# Culture, development, and social transition towards democracy

## Final Report

## DEDICATION

This report is dedicated to our colleague **Hassan Abbas**, who departed us after a long struggle with illness on March 7, 2021. Mr. Abbas is a Syrian researcher, writer, and activist who played a major role in promoting civic thinking in Syria and Arab countries. Regarded as a prominent opposition figure before and after the Syrian revolution, Abbas was active in the civil and cultural movement since the 1990s. He participated in the Damascus Spring Forums, co-established the Syrian League for Citizenship and the Human Rights Association in Syria, and was one of the founders of the Cultural Forum.

Early in his career, he taught Arabic language and culture to non-Arabs at the French Institute for Arab Studies in Damascus, which served him as a platform for educational activities, exchange, and interface with fellow Syrians. After leaving Syria in 2012, Abbas undertook one of his most ambitious civic and political endeavors by establishing the Syrian Association for Citizenship to promote citizenship among Syrians. He wrote extensively on citizenship, criticism, traditional music, culture, and intangible heritage. Endowed with the ability to smoothly and deeply link culture to development, Abbas authored the main theoretical background paper on "Culture and the democratic transition in south Mediterranean countries". We dedicate this report to him.

# Culture, development, and social transition towards democracy

## Introduction

The Arab NGO Network for Development conducted a study on the role of culture in development vis-a-vis the youth, and in social transition towards democracy and human rights in Arab countries. Amid the instability in the Arab region due to conflicts, revolutions, political, economic and social challenges, and the suppression of basic rights, culture is instrumental to discerning the causes and depth of these crises and establishing democracy and its principles in the countries of the region.

This study provides an analytical framework for civil society organizations and young incubators and project leaders. The outputs and recommendations of this study will serve as guidelines for the parties involved in "Safir" project.

"Safir" is an ambitious program dedicated to youth and the sustainable development goals in nine countries in the Middle East and North African (MENA) region: Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Palestine, Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Libya, and Algeria.  It aims at supporting more than 1,000 young men and women with projects that have social, cultural or environmental impact and to create a regional environment that promotes dialogue between youth and public  authorities.

Five entities are part of this project, which is supported by the **Institut Français and the European Union:**

**The Arab NGO Network for Development | Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie | Canal France International | Pitchworthy | LE LAB'ESS.**

This report, "Culture, development, and social transition towards democracy in South Mediterranean countries", summarizes a comprehensive research involving 76 researchers, experts, and young men and women from the Arab  region.

# Culture, development, and social transition towards democracy

# Report sections

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# Report methodology

This report titled "Culture, development, and social transition towards democracy in South Mediterranean countries" summarizes a project in which a large team of researchers and research assistants contributed over the course of 15 months (from April 2020 to July 2021). The project was structured in three phases:

**1. Preparatory phase**, during which ANND[1] team drafted and discussed the conceptual paper with partners, defined research paper goals and titles, and assigned 5 researchers to initiate the research

**2. The drafting phase of five background papers:**
- The first paper provided an overview of cultural problems in the concerned Arab countries, focusing on applied case studies from Syria and Lebanon;

- The second paper looked at the shifts in values, especially among youth. It focused on case studies on Arab youth in the diaspora (Germany) and included examples from Egypt, Libya, Lebanon, Palestine and Algeria;

- The third paper represented a research on values and their transformation in the virtual space of Facebook and Instagram, with a special focus on Tunisia, Algeria, and Palestine;

- The fourth paper provided a case study on cultural transformation in an urban neighborhood in Casablanca and in a rural community (Ahlaf) in Morocco;

- The fifth paper provided a case study on Tripoli and a neighboring countryside (Miniyeh) in Lebanon, with a focus on affiliation and shifts in awareness during armed clashes in the city's poor neighborhoods and on its cultural activities.

- In addition to the five papers, ANND team collected supplementary materials and conducted additional interviews in specific locations in Lebanon, Syria, and Morocco.

**Generally, background papers followed a complex research methodology that included the following:**
- **Desktop research** that was leveraged for all papers at varying levels. Desktop research associated with a complex analysis, which was the most used method in theoretical papers or in methodology sections and introductions of other papers;

- **Participatory action research through interviews** with professionals or selected concerned activists and youths and focus groups; mainly used for case studies;

- **Content analysis networks**, especially for research on the virtual space, Facebook, and Instagram.

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1- Arab NGO Network for Development, referred to hereinafter by ANND https://www.annd.org/ar

# Report methodology

A complex mix of the abovementioned methods was used for all background papers, which included an analysis of the covered subject.

