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# Unpacking the Arab part of Identity, Spring, and World

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In the opening to her book, *Fezzes in the River: Identity politics and European diplomacy in the Middle East on the eve of World War II* (2011), Sarah Shields narrates an incident on 10 May 1938 in what may appear to us today to be extremely peculiar. In Reyhanli, a town that was contested by Syrian nationalists and the young Turkish state, (it now sits in today's Turkey on the Syrian border), a chauffeur named Saydo was seated in front of a café chatting. Soon after, a man named Haydar Hassan Musto along with his friends approached Saydo at his table and then launched into a volley of screams at the chauffeur. They "demanded that Saydo declare himself to be an Arab, threatened to kill him if he claimed to be a Turk," as well as insulting his mother and mocking his "brimmed hat."<sup>2</sup> What was unusual, at least from our vantage point, is that this exchange did not take place in Arabic or Turkish, but in Kurdish. In other words, a group of Kurds attacked another Kurd for not affiliating in some way with the then fluid Arab identity or realm of Arabness before the identity eventually drew hard borders around the emerging postcolonial regimes.

When is an Arab an Arab, and when is an Arab not an Arab? This is an extremely difficult question to answer but we can mark the 2011 uprisings as a pivotal station on the identity trajectory as the events not only overthrew dictators and shook political establishments to the core, but it also unsettled the Arab identity out of its long drought. The revolutionary waves unleashed a pluralism that loosened the borders of Arabness, while reanimating or crystallising activity by minorities to make demands for their collective identity. One of the dominating themes in the formation of social movements and civil societies in the region has been the question of identity. If you sit through these sessions, matters of identity can at times consume a large part of the event's energy or, in some cases, torpedo the event.

Identity is extremely fluid and it is difficult alone to use it as a measurement without factoring age, class, gender, and most importantly, the audience being addressed. As Yasir Sulleiman notes, "the fact that it is not possible to posit identity without speaking of difference, of otherness."<sup>3</sup> With this in mind, and in order to bring in some focus, rhythm, and structure, I will investigate the term Arab world not only as a claimant to a geographical space stretching from Iraq to Morocco, but as an organizing concept and linguistic "blueprint" that enables the legitimisation of terms like the Arab spring, pan-Arabism, anti-Arabism, and various Arab identities to emerge and be contested, even if in the diaspora. I will argue that while the Arab world is inherently problematic as a term, it is the least bad option available compared to the alternative terms and acronyms. Yet the Arab world enables Gulf regimes to treat this space, the digital space no less, as a political totality and field of interest to ensure democratisation does not take hold in the region. I will use the example of a UAE troll farm stoking anti-Amazigh animosity in Algeria's Hirk protests, while examining how a viral hashtag was fueled by Amazigh activists for identity construction purposes and to "divorce" from the Arab world. The months following the

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2. Sarah D. Shields, *Fezzes in the River: Identity Politics and European Diplomacy in the Middle East on the Eve of World War II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). 3.

3. Yasir Suleiman, *Arabic in the Fray: Language Ideology and Cultural Politics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013). 16-17.

Tunisian revolution wrestled the term Arab world from regimes that made it a source of oppression and sphere of illiberal activity. A decade later, the term has been retaken violently by these regimes. Nonetheless, the conversation to unpack the Arab world needs to continue towards a pluralist direction, with or without elite blessings.

### **A coin in one's pocket called "Arab"**

Journaling and ethnographic observations over the years points to a dizzying use of the Arab identity that it takes on different meanings at different times, or its multiple uses in the same conversation for different aims. Take for example how an Egyptian at a Cairo coffeehouse might use Arab in three different contexts by saying the following: "The roaming Arabs near Marsa Matrouh (a city in north western Egypt) are not trustworthy,"; "The (Gulf) Arabs have way too much oil money,"; and upon meeting a Syrian, "The Syrians have brightened up Egypt, the Arab nation has to stick together." There were three different uses of Arab to signal mistrust, greed, or solidarity. The third one is a disclosure to having an Arab identity. For an Egyptian, particularly Muslim, speaking Arabic might be enough to classify him or herself as an Arab, that is, a sociolinguistic identity. A Moroccan might have an ethnic definition of Arab and therefore all the ready to reject the label. This is part of the reason why those from Egypt and the Levant are sometimes puzzled at the Maghreb region's ambivalence as Arab identity does not generally equate with being a descendent of the seventh century Arab conquerors of the region.

