, by labeling Muslims as solely Muslims, regardless of their Indian-ness, Indonesian-ness, Arab-ness, etc. Beyond the criticism of colonialism, Abu Zayd notes that "the matter became more complicated when those colonized unquestionably accepted this identity imposed upon them," since "such internalization of a reduced identity created an identity crisis."[342] In

[340] Prof. Zayd Eyadat, October 26th, 2023.
[341] For a deeper insight into the debate, see Zabad, *Middle Eastern Minorities*, Chap. 1.
[342] Nasr Abu Zaid, *Reformation of Islamic Thought. A Critical Historical Analysis* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 22.

addition, the colonizer logic – of which Ernest Renan (1832-1892) is one of the most significant representatives – depicted Islam as the cause of the contingent "backwardness of the Muslim world."[343] The reaction to such an identity crisis was on one side the development of modern Islamic reformist thought, on the other the crystallization of the religious dogma into political ideology and the perception of critical scholarship around the Qur'ān "as part of the European conspiracy against Islam and Muslims."[344] In this regard, it seems relevant to cite prof. Mahafzah's interview. In his reflection, the anti-colonialist and imperialist stance is recurrent. Regarding the interplay between Islam and Arabism, he states:

> *From the beginning of our history, we had two challenges. First, the interior challenge. Arabs, and other nations [he refers here to the struggle for unity of the Arab nation]. In this case, there was Arabism, a concentration of Arabism. But if we have a foreign challenge, we stick to Islam. It was always the shield that we used to stand in the front of foreign attacks or foreign integration. It is normal that we use Islam, because the western countries, the western people have Islamophobia, they hate Islam and hate Muslims. They believe that Islam is a danger. Well, Islam is not a danger, but we stick to Islam to defend ourselves because it's our culture, it's our religion and our culture.*[345]

While narratives of complete identification of Arabs with Muslims spread both in the West and in the East, failing in grasping reality and, with it, the multilayeredness of Arab identity and identity in general; several Arab contemporary intellectuals put their efforts in dismantling such reductionist attempts. Interestingly, these "enlightened" figures seldom faced overshadowing in the academia – notable is the case of Gamal Al Banna, secularist critic almost unknown comparing to the

[343] Ibid., 23.
[344] Ibid., 24.
[345] Prof. Ali Mahafzah, October 26th, 2023.

brother Hassan al Banna, founder of the Muslim Brotherhood[346] – and opposition in their own societies – as in the case of Egypt in the early 90s, where Faraj Foda was killed by Islamists and other scholars, among which Abu Zayd himself, were prosecuted for apostasy. 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. Nonetheless, such understanding demonstrates to be an antidote to dangerous essentialist approaches, as it seeks a "scientific" reading of Qur'ān and Islamic history and jurisprudence beyond ideological aims.

In a 2010 article about Islamophobia in the West, the Egyptian scholar Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid raised a variety of arguments in order to dismantle the western mainstream narrative regarding Islam, highlighting its commonalities with the fundamentalist discourse. Citing his own biography, Aby Zayd 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.*[347]

Echoing Abu Zaid's concept of "constructed identities," the Syrian historian Aziz Al-Azmeh (b. 1947) affirms that while "there is no doubt that Arab Christianity, especially in the Eastern churches, owes a lot to Islam," it is equally true that Islam

[346] Corm, *Arab Political Thought*, 246-247.
[347] Abu Zaid, "Religions: From Phobia to Understanding," 9.

has "borrowed from the surroundings."[348] In this sense, it is not possible to speak of a pure and authentic Muslim identity without considering how Islam's component has merged with other cultural and folkloristic practices: according to al-Azmeh, social culture and folklore in Arab countries "belong to the temporal domain and – in Syria's case for example – to a common history belonging to all the communities, and extending a long way back into the pre-Islamic era."[349] Al-Azmeh secularist but not anti-religious understanding of identity stems from the awareness of its multi-layered nature and of the interplay of religious traditions with other profane cultural practices in the formation of Arab collective identity. Such acknowledgment leads to a further reflection:

> *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 has already happened in Iran and Sudan and is threatening to happen in other Arab countries.*[350]

Al-Azmeh refers in this case to the Islamist manipulation of identity, oriented towards the affirmation of an essentialist understanding of Arab heritage as exclusively Islamic, and towards the elaboration of a past-centered approach to the challenges posed by modernity. Such ideology, in his view, shows ideological commonalities with other forms of nationalisms and populism observable around the globe.[351] Nonetheless, Islamism postulates the exceptionalism of the Muslim community while practicing an "over-Islamization of Islam," implying that Islam is a

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[348] Al Azmeh, *Islams and Modernities*, chap. 3.
[349] Ibid.
[350] Ibid.
[351] Al-Azmeh brings the examples of Russian Narodniks, African populisms, the twentieth-century German and Italian nationalisms, the Hindu nationalism, and "some of the major branches of Arab nationalism that are heavily tainted with fascism." Ibid.

permanent and unchangeable fact, "with which the Muslims are totally impregnated."[352]

Such analysis recalls the reflection of the Syrian political scientist Bassam Tibi (b. 1944) on Islamist ideology. He argues that Islamism is a semi-modern[353] political ideology that developed in response to Western cultural hegemony. Western hegemony is embedded, among other things, in the transplant of secular nation states. According to Tibi, these organizational entities did not become the identitarian system of reference for the local population, that continued to "turn to other identity references,"[354] among which the local communities and religious ones. In this framework, political Islam, being an ideology that politicizes religious belonging, has provided a highly symbolic tool to contrast the super-imposition of secularizing tendencies and replace failed nationalist ideologies. However, instead of producing a rational contribution to the development of an indigenous science and a cultural attitude open to plurality, Islamism attempts at substituting "one hegemonic structure with another."[355] The identitarian conceptualization related to political Islam is described by Tibi as follows:

> *In political Islam the image of one's self as being anti-Western is the referent for determining self-identity. The construction of an "imagined community" on which to base the cultural identity of a "we"-group is integral with a perception of an inimical global environment depicted as "they," that is, "the West."* [356]

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[352] Ibid.

[353] According to Tibi, modernity is composed of a cultural element - that resides "in the "principle of subjectivity" according to which a person is defined as an individual of free will, capable of determining his/her own destiny and changing the social and natural environment" - and an institutional one, comprehending techno-scientific achievements. Semi-modern are those societies or movements that embraced the institutional element but contest the cultural aspect of modernity as elaborated in the West. Bassam Tibi, *The Challenge of Fundamentalism. Political Islam and the New World Disorder* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2023), 24, https://www.perlego.com/book/3905670/the-challenge-of-fundamentalism-political-islam-and-the-new-world-disorder-pdf.

[354] Ibid., 21.

[355] Bassam Tibi, *Islam Between Culture and Politics* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 92.

[356] Tibi, *The Challenge of Fundamentalism*, 118.

Tibi's interest in the role of colonialism in the rise of Islamism is interesting insofar as it breaks the static conception of time, restoring the historicity of the identitarian struggle that led to the affirmation of religious identity over other components. Similarly, Al-Azmeh underlines how, while the historicity of Islamist phenomena is denied, its causes are visible in the modern history of the Arab world.[357] Alongside the placement of Islamism in its historical contingency, 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 Qur'ān 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."[358] 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). He strived to elaborate 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."[359] By affirming that the Qur'ān should be read "as if it was revealed last night," Sharhur invites interpreters to look at the text from a renewed contemporary perspective.[360] 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."[361] Arkoun's critique of Islamic reason merges anthropology, philosophy, history and linguistics in a cognitive approach oriented

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[357] Within such causes, Al-Azmeh highlights the weakness of post-independence states, their retreat from social and economic functions following the embracement of neoliberal policies, the failure of Arab Left, the detachment of Arabs from the secularizing Kemalist experience. Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, 231.

[358] Ibid., 194.

[359] Mohammad Sharhur, "Introduction," in *The Qur'an, Morality and Critical Reason. The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, ed. Andreas Christmann (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 2-3.

[360] Andreas Christmann, ed., *The Qur'an, Morality and Critical Reason. The Essential Muhammad Shahrur* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), XXXVIII, 149.

[361] Mohammed Arkoun, *Rethinking Islam. Common Questions, Uncommon Answers*, trans. and ed. Robert Lee (New York: Routledge, 2019) Accessed at: https://www.perlego.com/book/1477048/rethinking-islam-common-questions-uncommon-answers-pdf, Introduction.

towards dismantling the barriers of the "unthought" and "unthinkable" in Islamic thought, following reason and logic. As Robert Lee explains:

> *Although Arkoun denies there is anything one might call "the true Islam," he suggests that one could with sufficient patience establish all that Islam has been, all that has been thought about it, and all that has remained unthinkable or unthought. And in the totality of this understanding lies an important set of truths about Islam that can serve as a point of fixity and identity for Muslims and also as a bridge to other societies of the Book.*[362]

The hermeneutical and epistemological reflections of the mentioned authors share the goals of promoting rationality, cultural pluralism, and counter obscurantist understandings of religion. In doing so, they reveal the possibility of reconciling religious identity with the "ethnic, political, linguistic, and tribal affiliations that a person might have."[363] Such a view is shared by the interviewee Dr. Amer al-Hafi of the Royal Institute for Interfaith studies of Amman. Indeed, al-Hafi repeatedly stressed the fact that the religious one is one component of a complex identity. For al-Hafi, "Identity is not a rock, it's a river,"[364] not a permanent and solid entity – but rather a continuously flowing river, that might seem uniform at first sight, but is in fact a withholding of various forms of life within it.

4. For a comprehensive understanding of Arab identity

In his article "Islamic Monotheism and The Struggle of Opposites," the Bahreini thinker Mohamad Jaber al-Ansari highlights the centrality of the principle of unification in Arab-Islamic tradition, noting how it conflicts with the contradictory nature of reality. The question posed by al-Ansari is, thus, the following:

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[362] Ibid., Foreword.
[363] Mohammad Sharhur, "Conclusion." In *The Qur'an, Morality and Critical Reason. The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, ed. Andreas Christmann (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 498.
[364] Prof. Amer al-Hafi, December 18th, 2023.

> *How, then, are we to bridge the abyss between God and humanity, between the afterlife and the present life and between the transcendent ideal and the reality contaminated by multiplicity and contradiction? Must we, the Unitarians par excellence, surrender to the fact of constant battling and accept dualism?*[365]

Al-Ansari's question, partially rhetoric as it preludes to a critic of what he calls "conciliatory spirit" and its outcomes, opens the reflection around the issue of how to develop a comprehensive understanding of the individual and collective Self beyond what is here defined as the Arab-Muslim postulated dichotomy. This terminology is here used to evoke the set of reiterated contrapositions that are visible in both the Orientalist-colonialist rhetoric and in the religious traditionalist discourse, that oppose irreducibly two semantic fields: on one side, what concerns Islam, tradition, *turāth*, and on the other modernity, secularism, technology, etc. Following the dualist approach that echoes the Huntingtonian "clash of civilization", these semantic fields could be broadened exponentially, to include, for instance, the West, Christianism, Judaism, Zionism, colonialism, Illuminism, rule of law in the second field; and obscurantism, Salafism, violence, authoritarianism, terrorism, in the first. In the construction of such misleading imagery, Arabness has a controversial role. While it can be understood as the secular alternative to a strong Islamic identity, centered around temporal components such as language and ethnicity, it can also be located in the first semantic field, giving origin to the ill-motivated identification between Arabness and Muslimhood that this thesis substantially criticizes. In this sense, the reflection around Arab identity could be reduced to the debate around secularism applied to Islam in the Arab world; in other words, to the required choice between secular and religious identity, between West and East, "Mechanization and Mecca,"[366] where Arabs seem to have contingently chosen the latter.

