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Modern Arab culture: introductory remarks

"The Arab World" – the very term places the Arab Middle East and North Africa into a category of its own, for no other cluster of modern nation states is so commonly referred to as a "world" in English political parlance. It is not necessarily an inappropriate label if it is taken as an indication that these twenty or so countries are bound together by certain shared cultural ties and yet at the same time possess their own distinctive local identities and histories.[1] One of the key challenges to exploring modern Arab culture is understanding the interplay between the larger shared history of the region – in essence, what makes Arabs Arab – and the dynamic regional and local identities that make this such a culturally rich and diverse area of the world.

The bond that unifies Arabs is first and foremost the Arabic language (similar to the role of English in the "English-speaking world"), but Arabic is a language that provides both a connection to a shared cultural heritage and a vehicle for the construction of distinct local identities. In its standardized written form, Arabic is used and understood by educated people from Morocco to Iraq and from Syria to Yemen. At the same time, however, the many distinct spoken dialect forms attest to the uniqueness of different regions, social communities, and even economic classes.

Written Arabic has changed remarkably little over time, so educated Arabs have access to a rich literary heritage that extends back some fifteen centuries. It has its roots in what appears to have been a poetic koine in pre-Islamic times that included features of various spoken dialects (similar to the koine of the Homeric poems) and was used primarily as a special register for the composition of poetry that could be understood across dialectal boundaries. After its revelation in the

early seventh century, the Qurʾan was accepted as the most eloquent example of the Arabic language and greatly influenced the later development of the language. The rapid spread of Islam in the eighth century led to an increased need to teach Arabic to non-Arabic-speaking peoples, so formal Arabic was codified in a set of grammatical rules that to a remarkable extent are still accepted and applied today. But this formal register of the language is no one's mother tongue and is rarely used in daily life. Instead, it is learned in school, is now used primarily for written communication, and is essentially the same wherever it is taught.

In contrast, the spoken dialects of Arabic are nearly as diverse as the Romance languages of Western Europe. Although much vocabulary and grammar is shared, certain sound shifts and different stress patterns at times make it difficult to understand even closely related words. Indeed, if the Arabic dialects had developed on their own as written languages at some point (as Spanish, Portuguese, Catalan, French, and Italian did), we might well now refer to "Arabic" not in the singular, but in the plural, or perhaps even as a family of languages. However, historical developments in the Arab Middle East, took a different path than in medieval Europe. Instead of allowing the standard form of the language to be supplanted with a host of vernaculars, the classical form of Arabic, due in part to the prestige accorded to it as the language of the Qurʾan, has retained its position as the sole written form of the language. The dialects, on the other hand, have led a parallel, symbiotic existence as the primary means of spoken communication. The dialects are regional, whereas written Arabic is universal. Indeed, for over a millennium written Arabic has also been used far beyond the borders of the Arab World as a language of religion, literature, philosophy, and science among Muslims around the globe. In the past few decades, however, the technological revolution in broadcast and electronic communications in the form of hundreds of new satellite television channels and the advent of the Internet and social media has now put the spoken Arabic dialects in contact with one another in an unprecedented manner. Signs of rapid linguistic and cultural change are everywhere in the Arab World, but where those changes will eventually lead will not be known for quite some time. Arabic, the bond that holds the Arab World together, is undergoing dramatic transformations.

The Arabic language does more than open the door to a rich literary heritage, for in the Middle East one's mother tongue is also one of the

most important markers of ethnicity, and ethnic identities often overlap or intersect with religious identities. For outsiders who have been led by the Western mass media to believe that all Arabs are Muslims, and that Jews and Arabs are two separate and opposing peoples, it can be more than a bit confusing to learn that there are Jewish Arabs and Christian Arabs, as well as Muslim Arabs. Put quite simply, Arab identity is not based on religion any more than British, American, or French identity is, despite the presence of a dominant religious tradition in each of those countries. The dominant religion among Arabs is Islam, but being Muslim is not essential to being Arab, nor does being Arab mean that one is necessarily Muslim. Islam, Christianity, and Judaism are the three main religions of the Arab Middle East, and members of all three are native speakers of Arabic, and thus are Arabs. Arabs of these and of a number of other smaller religious traditions are very much participants in the larger sphere of "Arab culture" that is addressed in this volume. Indeed, the contributions of both religious and ethnic minorities have had a substantial impact on modern Arab culture.

