

IDE Research Bulletin

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Arab Nationalism and State Formation: The Maghrib Experiences

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Objectives of the project

The project analyzes the historical development of nationalism in the Maghrib countries (i.e., Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco) with a special focus on the local features of Maghribian nationalism which distinguishes the Maghrib region from other Arab countries. The reason for our choice of topic is that the academic discussion on Arab nationalism has conventionally centered on the Mashriq (East Arab) region, leaving aside the Maghrib (West Arab) region's experiences. By studying cases of the Maghrib region, the project reconsiders some unquestioned premises and prejudices in the existing literature of Arab nationalism and thus contributes to a theoretical elaboration of studies of Arab nationalism. More concretely, we discuss the following topics: the relationship between nationalism and religion in the Maghrib; the validity of the concept of *Waṭaniyya* (the attachment to individual nation-states) as nested within *Qawmiyya* (the feeling of being part of a larger Arab people); the national historiography as a modern, invented tradition and the role of Arabism and Islam in it; and the role of regional supra-national identity (pan-Maghrib solidarity) as part of the formation of nationalism.

One of the important premises of our project is that nationalism is a modern phenomenon. Built on theoretical studies of nationalism which have flourished since the 1980s, the project supposes that premodern communitarian identities (such as religious affiliations, belongingness to certain linguistic, cultural, or "ethnic" groups, and loyalty to particular polities or governments) have been transformed into modern national identities (Smith 1998). In the Arab regions, for instance, religious identities such as membership of the Muslim community have existed and were institutionalized by religious laws long before the creation of nation-states in the region. Similarly, the notion of belonging to the Arab community has been present throughout the history of Arab peoples (Hourani 1991), whether this notion of "Arab" was interpreted as a linguistic, civilizational, or racial category. In modern times, nationalism—a new way to connect cultural, political, and social identities—appeared to incarnate a presumed correspondence between the sphere of a nation as a cultural unity and that of a state as a political unity (Gellner 1983). Moreover, modern socioeconomic developments, including the appearance of traveling technology, the creation of printed media, the establishment of bureaucracy, and the generalization of literacy, have led to the rise of a

national consciousness that could involve a large number of people (Anderson 1983). Given that modern nationalism was manufactured from both old and new, and small and broader social identities, which were transformed within new politico-economic contexts, the shapes of nationalism have varied from one region to another, from one community to another. Thus, within the “Arab world,” we can find multiple types of nationalism: the Maghrib region developed a particular variety of nationalism, which was different from those in the Mashriq region or the Gulf region. For instance, in Maghribian nationalism, Arab identity was tightly connected to Muslim religious identity, contrary to the secular (or non-sectarian) type of Arab nationalism observed in Ba’thism in Syria and Iraq. For the Maghribians, the Arab identity tended to be seen as a linguistic or civilizational identity, not a racial one, due to a non-negligible number of non-Arabs (especially Berbers) among the residents. Popular nationalism in the Maghrib was shaped largely by the modern anti-imperial movement which appeared in reaction to French and Spanish colonial rule in the region. The resistance against colonialism did not necessarily play the most important role in the formation of national identities in all the Mashriq countries, as some of them gained national independence as a result of British foreign policy.

Despite such internal regional differences, the Arab peoples have looked for a cultural or even political unity. The Nahda (renaissance) movement in the 19th century in the Levant called for an awakening of the great Arab civilization. The creation of the Arab league in 1945 represented the ideal of Arab solidarity at a diplomatic level. The Arab nationalist politicians such as Gamal Abd al-Naser (as president of Egypt between 1956 and 1970) advocated in the 1950s and 1960s a supranational unity for the Arab nation. This ideal led to the creation of the United Arab Republic between 1958 and 1961 (Jankowski 2002). After the 1970s, Arab states remained crestfallen in the defeat of the Arab–Israeli war in 1967, and as a result, pan-Arab discourse has kept a low profile. However, the Arab world as a cultural unity has always been alive in the peoples’ imagination. The pan-Arab media, such as the satellite channels, al-Jazeera or al-Arabiya, and the newspaper, al-Sharq al-Awsat, have had a certain constructive impact on the Arab public opinion. Moreover, different kinds of SNS have created a new public space for the Arabic-speaking audience, who are also senders of information. This relatively free space for expression allowed Arab internauts to exchange their opinions and expand their slogans and ideals easily from one place to another, as observed in the so-called Arab spring in 2011.

