

## IDENTITY AND INTEGRATION: UNRAVELING THE COMPLEXITIES OF ARAB COOPERATION

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**Abstract:** At present, twenty-two Arab nations have a common language, Arabic, as well as a shared history, culture, and set of traits. Despite these commonalities, they have struggled to achieve integration. In contrast, the European Union, which consists of historically less similar and linguistically diverse countries, has been able to build a unified identity. This article looks at the successes and shortcomings of the Arab League, which has been a first step toward the unification of Arab governments. It also looks at how to help the region develop a shared identity, using knowledge from a thorough analysis of European experience. Through an analysis of surveys given to various segments of society, the article aims to find effective methods that are beneficial in promoting a sense of common identity across Arab nations. It also uses popular theoretical frameworks to examine public opinion and government attitudes toward integration through a number of research studies and surveys. Essentially, this paper provides an in-depth examination of the barriers to Arab integration and recommends using EU experience to successfully overcome these issues.

**Key words:** Identity, Arab world, European Union (EU), survey, integration, Islam, Europeanization, pan-Arabism, unity.

**Introduction:** The population of the 22 Arab nations, which stretch from the Atlantic to the Persian-Arabian Gulf, is estimated to be 363 million. Mauritania, Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Yemen are some of these nations. The area is diverse, with people from many different ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds. The majority language is Arabic, but French and English are also widely spoken, especially in former colonial territories. There are sizable communities of Christians, Kurds, and Berber-Amazigh, among other ethnic and religious minorities.

Arab nations' current boundaries were set by colonial treaties, most notably the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement. The region holds strategic significance as it is situated at the intersection of major global trade routes, including the Suez Canal, which accounts for 10% of all marine commerce, and the Straits of Hormuz and Gibraltar. Furthermore, the area possesses over 50% of the global oil reserves and over 40% of the global gas reserves.

Culturally, the Arab world can be divided into four main cultural regions: the Nile Valley in eastern North Africa, the Gulf states on the Arabian Peninsula, the Maghreb in western North Africa, and the Fertile Crescent, which forms a crescent-shaped area above the Arabian Desert and Peninsula. (Barakat, 2008; Hourani, 1991) Each region has its own historical significance, socio-political dynamics, and economy.

The area has a variety of social systems, from those that are socially homogeneous to those that are pluralistic. Despite these variations, there are still many issues that are universal, such as high rates of illiteracy, income inequality, poverty, gender inequality, and authoritarianism (United Nations Development Programme, 2002, 2003, 2006). The GDP of all Arab nations combined is still less than the GDP of Germany by itself. A significant portion of the youth in the area—roughly one in three Arabs—are jobless. Polls done in the nations in the area indicate that unemployment is the primary issue (Urdal, 2012). Because of limited opportunities in their homeland, 25% of Arab citizens want to migrate abroad, which contributes to the brain drain impact (see e.g. Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2013; ASDA'A Burson-Marsteller, 2014). Overall, the Arab world has common social and economic problems that call for all-encompassing solutions for stability and sustainable development, notwithstanding their variety.

## Identity

Before we start looking at identity in this region, let's first define what identity means in general. Identity refers to our sense of who we are as individuals and as members of social groups. It also refers to our sense of how others may perceive and label us. According to this identity can be understood in two ways: "social" and "personal." Social identity refers to being part of a group defined by labels and characteristics, while personal identity involves the unique traits that individuals value and see as unchangeable. While these aspects are often related, they can also be separate. The term "identity" suggests a connection between social categories and an individual's sense of self-worth. This view emphasizes not just the difference between social and personal identity but also what each aspect means for individuals.

In the context of the Arab world, understanding national identity is crucial. National identity refers to a person's sense of belonging to a particular state or nation, embodying the idea of a nation as a unified entity characterized by distinct traditions, culture, and language. Regardless of one's official citizenship status, it includes the subjective sentiment that people have for their country while interacting with a group of people. Psychologically, national identity involves an awareness of differences, entailing a sense of belonging and an understanding of what distinguishes "us" from "them."