Although the political, economic, and religious dimensions of the Arab World are those most often featured in Western media, the topic of this volume is Arab *culture*, the rich concatenation of language, literature, cuisine, music, cinema, theater, folklore, humor, television, radio, art, architecture, and other elements that make Arabs Arabs, whether they live in the Middle East or in the diaspora in other regions of the world. The essays included here are designed to provide a deeper understanding of modern Arab societies, a necessary counterpoint to the shallow coverage and staccato pace of news headlines. Although the focus here is on *modern* Arab culture, that is, of the past century or so, there are several broad historical processes that are critical to understanding the present state of the Arab World:

(1) the original spread of the Arabic language and Arabian culture beginning in the seventh century; in other words, the "Arabization" of what we now call the Middle East and North Africa;

(2) the impact of European colonization and the subsequent emergence of the independent Arab nation states that exist today;

(3) a cluster of important trends in political, religious, and cultural thought over the last century and a half, including the *Nahda* (the Arab "Awakening" or "Renaissance") of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the emergence of Arab Nationalism and Pan-Arabism, and the spread of conservative Islamist movements.

The historical spread of Arab culture

Before the seventh century and the advent of Islam, Arab tribes inhabited the Arabian Peninsula (modern Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, and Kuwait) and what are now the southern regions of Palestine, Jordan, Syria, and Iraq. Some were Christians, some were Jews, some were Zoroastrians, but most Arabs were pagans who worshipped multiple divinities, often in the form of idols, in a manner similar to the religions of ancient Greece and Rome. Bedouin Arab tribes led a nomadic existence that took them on migratory routes through the deserts of the Arabian Peninsula, but a large percentage of Arabs were sedentary, living in agricultural areas such as Yemen or in urban areas that survived to a great extent on trade, such as Mecca and Medina. Muhammad's call to monotheism in the form of Islam in the early seventh century set in motion great societal changes that, over a period of a century or two, led to the formation of a new Islamic community, the *umma,* in which tribal identities were gradually replaced or overlaid with a sense of being Muslim, an identity that quickly expanded to include non-Arabs. This same time period also saw a massive geographic expansion of the nascent Islamic Empire. Muhammad died in 632 and within a hundred years of his death the new polity controlled territories stretching from Spain in the west to the borders of India and China in the east.

It is a common misconception that these conquests consisted of large numbers of Arabs pouring forth out of the Arabian Peninsula who then occupied these extensive lands. Pre-Islamic Arabia was a sparsely populated region and there simply were not millions of Arabs waiting to fan out over these vast newly conquered territories and settle them. Instead, the conquests were driven to a great extent by new converts to Islam, as well as some mercenaries, who were recruited into the Muslim armed forces as the empire expanded. As each new city or region came under Islamic control, whether by conquest or capitulation, a basic political structure was set up for governing the region and the army was replenished with new volunteers, usually from the ranks of recent converts. By the time these armies reached North Africa or Iran or beyond, they were in fact very diverse bodies that included speakers of Arabic, Aramaic, Tamazight (Berber), Coptic, Greek, Kurdish, Latin, Persian, and other languages, united by their shared affiliation with Islam and led by a rather small number of ethnic Arabs.

The early Islamic military conquests were impressive, but not unique. This same region had, after all, seen similar empires and conquerors come and go. The Babylonians, ancient Egyptians, Alexander the Great, and Rome, for example, had all conquered comparably extensive territories – and the spread of Islam was similar to that of a number of earlier religions, such as the worship of the Greco-Roman gods, Mithraism, Manichaeism, and Christianity. What is perhaps most unexpected in the case of the Islamic conquests is that the Arabic language, which at that point had little written literature to speak of other than the Qur'an, eventually supplanted a number of well-established languages and their literatures including Aramaic, Greek, Latin, and, for a short period, Persian. Over the course of many centuries, and in the wake of the spread of the Arabic language, ethnic identification with "Arabness" began to take root, as well.