It is not unusual for individuals in the Arab world to rebuff any identification with the Arab label or had once self-identified as Arabs only to drop the label and take on their country's historical imaginary such as pharaonic Egypt, ancient Phoenicia, or Assyria. Yet it is also common to encounter the strategic use of (or close proximity to) an Arab identity by individuals who generally do not subscribe to the label or have been known to deny it. A young Tunisian woman staunchly refuses any association with an Arab identity until she moves to a university in the US to start her master's degree; during orientation week, she comes across an Arab students' club and is suddenly eager to join it. Two Coptic sisters from Cairo, one gets a job in Toronto, and the other in Kuwait. The latter's socialization made her more amiable to notions of Arabness while the other completely rejects it. A group of Lebanese businessmen, including a number of Maronite Catholics who do not generally associate with the Arab label, visit a UAE embassy to negotiate a deal, their conversation includes not only a loosening of an anti-Arab discourse, but an endorsement of Arabness to secure their request. An Amazigh in Tangiers who meets a visiting Syrian invokes the mention of an Arab great grandfather, which he may otherwise not have done so with other Moroccans.

So, how to make sense of this? The authors Jeffrey Lesser and Raanan Rein in seeking to understand the shifting identities of Jews in Latin America argue that ethnicity is simply "a piece within a broader identity mosaic."<sup>4</sup> Using an apt analogy, they state that "identity might be analyzed as a coin in a pocket filled with coins of different values. Sometimes we need 25 cents and we pull out one ethnicity quarter. Other times we need 100 cents and the ethnicity coin is just a penny of the total."<sup>5</sup> The array of colours and contradictions prompts a person to take out a certain "coin" when needed.

Therefore, it would be mistaken to say the above examples are opportunistic. Rather, it is the nature of identity to change depending on time, place, audience, and, if not adopting the label, coming closer to it or blurring the lines to establish familiarity and intimacy with the target subject. Taking this a step further beyond the human subject as Arab/non-Arab, we can establish some "solidity" by examining the identity of space as many will have a shared idea of what constitutes the Arab world.

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4. Jeffrey Lesser and Raanan Rein, "Challenging Particularity: Jews as a Lens on Latin American Ethnicity," *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies* 1, no. 2 (2006), <https://doi.org/10.1080/1744220600908010>. 251.

5. Ibid.

## The love-hate relationship with the term “Arab world”

It is not uncommon in the literature to see justification for the use of “Arab world.” It will be used in the “conventional geographic sense” that constitutes the members of the Arab league.<sup>6</sup> Older sources would restrict it to the “countries of the Fertile Crescent, the Arabian Peninsula, and Egypt.”<sup>7</sup> Acknowledging complexities also does not preclude the use of Arab world which “covers a complex area where one finds vast differences in politics and ideologies,” while stressing the “underlying similarities... in cultural and social formations” of the populations of the Arab world.<sup>8</sup> The recognition of the term’s difficulty is usually given attention but still it sticks: “Being conscious of the numerous problem and contrasts, we feel nevertheless, that there is a certain complex unity, which permits the use of ‘Arab world.’”<sup>9</sup> Another work spotlights the Arabic language as the driving force behind the Arab world as it is the “most obvious sign of a cultural or ethnic identity, and emotional feelings arise when there is any hint that language loss is possible.”<sup>10</sup> For other authors, it is a challenge to shed it off, for at the very least, it may be the best “shorthand expression.”<sup>11</sup> The fact that they need to validate the usage of the term highlights the fraught difficulty that it engenders. Yet, many books will use Arab world without giving any explanation as to why they did so, as if it was a natural and given term.

