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Pitfalls of Nationalism in the Middle East and North Africa Region

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Abstract

Nationalism in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is a fundamental issue. As long as this fundamental issue is not well discussed, any reforms in the regional system, including integration and state building, would be insufficient in alleviating the challenges faced by Arab nations as they attempt unity in the region. Any understanding of how and why MENA states make political choices towards stability and unity, necessitates the understanding of how they view themselves in terms of representing identity. The objective of this study is to investigate the transformation and the changing nationalism in the modern MENA region. For instance, Arab society has courted several ideologies from Arabism or Arab nationalism and Arab Islamic nationalism, among others. Ideologies do not exist in a vacuum. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate the context in which several ideologies interact with each other and affect nationalism in the MENA region. Although Arab nationalism continues to play an ideological role, what is its relation with Islam? Why Arab Islamic nationalism in the MENA region does not unite states or non-state groups like the cases of Iran and the Kurds? It is therefore useful for this article to illustrate firstly, the relation between Arab nationalism and Arab Islamic nationalism, secondly, the case of Iran nationalism and finally, the Kurds and their strive for a separate nationalism.

Introduction

The fundamental transformation in modern MENA region is very obvious. Its most visible signs are the changing ideologies, national identity and loyalty. Therefore, it is very crucial to investigate the nationalism issues and explaining its relation with unity and stability in EN region. Nationalism is essential to human existence in the modern world;

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however, it is a term that cannot be easily defined. Briefly, the first problem we confront is what we mean by nationalism. Breuidly (1996: 146-147) opines that a major difficulty in the way of clear definition is that different scholars and historians mean different things by the term. Therefore, there are various definitions of "nationalism" developed by scholars of political science and other fields of social sciences. According to some scholars, the idea of loyalty to one state, or to the fatherland, hardly existed. For instance, Kedourie (1972: 9) describes nationalism as a doctrine started in Europe at the beginning of the 19th century. The doctrine holds that humanity is naturally divided into nations. Nations are known by certain characteristics which can be ascertained, and that the only legitimate type of government is the national self-government (Kedourie, 1972: 9). Amin (1991) on the other hand, opines that nationalism is a sense of belonging to a number of entities that can be small and large, rather than just a loyalty to a country. In pre-modern period, people are generally inclined to view themselves as belonging basically to the communities formed around devotion to a cluster of religious beliefs and practices such as Islam and Christianity (Amin, 1991: 1-3). Breuidly (1996: 146) emphasised that we can distinguish between three different areas of interest when we define nationalism: nationalism as a doctrine, politics and sentiments.

Meanwhile, Kohn (1965: 9) says that "Nationalism is a state of mind, in which the supreme loyalty of the individual is felt to be due to the nation-state". Another definition is given by McGregor (2010) who argues that nationalism, especially in Eastern societies, conceives the nation as an organic community, united by culture, language and descent. Talking about regions, nationalism in the Middle East and North African region (MENA) is a topical subject for both politically and academically interested researchers (Tibi, 2007: 3). Therefore, this work will show and explain how different doctrines or ideologies, as an element of nationalism, can affect other elements such as sense of belonging and loyalty in the MENA region.

Literature Review

Conflicting and divisive views on nationalism like those of Islamic and Arab nationalists (Pan-Arabism) have been a major focus of scholars and a recent development, following independence of various nations in the MENA history (Tibi, 2007: 17-20). There are projects in MENA promoting state building and regional unity based on either Arabism and/or Islamic views. Arabism relies more on language and ethnicity. On the other hand, there are minority communities within the MENA Arab majority states for whom Arabic is not their native language, like the Kurds. These minorities are pushing for independence and separation from the Arab state system (Tibi, 2007). There are also differences among Muslims like *Sunni*[1] and *Shia*[2] that challenge Islamic Arab nationalism. Also in terms of loyalty and belonging, *Shia*s, for example in Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, Bahrain and Iraq are more inclined to identify with Iran than their own countries (Ereli, Pillar, Abdo & Vatanka, 2018). These differences occur clearly in religion and ethnicity, for instance, and they are characteristics of sectarian societies, or differences between regions within each country as is the case in Iraq where there are Arabs and Kurds.

Kumaraswamy (2006) maintains that most countries of MENA suffer from the fundamental problem of their national and regional belonging. According to Phillips (2013), the great problem for researchers of nationalism and Islamism to focusing mainly on the Arab world has been disentangling people`s complex multi-layered identities. Much of the difficulty in understanding the multi-layered identities in MENA is due to attempts to project European norms onto the region. Fred Halliday has played down the notion of Arab exceptionalism, explaining that European people also have multiple layers of identity (Christopher, 2013: 20-22). Iran's *Shia Mazhabiyah*[3]- Islamic school of jurisprudence - and the Kurdish plight in Iran, Syria, Iraq and Turkey are the best examples of the many problems inherent in state formation based on historical and colonial territorial demarcation, but not based on similarities in Arabic language or Islamic view.