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[365] Mohamad Jaber al-Ansari, "Islamic Monotheism and The Struggle of Opposites", *Oasis 26 – Muslims, Faith and Freedom* (April 18, 2018), 80. Accessed at: https://www.oasiscenter.eu/en/islamic-monotheism-and-the-struggle-of-opposites.

[366] Roberto Gritti, *La politica del sacro. Laicità religione, fondamentalismi nel mondo globalizzato*, (Milano: Guerini, 2004), 73.

This section, concluding the overview of the conceptualizations of Arab identity throughout history initiated in Chapter I, remarks, through the contributions of Arab contemporary thinkers, the need to abandon dualist attempts towards identitarian definition, as they prove fallacious in grasping reality and its complexity. Thinking of identity in a unilateral or bilateral perspective is equally inappropriate *vis à vis* its evident multifaceted, fluid, dynamic nature in the Arab world as elsewhere. Resuming al-Ansari's question, this section does not discuss submission to dualism, but openness to plurality.

Contributions by Arab intellectuals that place pluralism as a value to rediscover and pursue are varied, and many have been cited in the previous preluding questions. Among these, Bassam Tibi and al-Azmeh's ones are particularly profound. Moving from historical analysis, Arkoun draws attention to the fact that Islamic reason and Western reason have nourished each other, proposing a critical approach to both the traditions. Detaching himself from dominant ideologies of his time, namely Islamism, nationalism and ethnic separatism, Arkoun pursues an understanding of particularity within a universal framework.

Strong voices advocating for pluralism come from the Maghreb. Among these, the Tunisian Fathi Triki 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:

> *La dignité comme "karama"désigne finalement un statut honorable qu'autrui doit reconnaître, et qui impose certaines attitudes cohérentes avec le sens de l'humain. "Karama" offre une nouvelle dimension à l'humanité, celle d'un vivre-ensemble harmonieux, d'un vivre-ensemble raisonnable et agréable.*[367]

[367] "Dignity as "karama" ultimately designates an honorable status that others must recognize, and which imposes certain attitudes consistent with the meaning of being human. "Karama" offers a new

An alternative view is that of Mohammad Dahir (b. 1994), who with the aim of working towards the development of a "critical liberating consciousness,"[368] recalls the secular[369] 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.[370]

The Moroccan Abdelkebir al-Khatibi provides further insights in the issue of pluralism. His contribution, largely focusing on the Maghreb as a cultural hybrid, proposes the development of a decolonizing "other thought,"[371] detaching from both Western cultural imperialism and the Arab struggle for an immaculate identity. While the totality of al-Khatibi's thought cannot be described in this thesis, it appears crucial to underline his deconstructionist approach to identity, which owes much to Derrida's critique.[372] Recognizing plurality and diversity as a factuality in the Arab world, al-Khatibi refutes reductionist attempts, understanding identity as "the trace of time," a "perpetual becoming."[373] Thus, his appeal is for the liberation from the myth of immaculate identities. His conviction if powerfully resumed in the following words:

Everybody cherishes identity

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dimension to humanity, that of harmonious, reasonable, and pleasant living together." Fathi Triki et al., *Vivre-Ensemble Dans La Dignité* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2015), 37, https://www.perlego.com/book/3097628/vivreensemble-dans-la-dignit-thtre-antoine-vitez-ivry-novembre-2015-pdf.

[368] Corm, *Arab Political Thought*, 254.

[369] Although it shall be considered that the secular nature of the mentioned political experiences is highly controversial.

[370] Corm, *Arab Political Thought*, 257.

[371] Abdelkebir Khatibi, *Plural Maghreb. Writings in Postcolonialism*, trans. P. Burcu Yalim (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), chap. 1, https://www.perlego.com/book/874803/plural-maghreb-writings-on-postcolonialism-pdf.

[372] Mustapha Hamil, "Abdelkebir Khatibi and the Postcolonial Prerogative," *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics, The Language of the Self: Testimonies and Autobiographies* n. 22, (2002): 84.

[373] Sam Cherribi and Matthew 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: Amsterdam University Press, 2014), https://doi.org/10.1515/9789400601857-fm180, 180.

Everybody searches for origin

And I am teaching orphan knowledge.[374]

Finally, we want to resume to al-Ansari in order to examine his 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. The reconciling effort produced a status of cultural alienation since both these poles are "exterior" in place and time: the West is foreign to Arabs due to geographical distance and past is equally foreign due to its distance in time.[375] 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.*[376]

In this sense, emphasizing particularity appears as a tool to break free from the constraints of rigid identitarian conceptualization. Highlighting the many cleavages

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[374] Hamil, "Abdelkebir Khatibi and the Postcolonial Prerogative," 84.
[375] Mohammed Jaber Al-Ansari, *Al-Fikr al-ʿarabī wa sirāʿ al-aḍdād* [Arab Thought and the Conflict of Contraries], (Beirut: al-Muʾassasa al-ʿarabiyya li'l-dirāsāt wa'l-nashr, 1996), 641. Cited in Corm, *Arab Political Thought: Past and Present*, 253.
[376] Al-Ansari, *Arab Thought and the Conflict of Contraries*, 645.

that cross Arab social fabric, enables the analysis to go beyond the reductionist dualism that absorbs diversity in the magma of just two semantic fields. 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 millennia—a heritage which should be among our own most cherished and guarded legacies to the future."[377]

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Throughout the chapter, the reflections of contemporary Arab intellectuals have been put in dialogue in order to address a set of themes strongly relevant to identity. In first place, the chapter tackles the issue of historicization and the relation to heritage. The section argues that too often in the Arab world an idealized and ideological view of past has oriented identitarian feelings. Sacralizing the past implied referring to it as the model to be realized in the present. That, combined with the identification of Arab past with Islamic past, has fostered the rise of Salafi ideologies. As noted by al-Jabri, the interpretation of history in the Arab world is not yet systematized and evokes the existence of parallel "cultural islands," hindering the contingency nexus between past, present and future. Thus, mainstream Arab thought remained stuck in a traditionalist way of life that scarcely represents Arab heritage, characterized indeed by pronounced dynamism and cultural ferment. Rediscovering heritage beyond ideologization is a key argument of section IV.2. Indeed, the section explores the reflection of authors that highlighted the unique diversity in terms of ethnic and religious belonging that can be observed in such a crossroad of civilizations as the Arab world. The existence of such diversity alone is sufficient to motivate the need to develop a comprehensive understanding of identity. Doing otherwise leads, as in the case of Arab Jews, to the artificial marginalization of a minority. The following section highlighted how religious belief, with particular reference to Islam, can be subject of rational inquiry.

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

According to the examined authors, a secular identity does not hinder faith and, mutually, religious faith does not exclude the use of rational tools to examine reality and religious dictate. Such view is well-represented in Abu Zaid's sentence: "I think, therefore I am Muslim." Finally, the chapter proposes a plural approach to the understanding of identity, through the reflections authors like Arkoun, Tibi, al-Khatibi, and Triki. Their reflection testified the awareness of their plural heritage, as Arabs and as human beings. Their contributions attempted to deconstruct the Arab-Muslim axiom through a rational examination of history, the recognition of diversity and the acknowledgement of cross-cultural fertilization processes. Surrendering to the impossibility of an "immaculate identity," their attempt to detach from both traditionalist and orientalist views translates into the recognition of identity as plural, multilayered and dynamic.

V. Qualitative Case Study: four perspectives on Jordanian identity

The Jordanian case is of particular interest to this thesis since its demographic, historical and political setting produced a diverse society in which strong identitarian belongings tightly combine with each other. In this sense, the case study aims at demonstrating the relevance of a comprehensive approach to identity studies. The research is based on data gathered from semi-structured interviews with four key-informants. The study's findings are presented in five thematic sections, exploring various factors influencing both individual and collective identities. These include tribalism, religious ties, institutional narratives, ethnic diversity, and Arabness as both an identity and political ideology. Through the interviewees' insights, the chapter illustrates the nuanced nature of identitarian conceptualizations at the individual level. Moreover, it aims to provide a concise yet comprehensive overview of how different identitarian components interact, emphasizing the role of political and social factors in shaping fluid dynamics of inclusion, exclusion, and overlap.

1. Research tools and relevance of the case study

This final chapter proposes a country-based case study investigating different components of the contemporary Jordanian national identity, in order to provide a concrete example of how different "layers" of identity intersect each other without necessarily producing dynamics of exclusion. The case study is based on documentary research and on four semi-structured interviews carried with key-informants experts in the field of identity politics and history in Jordan. Due to the impossibility of collecting a relevant statistic sample to grasp the popular feeling of belonging in Jordan in each of its different sub-cultures and social strata, the research project was oriented towards the selection of key-informants that could provide useful insights on the topics covered from different perspectives according to both their academic background and their personal history. The section is organized in thematic sections that reflect and summarize the topics covered in the interviews. The interview form, prepared under the mindful mentoring of prof. Walaa al Husban and dr. Odetta

Pizzingrilli, is available for consultation as in both the English (Appendix B) and Arabic (Appendix C) versions.

Although this thesis prioritizes autochthonous perspectives on the subject, one of the selected interviewees is not of Jordanian or Arab origin. In light of her multi-year experience in the region and expertise in the field of identity politics she is considered to provide useful insights as an "outside observer," as the interviewee repeatedly defined herself. Since this interviewee prefers to remain anonymous, she will be cited as "interviewee 1." The other interviewees are prof. Zayd Eyadat, director of the Center for Strategic Studies of the University of Amman (where I attended a six-month internship and where this research was formulated); prof. Amer al-Hafi, expert in comparative theology and academic advisor at the Royal Institute for Interfaith Studies; Ali Mahafzah from the University of Jordan and renowned Jordanian scholar. All of them carry Jordanian citizenship. The interviews were conducted in Amman, Jordan, between September and December 2023. In the same period, the Gaza war started, bringing social unrest in Jordan and most importantly redefining the feeling of belonging across the populations of the region. While this is an ongoing process, hard to grasp and in continuous transformation, it is necessary to take the regional developments into account as the interview's materials are approached. During the latest interview, conducted on December 18th 2023, dr. al-Hafi addressed the current situation in Gaza in the following terms:

> *It's a kind of explosion on every level - even in theology, politics, international relations, values, morality. This is a very, very hard time. It's not just the explosion in Gaza. It's the explosion of our identity. It's huge, like WWII in Europe. Even if the war is in Gaza, we are involved, in one way or another, with every victim dying in Gaza. We are dying with them. They are destroying our feelings, destroying our spirit, our hearts. They are destroying our identity. I don't know if the Americans are aware of what is happening to us,*

to our feelings, to our awareness, to how we are feeling as Arabs, as Muslims.[378]

These words are explanatory of why the current events cannot be ignored when looking at the feelings of identitarian belonging in contemporary Jordan. Indeed, identity is fluid and continuously transforms according to the surroundings and to political developments. As highlighted by Interviewee 1, when speaking of Arab identity "we are talking about an ongoing process, so the answer you can get today is not the answer you can get on another occasion, because the geopolitical variables are many and move fast everywhere."[379] For this reason it is possible that the research, or aspects of it, will sound outdated soon. The understanding of identity from an academic perspective will require continuous research with the aim of tracking how identity evolves rather than defining it once and for all. The interest in a country-based case study stems from the awareness that nation-states are now the dominating reality in the Arab region, as was confirmed by all four interviewees. Interviewee 1 explained:

These states we are dealing with are the reality, this is what we have. Jordan has celebrated 100 years since its state foundation - we cannot keep writing articles saying there is no state because it appeared in 1922. It is 2023, it's done, the state is here, people accepted the idea and understood they are Jordanians. Maybe in 1922 it was not like this, but we cannot go back in time. Now people feel Jordanian, and Jordan is a sovereign country. This is the reality we are dealing with.[380]

Similarly, prof. Eyadat stated:

[378] Prof. Amer al-Hafi, December 18th, 2023.
[379] Interviewee 1, September 25th, 2023.
[380] Ibid.

