I. Introduction

Problematic of Identity: Given or Formed

The issue of identity is slippery. The heart of the problem lies in the following question: are identities given or formed? If given, then identity is constant. But all evidence points to the fact that identities (of individuals or groups) undergo shifts and changes across time. Therefore, identity must be seen as something that is formed, because it is subject to change. Hence the questions of "how is identity formed?" and "what makes identity susceptible to change?" In other words, what makes the same individual identify her/himself with her/his religion during one period, nationality during another, and class during yet another? This, of course, also applies to collectivities.

Longitudinal Comparative History

A good start is longitudinal comparative history (comparing two different periods of development in one country across time). Why is it that the identity of individuals and groups during pre-modern times was far less susceptible to change than it is in modern times? Generally, in premodern times, a peasant is born as such and dies as such. So does a King. Although this consistency in identity may apply today in many cases (especially in less developed areas), for the most part, identity has become fluid. What has changed?

Modernization

Actually, a number of fundamental changes have taken place in the modern world that transformed the generally unitary world view of the individual (based on conformity to unitary values) to a plurality of world views (based on a plurality of values). Modernization, in all its facets (social mobilization, technological change, literacy, political development, industrialization and mass production), is responsible for diversifying values and providing a plurality of "identities" for individuals and groups. Blacks and whites could identify themselves as American first and foremost, and then as blacks and whites. Christians and Muslims (who are Jordanian nationals) could identify themselves as Jordanians first and foremost and then as Christians and Muslims. By the same token, members of the same upper class from different countries could identify themselves as "bourgeois" first and then, for example, Canadian or Indian. Muslims from Tunis and Pakistan could identify themselves as Muslims first and then as Tunisian and Pakistanis. The same set of examples applies to occupations, sects, sex, race, ethnicity.
Concentric Circles of Identity: Dynamism

So, in the modern world, each of us has multiple identities that are hierarchically arranged in order of those most immediate to our consciousness. The diagram below points to a concentric circles conception of identity, where one’s identity has different dimensions: the dimension with which we identify the most, is the innermost circle, and so on. But that does not exclude other dimensions that might take precedence under changing circumstances.
The question becomes: *what makes one dimension of our identity take precedence over another?*

- One could be Arab, Muslim, Egyptian, physician, female, African in the 1960s, with Arab being the dominant identity,
- but then, the same person, becomes Muslim, Egyptian, Arab, physician, female, African in the 1990s, where Muslim becomes the dominant identity.

What happened? Well, we could interview such an individual and find out why they in particular underwent this change. But that would be narrow and anecdotal if we would like to know what explains a substantial social trend in this direction. To do so, *we must investigate the larger mechanisms that impact large groups of individuals.*

**Socialization and the State**

If identities are formed, according to the discussion above, we must look at how they are formed (and therefore how they shift or change). Virtually all analysts focus in this regard on the process of socialization that transmits values and conceptions of the self (i.e. identities) from one generation to the other. This occurs through *agents of socialization such as the family, church, mosque, school, army, the media, clubs and associations.* The more centralized these agents are (the more they are controlled by the state) the more guided and directed socialization would be. Of course, success depends on a host of factors that would require a different type of analysis that I shall not get into here (i.e. class analysis and hegemony, external challenges). In developing countries, such as those of the Middle East, the state figures prominently in the process of socialization, and has been more or less successful in socializing their citizens into the idea of a nation-state (even if largely artificial--i.e. without socio-historical, socio-intellectual, and/or civilizational roots--such as Jordan, Lebanon, Kuwait) far more than they have been in socializing people into a particular ideology. *Ironically, political identities have often been formed on the basis of opposition to the state.* Some have clung to a secular-democratic, human-rights valuing, Arab identity. Others have joined the Islamist opposition that privileges Islamic identity.

**The Particularity of Arab Cases**

In addition to the prominence of the state in the Arab world, the impact of external challenges is most important as a set of factors that contributed to the formation of variations of Arab identities. *Beginning with imperialism and colonialism, the implantation of the state of Israel, and subsequent political, economic, and to a lesser extent cultural dependency, most Arabs have been socialized to identify a constant encroacher: the West.* The manifestation of such new identities is varies and resembles those formed in opposition to the encroaching state. Many others (but not most), especially those who stand to benefit from economic liberalization, have adopted a pragmatic approach and identified themselves with liberal market-oriented values associated with the west and its client Arab regimes.
Elements of Identity

So far, we understand that in modern society, members of the same group (e.g. a nation-state) could identify themselves differently simply because they place strong emphasis on one dimension of their particular human existence, sometimes to the exclusion of other dimensions. So one Algerian could consider herself an Arab while her compatriot, considers herself a Muslim, and so on.