Method and Data

The data used in this work were selected from a collection of library materials such as books, journal articles and reports. Also, the data used in this study were selected from some organisations and research centers such as Pew Research Center, Forum on Religion & Public Life (2014) and data from The

Kurdish Institute in Paris (2017). This study adopted a qualitative method. The methodology was secondary in nature. It made use of content analysis to analyse different issues under study.

Frame of the Study

Kedourie (1972: 73-74) argues that in nationalism doctrine, language, race, culture and religion constitute different aspects of the same primordial entity which is the nation. It is incorrect to try and classify nationalism according to a particular aspect which the nationalists choose to emphasise. Based on this understanding of nationalism, this study will focus on how the nationalists in the MENA region have imposed different doctrines and theories which are based on one aspect only. For instance, the main objective of nationalistic ideologies in MENA is to unite the region; however, the Arab nationalists focus their theory mainly on Arabic language while the Islamic Arab nationalists on the other hand focus on other doctrines and they used to claim to be Islamic. This situation can shape nationalism in the MENA region in different ways.
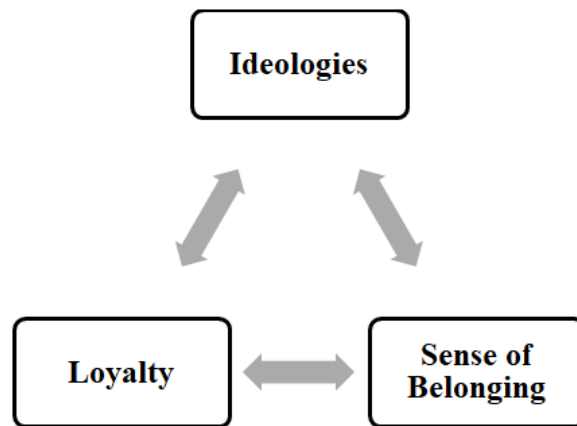

Fig. 1: Frame of the Study

This study adopted a comprehensive frame that combines the three major elements of nationalism, namely sense of belonging, loyalty to nation state and the role of different ideologies or doctrines. The objective is to see the interaction between the elements of nationalism in the MENA region and their effects on the issue of integration and unity in the region in re-establishing it as one nation. In this research, Arab nationalism and Islamic Arab nationalism, Iran and Kurds as the case studies will be discussed.

As Amin (1991) has mentioned, sense of belonging applies to a number of entities; however, in many cases one of the entities can become a priority especially in cases of crises and wars. For instance, when the *Mazhabiyah* became a priority for some people, the second step is to transform this sense of belonging into loyalty to other state(s) other than the fatherland state. It is because the fatherland state does not represent them nor allow them to adopt their faith and *Mazhabiyah* as a major entity. In time, this entity becomes an ideology and the nationalists use it as a means to affect people in the region. On the other hand, in some cases the entity becomes an ideology, like in the case of Arabism, and therefore, the loyalty to the state is mainly based on this ideology. In many cases, this situation creates conflicts of interest as the people inside the state have a different sense of belonging that contradicts the elite ideology.

Results and Discussions

Arab nationalism and Islamic Arab nationalism represent the issue of nationalism ideology or doctrine in MENA region. The case of Iran is a clear employment of nationalism loyalty and at the same level, the case of Kurds discusses the role of sense of belonging in shaping the awareness for nationalism building.

Table 1: The Definition of Nationalism Elements

Sense of Belonging	Brubaker and Cooper (2000, 19-20) describe a nation as a particularly strong kind of emotionally laden belonging which provides a sense of oneness to those conceived as members of the nation and boundaries, as well as a sense of difference, to those who are conceived as outsiders, i.e. non-members. For insiders, belonging to the nation is a personal, intimate, feeling of being at home (Antonsich 2010; Yuval-Davis 2006: 645), which engenders an emotional attachment as an ongoing project of belonging to groups and places (Yuval-Davis 2006).
Loyalty	Shain (2005) distinguishes between two types of loyalty. A behavioral manifestation of support to any entity like language or religion, as well as it can be a national loyalty as a concept that power-seekers use to rally support and undermine opposing claims. Loyalty as a behavioral manifestation would exclude by its very nature any moral evaluation of the object of loyalty. However, national loyalty is often defined by defining its negative, national disloyalty.
Ideology	According to Cambridge Dictionary (2019) Ideology can be defined as a set of beliefs or principles, especially one on which a political system, party, or organisation is based. Also, it can be defined based on Oxford Dictionary (2019) as A system of ideas and ideals, especially one which forms the basis of economic or political theory and policy.