Given these developments, it was important for us to reexamine the historical development of Arab nationalism, its discourse, and its movement. By focusing on the Maghrib historical experiences, which have often been ignored in previous studies on Arab nationalism, our project attempts to decentralize Arab nationalism studies. It discusses the validity of conventional assumptions regarding Arab nationalism, such as the secularist nature of Arab nationalism, and the clear distinction established between *Qawmiyya* and *Waṭaniyya*.¹ The Maghrib experiences indicated to us that these premises should be reviewed and a different conception is needed to reconstruct the historical trajectories of the Arab nationalism movement as a global phenomenon.

Background and issues

The first studies regarding Arab nationalism in English scholarship focused on the history of thought (Nuseibeh 1956; Haim 1962; Hourani 1962). These studies were published in the heyday of Arab nationalist politicians. Therefore, they were interested in analyzing Arab nationalist politicians' discourse and terminology. The famous theoretical distinction between *Qawmiyya* and *Waṭaniyya* appeared in these studies (Haim 1962, 39). The scholars of following generations, especially those of the 1980s onward, studied more the socioeconomic background of the rise of nationalism in the Middle East and North Africa (Marr 1985; Simon 1986). The shift was influenced by the development of theories of nationalism in the 1980s.²

These studies on Arab nationalism examined cases of Mashriqi countries while almost ignoring the experiences of Maghrib countries. Conventionally, studies on nationalism in the Maghrib were often authored by French scholars who succeeded in the French orientalist scholarly tradition since the colonial period of the Maghrib, or by post-independent generations of Maghribian scholars, writing in French or Arabic, who were strongly influenced by the history of national liberation from colonial domination. Therefore, studies of nationalism in the Maghrib have remained quite detached from the English scholarship which has contributed works of importance to studies of Arab nationalism. Recently, in the English scholarship, more and more publications have discussed Maghrib cases to integrate Maghrib experiences in the literature of Arab nationalism studies. The International Journal of Middle East Studies in 2011 featured

¹ See Shoko Watanabe, "Maghrib Experiences in Arab Nationalism Studies: Literature Review," in *Interim Report for Arab Nationalism and State Formation: the Maghrib Experiences*, (Chiba: IDE-JETRO, 2019), 5.

² For the development of Arab nationalism studies, see Gershoni and Jankowski 1997, Chapter 1.

“Relocating Arab Nationalism” and integrated two articles on Maghrib studies out of five articles in total (Gershoni, Pursley, Baron, and Wien 2011). One of these two articles dealt with reconsidering the *Qawmiyya* / *Waṭaniyya* debate by clarifying the peculiar meaning of Arabism in colonial Algeria. In colonial Algeria, where Arabic learning was almost excluded from the public school system, Arabism was a cultural project to be realized in the future rather than a reflection of a given social reality (McDougall 2011). Another article examined Berber identity in the colonial period in Morocco (Wyrzten 2011). The question of non-Arab minorities has been marginalized in conventional literature on Arab nationalism. Thus, Maghrib studies started to serve as a complement to the Mashriq-centered Arab nationalism studies, correcting their theoretical shortcomings, and enriching their frameworks.