Does this mean that the study of identity is futile since so much subjectivity comes into play in determining one's identity? The answer is no. The vast majority of a nation-state's population identify themselves with reference to elements that are more or less shared by that society. Our first task as students of "identity" (or "social scientists) is to identify this set of essential elements which bring a society together, or which are imposed on society (e.g. by a state). This set of elements (shared or existing in a particular society) can be called an "identity profile." The identity profile of a given society includes

- language(s)
- culture(s)
- religion(s)
- historical experience (political, economic) and memory (psychological stance(s))

Our second task as students of "identity" is to study and explain the pattern(s) of identity shifts; i.e. why certain dimensions of identity take precedence over others? Why certain dimensions are politicized and others not? And finally, what explains the timing of shifts? Below, I will focus on the identity profile of Arabs including nation-states and regions.

Politcization of Identity

According to the sociologist Halim Barakat, “identity refers to shared essential elements which define the character and orientation of a people and affirm their common needs, interests, and goals with reference to joint action.” The significance of this particular definition of identity is its political implication: not only does it stress the "sharing" of certain elements, but also the propensity of this commonality to form the basis for joint or collective action. This means that if enough people recognize consciously that they belong to a certain group (on whatever basis), and if they recognize that their interests could be served if they acted collectively, then we can speak of their common political identity.

Also, we can speak of common cultural, linguistic, ethnic, religious, occupational, class, and other types of identities that exist in a society but do not form the basis for collective action, i.e. they are not politicized. Evidently, then, the politicization of a particular identity does not stem exclusively from the objective belonging to a group (e.g. whites, blacks, Christians, Muslims, working-class members, capitalists, Canadians do not automatically organize on that basis). A shared element among a group of people must be subjectively recognized as an efficient basis for joint action with regards to certain goals. This is precisely how one dimension of identity becomes politicized. How, then, can we explain the politicization of pan-Arab identity in the 1950s and early 1960s, of national identity in the late 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, and of Islamic identity during the latter periods.

In order for us to identify how one dimension of our identity supercedes another, we must look at how political, economic, and social experience imbued these different dimensions of Arab identity with enough meaning so as to make it the basis for joint action.
"Arab" Identity Profile: Analysis of Objective Elements

The question of what forms the essence of Arab identity has been a subject of debate: is it Islam, Arabic (the language), or "Arab" culture (a combination). To be sure, identifying either factor as the principal "glue" for Arabs (irrespective of official nationality) is problematic and will be discussed below. In fact, our approach to identity resolves the contradictory explanations in the exclusive form by explaining identity as fluid and by analysing the political context that highlights different aspects across time. To begin with, let us look at the identity profile of Arabs, and here we are looking at the broadest categories that unite most Arabs from Marrakesh to Muscat.

We can identify six principal elements:

- language
- culture
- religion
- political history
- economic history
- historical memory

Language is the most basic common element and the least controversial. All literate Arabs speak and understand the formal Arabic language (spoken and written), and all Arabs speak and understand at least one dialect of informal Arabic (spoken). Nonetheless, illiteracy and the variety of dialects (some dozen ones) constitute a barrier that is moderated by the media and pan-Arab communication.

Arab culture constitutes the second most basic element. Although culture includes language and religion, it deserves a special designation simply because an illiterate Christian Arab could be strongly attached to her Arab identity by virtue of her identification with Arab culture. So there is something about Arab culture, other than the religion or language, that binds Arabs to one another and at the same time, distinguishes them from non-Arabs. Therefore, though Arab culture is rich and diverse (i.e. not uniform), it is nonetheless distinct. If we analyze culture at its three levels (i.e. a-norms, beliefs, values, customs, social heritage; b- artistic expression; c-knowledge/thought and science) we find that the commonalities are overwhelming. Improved communications (through television, computers, books, etc) in the 1990s is once again bringing Arabs—long prevented from free-communication—together, although there is a class factor at work: only certain classes, not the majority, have privileged communication mechanisms. These form what is called a subculture.

We should recognize, therefore, that culture is generally divided into three broad categories: dominant culture (includes most common and diffuse elements), subculture (includes elements peculiar to certain groups based on patterns of social formation, class, religion, sect, ethnicity), and countercultures (includes alienated/radical individuals and groups). It is inescapable, however, that all the above cultural foci exercise influence on Arab culture in general and help shape and reshape it.

Religion, Islam in this case, is another basic element of Arab identity. Ninety percent of Arabs are Muslims, the remaining 10% are predominantly Christian. It is important, however, to recognize that both Muslim non-believers (atheists) and Christians of all varieties are deeply influence by the Islamic civilization, particularly its universalist dimensions which exist in abundance. Having said that, it is important to stress that conflict within Islam, largely between
the dominant Sunni sect and that of the Shi`a, is another factor which problematizes Islam as a unifying element of Arab identity. Contrary to a prevailing misconception in certain Western circles, this simply means that Arab identity cannot be reduced to Islam because Islam cannot singularly explain one's allegiance to Arabhood.