Arab Nationalism (Arabism)

Arab nationalism or pan-Arabism can be considered as an ideology in MENA region. It is plainly evident to researchers that the writings and thoughts of al-Husri, a famous scholar and founder of Arabism as well as the writings of other Arab nationalists show no interest in and have a total disregard of other nationalism entities, especially the religious heritage in MENA region. The heritage (*Al-Turat*) of the Arab-Islamic civilisation is completely absent in their rhetoric, not only as a reference but even as an inspiration (see al-Husri, 1985: 73-78). It is hardly possible - with some exceptions - to find even a verse from the Qur'an (the holy book for Muslims), a line from a poem, or a historical event from the Arab-Islamic heritage in Arab nationalist discourses, writings and thoughts on this matter. In short, the nationalists regard Arab nationalism outside of any Islamic reference as an important entity in the region. The only authority that has used it seems to be an European reference. The direction and awareness, however, is most certainly Arabism doctrine, not Europeanism. To clarify, while the objective of Arab nationalists is to unite the Arabs, the means and the reference are mainly European and therefore, Western. In this regard, Tibi (2007: 27-38) tries to distinguish Arab nationalism in the Third World, including MENA countries from European nationalism in terms of formation and history. This is true in terms of the type of state; however, the idea of state building in MENA is closely based on the concept of *al-Wataniyah* (citizenship) as a new concept in the region similar to the concept of modern state when both of them are European products doctrine according to Kedourie (1972: 11).

There is an important issue that scholars and researchers should focus on when studying nationalism in the MENA region. Al-Jabiri (2006) is of the opinion that ideology cannot always be determined objectively according to its own principles but should be viewed along with an opposing ideology. Briefly, identification of an enemy or opposition has often been a major step in the construction of nationalism (Polese, Morris & Seliverstova, 2018). For instance, once the idea of Arab nationalism had been established, it grew as a thought and as a political movement for liberalisation and then for building a new state like Egypt, Algeria, Iraq and Syria (Kramer, 1993). Initially, Turkish nationalism was in opposition to it but thereafter, European ideologies were adopted along with their occupation of the majority of Arab countries. It was therefore no longer possible to adopt Islamic heritage

as a reference for the Arab nationalists. Also, this was because Islamic heritage was synonymous with the Ottoman Empire, which controlled the region in the name of Islam for almost five centuries. Moreover, it was because the Islamist movement leaders and scholars, such as al-Afghani and Abduh among others, considered Islamic heritage as an absolute reference.

Added to this was the concept of Arab nationalism which was based on avoiding the exclusion of Arab Christians and that they, the Christians, were the real founders of Arabism. Therefore, Arab nationalists, whether Muslims or Christians, have tried to link themselves to the Arabic culture and language without any Islamic reference as a show of regional unity. However, it is very difficult to separate Arabic culture from Islam in the MENA region, knowing that religion shapes the daily life of the people. In this matter, the serious consequence of such a separation according to Islamic movements would mean, firstly, intentionally or unintentionally, the exclusion of Islamic identity which is the identity of the majority and the framework of the culture and the civilisation in the region. Secondly, Islam is the real source of spirituality for many Arab people. Therefore, and to avoid this linkage between Arabic language and Islam, which would result in both identification with the Ottoman Empire and the Islamists, Arab nationalists have adopted the slogan of secularism to unite people in MENA without considering other ideologies and ideas.

Although the theorising of Arab nationalism began to spread and occupy an advanced position after the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the Turkish secular state, the Islamic thought has remained alive, whether as a slogan or as an ambition for political movements to practise politics in the name of Islam and under its umbrella, as the Muslim Brotherhood Movement, *al-Tahrir* (Liberation) party and others. For instance, religion has always played an important part in the MENA region as a sense of belonging to unite the *Ummah*. Scholars within the MENA region are working hard to establish unity for the sake of re-organising the Muslim community in the 21st century. They believe that unity is not a choice in Islam; it is a must and a duty in all aspects of life. Therefore, the best option to unite

Muslim countries is to re-enforce the ideas of Islam in the MENA region. From this point of view, Islamic ideas have been seen as a threat to Arab nationalism. Thus, what determined Arab nationalism after the fall of the Ottoman Empire were Islamic ideas. This is one of the important ideological obstacles that is faced by Arab nationalism because the Arabic culture and heritage are also Islamic. Figure 2 shows the components in Arabic nationalism.
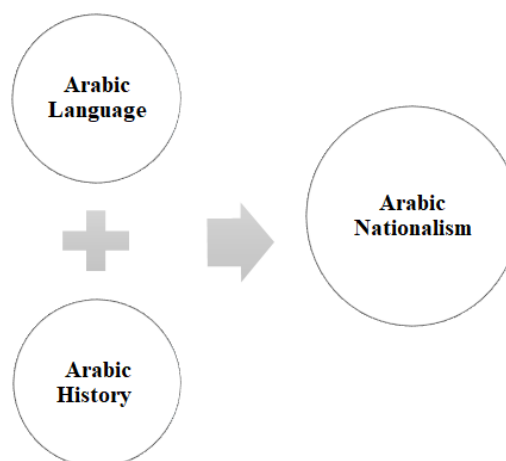