A large part of the reason why the Arab world keeps sticking is that the alternatives have not been useful. The MENA (Middle East and North Africa) is too broad as it allows the entry of Israel, Turkey, and Iran. That would be fine if the discussion included those three countries, but if one is referring to the swathe of territories from Morocco to Iraq due to the similarities that include core political economies, shared public spheres, historical circulation of knowledge production, and the most obvious, linguistic ties, then MENA does not help. SWANA (South-West Asia and North Africa) is another device trumped as a “decolonial” term unlike MENA which was spawned by eurocentrism. SWANA was conceived in diasporic spaces in the US to transcend nationalist and ethnic lines by elevating the regional dimension. These noble intentions are eclipsed by the fact that SWANA, same as MENA, is rarely used in the region. It raises the question if SWANA in attempting to dislodge other foreign terms, is it not also imposing a term from abroad? While perhaps better than MENA or Middle East, it still repeats the MENA fallacy by not crystallising the unique dynamics at play on the Rabat-Baghdad axis. Even the term Middle East, despite its colonial origin, is heavily used in everyday regional discourse because it still comes closer to the Arabic idea of *Mashreq* (east). Some authors in Europe and North America will use MENA and SWANA but make it conditional that they will limit it only to the Arab or Arabic-speaking parts of the region, which then simply becomes a longer route to say the Arab world. Perhaps Arabic-speaking world might be a candidate? It is somewhat more convincing than Arab world but then we are left with the exclusion of non-Arabic speaking minorities, similar to how the complaint is lodged at the term Arab world for excluding non-Arab minorities. Furthermore, it is not difficult to see Arab and Arabic being used as a synonym or interchangeably as if they meant the same thing. As it stands, the *Asharq Al-Awsat* (Middle East), *Mashreq* (east), *Maghreb* (west), *Al-Alem Al-Araby* (Arab world), *Al-dawal Al-Araby* (Arab countries) are the most widely used terms in the region.

I have heard activists at times say the Arab world is a byproduct of orientalist or colonial constructs. This presumes that there was no Arabic-speaking imaginary prior to the twentieth century that would have been necessary to facilitate trade, pilgrimage routes, alliances, diplomacy, marriages, and scholarly exchanges. The Arab world is used by pre-twentieth century regional scholars but certainly did not have the same politicised meaning as it does today. In an issue of *Şihyūn*, a late 1800s Coptic periodical, Alaa Murad, a PhD researcher on the nineteenth century *nahḍa* (renaissance) intellectualism and the competing historical claims over identities, notes that the Arab world is rendered in the text but clearly does not refer to the Arab world recognisable in post-World War One scholarship, let alone any coherent political and social imaginaries. For

6. Will Kymlicka and Eva Pfössl, “Introduction,” in *Multiculturalism and Minority Rights in the Arab World*, ed. Will Kymlicka and Eva Pfössl (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). 19.

7. Mohammed Shafi Agwani, *The United States and the Arab World, 1945-1952* (Institute of Islamic Studies, Muslim University, 1955). 1.

8. Nawar Al-Hassan Golley, *Reading Arab Women's Autobiographies: Shahrazad Tells Her Story* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003). 7.

9. Djambatan, *Atlas of the Arab World and the Middle East* (Macmillan, 1960). 1.

10. Reem Bassiouney and Keith Walters, *The Routledge Handbook of Arabic and Identity* (London: Routledge, 2020).

11. Nicola Christine Pratt, *Democracy and Authoritarianism in the Arab World* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2007). 22.

Egyptian Copts, it was a reference that is “vaguely adjacent to an Arabic tongue and seemed to include Egyptian Copts in this designation but not Ethiopian Copts.” Notions of Arabness and the Arab world have always been around, but its boundaries were blurry, Murad adds, and it is difficult to know how it was defined: linguistically? Ethnically? Religiously? Ethnographies-religiously? Geographically?

Moreover, the contemporary use of Arab World can be racist, orientalist, liberating, alienating, pragmatic, or informative, depending on the source and framing. The mention of the Arab world by a far rightwing extremist in a speech rally in Amsterdam is obviously not of the same conception when used by an activist leader in a protest march in Beirut.