> *These nation states, Jordan for example, are more than 100 years old. Same for Egypt, Morocco, Syria, Iraq - they have their sense of national identity, as being Jordanians, being Iraqi, being Syrians, being Egyptians, but also being Arabs. But being Syrian, Jordanian, and so on comes first and it is much stronger [than being Arab]. […] I think the nation state has proven itself to be the mechanism through which people express their identities and hopes.*[381]

In this sense, it seems relevant to focus on one specific example of how different identitarian components can be included under what Pizzingrilli defines as "umbrella"[382] of national belonging. The identitarian question in Jordan assumes relevance in light of the pronounced diversity that characterizes the country. Identity in Jordan is particularly multilayered due to historical and demographic reasons that will emerge in the next sections. Nonetheless, being Jordan a prominent example of political equilibrium between Arabism and westernism, the country seems a significant example of how identity can be shaped according to political interests and needs. Finally, the country enjoys decades-long substantial stability. In this sense, it is possible to observe its identitarian landscape free from the severe polarization that occurs in other Arab countries undergoing highly conflictual conditions. However, the country is not exempt from instability[383] and is rather an interesting example of how Arabness and national identity cope with unsteadiness and foreign interference in the region.

2. 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

[381] Prof. Zayd Eyadat, October 26th, 2023.
[382] Pizzingrilli, "State and Legitimacy within an Arab-Muslim context," 274.
[383] As demonstrated by the alleged coup uncovered on April 3rd, 2021, that led to the arrest of former crown prince Hamza. However, the real nature of the events is contested. For further insights in the matter, consult Jilian Schwedler, "A Coup or Not a Coup, That Is the Question in Jordan," interview by Yousef Munayyer, *Arab center Washington DC*, May 7th, 2021, https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/a-coup-or-not-a-coup-that-is-the-question-in-jordan/.

country's politics, economic fabric, value system, and identity. The tribe is the most rooted social institution in the country and maintained its cruciality after the constitution of the nation state. As explained in the first chapter, the tribal system has always characterized the Arabian Peninsula. In the area of Transjordan, due to its marginality from the different centers of power that emerged throughout history, tribes maintained a central role in the social structure. 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."[384] The importance of tribalism was recognized unanimously by the interviewees. Interviewee 1 stated:

> *Jordanian identity is tribal. Tribalism is* the *component. Even the minorities, even Circassian have tribal leagues*[385] *and tribalism is THE umbrella that comprehends all of the components. So you can't put it out. Tribalism is the country because it was there before 1922. You can't say anything that doesn't acknowledge the presence of the tribes. How to include the tribes in the nation state system that is not designed for this component to be there, I don't know. Clearly nobody knows nor made a real action, because it is very hard. The real power is still in their hands because nothing*

[384] Beverly Milton-Edwards and Peter Hinchcliffe, *Jordan. A Hashemite Legacy* (New York: Routledge, 2009), chap. 1, https://www.perlego.com/book/1607795/jordan-a-hashemite-legacy-pdf.

[385] Bram and Shawwaf provide an explanation of Circassian tribal sub-identities: "Circassians were divided into various sub-groups ("tribes"), who spoke different dialects. The most important distinction is between the various groups of the North-West Caucasus (such as Sha'psu, Abzakh, and Bzhadugh) and the Kabardian (Kabartai), a big group from Central-North Caucasus. These sub-groups brought with them different traditions, such as a class-based hierarchy among Kabardians versus a more "egalitarian" ethos among sub-groups of the North-West Caucasus. Although many of the specific differences are less relevant today, sub-divisions were, and still are, prominent among the Circassians, including the Circassians of Jordan." Chen Bram and Yasmine Shawwaf, "Circassians" in *The Palgrave Handbook of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan*, ed. P. Kumaraswamy, (Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 2019), https://www.perlego.com/book/3485740/the-palgrave-handbook-of-the-hashemite-kingdom-of-jordan-pdf.

works without the tribal leaders' support in Jordan. It is everywhere.[386]

As underlined by Interviewee 1, the political power is still largely linked to the tribal network. However, prof. Eyadat pointed out that the influence of tribalism on Jordanian identity is primarily referred to the value system it implies:

Tribalism is the dominant component of Jordanian identity and tribalism comes in two forms: tribalism out of Bedouins and the one out of city dwellers. But 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, so whenever there is going to be any type of reform or change in the politics or economy, tribes are always going to share. So yes, tribalism is dominant.[387]

The distinction between cultural and political implications of tribalism was proposed also by dr. al-Hafi, who shed light on the potential destabilization tribalism can cause in politics alongside the unifying effect it has on a cultural dimension:

As a political element, it could sometimes separate Jordanians. But in cultural terms it is a richness to our community. If the tribes tried to rule the state, or to have more power in the state, this would generate an internal conflict among them. So I think the Jordanian state tried to keep a kind of balance between tribes in terms of political power, especially for the big tribes, and not to give some of those tribes more power than the others. To keep this kind of balance on a political level it is something very important. But as I

[386] Interviewee 1, September 25th, 2023.
[387] Prof. Zayd Eyadat, October 26th, 2023.

said, on the community level, it's very rich, and there is a very deep relation between different tribes.[388]

Nonetheless, al-Hafi reflected on the most recent developments of the tribal structure of Jordanian society *vis à vis* modernization and urbanization[389]:

> *Now we embraced the city model, not the village model or agricultural model. Modernity pushed the tribes to become more civilian, rather than tribal citizens. 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. The belonging to the tribe started to weaken, and most of the time is seen in the workplace, to make a living, or when engaging with the wife and children. People concentrate on the economical aspect and seek to live in the city more than in the villages. This made the community less connected with the tribal system. Individuality became stronger.*[390]

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. The Hashemite dynasty currently in power descends from Sharif Hussein of Mecca (al-Ḥusayn bin ʻAlī al-Hāshimī, 1853-1931), head of the Hashemite clan from the Quraysh tribe and "hereditary custodian of the Muslim holy Places of Mecca and Medina."[391] The intersection between tribalism, Arabness and

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[388] Prof. Amer al-Hafi, December 18th, 2023.
[389] When speaking of urbanization, it is noteworthy to consider the sudden expansion of the capital Amman. In fact, the city's population increased from 5,000 in 1921 to 4,087,483 according to the most recent data of the Jordanian department of Statistics. "Population Estimates Of The Kingdom By Municipality And Sex, For End Of Year 2022," Department of Statistics, accessed January 22, 2024, https://dosweb.dos.gov.jo/DataBank/Population/Population_Estimares/Municipalities.pdf.
[390] Prof. Amer al-Hafi, December 18th, 2023.
[391] Milton-Edwards and Hinchcliffe, *Jordan. A Hashemite Legacy*, chap. 1.

religion is crucial to the Hashemites. Being a branch of the Quraysh tribe, the clan Banu Hashem[392] claims descent from Mohammad.[393] Such interplay of components is well captured in the words of prof. al-Hafi:

> *We are Jordanians and we are Arabs, because of this historical and very strong rule of the Hashemite family. 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.*[394]

Strong of his lineage and of his ruling position, Sharif Hussein assumed the leadership of the Great Arab Revolt of 1916 and strived to establish an Arab state "stretching from Aleppo (Syria) to Aden (Yemen)."[395] The emergence of Hashemites as leaders of the Arab cause *vis à vis* Ottomanism continued during the WWI, during which Hussein affirmed himself as interlocutor with the European powers and in particular the British authorities. The formation of Transjordan as British protectorate first, and independent state subsequently happened under the rule of Amir Abdullah (ʿAbd Allāh bin al-Ḥusayn, 1882-1951), first king of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan since 1946. However, king Abdullah I never abandoned the aims of territorial expansion from a pan-Arabist perspective. Remarkably, "the motive behind separating Transjordan from Palestine was closely associated with the 1917 Balfour Declaration"[396] and is therefore to be ascribed to the strategic partition of the Middle

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[392] Literally meaning "Hashem's sons."
[393] 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," 118.
[394] Prof. Amer al-Hafi, December 18th, 2023.
[395] "Biographical information. Sharif Hussein bin Ali," King Hussein website. Accessed January 16th, 2024, http://www.kinghussein.gov.jo/sharif_hussein.html#:~:text=Emir%20of%20Mecca%20and%20King,1916%20against%20the%20Ottoman%20army.
[396] Kenneth Christie and Mohammad Masad, ed., *State Formation and Identity in the Middle East and North Africa* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). Accessed at:

East between Britain and France through the Skyes Picot agreement and the San Reno conference of 1920. The creation of an East Bank as a separate territory implied the need for a national identity "that was Jordanian in character and yet managed to respect pre-existing loyalties and ties."[397] In shaping what Anderson defined as an "imagined community,"[398] the Hashemites largely counted on the legitimacy provided to them by their lineage. While kinship with the Prophet could be expected to produce a religion-centered legitimacy, Hashemism rather assumed the contours of a political stance. This point was clarified by prof. Eyadat:

> *Hashemism is not part of Jordanian identity. It has never been. When you mention the Hashemite, you don't think of them as a clan, you think of Hashemite as the Prophet. It's actually a symbol of the Prophet, Islam, and religiosity rather than the clan. In that sense, it's always been a catalyst for unification and unity, not a divisive factor. Now, Jordanians agree on very few things, but one thing that they almost agreed on is that the Hashemites are the safety valve for Jordan's political system. That's not identity. That's a political stance. From the political views of both Jordanian-Jordanians, and Palestinian-Jordanian, Hashemism actually is the common ground for both, because both looked at the Hashemites as being the arbiter, as being the loving king, the peaceful king, the inclusive king, whether king Abdullah or Hussein. The royal family is highly respected, admired, and loved by Jordanian-Jordanians, and Palestinian-Jordanians. But that's a political and social issue, not an identitarian issue.*[399]

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https://www.perlego.com/book/3489500/state-formation-and-identity-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa-pdf.

[397] Milton-Edwards & Hinchcliffe, *Jordan. A Hashemite Legacy*, chap. 1.