One of the reasons for the spread of Arab identity is that both Islam as a religion and Arab ethnicity were well suited for expansion. In Islam a Muslim man may lawfully marry a woman who is Muslim, Christian, or Jewish (the primary requirement is that she believe in the One God and not be a pagan), and, in addition, she is not required to forsake her own religion. Their children, however, are considered Muslim from birth and must be raised as such. The same is true of Arab ethnicity, which is understood to be inherited through the father's line. Thus if an Arab Muslim soldier in Spain, for example, married a Christian woman and they had five sons, those sons would all be considered both Arab and Muslim (and not "half Arab" or "part Arab" as we might think of them today). If those five sons then married five local Christian women, all of their offspring would be considered Arab and Muslim, and so forth.

Over the centuries, a large percentage of the population of the Middle East became speakers of Arabic as their sole language, and Aramaic, Coptic, Greek, and Latin ceased to exist as spoken tongues. However, some languages survived in minority usage, including Tamazight (Berber, which is in reality a family of related languages and not a single tongue), Kurdish, and Nubian (in southernmost Egypt). The eastern and northern limits of the Arab World in modern times are in fact most clearly demarcated by language: the borders of modern Iran and Turkey roughly correspond to the edges of Turkish- and Persian-speaking cultures (although there are small enclaves of native Arabic speakers in both of those countries).

In essence, in modern times, an Arab is generally someone who speaks Arabic as a mother or primary tongue, or, in the case of Arabs living in the diaspora, who identifies ethnically as Arab. Arabs can be of any religion. The Arab World is also home to a number of non-Arab ethnic groups, defined primarily by language, such as Imazighen (Berbers), Kurds, and Nubians. But the situation is complicated, for there are also many people who speak Arabic as their mother tongue who have a sense of historical connection to a different ethnicity. This is particularly common in North Africa where the majority of the population was in the past ethnically Imazighen (Berber) – after many generations, even centuries, of speaking Arabic as their mother tongue, some now identify as Arab, but some do not. In contrast, there are also many native speakers of Arabic who now identify primarily in national terms, especially in those countries that have ancient histories of their own, such as Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, or Syria, and only think of themselves as "Arabs" when speaking about the broader cultural or political context of the Middle East or in international terms, if indeed even then. Like all identities, "Arab" is a fluid concept that changes according to context. As will be clear from a number of the essays of this volume, the interaction between various identities in the Arab Middle East is a major component of modern Arab culture.

The era of European colonization

By the seventeenth century, nearly all of the Arab World had come under control of the Ottoman Turkish Empire, and most regions were at least nominally governed from Istanbul, though different areas experienced varying levels of autonomy. The main exceptions were Morocco in the far west, which repeatedly managed to repulse Ottoman incursions, and the sparsely populated interior of the Arabian Peninsula, along with some of the small principalities of the Persian Gulf. Although internal changes and transformations were already occurring in Arab lands in the eighteenth century, Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798 provides a convenient starting point for understanding the extraordinary transformation of the region in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It marks not only the beginning of more direct contacts with European culture, but also the opening gambit of a power struggle among Western nations that was played out in the Arab Middle East and that has continued unabated into the present day. Modern Arab culture has emerged in tandem with an unending series of Western interventions, military and otherwise, on

Arab soil. One cannot understand the situation of the modern Middle East without an understanding of the role these outside forces have played.