Another way the term Arab world is challenged by nationalists is by making the exceptionalism argument. For example, a segment of Moroccan activists and intellectuals have sternly rejected the idea of Morocco being described as an Arab country or being included in the Arab world but will then indirectly reinforce the country's traditional position because exceptionalism arguments need a comparative structure. To say “unlike the rest of the Arab world, Morocco has been able to” still drags Morocco back into the Arab world simply because the latter is its frame of reference. Irrespective if “Arab” is used in a positive or negative sense. Every country in the Arab world makes some sort of popular claim that their country is unique, neglecting the transnational influences that built it up. An Egyptian citizen will boast of their country as “Om al dunya” (“mother of the world”) and its soft power over the Arab world, yet the reverse is true. Egypt has been heavily shaped by the constructive and destructive forces of its region including Dubai-style capitalism, Tunisia's revolution, Moroccan Sufism, Saudi Wahabism, and Levant-authored pan-Arabism.

Identity shifts, even if hypothetically underpinned through a collective agreement by the population, does not simply make a country miraculously escape from the socio-historical forces that made it part of that region. A large swathe of the Arab world is not going to significantly alter its contemporary imaginary of Morocco whether it be the kingdom's attempt to gain entry into the European Communities (the precursor to the EU) in 1987 based on its “European-ness” and failed,<sup>12</sup> or its building of economic pathways to sub-Saharan Africa through an indigenous framework capitalising on its rich Amazigh heritage. These factors do not change the rest of the Arab world's, or Muslim world's, perception of the integrity of the Maghreb to its body. Spanish dictator Francisco Franco's pivoting Spain to Latin America and away from Europe did not equal socio-culturally separating the Iberian peninsula from Europe from the perspective of the continent's inhabitants.<sup>13</sup> At worst (or best?), post-Franco Spain eventually went from a “different” to a “normal” European country.<sup>14</sup> Just as the same argument played out in Lebanon for decades, in which Albert Hourani wrote in 1947 that an idea might take hold in Lebanon that sees a small state “not [on] the western edge of the Arabic Moslem world but the eastern edge of Western Christendom...with its face turned towards Europe.”<sup>15</sup> Lebanon has been anything but divorced from the region, no matter where it turns its face towards. Social movements and those with an interest in identity questions need to be constantly aware of identity shifts but short of a cataclysmic event on the magnitude of the loss of Moorish Spain or Palestine, a narrative continuum will underpin how these countries are envisioned, engaged, and reproduced.

The Arab world of 2021 is not the Arab world of 2011. A handful of the region's academics and civil society workers who are ambiguous towards the term Arab world were liberally making use of the term in 2011. The change could be for many reasons: a move towards a nationalist, ethnic, or minority worldview; discomfort with the term's association with illiberal currents; Arab regimes that sponsor partisan violence in their “fellow Arab brother” countries; not to mention the trauma and despair inflicted by war, counter-revolutions, terrorism, and ISIS. However, 2011 could simply be the old adage of “Success has many fathers, while failure is an orphan.” The term Arab, for a while atleast, redeemed itself enough for *Gulf News* to title an article “It's Cool to be Arab

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12. Volkan İpek and Selin Türkeş-Kılıç, “European Turkey and European Morocco: Two Identity Construction Cases in the Path to the EEC Membership,” *Turkish Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 6, no. 2 (12/30 2019), <https://doi.org/10.26513/tocd.607538>. 43.

13. Désirée Kleiner-Liebau, *Migration and the Construction of National Identity in Spain* (Madrid: Iberoamericana, 2009). 56.

14. Ibid.

15. Albert Hourani, *Minorities in the Arab World* (London: Oxford University Press, 1947). 71-72.

again<sup>16</sup> which was quoted by other outlets. The case for using another term than the Arab world is a sound one, but the names on offer are not constructive.

## The “Arab Spring”

The Arab Spring as a term has faced even more difficulty. The literature often prefaces why Arab Spring will be used or not be used in the text. It is shunned because of its seasonal imposition (except Syria, protests in other Arab countries broke out in winter), its association with the failed 1968 Prague spring, and its usage in 2005 following the quasi-liberalisation of political spaces in the Middle East.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, it could also be argued that unlike uprisings and revolutions which have a timeframe, spring is more elastic and metaphorical, it could be employed as an indetermined phase or recurring waves of resistance. The term is used widely in the Arab world and for some peculiar reason, scholars cannot seem to fathom that a term can be reappropriated. A term’s dubious origins does not negate its subsequent redefinition and eventual acquisition by local narratives. Surprisingly, the criticism is often at the “spring” part and not the “Arab” part of the term. The legitimate criticisms by minorities that they feel excluded is barely factored into the discussion. However, there is a key reason why the Arab Spring still holds up as a compelling term.