Fig. 2 : the Arab Nationalism Components

The use of Arabic culture and history by the nationalists simply means falling into the lap of the Islamic movement and giving up on the idea of Arabism that was located outside Islam at that time. There are consequences in separating the Arab-Islamic heritage from Arab nationalism. The inventory of the basic Arab nationalist elements is found in the language and history. The Islamic nationalists argue that without including the elements in Islam, as a reality and as a real power that guide loyalty in the Arab world, it can lead to a severe impoverishment of the concept of Arab *Ummah* (nation) and thus the idea of Arab nationalism as a political force and authority. The results of this impoverishment were the raised voices of opposition to the idea of Arab nationalism such as opposing the classical Arabic language and replacing it with local dialects to show a sense of belonging, as well as by opposing the Arab-Islamic history and using a local history like "Kabylism" in North Africa, "Pharaonism" in Egypt, "Kurdishism" in Iraq and so on.

Islamic Arab Nationalism

The objection to Arab nationalism, the idea of a party that advocates vernaculars and advocates local and national trends, is the objection that was not to be corrected and it was even possible without the most serious consequences of that situation. This is the lack of penetration of the idea of Arab nationalism in the popular masses and within social and religious frameworks that organised it. Arab nationalism has remained a slogan among the political elites as well as a slogan during popular occasions (i.e. in speeches during Independence Day). It does not penetrate into the cultural structure as a whole, for example, it does not have any resonance in mosques, or any presence in any popular or general locations.
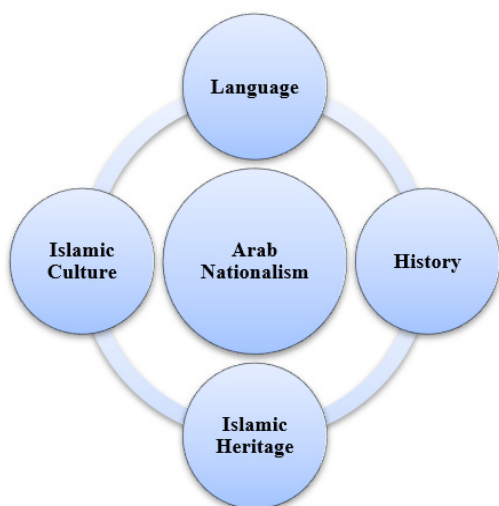
Fig. 3: the Preferable Components of Islamic Arab Nationalism (Al-Jabiri)

The non-consideration of the Islamic culture and heritage as a content of Arab nationalism has created defenders of Islamic thought as opposed to Arab secular nationalists. The Islamic movements have seen the situation as an exclusion of religion, which means Arab nationalism is against people's identity in the region. Arab nationalists have tried to deny this accusation and emphasise that the goal is not to do that. However, they have not succeeded in doing so because denying the accusation requires them to not only show their trustworthiness, but also the re-establishment of attitude, including religion as a strong component of Arabism which is not easy to be done.

On the other hand, the interaction within the MENA region has, in reality, been based firmly on state leaders and interstate relations rather than on Pan-Arabism as an ideology. It is important to state that in most MENA states, Islam is recognised as the official religion and the jurisprudence is based, one way or another, on the Islamic *Sharia* (laws and constitutions). With the exception of Turkey, all the countries of MENA have opted for a religion-centric identity. In some cases, this has coincided with state formation and in others like Iran and Saudi Arabia; religion gradually replaces identity as the pre-eminent national identity. If the Turkish decision to present itself as a secular state was the choice and outcome of the destruction of the Ottoman Empire, other countries in the MENA region have sought to buttress their identity through religion. Islam is thus the dominant identity of most people in Arab states while Iran defines itself as an Islamic Shiite state. Even though Egypt, Lebanon, Yemen, Syria and Bahrain are not Islamic states, its society are a mirror image of the sectarian tension among various religious movements and groups (Kumaraswamy, 2006).

