

Ideological And Cultural Determinants Of The Formation Of Arab National Identity

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Abstract: The article conceptualizes Arab national identity as a complex and multidimensional construct formed at the intersection of historical experience, cultural traditions, religious foundations, and political processes. Particular attention is paid to the unifying role of the Arabic language and Islam, as well as to the ideological functions of historical memory and the legacy of the post-colonial period in shaping collective self-perception. The study critically examines the long-term consequences of colonial domination, the intellectual efforts aimed at redefining and reconstructing national identity, and the emergence of hybrid and transnational forms of self-identification under conditions of globalization. Furthermore, the article demonstrates the significant role of the intellectual elite in constructing and disseminating the Arab national narrative, interpreting identity not as a static or essentialized category, but as a dynamic, socially constructed phenomenon that remains open to continuous reinterpretation and historical transformation.

Keywords: National identity, identity, Arab identity, Arabs, cultural codes, Islam, Arabic language, colonialism, globalization, ethnosymbolism, pan-Arabism.

Introduction: In the Arab countries, national identity throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has become one of the salient scholarly issues in political science, Oriental studies, and sociology. The genesis of Arab national identity constitutes a complex, multilayered process shaped at the intersection of historical, cultural, religious, and political factors. Its scholarly analysis occupies a significant place within the system of the social sciences, possessing both theoretical and applied relevance. The formation of a sense of national belonging in the Arab world is directly linked to historical memory, Islam, the Arabic language, shared symbolic systems, and the activities of intellectual elites. In the course of historical development, Arab identity has taken shape as a multidimensional socio-political phenomenon that combines elements of traditionalism and modernism.

The formation of Arab national identity took place through the interaction of such factors as language, religion, cultural memory, literary heritage, and the postcolonial experience. This process may be characterized as a dynamic form of cultural self-reflection and spiritual resistance to external influence. The substance of Arab identity is manifested in its

capacity to combine traditional values with contemporary political and cultural conditions, as well as in the transformation of historical heritage into a foundation of political and spiritual unity. Despite the impact of globalization and internal contradictions, Arab identity continues to function as a key ideological and cultural factor of social self-understanding, cultural continuity, and regional stability. In this sense, it serves as a spiritual bridge between the past and the present, between tradition and modernization.

Arab scholars conceptualize national identity not as a fixed category but as a product of cultural reconstruction. In the Arab context, this process was shaped under the influence of the colonial system, postcolonial discourse, and global transformations [1, 2, 4]. Edward Said emphasized that the image of the Orient had for centuries been constructed through Western perception, and that it was precisely in relation to this external construct that Arabs reinterpreted their own identity. An analysis of the genesis of Arab identity demonstrates that its conceptual roots can be traced back to the early Islamic period. The formation of the space of the Arabic language and Islam created the foundation for

perceiving the Arab countries as a unified civilizational field [14; p. 120].

The ethno-symbolic approach makes it possible to interpret this process as a reinterpretation of ancient ethnic symbols, myths, and traditions and their institutionalization in the form of national narratives. In this context, Arab national identity appears not only as a political phenomenon but also as a spiritual system grounded in historical memory, cultural archetypes, and symbolic values. The ethno-symbolic legacy constituted one of the key sources in the formation of Arab self-consciousness, providing ideological legitimization for political projects. In this regard, the period of an-Nahda (the Arab Renaissance) of the late nineteenth and early early twentieth centuries became an important stage in the creation of the cultural codes of Arab identity.

The intellectuals of this period – Butrus al-Bustani, Muhammad Abduh, and Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani – sought to restore Arab cultural unity through the modernization of education, the reform of language policy, and the renewal of religious thought. Their works placed particular emphasis on the need to counter Western colonialism and cultural expansion by strengthening pan-Arab cultural solidarity. At the same time, it was noted that Arab identity had never been entirely monolithic: tribal and confessional forms of self-identification often weakened national unity, although language and historical memory preserved the core of a shared cultural integrity. [6,7].