The simultaneous uprisings of 2011 “recreated” the idea of the Arab world because they did not unfold in non-Arab countries. If there was any skepticism of an Arab world, the uprisings reaffirmed a new pan-Arabism which scholars had long thought to have waned since the 1967 Arab defeat by Israel. “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 them to rest,”<sup>18</sup> argued F. Gregory Cause III in perhaps one of the most popular shared articles amongst scholars in 2011. The dizzying domino effect following Tunisia’s January 2011 protests helped spark the revolution in Egypt (25 January) and Yemen (27 January) with the former toppling Mubarak on 11 February; which was followed by the eruption in Bahrain (14 February); the Libyan protests (15 February); Moroccan protests (19 February), and the Syria uprising a month later (15 March). To say nothing of the widespread simultaneous challenges to governments in the region. These events could arguably only happen because “of shared built-in sociological constructs regarding freedom, resistance, unity, justice” and explains why they employed a “similar vocabulary with comparable objectives.”<sup>19</sup>

The events of 2011 were erected on the idea of the Arab public sphere and space that not only formed a “shifting frontier between state forces and ordinary citizens,”<sup>20</sup> but commenced in 2011 as a “single, unified narrative of protest with shared heroes and villains, common stakes, and a deeply felt sense of shared destiny.”<sup>21</sup> This phenomenon internalised a “new kind of pan-Arabist identity” one that was from below rather than imposed from the top, while also focusing protest energies toward domestic factors.<sup>22</sup>

Many years later, ambivalence towards the 2011 Arab Spring was witnessed in the protests by the reluctant successors of Sudan and Algeria in 2018 and 2019. While solidarity was visible through signs and chants with other simultaneous popular mobilisations in the Arab world, similar exceptionalism arguments were made which ironically reinforced similarities. For example, following the breakout of protests in Algeria in February 2019, it became a pattern to hear Algerians emphasise their uprising as uniquely Algerian and divorced from the Arab spring, partly due to the Arab spring’s perceived failure and because of its homogenous term that would not sit well in a country with Arab and Amazigh heritage. Yet, again, the frames of references were still the Arab spring. Hours would barely pass without an Algerian commentator or activist invoking the haunting

16. Aijaz Zaka Syed, “Gulf News,” *It’s Cool to be Arab Again* (19 February 2011). <https://gulfnews.com/opinion/op-eds/its-cool-to-be-arab-again-1.764067>.

17. James L. Gelvin, *The Arab Uprisings: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). 37.

18. III F. Gregory Cause, “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>.

19. Marwan Bishara, *The Invisible Arab: The Promise and Peril of the Arab Revolution* (New York: Nation Books, 2012). 175.

20. Charles Tripp, *The Power and the People: Paths of Resistance in the Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). 131.

21. Marc Lynch, *The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2012). 8.

22. Ibid.

spectre of facing their own el-Sisi and Egyptian style military coup. They were not hinting to Latin American or Asian despots, but, specifically, Arab ones and within the framework of the region's past decade.

### The distortion of identity in the digital terrain

It is not unusual to encounter young scholars and activists whom upon meeting at conferences and workshops in different cities in Europe will, after disclosing Morocco as their homeland and place of residence, will immediately follow it up with unsolicited variations of "I'm Amazigh, not Arab." This type of response I have yet to encounter with any other group from the region. In a sense, the Amazigh struggle is not new but it can come across as new due to their struggle for recognition being in vivid flux and accessing new outlets beyond the Francophone world. The reason why I have chosen to focus on Amazigh activism through the use of social media relates to the growing numbers that seemingly dominate internet traffic in minority politics from the region (in this context, I use the word "minority" not in terms of numbers, but those who sit on the lower end of the power structure). As well as how their activism has drawn the attention of Gulf countries that treat the Arab world, term and concept, as a totality and their sphere of influence. The Amazigh occupy a critical node in the transnational activist spectrum, and this is clashing with the authoritarian streak of (if not quasi) Arabism and pan-Arabism in which authoritarian governments have been active in thwarting mobilisation across the region.