Napoleon invaded Egypt and Syria primarily to establish a French trading presence in the Middle East and to impede Britain's access to India. Although the French occupation of Egypt ended after only three years, it almost accidently set in motion a series of new political forces. When the French retreated, the new governor of Egypt, Muhammad ʿAli (who was ethnically Albanian and is sometimes referred to by the Turkish version of his name, Mehmet Ali), embarked on a program of modernization, primarily of the military and economic infrastructures. To do so, he sent a series of "study groups" or missions to France and elsewhere in Europe, the members of whom were meant to return to Egypt and help modernize their country. Nominally under Ottoman control, Muhammad ʿAli soon acquired such power that Egypt became virtually independent and was perceived to be a potential economic threat to European nations. The members of those study groups returned with new ideas not only about the organization of the armed forces, weaponry, engineering, agriculture, and so forth, but also about culture and education, and they began to write and publish books about their experiences. Newspapers began to be published, the government began to sponsor translations into Arabic of works from European languages, and European professors and teachers were brought to Egypt to teach in newly founded secular government schools.

In North Africa, however, the French set a very different process in motion. In 1830, they invaded Algeria and within a few short years had conquered the country. In 1848, they annexed Algeria to France and declared it not merely a French colony, but a permanent part of France. This move was accompanied by government-encouraged programs of emigration that led to hundreds of thousands of French citizens acquiring land and settling in Algeria. The French regime pursued a policy of "divide and conquer." They awarded privileges to Algerian Berbers and Algerian Jewish Arabs that were denied to Algerian Muslim Arabs. Jews, for example, were granted full French citizenship, a status that was denied to Muslims, both Berber and Arab. With the establishment of French military and political control in Algeria, and the initiation of administrative policies aimed at fostering religious and ethnic divisions, the colonial era in the Middle East had begun in earnest.

Eventually Britain, France, and Italy took advantage of the decline in Ottoman power to carve up the Arab Middle East into a variety of

mandates, protectorates, fully annexed territories, colonies, and regions administered through capitulatory treaties in which rulers surrendered control of their finances, military, and foreign relations. With the ratification of the Treaty of Versailles after World War I, European powers effectively controlled over 85 percent of the Arab population. Although Arab leaders had repeatedly been promised independence and told that they would have a voice in choosing their own political future, their hopes were dashed at Versailles, and the future of the Arab World was instead decided by the Western powers.

Much of the political history of the Middle East over the last century is closely linked to the redrawing of the map in the aftermath of World War I. France and Britain played a large role in the creation of an independent state of Lebanon, which they conceived of as a homeland for the region's Arabic-speaking Christians, ignoring the realities of the mixed population. A united Iraq was created from three separate Ottoman provinces, though the fault lines between southern, central, and northern Iraq are discernible even today from news headlines. Libya, too, was pasted together from what had previously been separate provinces. Transjordan, including historical Palestine as well as what is now modern Jordan, was first brought into being as a British mandate, and the Kingdom of Jordan was later created "out of thin air" to fulfill British commitments to the Hashemite family of Mecca. The Hashemite Sharif of Mecca, Hussein, who revolted against the Ottomans during World War I at British instigation (in the Arab Revolt of 1916 that was made famous by the film *Lawrence of Arabia*), and three of his sons were each eventually given thrones: ʿAbdallah became king of Transjordan (now Jordan), Faisal briefly ruled as king of Syria, but was then made king of Iraq, and ʿAli ruled after his father in the Hijaz for a short period before being overthrown by the Saudi family. The political boundaries of many of the modern Arab nation states have their origins on the drawing tables of Western politicians who were, quite literally, designing a new Middle East in the wake of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire during World War I.

Two decades later, at the end of World War II when the European powers were greatly weakened, a new postcolonial world began to emerge with former colonies around the globe declaring or demanding their independence. But in 1948, the West redrew the map of the Middle East one more time when the United Nations voted to establish a Jewish homeland in Palestine, against the will of the indigenous people of the region and those of all the surrounding territories. By doing so, the

West managed to solve one of its own difficulties, namely, what to do with the hundreds of thousands of Jewish refugees who had survived the Holocaust, but set in motion a series of conflicts that are sadly still with us today. Given the long history of Western intervention in the Arab World, it is not surprising that for many Arabs, the modern state of Israel, which was populated by a flood of Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe, is scarcely more than the last surviving European colony on Arab soil. Whether that attitude will change over time has yet to be seen.