The Arabic language and Islam constitute the spiritual and cultural core of Arab national identity. Language performs not only a communicative function but also serves as a symbol of civilizational belonging, acting as a carrier of religious tradition and classical literature. It is regarded as the principal symbol of identity, ensuring the continuity of Arab culture, historical memory, and the value system. Islam functions not only as a religious institution but also as a cultural code that shapes social norms, moral orientations, and ways of life. The concept of the ummah serves as the ideological foundation for the unity of Arab society. However, in multiethnic and multiconfessional countries (Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Egypt, Syria, and Sudan), religious diversity may function both as a factor of unity and as a source of differentiation within Arab identity.

Colonialism became one of the key factors in the formation of modern Arab identity. The political, economic, and cultural dominance of Europe intensified the Arab world's aspiration to recognize its own cultural distinctiveness and gave rise to national liberation movements. According to F. Fanon, an individual living under conditions of colonial

subjugation arrives at an understanding of their own essence through resistance to the colonizer. Edward Said's concept of postcolonialism introduced a fundamentally new theoretical perspective into the analysis of Arab identity. Said interprets the "Orient" as an ideological construct created by the West to justify cultural superiority and political domination [14].

According to N. al-Karni and F. al-Khuri, the postcolonial period in the Arab countries was not confined to a critical deconstruction of Western discourses but became a foundation for the formation of local models of identity [2, 7]. A number of Arab societies adopted a strategy of "adaptive modernism," combining borrowed elements of Western institutions with the preservation of a traditional cultural foundation. Consequently, postcolonial subjectivity is manifested not only in opposition to the West but also in forms of cultural synthesis.

Salam Hawa, an expert of the Canada – Arab World research group at the University of Ottawa, explains the contemporary crisis of Arab identity as the result of centuries-long cultural and political fragmentation, external imperial pressure, and internal ideological conflicts. From his perspective, these factors consistently undermined the possibilities for the formation of a coherent Arab identity. As a result, fundamentalism and political instability in many cases began to be perceived as the only language of resistance to the global order. [6; 158].

The evolution of Arab political and cultural identity is examined in the scholarly literature through the prism of a comprehensive approach that combines historical-anthropological, sociocultural, and politico-philosophical analysis. Such an interdisciplinary method moves identity beyond the confines of a single scholarly tradition and makes it possible to interpret it as a multilevel process. Methodological pluralism prevents one-sided interpretations and helps to reveal the dynamic nature of Arab identity, which encompasses various historical models—tribal, pan-Arab, nation-state, and transnational.

In the study of Arab identity, the phenomena of collective memory and social forgetting play a key role. Maurice Halbwachs's theory of collective memory emphasizes the decisive importance of shared representations of the past for the formation of group identity. [17; 238]. B. Anderson's concept of "imagined communities" demonstrates that national identity is constructed through shared symbols and historical narratives [8; 202]. P. Ricoeur describes the mechanisms of social forgetting that determine which events are preserved in memory and which are repressed, thereby shaping the selective nature of

identificatory narratives [13].

In the Arab context, the legacy of *jahiliyya*, the Islamic conquests, and the colonial and postcolonial periods constitute fundamental historical layers that have shaped the configurations of Arab identity. Each of these layers has been reinterpreted in accordance with the demands of the time and the political context, giving rise to different models of contemporary Arab self-identification. Sociocultural norms and local legal traditions play a significant role in the structure of Arab values. The Arab legal tradition has historically developed as a synthesis of *shari'a* and local customs, creating a distinctive form of normative pluralism—the intersection of religious law, tribal norms, and state legislation. This has provided a stable yet flexible cultural and legal foundation for national identity.