The intrusion of UAE troll farms in the Algerian protests in 2019 is a case study of disturbing signs to come. An Algerian Facebook page *Fake news DZ* was created in April 2019 to reveal "fake news and attempts to manipulate public opinion via social networks."<sup>23</sup> Facebook pages sprang up "with the main goal of leading a counter-revolution online."<sup>24</sup> Algerian media started to point the finger at the UAE, confirmed by international media, that was pushing virulent anti-Amazigh prejudice, and accusing them of being in the pay of France. France or French were the most frequently used words to falsely accuse opponents of colluding with the former colonial boogeyman.<sup>25</sup> DZ also spotted outdated photos of the Kabylie region showing the deployment of special units as a warning to Algerians to stay home and avoid joining the scheduled Friday protests. It was described by DZ as an attempt to "destabilise the movement."<sup>26</sup>

Algeria, undoubtedly, has more than its fair share of regime loyalists to carry out a smear campaign, and it would probably be difficult to know a troll based in Algeria than one in the UAE. But it still matters. The injection of Gulf-funded troll farms is a new development that will impact adversely social movements in the region and worsen polarisation. The situation before troll farms can be glanced from a study on Egypt's transition between the overthrow of president Mubarak on 11 February 2011 and the coup on 3 July 2013 in which social media "exacerbate and intensify those factors which make failure more likely than in comparable cases which did not feature high levels of social media usage."<sup>27</sup> Identity is a key component to three developments that includes the reinforcement of solidarity for in-group solidarity and demonisation for the out-group; consolidation of crisis narratives with its own martyrs and villains. Finally, the mobilisation of fear through visual imagery, rumours, perceived outrage, and emotionally-induced, and often unconfirmed, stories.<sup>28</sup> Existential insecurity takes the helm and hostile camps are further polarised. Yet, that era of "extraordinary uncertainty"<sup>29</sup> was taking place long before the debilitating onslaught of troll farms which now come with significant roadblocks for social movements and civil society.

While the UAE illustrates how Arab identity can be hegemonically reinforced from the patriarchal top, – "the Arab world is not allowed democracy, pluralism, and freedom of speech" – cyberspace also acts as a platform in which Amazigh activists challenge Arab identity dominance through "strategic essentialism" which

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23. Carolyn Lambolely, "Analysis: Online trolls and the Algerian Protest Movement," *BBC Monitoring* (22 July 2019). <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c200ypo6>.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

27. Marc Lynch, Deen Freelon, and Sean Aday, "Online clustering, fear and uncertainty in Egypt's transition," *Democratization* 24, no. 6 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2017.1289179>. 2.

28. Ibid. 4.

29. Ibid. 3.



repositions marginalised populations through a shared identity and narrative in the public sphere. As Mokhtar Gambou notes, "The Berber narrative, like any minor narrative seeking to protect itself from an absorbing sameness, must highlight distinct characteristics on the one hand and dim those it shares with the dominant discourse on the other."<sup>30</sup>

Gambou's point can be gleaned from an analysis of over 200 Twitter accounts (English, Arabic, and French), including news outlets, that centre Amazigh politics exclusively in order to challenge Arab hegemonic discourse or, less so, black African centrism that denies the indigenous claim to Africa of the "lighter-skinned" Amazigh. Most of the Twitter accounts display a high level of identity policing towards other Twitter users which can be characterised by the following: Requesting the use of Amazigh instead of Berber; protesting against the labeling of Morocco or Algeria as an Arab country; shaming other Amazigh users who claim both Amazigh and Arab identities, or even worse for the suspect, acknowledging Amazigh heritage but claiming to be an Arab. The last point was prominently seen with French-Moroccan reporter Aziza Nait Sibaha, who denied making such a statement, and there is no evidence that she ever did make this claim, yet she was harassed incessantly by other Twitter users.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, there is a strong brandishing or citation of "DNA testing" for heritage legitimisation. The term Arab is often used in a negative, neutral, or comparative manner vis-à-vis the Amazigh subject. A high number of accounts do not use their real names.