**3- Final report phase:**
The report was developed based on the material produced and consolidated during the second phase. However, ANND conducted a second analysis of the material available without limiting it to the background papers. ANND team conducted the analysis based on two inputs: the first is **thematic**, and the second is **based on case/spatial study**. The final report followed a synthetic and analytical methodology, with particular attention to the theoretical and conceptual aspect.

# Prelude

"The country is still fine....as long as everybody is participating in the funeral of a poet!", says a Damascene citizen watching Nizar Qabbani's funeral scene in the series "The Four Seasons" by director and artist **Hatem Ali**. The same scene took place in Damascus on the first day of 2021 in Hatem Ali's funeral who had passed away a couple of days earlier (December 29, 2020). Thousands marched in a funeral shrouded in sincere and sweeping grief in a country torn apart by war and battered by troubles and COVID-19. Hatem Ali was stronger than division, hatred, and war: He brought them all together to his funeral. This is the secret of arts and culture.

Arab countries have known cases that are similar in essence but different in scale and geographical scope. The funeral of the Tunisian poet **Mohamed Al-Saghir Awlad Ahmed** (passed away on April 5, 2016) was a demonstration of freedom and a blow to patriarchal traditions, as Tunisian women accompanied him to his resting place. Reem Al-Banna, the Palestinian artist (passed away on March 24, 2018), touched so many Palestinian hearts with her death, that her funeral turned into a symphony of love for Palestine and freedom. Similarly, on the other side of the Mediterranean, "Idir" (one of the most famous Algerian Amazigh artists who passed away on May 3, 2020) had the same effect in evoking feelings of overwhelming joy and melancholy, especially in his famous song "A Vava Inouva", in an almost magical scene.

Decades ago on February 3, 1975, and just like they always waited for Kawkab al-Sharq Umm Kulthum to sing, 4 million Egyptians (along with tens of millions through the media) bid farewell to her in a funeral comparable only to the funeral of the historical leader **Gamal Abdel Nasser**. It is as if artists - who are the embodiment of culture - accumulate in their creativity the essence of a generation, people, or an entire era. It is as if nothing is truer than culture as an expression of identity, values, and dreams. **Mahmoud Darwish**, with a small group of Palestinian poets, writers, and thinkers, who were perhaps the most prominent face of the Palestinian cause, raised their cause to the ranks of major humanitarian issues and gained the sympathy of people around the world. However, it is as if the regression of the Palestinian cause today is nothing but a product of the generalized cultural regression in the world and in Palestine itself.

We are not here celebrating death and funerals; death itself is rather nothing but an occasion to celebrate the life whose endless flow is accumulated in culture and its creators, as they spread joy, hope, emotions, and behaviors of all kinds among people - all people - in a way that makes them better able to act and influence their lives and the life of their community. It is, therefore, about life and about culture, which is a representation of the daily life of common people - as we will see later in the report - and a creativity outcome of diverse affiliations and interests who were able to shape the features of very

rich phenomena and movements that cross borders and transcend time. Phenomena like **Fairouz and the Rahbani brothers** are in no need for introduction; as is the case for the music of **Marcel Khalife**, who, among many things, transformed the poetry of **Mahmoud Darwish** and others into songs sung by millions; or even the duo (the late) **Sheikh Imam and Ahmed Fouad Negm**, whose songs and chants were popular among the youth in every square of the Arab Spring movement.  We can also mention numerous intellectual writers who captured the spirit of the contemporary world, such as Amin **Maalouf, Taher Ben Jelloun, Rachid Boujdara, Ahlam Mosteghanemi, Radwa Ashour, Ahmed Beydoun and Muhammad Abed Al Jabri**, or playwrights like **Saadallah Wannous**, or creative engineers such as **Zaha Hadid** and others who have left their mark on the world.

As culture is also a life and a practice, we cannot, in a post-Arab Spring era (2011), overlook thousands of innumerable innovations and contributions made by young women and men of the Arab countries in sit-in squares from Tunis and Cairo all the way to Yemen, Beirut, Baghdad, Algiers, and Sudan, and the associated artistic and cultural production and creativity, as well as behaviors, practices, and values, whether manifested in the streets or in virtual space that witnessed innovations of no less importance.  All of this has led to a culture - which can be considered new - built by tens of thousands of male and female citizens. It will undoubtedly constitute a very rich asset for contemplation and study on the meaning of culture, its impact, and the identity of its makers.

However, this celebration of culture has also stirred hostility. What would make a ruler or a party in a country or authority assassinate a cartoonist like **Naji Al-Ali** (Palestinian artist assassinated on August 29, 1987) had it not been for his definite ability to influence people? Or why would they abolish philosophy and related social sciences education, as it was the case in Morocco in the sixties? Why would tyrannical regimes fear every unattended public space to the point that almost all of them, at the same time, enacted laws that criminalize expression of opinion on social media under the pretext of national security, counter-terrorism, and COVID-19, and imprison anyone who dares to express their opinion? This is not exclusive to developing nations such as Arab countries, as the U.S. Senate recently (January 2, 2021) rejected the veto administered by former U.S. President (Donald Trump) on the U.S. Department of Defense budget, thus halting his quest to put restrictions on social media platforms and hold them legally accountable for the content uploaded by individuals.