[398] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

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

Although in different terms, Interviewee 1 explained Hashemites' role in providing religious legitimacy to the existence of the nation state and to the current regime:

> *Tribal identity is, for sure, one of the biggest components. Religious identity is also a source of legitimacy for the government itself. The Hashemites rule because of this. The ruling family being Hashemite is the reason why they are still in power, and nobody overthrew them, as there is no will to overthrow them. In Jordan you have the religious legitimacy that comes from the ruling family being Hashemite, and you have the semi-rentier system which is a legitimizing process. These are the two things that keep the national state going. Firstly, this pillar, which is the Hashemites being protectors of the holy places, is based on the history that is behind them. Secondly, the state being semi-rental because they live on the revenues coming from the Gulf, the European union, and US. This is why this country is still alive.*[400]

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."[401] It seems relevant to conclude the section with the comment of prof. al-Hafi, who particularly stressed how Hashemites merge traditional components (like Arabness and Muslimhood) with a third element, that could be defined as openness and moderatism. It is worth highlighting that this third element remarkably influences Jordan's foreign policy.

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[400] Interviewee 1, September 25th, 2023.

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

Hashemism is very important, because it combines national identity as Arabs with religious identity. They have them both together. At the same time, the new royal family is very open to different cultures, especially since they are educated in European universities. They have this third element, the openness to western and different cultures. They added this third element as monarchy, the open-mindedness. They also have this Arab nationality and Muslim nationality. This is why I think Jordan can play a unique role in the issue of nationality, because we don't want to exclude any of those identities. We cannot do that in Jordan. Even if some Arab states or political groups want to do something towards the affirmation of one identitarian element over the other, that is unthinkable in Jordan. We simply cannot do that.[402]

3. Identity definition in a receiving country

Due to a coincidence of geopolitical factors, Jordan carries a rooted tradition as a receiving country and has been the destination of several migratory fluxes from the surrounding territories. Among these, particular attention is here referred to the influx of population from Palestine in different waves and to the most recent migrations from Syria and Iraq. While it is not possible to explore in detail the history of these fluxes, the main interest of this section is to highlight how different identities combine and coexist in the same narrow territory and how the receiving status shaped different conceptualization of the national identity in different historical phases.

How the Jordanian community embraced the incoming fluxes from an identitarian point of view is directly related to the political setting and to how Jordanian identity has been conceptualized throughout history. In particular, the Palestinian case resembles this issue. As explained by prof. Mahafzah, "The relationship between Jordan and Palestine is a special relationship."[403] Not only because the massive influx of Palestinians into Jordanian territories has made Jordan a

[402] Prof. Amer al-Hafi, December 18th, 2023.
[403] Prof. Ali Mahafzah, October 26th, 2023.

"substantially binational society,"[404] but also because before the 1922 partition[405] the territory of modern-day Jordan and Palestine was conceived as a unit. Although it is now clear that strong distinct Palestinian and Jordanian identities are largely affirmed, the two identities continue to be overlapped both in popular discourse and in the academic and political arenas. This is due to different reasons. Firstly, the pan-Arabist stance assumed by the monarchy since the establishment of the country has resembled Hashemite territorial expansionism. This has led to the incorporation of the West Bank to Jordan in 1950,[406] but also to the implementation of an "open door policy" towards the Palestinians since 1948, and to the conferral of full Jordanian citizenship to all Palestinian refugees. Secondly, the Zionist predicament of relocating the Palestinian refugees advocates for the assimilation of Palestinians in Jordan, arguing that "the Palestinian refugees would melt readily into the surrounding Arab societies by virtue of their shared language, history, culture, and, for the most part, religion."[407] In this sense, Jordanian exclusivists like the Christian Nahid Hattar - who was sued for his 1995 editorial "Who is Jordanian?"[408] – asserted that Palestinian' presence in Jordan is a Zionist victory and advocated for a return to Jordan's pre-1948 past. Third, the fact that branches of the Zionist discourse advocate for a broader expansion of the State of Israel to the neighboring territories of Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt fueled the perception of a shared struggle between Palestinians and Jordanians. This view is resembled in the words of prof. Mahafzah, who stated:

> *Since the beginning, we were part of the Palestinian question. We are the same nation, we have the same problems. The danger which the Palestinians are facing now is the same danger which will be*

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[404] Nur 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 and Identity in the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. Kenneth Christie and Mohammad Masad (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). Accessed at: https://www.perlego.com/book/3489500/state-formation-and-identity-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa-pdf.

[405] Resembled by the Leage of Nations decision to exempt Transjordan from the British mandate in Palestine. Milton-Edwards & Hinchcliffe, *Jordan. A Hashemite Legacy*, chap. 1.

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

[407] Abbas Shiblak, "Residency Status and Civil Rights of Palestinian Refugees in Arab Countries," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 25, no. 3 (Spring, 1996): 36.

[408] Nahid Hattar, "Man Huwa al-Urduni?" *Al-Hadath* (November 1, 1995).

faced by the Jordanians. Jordanians are under Israeli danger. We feel that Israel one day will occupy our land and will forcefully push Palestinians to our land. We have this feeling. That's why we consider the Palestinian question as a Jordanian one. And we don't feel that we should distinguish in our country, between Palestinians and us [Jordanians].[409]

Finally, beyond political reasons, Palestinian and Jordanian identities share a common history and family ties. In this sense, there is a sense of commonality beyond identitarian politicizations, that prof. al-Hafi particularly emphasized:

Maybe 50 % of the Jordanians are of Palestinian origins.[410] *This demographic element is a very strong element, but these Palestinians, they are Jordanians now. They are not any more Palestinians, but at the same time, they have their relatives. They are not Palestinians by ID, but in their culture and feeling they still have this deep relation with the part of their families still in Palestine. The people of Jordan and the people of Palestine, they have a lot of family relations. In some cases, one tribe is located partly in Jordan and partly in Palestine. It is a small geographic area. For example, Nablus and al Salt; al Karak and al Khalil. A lot of people came from Al Salt to Nablus and vice versa.*

(interviewer) Nonetheless, they say al Salt is built with stones from Nablus.

Exactly, so they have the same a lot of similarities, a lot of family ties even before the conflict in Palestine. After 1948, a lot of people

[409] Prof. Ali Mahafzah, October 26th, 2023.

[410] Although this thesis does not aim to provide a demographic approach to the matter, it is remarkable that data available on the Palestinian presence in Jordan vary sensibly according to the source, due to their high level of politicization. As highlighted by Köprülü, "The official records in Jordan today report that 43 percent of the population is of Palestinian descent whereas the unofficial estimates reach to 70 percent." Köprülü, "The Interplay of Palestinian and Jordanian Identities in Re/Making the State and Nation Formation in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan."

with Jordanian origins and Palestinian origins had mixed marriages. So the bond became very deep with time.[411]

However, the Palestinian and Jordanian identities have also produced conflict and mechanisms of exclusions of one another. As explained by Brand, since 1948 Transjordanian tribe members (or native Jordanians) have been favored to Palestinians for the recruitment of civil and military state apparatus. According to Brand, despite the issue being largely unexplored, "a central part of what it meant for many Transjordanians to be "Jordanian" was associated with employment by the state, especially in security services or the military."[412] In this regard, it is worth mentioning that, since the 30s, the Hashemites, supported by the British, initiated a process of Bedouinisation of the army, by recruiting mainly loyal tribesmen of the desert.[413] The tension between Palestinian and Jordanian identities was exacerbated by the foundation of the PLO in 1964, whose nationalism represented a challenge to Hashemite rule.[414] Tension peaked in 1970, with the Black September and the consequent expulsion of the PLO and Palestinian resistance from Jordan. In identitarian terms, the events marked a shift towards a "East Banker first trend."[415] Prof. Eyadat significantly resumed the complexity of Jordanian-Palestinian relations:

Jordanian-Palestinian relations after 1948, and after the unification between East and West bank, played and are still playing an overwhelming impact in shaping Jordanian political dynamics based on identity. 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

[411] Prof. Amer al-Hafi, December 18th, 2023.
[412] Laurie A. Brand, "Palestinians and Jordanians: A Crisis of Identity," *Journal of Palestine* Studies 24, no. 4 (Summer, 1995): 48.
[413] Milton-Edwards & Hinchcliffe, *Jordan. A Hashemite Legacy*, chap. 1.
[414] A deeper insight into the relation between PLO and Jordanian government is provided by Joseph A. Massad, *Colonial Effects. The Making of National Identity in Jordan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), chap. 5, https://www.perlego.com/book/775850/colonial-effects-the-making-of-national-identity-in-jordan-pdf.
[415] Brand, "Palestinians and Jordanians: A Crisis of Identity," 53.

Jordanians." Sometimes they clashed they went to war in 1970. In the 90s, we raised the major question, "Who is Jordanian?" referring to whether the Jordanians from Palestinian origin are Jordanians or not. What does it mean "Jordan", in terms of identity and nationality? So yes, Palestinians presence has shaped Jordanian identity and Jordanian politics.[416]

As explained in chapter III, especially after 1967 national identities assumed relevance in reaction to the failure of pan-Arabist ideology. The affirmation of a Jordanian national identity reflected the political reversal from the open-door policy to "administrative disengagement" in 1988, that implied a restrictive shift in the legal status of Palestinians in Jordan. Gazawi refugees remained stateless and hosted in camps, while the rest of Palestinians were granted temporary passports and residence, but not nationality. This generated heterogeneity in the status of Palestinians and in their identitarian perception. In a 1995 article, Brand operated a simplifying but meaningful distinction among different categories of Palestinians according to their legal status in Jordan: first she identifies the group of refugee camp dwellers, who normally show a strong Palestinian identity that hardly combines with Jordanian identity except for convenience – the fact of having Jordanian IDs; secondly she distinguishes the middle class of merchants and low level public employees, who, that to economic integration, developed limited hostility towards Jordanianess and have progressively begun to express feelings of belonging to Jordan; thirdly the upper class Palestinians, who developed loyalty to Jordanian regime "in exchange for the regime's provision of a stable atmosphere conducive to making money,"[417] becoming one of the pillars of wealth and stability of the country. According to Brand, "These are the Palestinians who tend to see no dilemma or contradiction in identifying themselves as both Palestinian and Jordanian."[418] Finally, Brand identifies the group of Palestinians who returned to Jordan from the Gulf in the 1990s. Among them, she detects a strong Palestinian identity and little attachment to Jordan, alongside "additional elements of

[416] Prof. Zayd Eyadat, October 26th, 2023.
[417] Brand, "Palestinians and Jordanians: A Crisis of Identity," 49.
[418] Ibid.

separate identity (not the least of which is hatred of Saddam Hussein) that set them apart in important respects from the kingdom's other Palestinian citizens."[419] The need to distinguish among Palestinian-Jordanians according to their status was explored by Interviewee 1:

> *We cannot talk about Palestinians as a whole, because it depends on their legal status, which plays the biggest role. If I have rights, if I am Palestinian Jordanian with my ID, my work, I lived here almost all my life, I'm fine… I still feel Palestinian, I still go to the manifestation, I still say that I am originally from Janine, but that's it, at the end. If I'm from Gaza, or if I am a Palestinian that moved here and didn't take the nationality yet, then it is different. So, it depends on which Palestinian. 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? Average people, they feel Palestinian, and this is something, I think, that needs to be explained from a psychological perspective, beyond the many political explanations. 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." Gaza is a peculiar example, but even normal people with the normal ID tell you stories that give an idea of radical vicinity to the territory. This gives us an idea of how strong and rooted Palestinianess is. Jordanianess is less strong, but 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 of. They may have never been there. In a way it is harder to destroy, because it has been idealized.*[420]

[419] Ibid., 49-50.
[420] Interviewee 1, September 25th, 2023.