The rich ancestral heritage that dates back thousands of years is the foundation of Arab identity. Cultural components, including familial bonds, dignity, bravery, and fluency in oratory, are fundamental to this identity. The Arabic language is essential to Arab identity because it acts as a uniting factor. Arabic holds sacred significance as the language of the Qur'an, seen as the direct word of Allah. The prophet Mohammed (pbuh) highlighted the value of Arabic and connected it to revelation from God (see e.g. Shu'ab al-Eemaan, al-Bayhaqi (4/187)).

The Qur'an's teachings of basic principles like community and solidarity helped to further solidify Arab identity as Islam expanded. The majority of Arabs are Muslims, with a tiny minority adhering to other religions, including Christianity, Druze, and Judaism. Hence, the two central pillars of Arab identity are Islam and the Arabic language. Both are essential components of Arab culture, inspiring a strong sense of pride and respect in the community.

## European identity

Let's take a look at the history, thirty years of battle in a church-dominated Europe eventually gave rise to separate states, but after that, each sovereign countries fought multiple wars for domination until 1945. However, none succeeded in consolidating power. In the end, a compromise was achieved to bring Europe together under a shared framework for mutual advancement and to peacefully settle territorial, political, and financial problems. With the passage of time, the European Union (EU) was founded and has made notable progress. Presently, Eurobarometer surveys indicate a growing number of people identifying as European. Understanding how Europe achieved this can offer insights into fostering a unified Arab identity. The fundamental achievements of European identity become clear upon closer examination.

The 27 nation-states that make up the European Union (EU) are a complicated entity that each preserves its own unique identity while fostering a shared European identity. Examining the relationship between national and transnational identities through a variety of theoretical frameworks is necessary to comprehend Europeanization.

- Historical context shapes European identity, but this approach has limitations due to its mythical nature. While Europe has a Christian culture, religion doesn't define its identity conclusively.
- Economic factors influence support for EU integration. Surveys show people believe EU membership brings economic benefits, driving their support for integration.
- EU institutions meet individual and social needs better than nation-states in certain areas like education and welfare, increasing support for EU policies over national ones.
- Moreover, institutions play a crucial role in shaping identity by influencing political participation and behaviour, gradually fostering new identifications.
- The media influences people's perceptions of the EU, but its impact varies based on factors like community size, indicating inconsistent effects on European unity.

The EU's purpose was to establish long-term collaboration among historically warring nations and link Germany to its European neighbors. This required a collective forgetting of past hostilities, which was partially achieved by domesticating or normalizing previously unfamiliar practices. As behaviors changed, the EU grew more established in daily life, with people "forgetting to remember" that the current situation was not always so. Renan (1990: 11) emphasized the need for collective forgetting of uncomfortable pasts in maintaining modern national identities, in addition to identifying the requirement for daily nationalism reproduction. Similarly, Weber (1977: 486) maintained that the transition of 'peasants into Frenchmen' occurred only through the development of universal education, military service, and enhanced communication.

- Without shared memories and meanings, without common symbols and myths, without shrines, ceremonies, and monuments, except for bitter reminders of recent holocausts and wars, who will feel European in the depths of their being, and who will willingly sacrifice themselves for such an abstract ideal? In short, who will die for Europe? (Smith 1995: 139).

Building on Bourdieu's habitus, Billig (1995: 42) addresses collective forgetting as "inhabitation," a crucial feature of nationalism. According to this theory, social norms develop over time and represent

the past. A dialectic of forgotten remembrance is created when thoughts, behaviors, and symbols become ingrained via routine creation. This leads to the past being inhabited in the present.

Deutsch (1966: 117) writes in response to an argument that strongly resonates with his theories regarding the process of social learning, which reinforces shifts in identification: 'And as with all learning processes, they need not merely use this new information for the guidance of their behavior in the light of the preferences, memories, and goals that they have had thus far, but they may also use it to learn, that is, to modify this very inner structure of their preferences, goals, and patterns of behavior' (Deutsch 1966: 117). This is in line with the emphasis on integrative habits as critical to regional integration put forward by Mitrany (1943), Deutsch (1953, 1957, 1966), and Haas (1958). According to Billig (1995: 43), these rituals and practices "serve to turn background space into homeland space" by acting as constant reminders of one's place in the world.