This confrontation with culture takes multiple forms exercised by the institutionalized authority through its institutions, or sometimes it takes the form of confrontations at the base of society as if it were a clash of multiple cultures within the same society. In Lebanon, the death of the musician **Bassam Saba** (appointed director of the National Conservatory in 2018 and died on December 4, 2020) revealed the extent of disregard for culture and arts to the extent of persecuting this world-class musician administratively and financially, igniting a silent revolution among artists and musicians in Lebanon. Over

the past decades, Lebanon had known such behavior and witnessed many muffled cries of famous artists living their late years without any income, insurance, or pension, reflecting state officials' contempt for culture.

As for society itself, the attack on Palestinian artist **Sama Abdel Hadi** (a globally-known techno music artist) on December 30, 2020 was very significant of society's view of culture; groups of angry young men attacked Abdel Hadi's concert venue near Prophet Musa shrine in Jericho and forcibly cancelled it. However, security forces arrested Sama herself under the pretext that techno is Western music with a subversive effect on the authentic Palestinian identity and culture. Following this incident, an open battle ensued on social media between supporters and detractors. In recent years, Palestine has witnessed significant manifestations of this kind, especially an increase in the murder rate of women and girls (to preserve honor). It has also witnessed a dangerous escalation in the level of discrimination against women, manifesting itself in the meetings, conferences, and movements of the Hebron (Al Khalil) clans against the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women - CEDAW, demanding Palestinian authorities to withdraw from it and close women's associations, given their subversive role against morals, social customs, and religion.

It can sometimes be difficult to sneak peek into the secrets of this culture of discrimination and hatred, especially when it takes unfamiliar forms in the hands of ordinary people, as in the story of **Liliane Chaito** (Lebanon). Liliane, a young Lebanese woman (26 years old), newly married and mother of one (born in June 2020), went out on August 4, 2020 to Downtown Beirut to buy a gift for her husband. However, Liliane suffered a serious injury to the head during the tremendous explosion that shook the Lebanese capital that day and was taken to the hospital, where she remained in a coma for five full months until she began to show some response on January 02, 2021. At that time, her story was widely publicized, as it turned out that her husband and his family wanted to limit any contact between Liliane and her family and the infant and send him out of Lebanon. This required the intervention of doctors and the judiciary, as well asa solidarity campaign by social media activists and associations in order to force the husband and his family to stop this behavior. Is this rational?

Many consider that such culture and behavior are of an individual nature, but unfortunately this is not the case as attitudes and behaviors in public affairs are no different and perhaps the reactions to the **report on individual freedoms and equality** prepared by a specialized committee at the request of the late Tunisian President Beji Caid Sebsi and delivered in June 2018 is the best proof of that. Political parties and religious figures in Tunisia and abroad, as well as the media throughout the Arab countries, indulged in a fierce campaign against the content of the report, considering it hostile to religion, social customs, and traditions, and destructive to families and good morals. Although the most widely used pretext is gender equality, especially in terms of inheritance, the essence of the uproar actually stemmed from the fact that the report violated a fundamental pillar of patriarchal

culture and ideology and dared to open the issue of individual citizen rights in Tunisia and, by extension, in Arab countries.

**We have the right to ask: Is the culture of discrimination and glorification of patriarchal power truly a reflection or an accompaniment of an authentic and deeply rooted societal and popular culture? Or is the truth the opposite, that authoritarian ideologies deliberately produce and popularize such a counterculture to the values of rights, citizenship, and recognition of diversity in an attempt to impede democratic transformation?**

These fragments do not paint a holistic picture of culture and its status in society and in societal transformation towards the values of human rights, citizenship and democratic transformation. They are rather unfinished parts of a paint or puzzle or scenes extracted from a theatrical script and open to all possibilities. However, at the same time, these fragments clearly express the importance of culture and knowledge in creating and transforming reality, and the single "notes" that have emerged so far do not constitute a coherent piece of music. In fact, the report as a whole will not achieve that, but will rather open a window on the path of multi-dimensional and immeasurable societal transformation.

However, this means that the interest in culture and values and their transformations must rise to a higher level of theoretical reflection and field research because it is perhaps the widest vessel in which knowledge and practices are deposited and from which the dynamics of change are generated, for culture is not an abstract mental product, but rather a lifestyle. This report will seek to explore some of these aspects by attempting to answer the previously mentioned questions and problems.