Political history economic history, and the resultant historical memory are other factors that not only help shape Arab identity but explain the shifts within it. It is impossible to explain adequately the full impact of these factors in one lecture. But each of these factors will be analyzed separately in some detail in upcoming lectures. Nonetheless, something can be said about a common Arab history that binds Arabs.

First, the overwhelming majority of Arabs share a common history (political, economic, and social) which extends from the 7th and 8th century to the turn of the 19th century. The legacy of European colonialism and its aftermath for the first time shattered Arab historical unity by introducing the concept of a territorial state which divided the Arab world into mini-states according to French and British interests. So when we speak of a common Arab history we are referring primarily to some dozen centuries that preceded the 20th century.

Furthermore, one can speak of common Arab political experiences in the 20th century associated largely with the post-colonial era and the impact of the creation of the state of Israel. We can group this set of experiences shared by most Arab states under the category of external challenges whereby embryonic Arab states were struggling to find a place for themselves in the theatre of international and regional politics. Perhaps no other concept captures the commonality of such experience than that of dependency, both in its political and economic forms (in addition to a growing cultural dependency in the post-Cold War period).

It is important to stress that common historical experiences in the 20th century were undercut by the emergence of the territorial state which, through its control of the means of communication and socialization, managed to construct a rival local identity such as Tunisian, Lebanese, and Kuweiti. A discussion Arab identity, therefore, must shed light on the interplay between pan-Arab identity and local identity. Influence of nation-state on trade and commerce.
Divisive Factors

Like other identities, Arab identity has its share of divisive factors. In fact, as we shall see, it has more than its share as a result of a host of factors the most important of which is the colonial legacy and the imprint it left behind.

As Barakat argues, orientalists and Arab apologists are both wrong when they singularly focus either on forces of unity or forces of divisiveness in the Arab world, or when they fail to study them in relation to one another. This is a manifestation of the failure to understand that Arab culture is both diverse and distinct.

The four principal divisive factors that we will focus on are:

- sectarianism
- tribalism
- nationalism(s)
- ethnicity

The divisiveness of these factors has been exacerbated by colonialism. Sectarianism is rooted in the existence of diverse sectarian communities in the Arab world. Under the millet system of Ottoman rule, sectarian solidarity was enhanced at the expense of social integration. Under the millet system, each sectarian community was granted some measure of local autonomy regarding religious and other sociopolitical affairs. Sectarianism became a mechanism of addressing grievances and maintaining privileges. Colonialists exacerbated this tendency by playing sects against one another in their attempt to achieve domination and stability. As part and parcel of alliance-making, colonial rule would support some sects at the expense of others. The post-independence era witnessed a further solidification of sectarian communities, especially when the disadvantaged population (economically and politically belonged to one sect, as the Shi’a in Lebanon prior to the civil war in 1975). The same applies to the `Alawis in Syria and the Sunnis in Iraq.

Tribalism has always been a thorn in the side of efforts at social integration, beginning with the efforts of Muhammad in the 7th century, and stretching to the efforts of the modern Arab state in the 20th century. All along, tribalism has been a powerful mechanism of associative behavior, especially when institutions of the state and its public policy failed to provide a social-associative and organizational alternative to tribal solidarity. In the Arab world, tribalism proliferates in the Arabian Peninsula, Yemen, Sudan and the Maghrib.

Conflicting nationalism has also been an obstacle to developing a homogeneous Arab identity or any kind of political unity. We can identify three brands of nationalism: local (nation-state: mid 1960s--?), regional (Greater Syria: 1930s--1940s; North Africa, Arab Gulf: 1970s--?); and pan-Arab (Arab nationalism: 1950s--1960s). These nationalisms compete at the level of national politics and individual politics. The greatest tension emerges between Arab nationalism and local nationalism. The oil era, which clearly separated the haves from the have nots intensified this tension and gave it a regional flavor, where oil rich states were perceived as one group (excepting Libya and Iraq). Almost on all levels, local nationalism gained the upper ground.

The existence of non-Arab ethnic communities also frustrates efforts at national integration based on a homogeneous Arab identity. Communities such as the Berbers, Kurds, and the ethno-linguistic groups in Southern Sudan do not profess Arabhood to be their primary identity although many do identify with Arab culture. This is more the case when under oppressive and discriminatory rule by Arab leaders. The Kurds in Iraq is a case in point, and so are the Berbers in Morocco (40%) and Algeria (30%). The case in Southern Sudan is made more complex by virtue of religious as well as ethno-linguistic variance.
It is important to note that these divisive forces are exacerbated by both economic crisis and political crisis because they become vehicles for political mobilization and empowerment. Thus, today's continuing economic deterioration in the Arab world is fueling the intensification of these factors.

**Arab/Muslim Identity and the War on Terrorism**