This emphasis on religion becomes more apparent when some ruling leaders try to justify their claims and legitimacy to their people and supposed membership to Islamic groups. The ruling *Hashemite* states in Jordan, for example, have traced their lineage to the days of the Prophet and have sought to claim both religious and temporal loyalty of their subjects. Likewise, some countries also lay claims on their strong links to Islam. Indeed, following domestic opposition from some Islamic groups, which also claim link to Islam but in many cases are not, most of the MENA countries are asserting that Islam is the identity of their state as it is the main guide for their country's constitutions. On the other hand, Hasou (1985: 1-2) points out that firstly, and because of internal and external factors, Arab nationalism and Islamic Arab nationalism have turned into a regional phenomenon that reflects Arab rivalries, contradictions and the seemingly endless disputes among the Arab states. Secondly, the reason for the weakness is the MENA states' lack of confidence and trust in it because of the widely conceived domination of Arab nationalism and Arab Islamic nationalism by some of the states' leaders. Moreover, the ideology of Arab Islamic nationalism has faced

some serious challenges like the practices of several states in the MENA region, i.e. Iran in terms of using *Shia* groups in neighbouring countries as well as the Kurds who consider themselves as a different nation from the Arabs in the region even they are both *Sunni* Muslims.

The Case of Iran in the MENA Region

The *Sunni-Shia* conflict, or what experts call "Sectarianism", is a prominent feature of the Middle East landscape (Martini et al., 2016). The case of Iran is peculiar as it can explain the movement of loyalty and sense of belonging. Under the constitution, "Twelever *Ja'fari* School" is the official religion and identity of the Islamic republic. This *Shia*-Islamic nationalism excludes a large portion of its population, including the Arabs, Turkmen, Assyrians and Kurds, who are all *Sunni*s as well as others, both non-Persians like the Azeris and non-Muslims like the Armenians and Bahais. In other words, a vast majority of the Iranians would have difficulty in identifying loyalty with the current regime that represents *Shia*-Islamic nationalism. The policies and strategies of Iran have generated a real challenge to Arab Islamic nationalism in the MENA region. According to Martini (2016), there are several drivers of sectarian *Sunni-Shia* conflict. Sectarian entities are dominant when religious leaders promote an adversarial relationship between sects and non-state actors mobilised around the sect. In reality, most regional states push a sectarian agenda and those states do not provide services for some people based on discrimination and sectarian affiliation.

Iran, as a regional state that pushes for a sectarian agenda in MENA, is using its similar religious groups systematically and as a strategy to power its passion within the region by promoting the sense of belonging and loyalty to *Mazhabiyah* entity: *Shia* majorities in Iraq and Bahrain; Lebanon's *Shia* plurality in Syria, *Shia* and anti-Taliban *Sunni*s in Afghanistan and Zaidis in Yemen. By helping such communities organise themselves to press their *Sunni* regimes and governments more effectively, Iran has created options for influencing on-the-ground developments in contested venues across the MENA region based on religious similarities and contradicting the sense of belonging to the fatherland. The most affected option is the use of non-state actors' mobilisation

in regional countries; examples are Hezbollah in Lebanon, Houthis in Yemen and Alawites group in Syria.

On the other hand, the identity drivers of instability in MENA have common sources. For example, most of the conflicts are exacerbated by the increased deployment of expressions of *Mazhabiyah* belonging for political ends (Aaron, 2014). Religious leaders are using speeches, aids, engagements in political life and conflicts with existing governments to feed adversarial relationships between sects. Also, state weaklings in MENA, like in Syria and Iraq tend to encourage recourse to identities that do not align with state nationalism, such as sect, ethnicity, or tribal. The reason for that is a state's incapability in providing the basic services and the discrimination based on *Mazhabiyah* in delivery of resources. Sectarian conflicts face the symptom of political conflict rather than the cause. However, it could become a cause of violence as groups strike pre-emptively against perceived threats to their communities or pursue revenge as in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Lebanon and Egypt.

Table 2 illustrates the size of the *Shia* community in each Arab state. These sectarian divisions have a history of violence and tension that have divided the *Sunni* and *Shia* communities for centuries and the links between Iran, a *Shia* state and the *Shia* communities in the Gulf States have been a concern of *Sunni* governments since the Iranian Revolution in 1979. There is nothing inherent about the conflict between *Shia*s and *Sunni*s, and reductive arguments that treat these differences as inevitable or immutable do little to advance an understanding of the situation. Yet these identities work massively to create 'we' and 'the others' to mobilise supporters more easily in politics or in conflicts. *Mazhabiyah* dynamics have been deployed by Iran who has interest in this as it seeks to draw lines of support and contestation.