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 Jordanian's perception of 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. If there were many opportunities, a lot of support, I don't think there would be any problem. It's an economic issue, mostly, and maybe a bit political. It's an economical challenge because our resources are very limited, we have shortage of water… We had a lot of problems even before the refugees. But secondly, it's political, because there are some groups that came with refugees with political ideas against the Syrian or the Iraqi regime, for instance. So, it's also political. But I don't think it's a kind of identity problem.*[421]

Interviewee 1 and prof. Eyadat agreed on the fact that the first waves of Iraqi migration – before 2012 – enjoyed a smooth entrance in Jordanian society. On one side, "people came with a lot of money,"[422] and their wealth contributed to Jordanian economy positively. On the other side, Jordanian-Iraqi relations under king Hussein were flourishing under the pan-Arabist discourse developed by both the king and Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein, whose partnership has proven beneficial to Jordanian

[421] Prof. Amer al-Hafi, December 18th, 2023.
[422] Prof. Zayd Eyadat, October 26th, 2023.

economy. In this sense, Jordanians perceived Iraqis as "brothers in Arabhood"[423] and empathized with the struggle of the population during the Gulf War and the 2003 war. According to Eyadat:

> *Iraqis did not actually trigger bad reactions because they came with a lot of money. Jordanians were sympathizing with what was happening in Iraq after the 1991 invasion, and the 2003 war. The two waves of Iraqis coming into Jordan, they came with a lot of resources and that has impacted Jordan economy in a good way. The resentments against Iraqis were simply not there. Second, Iraqis were not received or perceived by Jordanians as permanent citizens, or half citizens, or quasi citizens like Palestinians, because Iraq is not under occupation, so they are free to go back if they want.*[424]

However, the situation is radically different for Iraqis that entered Jordan after 2013. Not being recognized as refugees, contrarily to the Syrian counterpart, they are excluded from access to work and basic services such as health and education. As underlined by Interviewee 1, "This is also a mental health problem."[425] Furthermore, many of them are Christian and speak Aramaic as their first language rather than Arabic. This triggered mechanisms of social and economic marginalization:

> *Iraqis that came after ISIS are very poor, many speak Aramaic, and they are not from Baghdad. Arabic is not their mother language. They are Christian because many Christians ran away from ISIS. The ones that came before, came with money. They changed the house market, they bought a lot of houses, they made the prices increase. They were seen as money bags. When this other flow of Iraqis arrived after 2015, they struggled from stereotypes, because when Jordanian people thought of Iraq, they thought of money. […]*

[423] Interviewee 1, September 25th, 2023.
[424] Prof. Zayd Eyadat, October 26th, 2023.
[425] Interviewee 1, September 25th, 2023.

Also, there is a big difference in the accent, so they are immediately spotted.[426]

In conclusion, Interviewee 1 convened with the other key-informants that "the recent migrations didn't change much, because the identity in Jordan is still the same. Simply, new actors entered the scene, but they are still foreigners because they will never, unless they marry (for the girls), become citizens."[427] Although they might be considered as "fellow Arabs" by Jordanians, their legal status impedes them complete assimilation in Jordanian society, since according to Jordanian law, citizenship can be transferred only patrilinearly. However, Interviewee 1 reported significant information she collected while researching on the feeling of belonging among different communities in Jordan. A Palestinian Jordanian she interviewed, referring to Syrians, stated: "as a Palestinian, I feel more Jordanian because there is now another other."[428] Remarkably, this affirmation explains that another component has added to the identitarian landscape of Jordanian society.

4. Diversity and identitarian belonging

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. Nonetheless, Jordan is home to important religious sites such as Mount Nebo and the Baptism site. Christian presence accounted for an estimated 10% of the population at the time of the first British census (1921), while nowadays sets around 2.2% due to large migrations in search of job opportunities and to a drop in the fertility rates.[429] The Christian community, established as a well-educated and generally wealthy elite, is concentrated in the north provinces of Jordan

[426] Interviewee 1, September 25th, 2023.
[427] Ibid.
[428] Ibid.
[429] Nanneke Wisman, "Christians in Jordan," in *The Palgrave Handbook of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan*, ed. P. Kumaraswamy, (Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 2019). Accessed at: https://www.perlego.com/book/3485740/the-palgrave-handbook-of-the-hashemite-kingdom-of-jordan-pdf.

and in particular in the towns of Madaba and Fuheis, where the Christian population reaches 60%.[430] Alongside religious pluralism, Jordan presents a high level of ethnic diversity. At the dawn of 20th century, the Circassian and Chechen establishment in Jordan was fostered by Ottoman policies and fueled by the Czarist persecution. Furthermore, fluxes of Syrians and Palestinians reached Jordan escaping "over-taxation and ongoing feuds."[431] In short, at the time of creation of the Transjordan emirate, the plethora of communities coexisting alongside Bedouin tribes was already significant. As a result, the state building process led by the Hashemites revolved around the integration of different religious and ethnic components under the wider umbrella of national identity. Minorities, far from being exclusively protected communities, covered key roles in the formation of the state. Moaddel uses the expression "authoritarian pluralism" to indicate the process of patronage and affiliation of different religious and ethnic groups orchestrated by the monarchy in order to stabilize and legitimize their power.[432] Under Abdullah I, Palestinians and Syrians covered positions of responsibility in the newly established bureaucracy: "In the absence of trained Transjordanians, Palestinians and Syrians filled the posts of teachers, surveyors, medical and agricultural officers."[433] Remarkably, minorities were overrepresented in the formation of the first legislative council[434] and still are in the current parliamentary setting[435].

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

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[430] Wisman, "Christians in Jordan."

[431] Miranda Egan Langley, "Minorities," in *The Palgrave Handbook of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan*, ed. P. Kumaraswamy, (Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 2019). Accessed at: https://www.perlego.com/book/3485740/the-palgrave-handbook-of-the-hashemite-kingdom-of-jordan-pdf.

[432] Mansoor Moaddel, "Religion and the State: The Singularity of the Jordanian Religious Experience," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 15, no. 4 (Summer, 2002): 527-568.

[433] Milton-Edwards & Hinchcliffe, *Jordan. A Hashemite Legacy*, chap. 1.

[434] "The legislative council had provision for 21 members […] Minorities were over represented with four Christians and two Circassians – six out of 14 elected members." Ibid.

[435] "The House of Representatives consists of 130 seats out of which […] 21 are reserved for minorities: 9 for Christians, 9 for Bedouins, and 3 for Chechens and Circassians." Nanneke Wisman, "Christians in Jordan."

system.[436] Later, the Hashemite state incorporated them in the newly founded state under a two-folded discourse. On one side, the moderate Islamic identitarian components dictated the protection of Christian as a minoritarian community. This aspect is tangible up to nowadays, where the army is deployed around Churches to prevent attacks especially in concomitance with important festivities such as Christmas and Easter. Interviewee 1, although critically, highlighted how religious tolerance is a source of pride for the whole community:

> *I only had a few contacts with the Christian community. However, they have high social status. The church is powerful. And they have a lot of money, also for humanitarian projects. From a religious point of view, we accept Christianity because we believe in the same God. This makes it easy. It's also a source of pride: "Do you see how welcoming and democratic our community is? There are people from many religions!*[437]

On the other side, the Arab and tribal identitarian components determined the inclusion of Christians as "integral part of the '(Trans) Jordanian family'."[438] This aspect was largely clarified by prof. Eyadat:

> *Religion had very little impact on the construction of Jordanian identity. As I said, Arabism shaped Islam, not vice versa. Christians in Jordan, they're Arabs. They identify themselves as Arab Christians. So, they are Arabs before being Christians. They say that. Some Jordanian families with the same family name have some Muslim members and some Christian members. Because when Islam came into Jordan, Christians Arabs were here. Some of them decided to convert and become Muslim, and some didn't and stayed*

[436] Paolo Maggiolini, "Christian Churches and Arab Christians in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan: Citizenship, Ecclesiastical Identity and Roles in the Jordanian Political Field," *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 60, no. 171 (July-September 2015): 38.
[437] Interviewee 1, September 25th, 2023.
[438] Maggiolini, "Christian Churches and Arab Christians in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan," 38.

Christian. And yet they are cousins, with the same blood. What I'm trying to say is that 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. Same with Muslims Jordanians. They are Arab Jordanians before being Muslim. The majority of Jordanians are Muslim, Sunni. Then you see in the constitution that the religion of the state is Islam. Nonetheless, I think Christians in Jordan are the most fully integrated and overrepresented among all Christians in the region. They're treated equally. They are actually overrepresented. They are less than 165,000, which is less than 1 % of the population. Yet, their presence in the economy is like 10 times their percentage of the population, their quotas in Parliament, government, banks and economics is way higher than their demographic presence, because Jordanians don't look at Christians as Christians. Christian Jordanians don't look at Muslims as Muslims. We are all Jordanian. So they are actually part of the social fabric, social identity. They are fully incorporated in and fully creators of Jordan national identity.[439]

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.[440] 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 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

[439] Prof. Zayd Eyadat, October 26th, 2023.
[440] Langley, "Minorities."

the Jordanian army since 1923).[441] 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 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."[442] Interviewee 1 developed this aspect in the following terms:

> *They have a privileged status, especially Circassians by being the royal guard. The Circassians I met were working in high profile jobs or anyway were wealthy and fine. Some tried to live in Russia, and then came back. They have this strong ethnic identity (most of them, not all of them). A large majority of them identify as Circassians. But the Jordanian component is also strong, they are thankful, because here they can express themselves compared to Turkey for instance. There are still critics because of the relationship with Russia, they hate the Russian government, so as the politics change, their feelings change. But I would say they feel more Jordanians than other components.*[443]

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:

> *They are fully considered Jordanian citizens. Chechens and Circassians have been part of the Jordanian social fabric and the establishment of the country. These people came into Jordan after*

[441] Bram and Shawwaf, "Circassians".
[442] Prof. Amer al-Hafi, December 18th, 2023.
[443] Interviewee 1, September 25th, 2023.

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. First, because the numbers are not too high, so they don't actually consider them a threat. It's not like the Palestinians, for example. 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. They became top leaders of security agencies, army, ministries, parliamentary, and they have quotas exceeding their percentage of the society. They are liked by Jordanians despite being ethnically different. But culturally, they are Jordanians.[444]

However, as repeatedly stressed throughout this thesis and by the key-informants themselves, identity is an ongoing process. In this regard, both prof. al-Hafi and Interviewee 1 highlighted how the new generations of Chechens and Circassians are transforming their identitarian definition. For this purpose, prof. al-Hafi explained:

All of them speak Arabic and the new generations of Circassians and Chechens are losing their language and starting to speak only Arabic. Chechens also speak fluent Arabic, but if we want to do a comparison, they are safeguarding their language more, I think because the community is smaller in numbers and when the minority find their number is inferior, they try harder to preserve their identity.[445]

[444] Prof. Zayd Eyadat, October 26th, 2023.
[445] Prof. Amer al-Hafi, December 18th, 2023.