# Chapter 1: Conceptual framework and research problematics

## 1. Introduction

The social protest movement in a number of Arab countries - including those located on the southern part of the Mediterranean sea - constituted a moment of historical transformation in the countries of the region, as well as a knowledge shock that surprised researchers and various actors alike, due to the prevailing belief that a state of stagnation and inert stability has settled in these countries and societies and their culture, perpetuated the "status-quo", and dismissed any change in the foreseeable future.

However, the social, political, and cultural explosion that shook these societies revealed the one-sided and stereotypical nature of these perceptions and posed a real and cognitive challenge to everyone, given the questions and challenges it raised on various theoretical and practical levels. With a number of these countries undergoing political and institutional transformation, or slipping into war and violence, it was necessary to reconsider these perceptions and to conduct a new, more structured and objective analysis to explore political and institutional transformation paths on one hand, and cultural and value transformation paths on the other. All of the above was linked to the social and institutional transformation towards democracy and human rights, which constituted the ultimate and shared goal of all countries in the region and was summarized by the movement's slogans everywhere (Wave one in 2011 and Wave two in 2018). These slogans considered the movements as "revolutions of dignity", "rebellions for employment, bread, freedom and justice", and the construction of a "modern democratic civil state."

This is the realistic context of the current research, attempting to monitor the interaction between culture and the desired transformation paths towards a democratic state and society, through a methodology that combines theoretical research with extrapolation of reality based on multiple-entry case studies in a number of Arab Southern Mediterranean countries. **It is primarily a study of culture** - in its broad sense - and of forms of action, activities and cultural spaces and their adaptation to developments. It also explores the content and values of potential and desirable paths of transition towards democracy, citizenship, and human rights.

It should be noted that these developments are not isolated from the global context, whether in terms of modern globalization transformations and the re-emergence of protectionism and trade wars in countries controlling the international order, in terms of renouncing rules of international diplomacy in accordance with international law and ceding commitment to human rights, as well as in terms of COVID-19 and all associated crises and proposals, or in terms of chronic wars and conflicts in the Arab region.

The research begins by identifying some of the prevailing cultural trends and transformations at the global level, the basis of the project concept paper, such as: Consumerism, the rise

of right-wing populist movement, and the retro-regression of sub-identities at the expense of the nation-state (or nationhood), in addition to COVID-19 challenges. These are all global problems that have a strong presence and repercussions on southern Mediterranean countries, in addition to other problems and issues in the region, such as sub-identities and religious identity, gender equality and the hegemony of patriarchal-masculine culture, wars, conflicts, occupation, democratic exception…, and other matters that will be addressed successively through a combination of theoretical analysis and participatory research.

**This chapter includes three sub-titles as follows:**

• Definitions and concepts.

• Presentation of the primary problems of culture and democratic transition.

• Theoretical framework and cultural problems in the Arab countries.

## 2. Definitions and concepts

We begin by defining basic concepts frequently mentioned in the report: culture and development (path of social development), democracy, and democratic transformation (direction of required change and description of the journey of a number of Arab countries after the Arab Spring). It goes without saying that the study will not provide "inclusive" definitions that are difficult to agree upon, but will rather deal with their interrelations: the report will study the Arab culture as a culture and as a contributor to development and democratic transformation and their interactions with culture.

## A- Culture

The report adopts a definition of culture rooted in the anthropological definition developed by the American "Edward Tylor" in 1871: culture is "that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society."

UNESCO built on Tylor's definition to set a definition of its own adopted at the World Conference on Cultural Policies in Mexico City in 1982, where culture was defined as: **"The set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional features of society or a social group, and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs."**

In the same context, Edgar Morin argues that "culture and society are in a reciprocal generative relationship… We can metaphorically say that the culture of a society is a large and complex computer that stores all knowledge. And because they are software-like, they are the practical, ethical and political standards of this particular society[2]." Such an approach places culture at the center of development and societal transformation, being an influential actor through people and their culture, whether individuals, groups, or a national community.