Table 2 indicates that the *Shia*s constitute a larger proportion of the population in Iraq (60-65%) and Bahrain (50-60%) than anywhere else in the region. This is followed by Lebanon (40-45%), Yemen (35-40%), Kuwait (15-20%) and Saudi Arabia (8-15%). Many of the Shiite/*Sunni* figures vary from

Table 2: Distribution of Shia in MENA Region

Country	Shia Population Percentage within the Country	Shia Population Percentage of the World Shia Population
Bahrain	50-60	< 1
Iraq	60-65	11-12
Kuwait	15-20	<1
Lebanon	40-45	<1
Oman	5-10	<1
Qatar	10	<1
Saudi Arabia	8-10	2
Syria	15-20	2
Turkey	8-12	4-6
UAE	8-10	<1
Yemen	35-40	5

Source: Table created by using data from: Pew Research Center, Forum on Religion & Public Life, (October 7, 2014), Anthony H., Shelala, Robert M., And Mohamed, Omar. (2015).

one source to the other, while GCC officials claim that Western statistics about Shiites to be highly exaggerated. For instance, the last sect-based census conducted in Bahrain was held in 1941. Justin Gengler, a Fulbright scholar who conducted a mass political survey of Bahrainis in 2009, concluded that the Shiite population is 57.6%. Another issue arises with the total population figures themselves; population estimates in the GCC that are used by international and regional organisations have been found to differ by as much as 25% or more from the best official authoritative estimates, which results in seriously distorted socio-economic indicators. Most of these countries have *Sunni* governments except for Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. Moreover, most of these governments have been particularly cautious about their Shiite populations and all share a history of violent tension with Iran with the exception of Qatar, the wealthiest country per capita among all countries within the region. All of these states face internal Shiite unrest with alleged Iranian involvement. The major problem according to the governments is the question of loyalty that can affect GCC nationalism negatively.

The *Shia*s in those countries have strong links with Iran and therefore, the *Shia* community in the Gulf countries relate themselves more to the Iranian government and the Iranian *Mazhabiyah* and that is seen as an obstacle for Islamic and Arab nationalism to unite the region. At the same time, many of the comparisons show less stress in the Southern Gulf states than similar statistics for the countries that have already had major political upheavals, namely Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and Syria. It is also important to note that Iran had equally bad or worse figures than the Southern Gulf states even before strict sanctions began to go into effect in 2012.

Both Hezbollah and *Shia* groups in Iraq, Syria and other countries have used *Mazhabiyah* shrines emotionally to get more supporters. In this matter for example, Nasrallah (Reuters, 2013) states:

As long as the reasons to [fight in Syria] remain, our presence there will remain … Anyone who speaks of Hezbollah's withdrawal from Syria as a condition to form a new government ... is imposing a crippling condition … Our fighters are present on Syrian soil ... to confront all the dangers it faces from the international, regional and takfiri attack on this country and region.

Meanwhile, the former Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri (Reuters, 2013), responding to Nasrallah's speech, claims:

Map. 1: Sunni and Shia in the Middle East

Nasrallah's loyalty to Tehran and to Assad was endangering the country [Lebanon] … Hezbollah chose to sacrifice Lebanon's sovereignty, dignity, and national unity for the sake of Bashar al-Assad and to execute the decision of the Iranian leadership to protect this regime … It is a choice that history will curse.

On the other hand, al-Qaradawi insists that his call to fight Hezbollah is "not against all *Shia*". This is to show that these identities provide ready means for external actors, regional or international, to justify their involvement, and interventions using what Aaron (2014) calls an "inflammatory rhetoric". Moreover, the conflict has expanded beyond the boundaries of Iraq and Syria, and has become increasingly regional in scope.

Also, Aaron (2014) states that the second driver of instability in the MENA region is the weakening of state institutions and the decrease in public trust in state institutions. Gregory Gause (2013) says:

The best framework for understanding the complicated and violent regional politics of the Middle East is as a cold war among a number of regional players, both states and non-state actors, in which Iran and Saudi Arabia play the leading roles. It is a cold war because these two main

actors are not confronting and most probably will not confront each other militarily… their contest for influence plays out in the domestic political systems of the region's weak states … It is a struggle over the direction of domestic politics more than a purely military contest.

As the Assad regime has lost its capacity, both as a government whose credibility has evaporated in many areas and as a military force worn down by fighting, citizens can no longer rely on the state for protection. The intervention of the *Shia*s in Iran and Lebanon remains a real sign of the absence of both Arab nationalism and Islamic Arab nationalism in the MENA region.

The Case of Kurds in the MENA region
The Kurds are the largest minority group in the Middle East (Bowring, 1996). In the absence of an independent state, Kurdistan or the land of the Kurds constitutes a geographical area and the largest ethnic minority in the Middle East where the states of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria converge (Izady, 1992; Gunter, 2004). Kurdish ethnic domains border three major ethnic groups of MENA; the Arabs to the south, the Persians to the East and Turks to the West (Izady, 1992) (See Map 2). Most Kurds are *Sunni* Muslims and nearly all of them are Kurmanji speakers with a minority who speak Sorani, Zaza and Gurani. There

are also followers of mainstream Imam Shiite among the Kurds, particularly in and around the