National loyalty does not always give way to a homogenized European Union identity as a consequence of European integration. Rather, it has the potential to strengthen already-existing national identities within member states, impact sub-national discourse in stateless regions like Scotland and Catalonia, enable the "virtual reunification" of kin-nationals like Hungary's extra-territorial nationals, nurture new concepts of identity in divided territories like Cyprus, and even mobilize previously ambiguous national identities as observed in Malta. These examples demonstrate the various ways the EU shapes local identity within its borders. Such identities, which are typically disregarded in conventional analyses, are reinforced by the idea of "banal Europeanism," according to which the EU provides a framework for a variety of national identities, ultimately advancing more integration.

In Spain and throughout Europe, "nested identities" are beginning to emerge, according to Diez Medrano and Gutierrez (2001). The process of integration has reinforced national identities and nation-states rather than creating a conflict between Spanish and EU identities. The idea of "a European Spain" was crucial in helping Spain develop a unified national identity after the Franco dictatorship since Europeanization stood for progress, democracy, tolerance, and communication while bridging cultural gaps. Similar to this, the Italian identity has benefited from EU integration in a number of ways. It has served as a resource for national identity in a nation where nation formation is still lacking, improved international standing, and given channels for resolving internal regional problems (Triandafyllidou, 2005; Jauregui and Ruiz-Jimenez, 2005).

All things considered, the Catalan concept of "one region, many identities" is consistent with the notion of the European Union as a multi-national organization that transcends traditional nation-state boundaries (Laitin 2001: 93–10). Being a member of the EU allows different identities to grow and even impact national movements. The traditional understanding of nation-states is being questioned as nations change inside member states. But rather than undermining EU unity, this diversity gives the integration process new life. At the end of the day, the EU contributes to a feeling of everyday European togetherness by creating an atmosphere in which multiple identities are able to thrive.

### Modern Arab identity

Many surveys have been carried out in the modern era to assess Arabs' sense of identity, with some of the most notable ones used frameworks such as Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions, the World Values Survey, and Schwartz's Value Survey. These studies offer insightful information on the complex web of cultural values in this diverse area. The Arab region, according to Hofstede's dimensions, tends to lean towards collectivism, where individuals prioritize the interests of the group over personal interests. This reflects a collective identity where social cohesion and harmony within the community are highly valued.

- Based on Hofstede's dimensions, people in the Arab world have a tendency to be collectivist, meaning that they prioritize the interests of the group over personal interests. This emphasizes a collective identity that places a high value on social cohesiveness and harmony within the community.
- The World Values Survey highlights the importance of survival and traditional values in Arab nations, emphasizing an identity firmly anchored in religious convictions, cultural customs, and a need for security and stability. These principles are essential in determining how people feel about themselves and their place in their communities.
- Despite the absence of direct data from the Arab world, Schwartz's Value Survey indicates that morality and hospitality are highly valued among Arab populations. By highlighting traits like generosity, friendliness, and adherence to ethical standards—all of which are essential to the Arab cultural identity—these values help to shape the identities of individuals.

Another survey, involving 20,350 participants from 14 Arab countries (Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Tunisia, and Yemen), found that 79% believed in "the integrity of a single Arab nation" or that "Arab peoples comprise one nation, notwithstanding the possible differences between Arab peoples" (Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2013, p. 8). This was a reported 7% rise over the same survey done in 2011.

The concept of national identity differs across Arab nations, with certain regions, like the wealthier Gulf states, placing more emphasis on their specific national origin rather than a broader Arab identity. In countries like Egypt, national identity takes precedence over other identities, whereas in nations like Tunisia, Yemen, and Libya, Islamic identity is given greater importance, according to the Al Jazeera Center for Studies in 2013.

When it comes to the identity of Arab students, many studies have been conducted to comprehend it. It started with studies at the American University of Beirut by Levon Melikian and Lutfy Diab. Then, similar studies were conducted at other universities, like Kuwait University, Northeastern University, and California State University. The majority of Arab university students have a strong desire for greater Arab unity. They frequently endorse concepts such as pan-Arabism and the union of separate Arab governments to cooperate on matters of the economy, politics, and military. Although there is a wide range of excitement, many students support strengthening the Arab community.