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**2-** Edgar Morin, La Méthode Tome 4 : Les idées, leur habitat, leur vie, leurs moeurs, leur organisation. Published by Le Seuil

## Society-active cultures

Contemporary societies are multicultural and include: religious culture(s), a national culture (which may encompass ethno-regional cultures), a syncretic "mass culture" (facilitated by mass media), a scientific culture, and last but not least what two centuries ago was known as "high culture": a "humanistic culture" which entails classical literature and philosophy, and - as we shall see - a dimension of "human sciences."[3]

Culture is "a force of homogeneity and differentiation. It is an essential bearer of social cohesion, uniting society on the symbolic and emotional levels. However, it is also a differentiator between groups, legitimizing the disparity of power, dividing the folds of society into honorable and disgraceful (e.g., legitimate culture vs. popular culture, or castes, etc.)[4], and isolating the society from others (representations, languages, traditions, etc.). This is what makes culture "a fact of great importance in the life of human societies."[5]

All cultures that motivate human activity and establish relations between individuals and their surroundings are acquired cultures. They can be classified into two separate groups according to the dynamics through which the individual acquires its cultures:

**1. Primary cultures (inherited, involuntary):** acquired by the individual before gaining sufficient awareness to choose to accept or reject them. They are cultures we are born into, in which the small community (family), then the larger (entourage), and the larger (neighborhood) and the larger (school)... embrace us and shape us into their mold. Primary cultures are organized into four basic categories: religious (sectarian), national or ethnic, nationality-based, and regional.

**2. Secondary cultures (voluntary):** cultures an individual acquires consciously and voluntarily, or as an automatic result of their biological, social, and intellectual development. The individual has the freedom to accept or reject them and often seeks them out of their own free will. Such cultures are countless.

The Arab region has widely diverse primary cultures, and it is obvious that this diversity is a source of great knowledge and spirituality, so there is no doubt that having a specific component means having the added culture specific to that component. It is also beyond question that coexistence between different identities/cultures reduces fanaticism if these cultures are open to each other and can get to know each other. However, this same coexistence becomes a ticking bomb that threatens society with disintegration, and perhaps division, if the diversity between religious and national components is not managed wisely and responsibly, and puts the interests of the people and the country above narrow collective interests, above the political interests of a ruling political class, and above the authoritarian tendencies of a tyrant ruler.

**3-** Edgar Morin, Ibid.
**4-** Jean Fleury, « La culture», Éd. Bréal, col. Thèmes & Débats Sociologie, 2002.
**5-** Ibid, 60.

## B – Development concept

The 1995 UNESCO report - Our Creative Diversity - underlined the importance of cultural factors as the building block of development strategies and emphasized that elements such as the history and culture of each community are key for sustainable social development.[6] The report also affirmed that "culture is the essence of development and is vital in shaping the relationship of humans with nature and the environment.[7] Culture is not an aspect of society, but rather a dimension clearly linked to development."

However, our approach to the development-culture relationship extends to a more general and abstract notion to include the definition of development itself. The United Nations Declaration on the Right to Development defined development as "... a comprehensive, economic, social, cultural, and political process, which aims at the constant improvement of the well-being of the entire population and of all individuals ...".[8] Moreover, several Arab organizations have actively participated in proposing an improved conceptual framework for development that does not limit the definition of (sustainable human) development to three economic, social and environmental dimensions, but rather extends to include the cultural and political dimensions as well. The cultural and political dimensions are as important as the other components/ dimensions, and neglecting them will create a knowledge and practical gap in the development journey.[9]

Realistically, and in line with the aforementioned definition of culture, achieving a developmental transformation towards a human (sustainable) development model will be impossible unless it builds upon cultural and cognitive transformation, including the expansion of the development concept itself and our perception of development projects in Arab countries and societies. These same parties have also developed **an original concept of the Arab development project, a renaissance project that restores the cultural component that distinguished the Arab renaissance in the late 19th century and early 20th century. This cultural component was overlooked during the early days of independence, only to reemerge stronger with the Arab Spring uprisings.**

**6-** UNESCO, Our Creative Diversity: Report of the World Commission on Culture and Development, September 1995. **https://www. gcedclearinghouse.org/sites/default/files/resources/%5BENG%5D%20Nuestra%20diversidad%20creativa.pdf**
**7-** Ibid, 60.
**8-** Declaration on the Right to Development - United Nations: **https://www.un.org/en/events/righttodevelopment/pdf/rtd_booklet_ar.pdf**
**9-** Since 2005, ANND has worked systematically to develop this concept hand in hand with the Center of Arab Women for Training and Research, ESCWA, and the United Nations Development Program. The Arab Women's Development Report 2019, Gender Equality in the 2030 Agenda highlights the said concept - The Role of Civil Society and the Media. Center of Arab Women for Training and Research (CAWTAR), Arab Gulf Program for Development - AGFUND. Tunisia 2019. See also: Adib Nehme, Development and Poverty - A Critical Review of Concepts and Measuring Tools; Center for Arab Unity Studies, ANND. Beirut, 2021, Chapter 1.