Interviewee 1, who had the chance to interview Jordanian Circassians, reported similar findings:

> *There is a generational gap, meaning that younger generations feel ethnic identity as less important, but I cannot say that statistically, it would require further research. For sure, the new generation addresses issues differently from the old one. They are tired of doing these cultural events, dancing, music, etc. They would like to go deeper in politics, and this is not happening.*[446]

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 Jordanian backgrounds or religions, diversities in our community. Without a wide idea of Jordanian nationality, it's impossible to include all those different Jordanians. Jordan had, at the time of king Abdullah I, the Armenian Christians who came as immigrants to Jordan. He received them and welcomed them. They are not Arabs, not Muslims, but he was very open to them. At the same time, we had Chechens, Circassians, we also have a lot of Arabs from different countries, from Palestine, from Iraq, from different countries. 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.*[447]

[446] Interviewee 1, September 25th, 2023.
[447] Prof. Amer al-Hafi, December 18th, 2023.

5. Top-down narratives of identity

Due to the pronounced diversity of Jordanian society, the narratives of identity elaborated by the monarchy have proved crucial in manipulating popular feelings of belonging. Far from being an exclusively 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. This section aims at providing a brief overview of the different state-sponsored conceptualizations of Jordanian identity throughout time according to the contingent political needs.

Borrowing Blight and Hitman historicizations, four stages can be identified in the development of nationalist discourse in Jordan, each corresponding to a different identitarian rhetoric. 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."[448]

The following decade, between 1952 and 1963, is marked by events that progressively dissipated the dream of an Arab unity under Hashemite guise: Abdullah I was assassinated by a Palestinian in 1951 and, shortly after, Nasser arose as the strong men of Arabism, proposing a pan-Arab anti-monarchical stance that threatened Hashemite rule over Transjordan. King Hussein faced the need to elaborate a unifying ideology to secure Hashemite power by balancing Arabness with Jordanianess. In other words, this ideology "had to be 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."[449] In this transitional phase, the top-down narrative shifted from "Arabism first" to a focus on the Jordanian political entity, while tensions developed between the Western Bank Jordanians of Palestinian origins and East Bankers. The

[448] Alexander Bligh and Gadi Hitman, "Composite Nationalism Re-visited," in *The Palgrave Handbook of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan,* ed. P. Kumaraswamy, (Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 2019), https://www.perlego.com/book/3485740/the-palgrave-handbook-of-the-hashemite-kingdom-of-jordan-pdf.
[449] Bligh and Hitman, "Composite Nationalism Re-visited."

consolidation of this nationalist trend is observable in the period between 1963 and 1988. The events of Black September further triggered the need to dissociate Jordanian identity from the West Banker one. Interviewee 1 highlighted:

> *We have the 1967 defeat, Nasser died and then we have the Black September, that changed all the balance. At this point, we want to reassess the Jordanian identity, because we want to push out the component [Palestinian] which is undermining the Hashemite power. They started to build a state within a state. In 1988 - disengagement, we continue to dissociate ourselves. And then we have to build this new Jordanian identity.*[450]

In doing so, the king resorted to "primordial essentials, perhaps imagined ones, to build some collective identity."[451] Among these, tribal, Bedouin and religious traditions have been the main references of a strong local identity centered around tribal affiliation as still visible nowadays. In this framework, in order to maintain order and prevent the complete loss of support on behalf of the Palestinian component, the monarchy presented itself as an advocate of a just resolution of the Palestinian question. The year 1988 can be considered as the definitive watershed between "Arabism first" and "Jordan First." In 2002, King Abdullah II 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." While the country has continued to receive massive incoming fluxes from neighboring Arab countries, the newcomers are considered as temporary guests with little or no possibility of becoming part of the Jordanian collective identity despite belonging to the broader Arab *umma*.

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[450] Interviewee 1, September 25th, 2023.
[451] Bligh and Hitman, "Composite Nationalism Re-visited."
[452] Ibid.

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."[453] 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 aim.[454] Massad notes that Palestinian-Jordanians seem to be receptive to this state-sponsored national identity, despite refusing exclusivist attempts towards their de-Palestinization.[455] Prof. Eyadat clarified the new frontier 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-Jordanian and Palestinian-Jordanian. 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. You can also think about this political modernization reform in Jordan - I sit in the committee too. It's a project aimed at achieving a kind of unification of Jordanians, providing them with identity that is all about the future, about modernizing the system, about being a*

[453] Prof. Zayd Eyadat, October 26th, 2023.
[454] Elie Podeh and Samira Alayan, *Multiple Alterities*. (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017), https://www.perlego.com/book/3494233/multiple-alterities-views-of-others-in-textbooks-of-the-middle-east-pdf.
[455] Massad, *Colonial Effects*, chap. 5.

peaceful, democratic civil state, and where citizenship is the backbone of the new contract.[456]

The comment of prof. Eyadat raises one of the key aspects concurring to the formation of Jordanian national identity, which is the modern and moderate character that the monarchy, especially king Abdullah II has combined with the other traditional components. This is also exemplified in the Kingdom's foreign policy regionally and internationally. This aspect, declined in the religious dimension, has been developed in *Risālat 'Ammān* [Amman's Message], the 2006 king's initiative that denounces terrorism and religious extremism in the name of Islam, advocating for tolerance and unity of the Islamic *Umma*.[457] The latest frontier of this pluralist but unionist stance is the Comprehensive Jordanian Identity initiative, based on a strong but flexible national identity. The words of King Abdullah II, pronounced in occasion of the Jordan's 70th Independence Day, embed this identitarian conceptualization:

There is no difference between Jordanians, except by what they do for their country. I am inspired by the clear vision of Sharif Hussein and his call for unity, freedom and pluralism as well as his advocacy of religious harmony. It was he who said, "The Arabs were Arabs before they were Muslims or Christians." This nation was built on unity and a unifying national identity that embraces all those, who, with dignity and pride in being Jordanian, believe in this country, cherish and defend it. Every citizen is a full partner in the process of building, hard work and giving, and they share rights and duties.[458]

The King's speech reflects the strong Arab identity of Jordan while interlacing it with nationalism and the concept of citizenship. Although it is clear that the

[456] Prof. Zayd Eyadat, October 26th, 2023.
[457] Complete information on the initiative can be found at the official website: https://ammanmessage.com/.
[458] King Abdullah II website, "Remarks on the Occasion of Jordan's Independence Day," May 24, 2016.

established 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, perhaps, to conclude the section with the comments of Interviewee 1, who provided meaningful and 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. So, we are working towards this goal. It's not really happening, we are in the process, but it's very hard. Because all these layers are all coexisting and history is moving very fast. It's very hard to change direction again after 20 years. And they are being very optimistic. Furthermore, now there are other more pressing problems like unemployment, corruption, rate of suicide, etc. Thinking about identity is not the priority for the people. They don't want to talk about this now. 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 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.*[459]

[459] Interviewee 1, September 25th, 2023.

6. Arab identity in Jordan

The deep link between pan-Arabist ideology and the early steps of Jordanian nation building has been highlighted in section V.1. with reference to the legacy of Sharif Hussein and king Abdullah I. However, as explained in the previous section V.4, top-down narratives of identity progressively shifted from Arabness to Jordanianess, making it possible nowadays to state that "national identity is the most relevant."[460] Interviewee 1 motivated this point in light of her research, notwithstanding criticalities:

> *My not-statistically-relevant research for the PhD, based on a 50 people sample, revealed that the national identity, like I am Jordanian, was the most relevant. So most of the people answer to me, "I am Jordanian" or "I am Palestinian" to the question: "Do you feel to be more Jordanian, more Arab, is the religious or tribal identity more important for you, etc.?" Overall, I found that the Jordanian identity is still the most relevant […] Jordan exists, the nation state has existed for 100 years or more, and we are Jordanians. Then of course, there are different levels of belonging, because if I am from Banu Hashem, I'm truly Jordanian, and all the aspects of civic life are open to me. And if I need something, I find a solution. If I am Palestinian, it depends. And then we go back to the family name, we go back to the social class, and to the fact that the law is not truly equal for everybody.*[461]

All the interviewees agreed on the fact that a pan-Arab political project is not viable nor pursued by the monarchy nowadays. However, the identitarian inheritance of such ideology seems to persist. In 2016 Independence Day speech, King Abdullah II stated:

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[460] Ibid.
[461] Ibid.

> *Even now, the first bullet fired in the Great Arab Revolt still echoes in the skies of our nation. Every Jordanian carries inside something of that day and these principles lie at the center of his or her identity. […] Our country's pride in its religion and Arab identity is a national constant. […] Jordan, with its unifying identity, welcomes and supports its Arab brethren.*[462]

This section, moving from the contributions of the four key-informants, aims at exploring the relation between Arab identity and national identity in the Jordanian framework. The comments of prof. Eyadat, prof. al-Hafi, and prof. Mahafzah shed light on this aspect:

> *All Arab Jordanians like me, we all were built on the idea of pan-Arabism, to be a part of the Arab identity. That doesn't mean that it is a pan-Arabist political project, where you have a united state, although the grand grandfather of the king, Sharif Hussein, was promised to be the king of the Arabs. […] So, what I am saying is that the fact of referring to pan Arabism is not the political project, but rather to the identity. Now, personally I subscribe to this kind of culture. I am a Jordanian Arab who advocates Arabism or Arab identity vis à vis Islamists and Islamism. I think this is a dominant kind of understanding in Jordan, Jordanians would be part of a bigger identity that is Arab, and is not a state or a political project, it is only a history-built and cultural ideation.*[463]

Prof. al-Hafi provided some insights on how Arabness was and still is present on an institutional level: in the army, in the education system and even in the Constitution. In fact, Art. 1 of the 1952 Constitution states: "The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan is an independent sovereign Arab State. It is indivisible and inalienable and no part of it may be ceded. The people of Jordan form a part of the Arab Nation, and

[462] King Abdullah II, "Remarks on the Occasion of Jordan's Independence Day," May 24, 2016.
[463] Prof. Zayd Eyadat, October 26th, 2023.

its system of government is parliamentary with a hereditary monarchy."[464] Several are the references to Arabism in official websites and declarations. In the words of prof. Hafi:

> *In our constitution, we are an Arab state. The Jordanian nation belongs to the Arab nation. It is very clear. And, as you mentioned, the Arab revolution by Husein Ben Ali was for the Arabs. This revolution tried to establish one Arab state under Sharif Hussein Ben Ali. When our monarchy was established in Jordan, it was under the same idea. We call the Jordanian army al-jaīsh al-'arabī, the Arab Army. We teach in our universities a specific course for each student to raise awareness about Arab nationality. […] 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.*[465]

However, his answer should be contextualized in light of al-Hafi's preliminary observations:

> *Now it has become more a cultural and kind of emotional unity, more than political unity. Now, it's not easy to think of unity or to reestablish the state in our region under the idea of one Arab nation state. I think this idea now is not strong among Arabs. It is not about political unity. As I said, it's cultural unity. 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*

[464] "Constitution of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan," Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. The Parliament., accessed January 22, 2024, http://parliament.jo/en/node/150#ch1.
[465] Prof. Amer al-Hafi, December 18th, 2023.

became more cultural, more emotional, more concerning the values, rather than politics.[466]

Prof. Mahafzah, who among the interviewees seems to be the most attached to the Arab identitarian component, reflected on the unitarian reaction of Arab people *vis à vis* political development 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.*[467]

To conclude this section, it seems noteworthy to introduce the reflection of prof. Eyadat on Arab and more specifically tribal values. His perspective stems from the belief, remarked by prof. al-Hafi and prof. Mahafzah, that values are the key legacy that unite Arab people together, alongside language and tradition. Such values vastly permeate Jordanian culture and may represent the core pillar of popular Jordanian and Arab identity beyond institutional rhetoric. According to Eyadat, tolerance, acceptance, respect, recognition, *murū'a*[468] coexistence, and *'aṣabiyya*[469] are the core values "common, dominant and shared by all Jordanians."[470] The origin of the key values of Jordanian society, "shared practice of Arabs and non-Arabs, Muslims and non-Muslims,"[471] are thus to be traced back to the rooted tradition

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[466] Prof. Amer al-Hafi, December 18th, 2023.
[467] Prof. Ali Mahafzah, October 26th, 2023.
[468] 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.
[469] Arabic for solidarity.
[470] Prof. Zayd Eyadat, October 26th, 2023.
[471] Ibid.