Below is a brief listing of the Arab countries (from west to east) and a summary of their recent political history:[2]

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Morocco – divided into Spanish and French protectorates in 1912; independence declared in 1956.
Algeria – invaded by France in 1830; annexed in 1848; independence declared in 1962 after 132 years of French occupation.
Tunisia – invaded by France in 1881; governed as a protectorate until independence in 1956.
Libya – invaded by Italy in 1911; governed from 1912 to 1943 as three (later two) Italian colonies; governed by the Allies from 1943; unified as a single independent nation in 1951.
Egypt – occupied by British military forces in 1882; fully or partially administered by the British until the revolution of 1952; declared the independent Republic of Egypt in 1953.
Sudan – conquered by Muhammad ʿAli, ruler of Egypt, 1820–22; governed as an extension of Egypt until the British occupation of Egypt in 1882; the Mahdist Revolt established an independent regime for a decade that was then overthrown by the British in 1899; ruled by the British via Egypt until the Egyptian Revolution of 1952; independence declared in 1956; the non-Arab, non-Muslim region of South Sudan voted to secede and was declared independent in 2011.
Palestine – occupied by British military during World War I; administered under the British Mandate of Transjordan from 1922 to 1947; declaration of the State of Israel in 1948 split historical Palestine; negotiations for an independent state of Palestine still ongoing.
Jordan – subsumed into the British Transjordan Mandate in 1922; established as an independent monarchy in 1946; name changed to Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan in 1949.
Lebanon – after violence between Christians and Druze in Mount Lebanon in 1860, an international commission separated Lebanon from Syria; governed from 1861 to 1918 by a non-Lebanese Christian governor appointed by the Ottoman sultan, but approved by European powers; from 1920 administered as part of the French

Mandate of Syria and Lebanon; the French created the Republic of Lebanon in 1926 that achieved partial independence in 1943 when Hitler invaded France; French forces attempted to retain control, but eventually withdrew fully in 1946.

Syria – an independent Kingdom of Syria declared by Faisal of the Hashemite family in 1920, but was almost immediately deposed by French military forces; administered as a French Mandate from 1920; a treaty of independence negotiated in 1936, but not ratified by the French Parliament; de facto independence with the fall of France to German forces during World War II; full independence recognized in 1946.

Iraq – administered as a British Mandate from 1920; the British created a monarchy and placed Faisal on the throne in 1921 after he had been expelled from Syria, and granted the new kingdom nominal independence in 1932 though they retained a significant military presence; in 1958 the monarchy was overthrown in a coup.

Saudi Arabia – the British supported the Arab Revolt against Ottoman rule by the Sharif of Mecca during World War I beginning in 1916; in the years immediately following World War I, however, Ibn Saud conquered and unified most of the peninsula, establishing the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932.

Yemen – the British occupied Aden (South Yemen) in 1839; Northern Yemen went back and forth between Ottoman and local control, was invaded by Italy in 1911, but declared its independence in 1918; South Yemen established in 1967 upon the final withdrawal of the British; the two Yemens unified in 1990.

Gulf States – consist of Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and the Sultanate of Oman: Kuwait became a British protectorate in 1899 and remained so until independence in 1961; Bahrain was overrun by the British and remained a protectorate from 1861 until independence in 1971; Qatar became a British protectorate in 1916 and achieved independence in 1971; the seven small sheikhdoms that became the United Arab Emirates (Dubai, Sharjah, Abu Dhabi, Ajman, Fujayrah, Umm al-Quwain, and Ras al-Khaimah) were the target of British military expeditions from the first decades of the nineteenth century and, eventually, via a series of treaties or "truces" starting in 1820, became British protectorates (hence their early name of the "Trucial States") and became independent in 1971; Oman, like the interior of the Arabian Peninsula, was never under effective European control during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

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The impact of the colonial period on Arab culture was enormous. Perhaps the most egregious example is that of Algeria where the French government outlawed the use of Arabic in government schools. For over a