## C - Democracy - democratic transition

The transition from the neo-patrimonial state to **the modern democratic civil state** was the final and paramount goal of the Arab Spring that sparked in Tunisia and Egypt at the end of 2010 and spread west to the Kingdom of Morocco, east to Yemen, and south to Sudan. In fact, this transition still is the explicit or implicit motivation for all forms of citizen or civil society objections and demands in Arab Southern Mediterranean Countries, **thus crowning democracy as the superior goal, and the transition towards democracy as the people's aspiration.**

It is to be noted that this report does not claim to define democracy, which is clearly beyond its mission and capacity. Two aspects in the research topic must be underlined:

• **The first aspect is related to democracy as a political system** with multiple forms that all adhere to basic principles: i.e. the formation of authority through periodic general elections, the peaceful transition of power, the respect for public liberties, the development of relations          between institutions and between institutions and citizens based on the constitution and laws, and the systematic functioning of the state and its bodies based on neutrality in the performance of its administrative and daily functions in accordance with the principle of separation between the political function and the administrative function.

• **The second aspect is related to democracy as a system of values and relations between people and a prevailing political and social culture** based on respect for rights and for the freedoms of individuals and groups and on the predominance of dialogue in society. This dialogue aims at reaching settlements that pave the way for advancement and sustainability in relations between society members, as well as their compliance with generally accepted and/or regulated codes of conduct.

From Morocco to Yemen, the Arab revolutions held a common goal: "the modern democratic civil state," based on three interrelated concepts that lead to the establishment of the modern state model based on citizenship, human rights, the rotation of power, and democratic convergence within the confines of a civil and modern state, from a political and institutional perspective, as well as a cultural and value-related perspective.

Therefore, the expressions used to describe the changes that the countries of the Southern Mediterranean bank have undergone (and are undergoing) under the umbrella of "democratic transition" must reflect in a profound transformation at the political and cultural levels, not limited to formal institutional and electoral transformations, no matter how important they are.

The term **"democratic transition"** has been used to describe the political and institutional process introduced in some countries where political changes occurred subsequent to the "Arab Spring" (Tunisia is often the most prominent example). "Democratic transition" is the transitional phase in which special procedures are taken to transfer to a new regime - presumably democratic - with special emphasis on the electoral process and the amendment of  constitutions.

However, this is not sufficient. Rather, it is correct to describe the post-Arab Spring period using a three-term expression, for it is at once a **transitional, foundational, and formative stage:**

• It is **transitional** because it requires temporary and urgent measures to prevent the deterioration of the situation, the collapse of institutions, the disintegration of the state, and the slip towards violence...etc. It often requires taking special measures that fall under what is called the "transitional justice," as well as holding elections to form constitutional institutions to run the country during this transitional phase...etc.

• It is **foundational** because it also entails drafting new constitutions or amending old ones, reforming or amending the political regime, establishing new independent institutions and entities (often of a constitutional nature not common under the previous regime), passing new laws, forming parties and restructuring authority through elections, etc... These actions transcend the term "transitional"; they are rather steps in the re-establishment of a state's regime.

• It is **formative** because the state's transformation extends to society, values, and culture, especially in the early attempts at cascading the values of citizenship, equity, gender equality, freedom of expression and belief, justice and solidarity, etc. Democratic transition is a reconstruction of society with a long-term impact. It is a lengthy, complex, and winding pathway that goes beyond the procedures and timeline of a transitional and even a foundational phase.[10] Here, we find ourselves again focusing on culture, at the heart of our report.

## 3. Global problems

Public policies are not directly and explicitly concerned with the cultural process as a contributor to development and change, but rather as a consumer perspective-based tool for profit, market mechanisms, and media promotion, or as a (religious, ideological, or identity-related) political ideology used to establish control and impose specific paths for political mobilization as well as shaping authorities and supporting their choices. The intensive consumerist or the ideological-political use of culture (as it is a form of consciousness) is an acknowledgment of the growing role of the cultural dimension in our time. We find some of its most important manifestations in three simultaneous phenomena spreading around the world, in addition to the cultural aspect of the COVID-19 pandemic. These phenomena can actually hinder any real transformation towards development and democracy, affecting the Arab Southern Mediterranean countries, subject of this study.

**A- The first phenomenon** is the massive expansion of **consumerism** and market values accompanying economic globalization. The revolution of communications, information, and satellite TV plays a major role in this phenomenon and leads to the transition from the values and institutions of a care state towards justice and solidarity, to be replaced by inequality and focus on the importance of wealth in an unprecedented manner.

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**10-** See also: Adib Nehme, The Neo-Patrimonial State and the Arab Spring, Dar Al-Farabi - ANND, Beirut 2014.

**B- The second phenomenon is the rise of right-wing populist movements** (including in developed industrial countries), the extensive use of political ideology by parties, and the transformation from polarization based on socio-economic interests to polarization in which ideology plays a decisive role in line with the interpretation of the problems facing the country, in particular xenophobia, terrorism, extremism, immigration, the resurgence of nationalism, and isolationism in the face of prevalent globalization.