cities in southern and eastern Kurdistan land in Iran (Martin, 1992: 35; Bowring, 1996: 133).
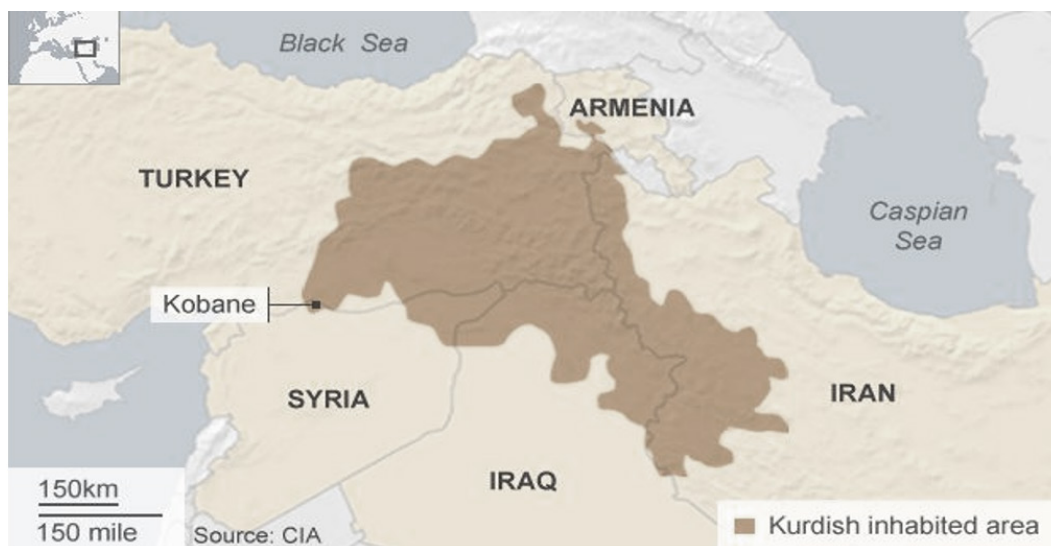
Map. 2: Kurdistan Geographical Areas (2017)

Table 3 shows that the Kurdish population in the MENA region varies from one country to another. There are 15-20 million Kurds in Turkey, 10-12 million in Iran, 8 million in Iraq, almost 4 million in Syria and 2 million in the rest of the world. Even though the Kurds population in Iraq is less than in Turkey and Iran, they consist almost 27% of the total population.

The total number of Kurds population is almost 46 million, and they represent a quarter of Iraq`s population; however, they are witnessing, have been for a long time, the practices of the ruling authorities that have been considered Arab nationalists. For example, in 1957 the government of Syria formally banned all publications in Kurdish languages.

Table 3: Kurdish Population (2016-2017)

Country	Minimum Estimate (Million)	Current Estimate (Million)	% Minimum of Total Population	% Current of Total Population
Turkey	15	20	19	25
Iran	10	12	13	17
Iraq	8	8.5	25	27
Syria	3	3.6	12.5	15
Rest of the World	1.6	2		
Total	36.4	45.6	---	---

Source: The Kurdish Institute in Paris. 2017.

On the other hand, the emergence of the new Kurdish political self-awareness is a political evolution that has roots in the past. The Kurds are undergoing a period of profound awakening of their national consciousness as a people. They have been aware of themselves as a distinct people and community for well over a thousand years, linguistically sharply different from their Arab and Turkish neighbours and a distinct branch among diverse Iranian peoples. In the late 19th and 20th century, the Kurds of Iraq, Iran and Turkey have, at various times, been stirred to fight for their local or national rights. Today, faced with a combination of dramatic domestic political changes and profound international developments, the Kurds of Iraq (as well as of Turkey and Iran) have entered a new phase of national awareness. Domestic assertiveness has emerged in the context of a modern world of nation states, the spread of democratization and human rights, increased communication among all Kurds themselves and raised political expectations.

The Kurds, especially in Iraq, have been in an almost constant state of revolt ever since Great Britain artificially created Iraq out of the former Ottoman Empire. According to Gunter (2004: 3), there are three major reasons for this rebellious situation. First, the Kurds in Iraq have long constituted a greater proportion of the population than they ever did in any other state they inhabited. Despite their smaller numbers compared to the Kurds in Turkey and Iran, they represent a larger critical mass in Iraq, a situation that has enabled them to play a more important role there than they do in Turkey and Iran. Second, as an artificial state, Iraq has less legitimacy as a political entity than Turkey, Iran or Syria, three states that have existed in one form or another for many centuries, despite their large Kurdish minorities. Thus, discontent and rebellion come easily for the Iraqi Kurds. Third, Iraq is further divided by a *Sunni*-Shiite Muslim division not present in Turkey or Iran. This predicament further calls into question the future of the Middle East.