Despite feeling politically empowered, many Arab students feel disconnected from their governments. This suggests that there could be potential for political unrest, especially among students who prefer confrontational approaches rather than cooperating with authorities. Whether they are studying overseas or not, Islam is the center of life for Arab university students. Numerous students actively

engage in religious activities, demonstrating a profound commitment to Islam that goes beyond geographical boundaries.

Based on the results of these studies, it can be concluded that the modern Arab world's identity is shaped by a variety of cultural influences, religious beliefs, customs, and collective values. While common cultural trends exist, there is also an acknowledgment of the diversity and complexity of identities within Arab countries. Variations in cultural dimensions such as individualism-collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, and power distance highlight the diverse social structures and identities across the Arab world. This diversity underscores the complexity of Arab identity, which encompasses a wide range of cultural, religious, and social influences.

### Arab league

The challenging balance between Arab unity and state sovereignty is reflected in the institutional design of the Arab League, which is built on identity-based values and domestic politics. The League has struggled with this conflicting interest since it was founded in 1945. There is "a difference between the sources of a particular policy, which are in many cases specific state interests, and the justification of that policy – usually articulated in pan-Arab rhetoric," as noted by Charles Tripp (1995) in his study of Arab foreign affairs.

This tension has been seen throughout the League's existence, as member nations' unwillingness to give up sovereignty and control over internal affairs has frequently impeded efforts to foster collaboration. The League's emphasis on maintaining state sovereignty has been a key factor in the institutional architecture of the League, as noted by Clovis Maksoud (1995) in his examination of the relationship between the League and the UN. This dedication to sovereignty has frequently overridden attempts at productive collaboration, with the survival of governing coalitions at home taking primacy.

The League has seen a trend of symbolic gestures and low institutional performance as a result of its attempt to balance these conflicting objectives. The League struggled to put its resolutions into practice, as evidenced by the fact that even though over 4,000 had been passed by the 1980s, many of them were never put into effect. In his analysis of inter-Arab politics, Ghassan Salamé (1998) draws attention to the League's deficiency in formal sanctioning processes and oversight, which impeded its ability to effectively settle disputes between its member nations.

The function and importance of the League have also become increasingly complex as globalization and Arabism decrease. The League has always "lived by and for the Arab-Israeli conflict," as Ibrahim Awad (1994) pointed out, but shifting global dynamics have called into question this paradigm. Member states' internal disputes and unwillingness to adjust to changing circumstances have made it more difficult for the League to handle regional conflicts and crises.

The League's limits as a platform for collective action have been further highlighted by recent problems, including as discussions about political change and democracy. According to Neil MacFarquhar (2004), the breakdown of an Arab Summit conference due to differences in political reform reflects the League's profound conflicts over issues of administration. The legitimacy and

efficacy of the League in tackling the major problems confronting the Arab world have been damaged by these difficulties.

The League's future course is still unknown despite its symbolic significance since it depends on its capacity to adjust to shifting circumstances and promote sincere collaboration among member nations. The Arab League's involvement in regional affairs will continue to be shaped by the challenge of striking a balance between national interests and collective ambitions as it navigates these complications.

**Conclusion:** The 22 Arab League member states are facing an array of issues to address, such as identity, governance and regional cooperation. These have been the results of colonialism, the political unrest that followed it, the social issues, including the high levels of unemployment, etc. When drawing parallels between European and Arab conceptions of identity, the latter is rooted in ethno-cultural heritage, while the former prioritizes social institutions as well as financial benefits.

In this regard, developing stronger civil institutions in Arab societies is vital for uniting disparate groups and effectively addressing the challenges that they are encountering. Initiatives for financial cooperation, such as the Greater Arab Free Trade Area (GAFTA), can also be extremely important in promoting economic growth and unity if they are reformed. Modifications must be made to the Arab League, such as mandating resolutions instead of just recommending them.

Internal conflicts and opposition to change continue to be major obstacles to real collaboration and advancement, notwithstanding the Arab League's efforts to promote unity. Striking a balance between national interests and group objectives is essential for the Arab world's future, particularly in light of the shifting dynamics of globalization.

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