**C- The third phenomenon is retrogression to sub-identities** in various regions of the world (especially in developing countries, including Arab countries) whether religious, sectarian, ethnic, racial, etc. The three above phenomena all share a common ground: they weaken the concept of a national state that offers care for its citizens and promotes their welfare and acts as a framework for determining the country's position in international economic and political relations.

**D-** The global **COVID-19 pandemic** has shed light on cultures, social and economic relations, and world and national society management methods because it unveiled underlying gaps and pain points, thus prompting contemplation and reconsideration of some aspects taken for granted.  Here arise some fundamental (sometimes existential) questions regarding the entire prevalent civilizational, developmental and cultural pattern that has been the subject of debate and conflict, especially in terms of humans' relationship with nature, the relationship between society and the state, institutions, and economic and political regimes, the relationship among individuals themselves, and the dominant values and behaviors. Post-COVID-19, culture is almost the most recurring theme in the opposing forward-looking visions: some are pushing towards technological transformation, some are pulling towards authority, while others are promoting the renewal of the development model based on profit and destruction of the environment. Countering these three trends is a new humanitarian and social trend that finds salvation in a civilized pattern and a new culture based on rights, solidarity, justice and respect for nature.

## 4. Additional problems in Arab societies

The four global problems previously mentioned are strongly present in the countries subject of study and were addressed by the research. Some additional problems will also be discussed, and the report will focus in particular on the following issues:

**A- Democracy and human rights:** There is a common cultural discourse that describes Arab countries with what is known as "**democratic exception**", which refers to Arab countries' fundamental cultural impossibility to transition towards democracy and the human rights system.

**B- The hegemony of patriarchal-masculine culture and the position of women** in society: The patriarchal-masculine culture is still very present in the culture, politics, and social relations in our communities, making our societies incompatible with the era we are living in.

**C-** **Sub-identities**, including the religious or sectarian identities that have dismantled and incapacitated the national state, traditional social institutions (including the family), and civil society organizations (unions and civil associations). The same applies to other cultural and ethnic identities.

**D-** **Social disintegration and overall cultural deterioration** resulting from occupation, wars, conflicts and tyranny that have raided the region for decades, as well as their joint impact on social development, culture, and values. This problem represents the full-blown situation and cumulative effect of the previously mentioned problems.

**E-** **Weak knowledge and artistic production, poor quality of education, and the inadequate production of knowledge and scientific research. This also includes the lack of artistic production in its various forms**, or rather the lack of official interest in artistic production, and the promotion of tasteless art and culture at various levels.

# Chapter 2: Regional context (recent developments)

## 1. General framework for recent developments in South Mediterranean countries

The analysis in this report is based on a chronological order, in which the Arab Spring revolutions (2011) represent the major turning point directly related to the topic of our research (culture and democratic transformation).

**Prior to 2011**, there were two main sub-stages in each country: The **first** often immediately followed a nation's gain of independence, in which authorities enjoyed relative legitimacy in the prevailing political and governmental discourse and the associated political and public culture; the **second** is the stage in which the nation embarked on a journey of loss of legitimacy and crisis, ending with an explosion or change, such as the Arab Spring in Arab countries in 2011.

The period **following 2011** can also be divided into two sub-stages: The **first** was the stage of the broad popular movement that swept the streets and the direct transformations or reforms it imposed. This stage was a celebration of democracy, freedom and diversity, in which culture emerged as a value and creative mass productions. The first sub-stage extended from the **first wave of the Arab Spring** in 2011-2012 until the rise of the "counter-revolution" in the form of destructive wars in some countries, the circumvention of democratic change in others, or the return of pre-2011 crises (second stage). The same turn of events occurred during the **second wave of the Arab Spring**, starting at the end of 2018, and included Sudan, Algeria, Lebanon, and Iraq. Throughout 2019, these countries celebrated art, culture, and democracy, before subsequent developments of varying impact came upon, with some accepting and others rejecting - perhaps temporarily - the climate that prevailed early in the second wave.

## Retrospective

Multiple structural and historical factors have built up the problems that Arab countries face in all areas. The huge upsurge of 2011 was nothing but a natural and logical outcome of its context. The surprise or even the shock expressed by most parties was not imputable to the fact that the Arab Spring was out of the context, but rather to the **lack of visions or the neglect of accumulating factors behind the deteriorating situation, whether due to a lack of knowledge, an interest, or the projection of ideologically biased cultural perceptions on the region's societies as an exception that is not qualified or predisposed for democratization or modernity.** The region appeared to be in a state of stagnation that is difficult to overcome. Several parties deemed this description a fixed (core) nature of South Mediterranean countries and societies and did not expect the possibility of real change in the foreseeable future. However, the elements of developmental crisis and failure had been well-observed and documented in books, studies, announced and unannounced protests, and international, regional, and national reports, including those

issued by international organizations. The Arab Spring and its accompanying demands came basically as a response to the crisis and its agents.