Literature and art reveal latent modes of identification that are not always present in official discourse. Arab poetry has for centuries served as a repository of cultural memory, recording values, historical events, and collective experiences. Music and dance represent regional particularities of the Arab cultural tradition, simultaneously expressing both its unity and diversity [4; 48].

The interpretation of identity as a dynamic system constitutes a key methodological principle distinguishing the constructivist approach from the essentialist one. Z. Bauman's concept of "liquid modernity" and J. Butler's theory of performative identity allow identity to be understood as a process continuously reproduced through discursive and practical actions [10, 9]. The evolution of Arab identity—from tribal to pan-Arab, then to nation-state, and subsequently to transnational—demonstrates its dynamic and mutable character. The categories of 'Asabiyya, *Qawmiyya*, and *Wataniyya* reflect identificatory models that emerged under different socio-economic and cultural conditions.

The formation of identity boundaries necessitates an analysis of the category of the "Other," which plays a fundamental theoretical and practical role. In the Arab politico-cultural context, attitudes toward non-Arabs, non-Muslims, and colonizers defined the symbolic boundaries and internal structure of identity. Within the Islamic tradition, the categories of *Ahl al-Kitāb*, 'Ajām, and *Kāfirūn* established status hierarchies and norms of civilizational interaction.

The interplay between cultural archetypes and political institutions constitutes an important avenue for the analysis of national identity. The neo-institutional approach emphasizes that political structures do not exist autonomously but are legitimized through cultural symbols. Nationalist Arab regimes actively drew upon

language, historical memory, and Islamic heritage to substantiate political legitimacy.

The systemic approach allows for the analysis of Arab identity within both diachronic and constructivist frameworks. In Salam Hawa's conception, emphasis is placed on the need to restore the "damaged cultural foundation" of Arab civilization—the ideals of knowledge, dignity, moderation, and social justice [6; 153]. The modernization and globalization of the twentieth century radically transformed the social structure of Arab societies. The development of education and media communications facilitated the integration of traditional and contemporary models of identification. The Arab diaspora, digital media, and academic mobility have intensified processes of transnational and hybrid identity formation.

Hybrid identity emerges as a result of the interaction of diverse cultural, ethnic, and religious traditions and is associated with processes of globalization, migration, and cultural diffusion. Homi Bhabha's concept of the "third space" interprets hybridity as an intermediate zone in which new meanings, cultural codes, and subjectivities are produced [3; 42]. Stuart Hall conceptualizes diaspora hybridity as an identity that is not in a state of "being" but in a continuous process of "becoming" [5; 235].

The dynamics of religious adaptation also constitute a significant aspect of hybrid identity. Tariq Ramadan emphasizes the need for a contextualized Islamic ethics for Muslims in Europe, which entails combining fidelity to the foundations of Islam with their reinterpreted application in European settings. The everyday cultural life of the Arab diaspora – blending Arab and Western holidays, simultaneously consuming products of mass culture, and employing both traditional and modern forms of self-organization – visibly demonstrates the transnational character of hybrid identity. Digital media unite the Arab diaspora and residents of Arab countries into cohesive virtual communities, creating a new cultural space. [12; 198].

Musical hybridity, particularly in the genres of Arab hip-hop and rap, represents a combination of Western musical forms with the Arab poetic tradition, local lexicon, and socio-political themes. It constitutes not only an artistic innovation but also a means of symbolically expressing an "identity between two worlds." Academic mobility fosters the development of intellectual hybridity by combining Western methodologies with Arab cultural capital.

Despite the widespread adoption of the concept of hybridity, it has faced criticism. Scholars note that hybridity theory can obscure real politico-economic inequalities by translating them into the realm of

“cultural differences.” In some cases, hybrid identity may be accompanied by social alienation, double marginalization, and psychological trauma. Within the Arab cultural space, hybridity coexists with strong essentialist discourses. The Islamic revival of the twentieth century largely emerged as a response to processes of cultural mixing, aiming to restore a “pure” Islamic identity.