In the disorienting swarm of Twitter, a viral hashtag can give some structure to how an event evolves because it will have a clear origin, focused subject content, and eventual trickling out. One case that is of particular interest unfolded following the Arabic hashtag (#لستم\_عربا) "You are not Arab" which emerged on 19 June 2020 by the @fr2bit account that argued the origins of humanity are from Africa and displayed a photo of different pantone skin colours.<sup>32</sup> This is the first known use of the hashtag. It was supposed to indicate to the Amazigh on Twitter that this provides "proof" that they are not Arab. The same day, the account @najlanakadh quoted a news source from portail-Amazigh.com in which a Saudi troll (@wy\_4h) made an Arab supremacy claim, but he did not use the hashtag.<sup>33</sup> The article nonetheless linked the hashtag to him with a stereotypical stock photo of a Gulf Arab in sunglasses. This was followed by @Tripolitaniano tweeting the same article with the "you are not Arab" hashtag. In effect, the news article propagated a false claim that a "massive campaign" by Gulf Arabs was launched to deny that the Amazigh were Arabs.<sup>34</sup> The hashtag quickly spread and was used by accounts that identify as Amazigh to exhibit pride and attack Arabs, while using the counter hashtag (#لبننا\_عرب) "We are not Arabs" as a mark of defiance. The campaign was picked up widely, from a Tunis radio station to BBC Arabic.<sup>35</sup>

How the initial message got intentionally twisted and embellished should be of concern. What made the campaign suspect from the start is that the region's dominant discourse pushes an Arabisation and uniformity that spreads or assumes Arab identity in Arabic-speaking lands. It is unlikely to withdraw the Arab identity. What became clear from observing the engagement with the hashtag is how accounts fell into a pattern of virulently seeking exclusion. This is not unusual in identity construction, after all, "Otherness or difference helps structure the Self and enables symbolic meanings to emerge."<sup>36</sup> Daniella Merolla offers a sound explanation on the simplifying nature of this particular style of online Amazigh activism, "If the unifying discourse on the past and the cultural heritage is simplified and simplifying, such a simplification is 'strategic' because it

30. Mokhtar Ghambou, "The "Numidian" Origins of North Africa," in *Berbers and Other: Beyond Tribe and Nation in the Maghrib*, ed. Katherine E. Hoffman and Susan Gilson Miller (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010). 156.

31. (@AmazighWNews) Amazigh World News, "Twitter," (15 May 2019).

<https://twitter.com/AmazighWNews/status/1128716467975925760?s=20>.

32. Franky @fr2bit, *Twitter* (19 June 2020). <https://twitter.com/fr2bit/status/1273784599261437954?s=20>.

33. "Gulf Arabs launch a massive campaign on Twitter to deny affiliation of North African Arabs," *Portail Amazigh* (June 2020). <http://www.portail-amazigh.com/2020/06/twitter-arabes.html>.

34. *Ibid.*

35. "#WeAreNotArabs, this is how people of the Maghreb responded to the campaign #YouAreNotArabs launched by Saudis against North African countries (Arabic)," *Mosaique FM* (22 June 2020). [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MOB5-3xXx60&feature=emb\\_logo&ab\\_channel=MosaiqueFM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MOB5-3xXx60&feature=emb_logo&ab_channel=MosaiqueFM). ; "'You are not Arabs': controversy over campaign questioning the 'Arabism' of North African countries," *BBC Arabic* (22 June 2020). <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/trending-53141047>.

36. Yasir Suleiman, *Arabic, Self and Identity: A Study in Conflict and Displacement* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). 71.

functions to get people 'moving' and to engage in cultural and political forms of activism online and offline."<sup>37</sup> This would be fine in other situations, but the hashtag campaign, just like the troll farm attack, leaves one with more questions as to how to inform cyber publics better to prevent or torpedo the next wave of cyber hate. It took a few days to question the campaign, with some Arab and Amazigh activists employing Islamic appeals to equality, but it was too late by then. The hashtag still circulates, albeit in trickles, into 2021.