The Kurds have emerged, though not quite a coherent nation. Nevertheless, it is an ethnic community that can no longer be ignored. According to Mcdowell (2000: 1-2), the real issue of the Kurds goes back to the years 1918-1925. The reason is that during this narrow period, the Kurds lost

their one great opportunity to become a state and found themselves apportioned as minorities in the new state systems that replaced the Ottoman Empire. The Kurds did not get a separate country. They were divided into multiple states and this remained a destabilising factor until today. Unlike the surrounding countries, Kurds could not establish a state and at the same time they did not integrate with the new states namely Iraq, Turkey, Iran and Syria. Therefore, the sense of national community occurred at the more or less the same time that Turks and Arabs, and Arab nationalism began to embrace an ethnic sense of identity in place of the previous basic forms of unity, which were Ottoman citizenship and membership of religious community. For example, there is a division in Iraq; over 90% of the people are Muslims but they are divided between Shiites and *Sunni*s. But still the biggest disruption is the fact that 15% of the populations are Kurds and even if they are *Sunni* Muslims, Kurds do not define themselves as Iraqis like most of the Arabs (Yapp, 1996: 69).

A consequence is that Kurds have redefined themselves in terms of sense of belonging with an ethnicity entity, competing against states intent on forging a new identity based upon an ideology they feel has denied their own identity belonging. Arab nationalism could not penetrate the Kurds land because of the differences in ethnicity. Also, even if the Kurds are a majority *Sunni* Muslims like the other populations in Iraq, Syria and Turkey, Islamic nationalism could not unite and combine the *Sunni*s under one Islamic doctrine as is the case of the Shiites. Shapiro (2016) opines that it is an overly simplistic way of looking at a diverse group of people who share a number of things in common but who are also very different from each other in terms of other entities like the ethnicity. This is the case of the Kurds who are *Sunni*, yet share the same *Mazhabiyah* with the Arabs in the region which is the *Hanafi*, but they are different in terms of the sense of belonging to a certain identity. After the elections in Iraqi Kurdistan area in September 2017, more than 90% of the Kurds voted yes and showed strong support for independence. The elections reflected that most of the Kurds have a strong awareness of belonging to a separate nationalism which is totally different from the Arab nationalism that represents an ethnic and a language of certain group, and Arab

Islamic nationalism which represents an ideology in the MENA region.

Conclusion

Arab nationalism acquires greater importance for the Arabs as a uniting factor in MENA. Many Arab nationalists have tried hard to show the necessity of an Arabic language and culture in integrating the Arabs till it became an ideology. According to most scholars of Arabism, language unity permits the circulation of information and cultural inputs, which would be obviously blocked by language barriers. Therefore, the ideological foundation of Pan-Arabism has been to merge the 'artificially divided' Arab states. Pan-Arabism, in a sense, provides one form of regional identity, which serves as a basis for regional unity and cooperative projects. However, this works more on the level of ideology and discourse than on the level of practical consequences that concern other nationalism elements such as sense of belonging and loyalty.

State building projects necessitate state nationalism and the promotion of state interests. Most of the ideas of unity that has taken place under the umbrella of Arab nationalism is, therefore, based more on the Arabic language and does not include other entities like religion and history. In critically reviewing the foregoing ideas from the perspective of Arabism and Arab nationalism in MENA, one is driven to the conclusion, as Paul Salem (1994) mentioned after more than eight decades of ideological activity, political culture in MENA is still in great disarray. There is no clear definition of regional unity, no agreed basis of political unity, no intelligible understanding of national or MENA regional duties, no stable framework for MENA regional interaction and no widely recognised agenda of goals. This is a failure of Arab nationalism as an ideology, as much as ideology explicitly attempts to resolve and provide a foundation for these issues, especially Arab unity.

On the other hand, even if there is a close history between Arabic as a language and Islam, there is an absence of Islam in the discussion of nationalism and Arabism. The non-consideration of the Islamic culture and heritage as a content of Arab nationalism has harmed MENA's unification for decades. Moreover, many regimes have negatively deployed religious ideologies not for the benefit of the region but in contrast, for political ends and sometimes they make unity look far from realisation. State interests and *Mazhabiyah* loyalties have taken a *de facto* lead over Arab nationalism and Islamic Arab nationalism, although Arabism and Islamism continue to play an ideological role. The relations within the MENA region have, in reality, been based firmly on state and group interests rather than on Arab nationalism or Arab Islamic nationalism. Concerning the other cases, Iran and Kurds, there is always deep-rooted mistrust and a serious sectarian (*Sunni-Shia*) division that represent the forces of loyalty in the region. The behavioural loyalty seems more adequate in the case of the *Shia* comparing to national loyalty, especially when *Shia*s are suffering from different sorts of discrimination in some MENA countries. As well as, the ethnicity that represents the sentiments of belonging, like the case of the Kurds, where there is polarisation between the so-called progressive leadership in Arab republics and conservative Arab monarchies.

Conflict of Interest
The authors do not have any conflict of interest.

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