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" and interlace it Jordanianess.[472] Thus, it can be inferred these values are the main intersection, or the red thread, between Arabness and Jordanianess. Furthermore, according to Eyadat, these represent the explanation and the foundation of Jordanian tradition of openness and hospitality:

> *Jordan is known worldwide as a very welcoming nation. This is part of these values. Tribes in the past used to live in the desert away from each other. So, the value system constituted a moral bond, unwritten law, about how people will come to help each other. Otherwise, they would be subject to environmental violence, to animal violence, or to human violence. So, providing safety and security to others was key. 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.*[473]

While this view might sound optimistic, it proposes an interesting example of how heritage can be declined in contemporaneity in a virtuous way. According to Interviewee 1, the challenges posed by the pronounced diversity of the country consist in not having a strong national identity and in the risk of destroying the idea of the national state from inside due to the lack of social cohesion.[474] As tension between Jordanian and Palestinian identities rise due to the conflict in Gaza, the establishment of a strong inclusive national identity is more than ever crucial to the governability of the country. While prof. Eyadat himself recognized that the tribal Arab value system

[472] Ibid.
[473] Prof. Zayd Eyadat, October 26th, 2023.
[474] Interviewee 1, September 25th, 2023.

carries both positive and negative implications, he believes the values of generosity, solidarity, and respect can and do lead the way towards social cohesion and inclusion of diversity in Jordanian society.[475] 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.

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

Conclusion

The main legacy of this thesis is that individual and collective Arab identities cannot be understood in their complexity if not as a dynamic overlapping of different components, that can variously be defined, delimited, and conceptualized throughout time. Politics, society, and economy dynamically constitute the framework in which identitarian conceptualizations are grounded, thus dictating the extent to which one identitarian component gains saliency over another. In this sense, it is possible to affirm that identities are a shifting bond, which evolution needs to be continuously traced in its temporal unfolding. Mutually, feelings of identitarian belonging orient decision-making, and with it institutional and popular stands *vis à vis* political, social and economic circumstances. In this sense, looking at the unfolding of identitarian conceptualizations in given societies can provide useful tools to political and geopolitical analysis.

Coming to Arab identity (more accurately Arabness as one identitarian component), it manifested as a multilayered and diverse identity. Arabness is here understood as a socio-cultural construct that borrowed from other identitarian catalysts while merging them to one another. Starting from providing a label to a people divided into tribes; to capturing and dictating ethics and morality of different faiths, and Islam in particular; to stretching across distinct geographical areas and incorporating different religious and ethnic communities; Arabness has absorbed rather than excluded, embraced rather than marginalized. Nonetheless, its genius has thrived in the encounter with different cultures, from the Byzantine to the Persian, from the Latin to the Turkish. Looking at the classic Golden age and the modern Nahda, this thesis demonstrated that the plural character of Arabness is also its utmost richness.

The case study demonstrated that several identitarian components can coexist peacefully in the construction of individual and collective identities. This is the case of those Jordanians of Palestinian origin who feel attached to both sides of Transjordan Bank, but also of Circassians and Chechens that developed their Jordanian identity without abandoning the feeling of belonging to a different ethnic group with peculiar customs and language. From a collective perspective, the

interviewees highlighted how religious differences, if not politicized, do not constitute a social cleavage; and that the feeling of belonging to a broader Arab or Muslim community does not conflict with a strong national identity. Therefore, any attempt to disentangle the mutual relation among identitarian components is neither realistic nor respectful of the nature of identities themselves. 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."[476]

The case study 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 for instance in the colonialist and Arab nationalist attempts to overshadow religion in favor of a "secular" identity, has the power to strengthen the catalyzing 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*

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

> *"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.*[477]

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 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. However, forcing Arab identity into the boundaries of one religious component is misleading to say the least.

The thesis concludes that developing 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 for Arab world's internal and external observers. In first place, because the postulated Arab-Muslim axiom needs to be 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

[477] Ibid., 2-3.

frameworks where the peaceful coexistence of different identitarian components is presumed rather than questioned, facilitated rather than obstructed.

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 history of the formation and development of identity in the Arab world. If providing historical depth to the research to support its core arguments seemed necessary, concentrating centuries of history in a limited dissertation has proved to be extremely challenging. Thus, it is important to underline that this thesis does not claim to be exhaustive, since adopting an overall look enables to trace red threads in the development of identity, but definitely hinders particularity. Rather, the thesis aims to pave the way for further research in the field of identity politics, where both general and particular perspectives need to be further explored.

A second challenge we want to consider is what Bourke calls "positionality,"[478] 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."[479] 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 contribute 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."[480] Should only Arabs speak for themselves, regarding their identity, their politics, their history, their religions? If this is a recurrent question, some considerations stem from it. In first place, the need to focus on the analysis of Arab literature and Arab perspectives on identity rather than outsider ones. This is resembled by the bibliographic choices: selected non-Arab sources have been used to complement or

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[478] Brian Bourke, "Positionality: Reflecting on the Research Process," The Qualitative Report 19 (2014): 1.
[479] Pizzingrilli, "State and Legitimacy within an Arab-Muslim context,"119.
[480] Giampietro Gobo and Andrea Molle, *Doing Ethnography* (London: SAGE Publications, 2017), chap. 1, https://www.perlego.com/book/1431865/doing-ethnography-pdf.

report Arab point of views, that in any case remain the protagonists of this thesis. The same considerations guided the choice of the key-informants: only one of them is non-Arab. As mentioned in chapter V, the choice of selecting a non-Arab informant has been motivated by her expertise in the field and knowledge of the region; together with the interest in exploring how an "outside observer" perceives and codifies matters related to identity. The outcome of the interview has been unexpected and introduces a second reflection on the positionality of this research project as a whole. In force of her different cultural background, the non-Arab interviewee expanded, among others, the reflection about citizenship, bringing up crucial criticalities – such as the inequality of treatment based on tribal affiliation of citizens – that were overlooked by other participants. In other matters, such as the inclusion of minorities or the value of Arabism in Jordanian society, her conclusions were substantially similar to those of the Arab-Jordanian interviewees, testifying a lucid understanding of the society she studies and lives in. In light of this interview, I re-considered the added value that a symmetric exchange between local and foreigner researchers can generate. Indeed, while local views have the full entitlement to address the issues they are concerned with, they might be influenced by their own positionality, ideology, and even private background. Not last, some aspects might be given for granted, constituting part of the common sense which sometimes can escape analysis. Conversely, "the stranger is also able to notice details invisible or irrelevant to the group members." [481] As noted by Gobo and Molle, "estrangement" is the recommended attitude to assume when conducting a participant observation, either in an unknown or known context. The condition of estrangement, 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. Thus, expanding, delocalizing and critically revising knowledge is one of the core aims of this thesis.

Alongside this reflection, we want to remark one last time how the chosen topic is sensitive to personal interpretation that may vary with time. 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

[481] Gobo and Molle, *Doing Ethnography*, chap. 9.

factors that contribute to the shaping of individual identity. To escape personalization, the researcher would have to prefer quantitative methods to qualitative ones. Although statistic research on the topic of identity in Jordan would have been of great interest, creating a statistically relevant sample poses serious challenges. In fact, it implies involving a proportional number of respondents from each community in Jordan, considering the intersection variables such as tribal and ethnic identities, religious affiliation, different legal statuses, urban or rural lifestyle, gender, age, economic status, etc. Beyond this complexity, access to updated data on Jordanian population would be required, whereas in Jordan the last census dates back to 2015. As Pizzingrilli explains, in Middle Eastern regimes quantitative research is usually not preferred since access to administrative data might be restricted and sometimes "data itself is not reliable."[482] Remarkably, in Jordan there is a general lack of updated, disaggregated, and reliable data on both local and hosted population. However, as examples of valuable quantitative research are available – for instance in the polls conducted by the Arab Barometer across several MENA countries – it seems reasonable to conclude that conducting quantitative research on Jordanian identity is possible but requires apt preparation that exceeds the scope of this thesis. It remains an interesting field for further research, to be monitored continuously.

In concluding this thesis, the most recent regional developments cannot be ignored. If nobody would have expected a regional crisis of the magnitude of that generated by October 7th events, they constitute a *caesura* that cannot be overlooked while drafting the conclusion of this thesis. Indeed, the war in Gaza irreversibly affects the identities of Palestinians, Arabs, Muslims and humans around the globe. In Jordan, the impact of war in Gaza has raised salient questions that this thesis could not explore due to the speed of events but that I could grasp through participatory observation. Many of these questions were directly related to individual, collective and religious identity. In determining its political stand *vis à vis* war in Gaza, the population of Jordan finds itself to confront possibly contrasting feelings of belonging. In doing so, the cleavages that differentiate religious, ethnic, social communities emerge.

[482] Pizzingrilli, "State and Legitimacy within an Arab-Muslim context,"119.

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 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 religious militias the main resistance actors, while Arab states are – more or less willingly – embedding cautious positions, it is possible the current war will exacerbate the Arab-Muslim dichotomy. Not lastly, it is interesting to note that in this context Palestinian resistance is being ascribed to a broader decolonial stance that has historically brought Arabs together. The war triggered identitarian dynamics on many fronts, as prof. al-Hafi affirmed "it is an explosion of our identity."[483] While the 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.

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

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Appendix A

IJMES TRANSLITERATION SYSTEM FOR ARABIC, PERSIAN, AND TURKISH

Consonants

A = Arabic, P = Persian, OT = Ottoman Turkish, MT = Modern Turkish

	A	P	OT	MT		A	P	OT	MT		A	P	OT	MT
ء	ʾ	ʾ	ʾ	—	ز	z	z	z	z	ك	k	k *or* g	k *or* ñ	k *or* n
ب	b	b	b	b *or* p	ژ	—	zh	j	j				*or* y	*or* y
پ	—	p	p	p	س	s	s	s	s				*or* ğ	*or* ğ
ت	t	t	t	t	ش	sh	sh	ş	ş	گ	—	g	g	g
ث	th	s̱	s̱	s	ص	ṣ	ṣ	ṣ	s	ل	l	l	l	l
ج	j	j	c	c	ض	ḍ	ż	ż	z	م	m	m	m	m
چ	—	ch	ç	ç	ط	ṭ	ṭ	ṭ	t	ن	n	n	n	n
ح	ḥ	ḥ	ḥ	h	ظ	ẓ	ẓ	ẓ	z	ه	h	h	h[1]	h[1]
خ	kh	kh	h	h	ع	ʿ	ʿ	ʿ	—	و	w	v *or* u	v	v
د	d	d	d	d	غ	gh	gh	g *or* ğ	g *or* ğ	ي	y	y	y	y
ذ	dh	ẕ	ẕ	z	ف	f	f	f	f	ة	a[2]			
ر	r	r	r	r	ق	q	q	ḳ	k	ال	[3]			

[1] When h is not final. [2] In construct state: at. [3] For the article, al- and -l-.