## Conclusion

One of the enduring successes of colonialism is not only that it fomented ethnic divisions and sectarian cleavages, but it made them seem natural, historical, and timeless to the respective populations. What often is a century-old problem, is treated as a centuries-old problem. Social movements have a responsibility to critique the politics of identity that is more recent than many would imagine. It is dangerous to accept certain divisive myths as historical. Just as many today would be repulsed by the now-weary myth of Arabs and Jews "fighting each other for centuries" to legitimise the Palestinian-Israeli conflict or take a hands-off approach to Palestinian suffering. Moreover, the Arab identity cannot simply be taken for granted or assumed. Are we talking about Arab as an ethnic or sociolinguistic identity? Or something else? This slip of communication contributes to the gross misunderstandings in the region.

The term Arab world is still problematic and needs to be further unpacked towards a pluralist direction that makes the Arab identity more elastic and widens the net to new conceptions as it once did in 2011, and even better a century before. In its current incarnation, not helped by the powers that be, it still perpetuates a overbearing discourse that unsettles the sense of place, space, and time for minorities. However, the alternatives to Arab world are still not an effective instrument to address the transnational sphere stretching from Iraq to Morocco. Perhaps a movement of the Arab world towards a language construct like Latin America? A redefinition or a new term still awaits. The idea of the Arab world, along with Arab identity in general, enjoyed a honeymoon period in 2011 and saw pan-Arabism engendered with pluralism and dignity, only to be soon usurped by regimes committed to grievous wrongs – not in the name of some abstract Arabism, but by regime proximity to the language and remnants of authoritarian Arabism.

The troll farm scourge and hate-laced viral hashtags provide a picture of the need for social movements to wrestle identity-construction questions away from the digital storm. As I have argued before, "when the digital order subverts or skews the terrestrial order, it undermines the abilities of civil society and social movements to give name, shape, and form, to the world they are seeking to make a better place."<sup>38</sup> A digital ethics discussion and platform is needed for the region's social movements and documented strategies to deal with politically consequential trolls and misleading hashtag campaigns.

The normalisation of ethnic genetics and commercial DNA testing, along with terms like "pure Egyptians", "Berber blood", "authentic Amazigh", and "Arab race" can only be a road to darker territory. Accountable social movements are not expected to halt the wave of individuals posting DNA-test results on the net, but they need to explicitly critique the problem of this approach with respect and humility. The aim should be to create conditions where it is sufficient for one to culturally claim to be Amazigh, Assyrian, Nubian, Arab, and so forth. The endeavour should be to humanise marginalised peoples, not turn them into caricatures in a historical play.

While strategic essentialism and the whole identities literature will provide an array of different answers, it should be taken into consideration along with locally lived experiences and the complexity of human beings. One should keep in mind that social media is not the best representation of ground realities. Agadir and Benghazi are a world away from hashtags. One way to think about this, for example, is how surprising the function of faith does not figure prominently in these identity battles. Is it because prioritisation of faith can deprioritise ethnic identity politics or make temporal identities porous? Liberals, socialists, Arab-Islamists, and

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37. Daniela Merolla, "Cultural Heritage, Artistic Innovation, and Activism on Amazigh Berber Websites," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 32, no. 1 (2020/01/02 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1080/13696815.2019.1624153>. 14.

38. Amro Ali, "Re-envisioning Civil Society and Social Movements in the Mediterranean in an Era of Techno-Fundamentalism," *European Institute of the Mediterranean* 25 (2020), <https://www.iemed.org/publicacions-en/historic-de-publicacions/papersiemed/25.-re-envisioning-civil-society-and-social-movements-in-the-mediterranean-in-an-era-of-techno-fundamental.10>.



secular nationalists, not to mention the highly problematic diaspora organisations in Europe and North America who largely dominate the discourse, will skew the collective identity labels that can often be far removed from the daily lives of the people they claim to represent.

We may need to return to the Kurd, actually, we should instead call him by his name Saydo, at the café and politely inform him that there are many coins in all our pockets and he can choose one that suits him and come help build something better than what is present around us. Or we can just leave him alone to enjoy his coffee and conversation with his friend. That too is also an identity.

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