However, hybridity should not be regarded solely as a threat: under conditions of globalization, it functions as a strategy of adaptation and cultural resistance. Selective appropriations enable Arab societies to preserve their own cultural core while simultaneously adapting to external influences.

In the Arab cultural space, essentialist models of identity were largely shaped as a response to the colonial legacy and Western cultural expansion. The idea of seeking an “authentic” identity became a means of resisting external pressures. However, acknowledging the historical dynamism and internal diversity of Arab culture is a key condition for overcoming the identity crisis. In contemporary social research, identity is understood as a constructive process, shaped through social practices, collective memory, and political experience [2; 137]. The critique of essentialism does not imply a rejection of tradition but requires its understanding as an evolving cultural process subject to interpretation.

Arab literature and the intellectual elite have historically played a central role in the formation, articulation, and reinterpretation of the Arab national narrative. Artistic creation and scholarly-publicistic activity functioned not only as aesthetic practices but also as mechanisms of symbolic mobilization, the formation of collective memory, and the production of political legitimacy. The national discourse emerged at the intersection of the cultural environment, institutional structures, and ideological currents. In this process, literature functioned not merely as a reflection of social reality but became an institution that constructs and consolidates identity.

The works of Mahmoud Darwish, the novels of Naguib Mahfouz, and the journalistic writings of Mustafa Balila and Suad al-Sabah have shaped new semantic horizons for the reconstruction of the “Arab Self,” resistance to cultural domination, and the symbolic expression of collective identity. Intellectuals acted as intermediaries between society and the state, between culture and politics, shaping national identity through narratives, symbols, and metaphors [7].

Several scholars regard Arab national identity primarily as a political project that emerged in the twentieth century in response to colonialism and geopolitical

threats. From this perspective, national identity is not a natural product of cultural homogeneity but a construct shaped by historical context. As a counterargument, the deep-rooted cultural foundations – namely the Arabic language, Islam, and shared historical memory – are highlighted, as they fostered a sense of collective belonging long before the emergence of modernist political projects.

An alternative approach interprets Arab identity as a multi-layered system of loyalties, in which national, religious, and local identities do not compete but complement one another. This perspective mitigates the dichotomy between “nation” and ummah, allowing Arab identity to be understood as a dynamic, adaptive structure open to historical change.

In summary, the genesis of Arab national identity developed under the influence of a complex set of interrelated sociocultural factors. Central among these are the Arabic language, Islam, historical memory, the experience of colonialism and postcolonialism, as well as the cultural contradictions of the globalization era. National identity emerges as a result of the continuous interaction between traditional values and modernization processes, and between local and universal orientations. Under these conditions, Arab national identity appears not as a static given but as a dynamic intellectual and philosophical phenomenon that retains its relevance amid contemporary geopolitical and cultural transformations.

The analysis of national identity in Arab countries requires an interdisciplinary and comprehensive approach. Such an approach allows identity to be understood as a construct that evolves under the influence of historical, political, and economic factors. The colonial period marked a turning point in the development of Arab identity: Western expansion disrupted traditional sociocultural structures and spurred the emergence of national liberation movements. Colonial discourse introduced Eurocentric representations of the East, generating a condition of “secondary identity.” In contrast, postcolonial discourse created an intellectual space for the critical reflection on the cultural subjectivity of Arab societies and the reconstruction of the national narrative.

Modernization and globalization demanded that the Arab world develop strategies to reconcile traditional values with contemporary realities. The intensification of Western development models stimulated efforts to protect cultural distinctiveness, strengthen national solidarity, and preserve civilizational uniqueness. Trends toward the global homogenization of cultures were perceived as a threat to Arab diversity, prompting intensified efforts to preserve and reinterpret the

cultural foundation. In these processes, Arab literature and the intellectual elite played a key role, generating new cultural codes and shaping a space of symbolic struggle over the content and boundaries of contemporary Arab identity.

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