Building on this recent scholarly development, our project analyzes the relationships between different levels of national identities in the Maghrib, that is to say, Algerian, Tunisian, and Moroccan national identities, the pan-Maghrib identity, and broader Arab unity, to re-examine, again, the concept of *Waṭaniyya* as nested in *Qawmiyya*. Our project also investigates the historical background that determined the religious (Muslim) nature of nationalism in the Maghrib, which excluded the secularist approach to nationalism from the mainstream of Maghribian nationalist movements during the colonial period. Finally, our project inspects how Maghribian modern nationalists reconstructed national historiography to counter colonial discourses which condemned the Maghrib region as being incapable of forming a modern nation state by itself. French and Spanish orientalist studies, as part of the colonial legacy, influenced the way in which the nationalist cultural discourse was established.

Our findings and implications

(1) Pan-Maghrib nationalism and territorial nationalism

Our project examines how Maghribian elite students, who received their higher education in France, opted for the ideology of pan-Maghrib solidarity to express their political aspirations. Contrary to previous studies which effectively confused Maghribian nationalists’ pan-Maghrib ideology with broader Arab nationalism, we reveal that these Maghribian elite students distinguished the Maghrib region from the Mashriq as regions with different degrees of civilizational development and looked to Europe for technological advancement. These Maghribian elites did not see the Arab nation as a homogeneous cultural space. French imperial rule in the Maghrib urged the young Maghribians to come to France to study. When these students met with other

Maghribian fellows who came to France in a similar situation, they saw the Maghrib region as a federal space bonded by common interests and issues, which distinguished it from the rest of the Arab region.

In addition to this, pan-Maghrib nationalism did not conflict with territorial nationalism for Algerian, Tunisian, or Moroccan nation-states. This fact contradicts the premise that loyalty to individual states (*Waṭaniyya*) may contradict broader geographical identities such as pan-Maghrib or pan-Arab solidarities. In the context of French colonial domination which emphasized imperial ties between France and Algerian, Tunisian and Moroccan states and also French cultural superiority, pan-Maghrib solidarity and Arab identity served as elements of anti-colonialist discourse. If Maghribian elite nationalists did not aim to create political unity for the Maghrib, this was because they regarded the territorial borders which divided the three countries as an established fact. Maghribian nations have been detached from the Ottoman Empire since the 19th century due to the early days of French colonialism in the region which happened in 1830. In particular, Morocco and Tunisia were protectorates, thus they were conceived as sovereign states, at least formally. The relatively long experience as institutional states, colonial or not, of the three Maghribian countries allowed the Maghribian nationalists to imagine their future careers as modernist administrators of each country. If they might have needed to chase the French and old generation elite away from privileged administrative posts, they did not need to reconstruct new state boundaries to gain access to state resources.

(2) The religious nature of nationalism

In the Maghrib, nationalism was closely associated with religious feeling, especially that of the Sunni Muslims, who constituted the majority of the population in the region. Religious minorities such as Jews and Ibadi Muslims were either accepting of this mainstream conception of nationalism or excluded from the dominant nationalist groups.³ This religious nature of nationalism in the Maghrib was partly due to an institutional form of colonial domination. The French authorities did not recognize Maghribian Muslims as French citizens so they could only gain access to French citizenship after renouncing their Muslim personal status, and this included the renunciation of the right to being subject to Muslim jurisdiction for marriage, divorce, and heritage. Maghribian nationalists considered the renouncement of Muslim personal status as an apostasy against Islam and regarded the minority Maghribians with French

³ Watanabe, "Maghrib Experiences," 5–8.

citizenship as apostates. Moreover, in Tunisia and Morocco, the “naturalization” process to gain French citizenship involved the renouncement of Tunisian or Moroccan nationality. It was the reason why the nationalists of these countries campaigned against the burial of the naturalized in Muslim cemeteries and treated them almost as political traitors.