Vowels

	ARABIC AND PERSIAN			OTTOMAN AND MODERN TURKISH
Long	ا or ى	ā	ā	words of Arabic and Persian origin only
	و	ū	ū	
	ي	ī	ī	
Doubled	ـِيّ	iyy (final form ī)	iy (final form ī)	
	ـُوّ	uww (final form ū)	uvv	
Diphthongs	ـَو	au *or* aw	ev	
	ـَي	ai *or* ay	ey	
Short	ـَ	a	a *or* e	
	ـُ	u	u *or* ü / o *or* ö	
	ـِ	i	ı *or* i	

For Ottoman Turkish, authors may either transliterate or use the modern Turkish orthography.

Appendix B

Interview form

The interview aims at collecting information for my master's thesis titled "Shaping Arab Identity: Historical Evolution, Contemporary Perspectives, and Political Implications - A Jordan Case Study". The thesis analyses how Arab identity has been conceptualized through history, analyzing the contributions of several Arab intellectuals and politicians. The aim of the thesis is to understand how identity changed in the Arab world according to social and geopolitical transformations, in order to highlight its multilayered nature and rich complexity that makes it unique. Jordan is the chosen case study, that due to its features, provides the opportunity to have an insight into the relation between the macro-Arab identity and all its sub levels: the regional, the national, the tribal, the ethnic, the religious, and so on. This interview aims at grasping your point of view, as key informant, on the main topics addressed in the thesis and in the case study in particular. Of course, you can refuse to answer if the questions made you feel uncomfortable.

1. The Arab world is known for its linguistic, religious and cultural diversity. Every country, region and community show its peculiarities: for instance, Egyptian national identity differs from the Jordanian one and the Maghrebi macro identity differs from the Levantine. That said, do you think it is possible to speak about a common Arab identity? If so, what are the common elements that bind different Arab communities together? How do these national-regional variations influence the perception of Arab unity among people from different Arab countries?
2. The Arab world has a rich history, including pre-Islamic civilizations and the Arab-Islamic golden age. Some intellectuals supported and others criticized the glorification of Arab-Islamic past. Do you think that historicization (meaning the way to interpret, organize and tell Arab history) has a big role in shaping identity, perceptions of cultural heritage, and future perspectives?
3. How do you believe pan-Arabism is a viable political project nowadays? Do you think national sub identities are the key to achieving the cohesion of social fabric and political stability? If so, at what conditions? If no, what do you think is the political asset that would better fulfill the region's need for geopolitical stability?
4. What is the place of Arabism in the identitarian perception of Jordanians? I notice that the official documents and website often refer to pan-Arabism. For instance, the king's website reports that Jordan is "Built around the concept of pan-Arabism". What is in your opinion the role played by pan-Arab feeling in the top-down (institutional) conceptualization of Jordanian identity?
5. What are the key components that shape the Jordanian national identity? Jordan has a diverse population with various ethnic, tribal, and religious backgrounds. How do you think this diversity impacts complex nature of identity in Jordan? In light of this, in your opinion, what elements are common to all Jordanians?
6. How important do you think the tribal component is in the shaping of Jordanian identity? How does it impact politics? How do these tribal identities interact with broader national identity and governance?
7. What is the evolution of identity perception in Jordan since its independence? In your opinion, what are the main political/historical events that marked a shift in the identitarian perception?

8. Do you perceive the Palestinian component had a role in the formation of Jordanian identity? What can you tell about its significance in the multilayered Jordanian identity nowadays?
9. The most recent influx of refugees from neighboring countries, especially from Syria and Iraq, has had a significant impact on Jordan's social fabric. How has this influenced the sense of identity among Jordanians and the Syrian and Iraqi communities?
10. Is allegiance to the royal family a catalyst factor of identity in the country? Do you believe it enhances the social and political stability of Jordan?
11. Are you aware of ongoing initiatives, policies, or programs aimed at promoting unity and a shared national identity in Jordan?
12. In your opinion, how is diversity included and respected into the wide umbrella of Jordanian identity? What are ongoing challenges and opportunities in terms of inclusion of minorities living in the country?
13. How are ethnic minorities (Chechens and Circassians) included in the identity building process of the country? What is their status? Are they considered 100% citizens and perceived as such?

    i. If Circassian: I know that the Circassian community had a special role in the foundation of Jordan. What is yours and your community's understanding of identity? Would you primarily define yourself as a Jordanian, as a Circassian or in some other way?

14. Does religion play a main role in the construction of national identity? How do you evaluate the relationship between religious minorities and Sunni majority?

    i. If non-Muslim: Is religion an important factor in the definition of your identity? Do you feel represented within the broad Jordanian identity? Do you feel like belonging primarily to your religious community, to the Jordanian nation, or others?

Appendix C

تهدف المقابلة إلى جمع معلومات لأطروحة الماجستير الخاصة بي بعنوان «تشكيل الهوية العربية: التطور التاريخي والمنظورات المعاصرة والآثار السياسية - دراسة حالة الأردن». تحلل الأطروحة كيف تم تصور الهوية العربية عبر التاريخ، وتحليل مساهمات العديد من المثقفين والسياسيين العرب. الهدف من الأطروحة هو فهم كيف تغيرت الهوية في العالم العربي وفقًا للتحولات الاجتماعية والجيوسياسية، من أجل تسليط الضوء على طبيعتها متعددة الطبقات وتعقيدها الغني الذي يجعلها فريدة من نوعها. والأردن هو دراسة الحالة المختارة، التي تتيح، نظراً لسماتها، الفرصة لإلقاء نظرة ثاقبة على العلاقة بين الهوية العربية الكلية وجميع مستوياتها الفرعية: الإقليمية، والوطنية، والقبائل، والعرقية، والدينية، وما إلى ذلك. تهدف هذه المقابلة إلى فهم وجهة نظرك، بصفتك المخبر الرئيسي، حول الموضوعات الرئيسية التي تم تناولها في الأطروحة وفي دراسة الحالة على وجه الخصوص. بالطبع، يمكنك رفض الإجابة إذا كانت الأسئلة تجعلك تشعر بعدم الارتياح.

1. يُعرف العالم العربي بتنوعه اللغوي والديني والثقافي. تظهر كل دولة ومنطقة ومجتمع خصوصيتها: على سبيل المثال، تختلف الهوية الوطنية المصرية عن الهوية الأردنية وتختلف الهوية المغربية اختلاف كامل عن الشامية. ومع ذلك، هل تعتقد أنه من الممكن التحدث عن هوية عربية مشتركة ؟ إذا كان الأمر كذلك، فما هي العناصر المشتركة التي تربط المجتمعات العربية المختلفة معًا ؟ كيف تؤثر هذه الاختلافات او التنوعات القومية الإقليمية على تصور الوحدة العربية بين الناس من مختلف البلدان العربية ؟
2. للعالم العربي تاريخ غني، بما في ذلك الحضارات الجاهلية والعصر الذهبي العربي الإسلامي. أيد بعض المثقفين وانتقد آخرون تمجيد الماضي العربي الإسلامي. هل تعتقد أن التأريخ (بمعنى طريقة تفسير التاريخ العربي وتنظيمه وإخباره) له دور كبير في تشكيل الهوية وتصورات التراث الثقافي ووجهات النظر المستقبلية؟
3. كيف تعتقد أن العروبة مشروع سياسي قابل للتطبيق في الوقت الحاضر ؟ هل تعتقد أن الهويات الفرعية الوطنية هي المفتاح لتحقيق تماسك النسيج الاجتماعي والاستقرار السياسي ؟ إذا كان الأمر كذلك، فما هي الظروف ؟ إذا لم يكن الأمر كذلك، فما هو في رأيك الرصيد السياسي الذي من شأنه أن يلبي بشكل أفضل حاجة المنطقة إلى الاستقرار الجيوسياسي ؟
4. ما هو مكان العروبة في التصور الهوي للأردنيين ؟ ألاحظ أن الوثائق الرسمية والموقع الإلكتروني غالبًا ما يشيران إلى العروبة. على سبيل المثال، أفاد موقع الملك على الإنترنت أن الأردن «مبني حول مفهوم العروبة». ما هو في رأيك الدور الذي يلعبه الشعور العربي في التصور (المؤسسي) للهوية الأردنية من أعلى إلى أسفل ؟
5. ما هي المكونات الرئيسية التي تشكل الهوية الوطنية الأردنية؟ الأردن لديها مجموعة متنوعة من السكان من مختلف الخلفيات العرقية والقبلية والدينية. كيف تعتقد أن هذا التنوع يؤثر على الطبيعة المعقدة للهوية في الأردن؟ في ضوء ذلك، في رأيكم، ما هي العناصر المشتركة بين جميع الأردنيين؟
6. ما مدى أهمية العنصر القبلي في تشكيل الهوية الأردنية ؟ كيف تؤثر على السياسة ؟ كيف تتفاعل هذه الهويات القبلية مع الهوية الوطنية الأوسع والحكم ؟
7. ما هو تطور تصور الهوية في الأردن منذ استقلاله ؟ في رأيك، ما هي الأحداث السياسية/التاريخية الرئيسية التي مثلت تحولًا في التصور الهوائي ؟
8. هل ترون أن العنصر الفلسطيني كان له دور في تكوين الهوية الأردنية ؟ ماذا يمكنك أن تقول عن أهميتها في الهوية الأردنية متعددة الطبقات في الوقت الحاضر ؟
9. كان لأحدث تدفق للاجئين من البلدان المجاورة، وخاصة من سوريا والعراق، تأثير كبير على النسيج الاجتماعي للأردن. كيف أثر ذلك على الإحساس بالهوية بين الأردنيين والطوائف السورية والعراقية ؟
10. هل الولاء للعائلة المالكة عامل محفز للهوية في البلاد؟ هل تعتقد أنه يعزز الاستقرار الاجتماعي والسياسي للأردن؟
11. هل أنتم على علم بالمبادرات أو السياسات أو البرامج الجارية الرامية إلى تعزيز الوحدة والهوية الوطنية المشتركة في الأردن ؟
12. في رأيك، كيف يتم تضمين التنوع واحترامه في المظلة الواسعة للهوية الأردنية ؟ ما هي التحديات والفرص المستمرة فيما يتعلق بإدماج الأقليات التي تعيش في البلد ؟

13. كيف يتم إدراج الأقليات العرقية (الشيشان والشركس) في عملية بناء الهوية في البلاد ؟ ما هو وضعهم ؟ هل يعتبرون مواطنين بنسبة 100٪ ويُنظر إليهم على هذا النحو ؟
14. هل يلعب الدين دورا رئيسيا في بناء الهوية الوطنية ؟ كيف تقيم العلاقة بين الأقليات الدينية والأغلبية السنية ؟