The theoretical reason for the refusal of French citizenship to those who were subject to Muslim jurisdiction by the French authorities until the end of WWII was the claim that the French secular judicial system was not compatible with the Islamic faith. However, the claim was based on the prejudice of orientalist studies that considered Islam as contradictory to the Western distinction between the sacred and profane. Contrary to such prejudice, the Association of Algerian Muslim Ulama (founded in 1931), an association of men of religion in Algeria, supported the separation of church and state. The Association of Algerian Muslim Ulama has repeatedly requested the application of the French law of separation of church and state (1905) in Algeria, where Muslim religious agents were both economically and politically controlled by the Algerian Government-General in the name of a policy of official Islam. The Association of Algerian Muslim Ulama asked for the implementation of this separation, together with the freedom of Muslim religious practice, as well as access for Algerian Muslims to French citizenship while conserving their Muslim personal status. The colonial domination justified social discriminations against natives by attributing different political statuses to people according to their religions. Maghribian nationalists, in reaction to such discriminative measures which deprived Maghribian Muslims of their social rights and full citizenship, gave importance to religion as their identity marker.

Another reason for the establishment of a connection between the Muslim faith and Maghribian nationalism was that religion was a symbol of unity for the anti-colonial resistance. Shinoda showed, in his interim report published in 2019, how Moroccan nationalists mobilized religious terminologies, such as Jihad against Christian invaders, to call for resistance against French and Spanish colonialism.⁴ Such nationalist discourse refers to historical events in pre-modern Morocco, but it was effectively a retrospective interpretation of history, established in reaction to the historiography by European orientalists. In the nationalist discourse, successive Moroccan dynasties were considered as being powerful thanks to religious legitimacy.

⁴ Tomoaki Shinoda, “Historiography of the Jihad movement in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Maghrib al-Aqṣā and its nationalist interpretation in Morocco: Literature Review,” in *Interim Report for Arab Nationalism and State Formation: the Maghrib Experiences*, (Chiba: IDE-JETRO, 2019).

Such legitimacy served as an important bond connecting the Moroccan court, nationalists, and intellectuals with the general public.

(3) Orientalist legacy and nationalist discourse

Just like the religious policy, the colonial policy of “race” or the practice of divide and rule in the colonial period had a heavy impact on the Maghribian nationalist discourse.⁵ Our project examines the French Berber policy in colonial Maghrib, as well as nationalists’ attitudes toward it. In Algeria from the 19th century onward, orientalist publications based on thorough fieldwork remained an important provider of scientific knowledge on Maghribian local society and culture. These publications supported the famous “Kabyle myth,” which insisted on the superiority of the Berber “race” over the Arab one and called for further colonial interventions among the Berbers to make them collaborators of the colonial domination. While this ideology was not translated into important policies in Algeria, the colonial administrators in Morocco later adopted it to help the implementation of several influential policies, which were applied to Berber regions of the country. Moroccan nationalists criticized these colonial policies as an attempt to divide the unity of the Moroccan nation and tried to provide another discourse emphasizing national solidarity.

While comparing colonial discourse and nationalist narratives, our project pays attention to the fact that two kinds of discourse (colonial discourse and nationalist discourse) often look opposite and dialogical. For instance, Maghribian nationalists highlighted Arab/Berber integration, due to religious and cultural bonds between the two groups of people, in reaction to the colonial discourse which put the emphasis on racial segregation. However, the two discourses were not symmetrical in terms of their relation to power. This point is underestimated by many scholars. Colonial policy makers, whether in Algeria or in Morocco, could ignore the reality of local society and impose by force any policies they designed. Contrary to this, Maghribian nationalists, even if they were from an elite section of society, did not have such power to impose. Nationalists needed to attract their fellow people’s attention to gain any social support for their claims. Even with the overwhelming support of the public opinion of the natives, nationalists did not have any easy solutions to realize their social, cultural, or political project, as they were often faced with repressions from colonial authorities. When scholars discuss a mirror-like relationship between colonial discourse and

⁵ In his recent publication, Jonathan Wyrzten discussed colonial identity politics in Morocco and reactions of Moroccans to them. See Wyrzten 2015.

nationalist imagination, we should take into careful consideration the relationship between discourse and power and clarify why a particular version of nationalist discourse appealed to people. Neither should we forget about struggles for hegemony among different nationalist groups or individuals, which also constituted a polyphonic form of nationalism.

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