The previous narrative prevailed over everything else, including the reports of international organizations. However, after the Arab Spring, independent researches were widely conducted and numerous reports were prepared by international organizations, EU, OECD, and others: they changed their point of view towards Arab countries, recognizing the depth and comprehensiveness of the crises, after having celebrated their alleged achievements for many years, in support to their governments rather than in an objective assessment of the reality.[11]

## The political and socio-economic tracks

All the transformations that took place in the Arab countries fall within the overall globalization context and are consistent with the global context that witnessed significant setbacks in the logic of productive work in favor of rentier economies and economy financialization, tolerance of human rights violations, aggravation of security and war tendencies in international relations and domestic politics, the re-emergence of protectionist economic and political tendencies and retro-regression inside national borders, and the revival of sub-identities and fanatic and populist tendencies.

The political, economic, and social histories and interactions with globalization in Southern Mediterranean Arab countries resulted in transformations whose "intersecting and joint effects" led to a serious erosion of the historical and political legitimacy of Arab regimes at the international and regional scenes. The resulting transformations also led to a qualitative change in the internal socio-political alliances on which the ruling regimes were built, as well as to a shift in national, economic and social policies to meet the economic requirements of neoliberal globalization and the political requirements of the international order, along with the associated culture(s). Along came a sense of failure in development as well (in the strategic and deep senses) in most areas, thus communities turned to neo-patrimonial behavior, corruption, and violence to deal with problems, and sub-cultures and identities emerged at the expense of the culture of citizenship and national identities[12].

An ESCWA report highlights three major developments during the past 50 years: 1- The rise of the role of the state in the beginning and then its severe downfall; 2- The waves of economic liberalization in the 90s that led to the establishment of a capitalist system purely based on nepotism; and 3- The lack of political liberation during that era. These developments instilled power-retention strategies and mostly impacted the personal independence of citizens in many ways[13]...".

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11- See: Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in the Arab States E/ESCWA/29/11. Report submitted in the 29th ESCWA Ministerial Meeting, Doha, 13-15 December 2016. **See also**:Key challenges Arab countries face during the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Report submitted in civil society organization meeting on April 22-23, 2018 and presented as a contribution to the Arab Forum for Sustainable Development. The second report is based on the first with some additions and amendments. The first Arab Human Development Report (2002) and subsequent reports. Arab Development Challenges Report 2011 (UNDP) ESCWA report: Vision 2030 (2015/2016). ESCWA Arab Sustainable Development Report 2020 "Arab Adolescent Girls: Realities and Prospects", CAWTAR, AGFUND, Tunisia 2003

12- The Neo-patrimonial State and the Arab Spring, Adib Nehme: ANND; Dar Al-Farabi. Beirut 2014.

13- Social Development Report: Inequality, Autonomy, and Change in the Arab Region. ESCWA, 2017. The report indicates that government spending reached its peak in the 70s, and then declined steeply in 1998, (e.g.: from 62% of the GDP to 25% in Egypt, and from 45% to 29% in Tunisia).

On the eve of the Arab Spring, the ingredients of a social eruption were boiling in a number of Arab countries, starting with Tunisia and Egypt and then spreading to others.

Indicators of crisis and development failure were abundantly mentioned in international, regional and national reports, in easily accessible databases, and in numerous national studies. They are all known, proven, and accepted facts. **As for our report, which focuses on culture and cultural transformations, its added value lies in determining the impact of these social eruption aspects on culture (in its broad sense as previously explained), how this eruption transforms into a mental, psychological, and behavioral state among citizens, and how they are manifested in phenomena, movements, and ideas that seek change or reverse it.**

Given this focus on culture and values in this report, we address in this regard **two issues: immigration** and **education systems** in Southern Mediterranean countries, both expressions of chronic problems or structural factors that are still active today and are directly related to the topic of the report.

## 2. Immigration: Repulsive societies for youth and citizens (example)

Developments, wars, and violent conflicts in Arab societies of the Southern Mediterranean bank shaped them into countries that drive away their citizens, especially their youth and professional and educated elites (not to mention labor force migration in general). **This desire for immigration cannot actually be traced back exclusively to a single reason, even if it seems that a reason is more likely than another in a country and at a certain historical moment**. However, this stubborn insistence on legal and illegal immigration, to the extent of facing life-threatening dangers and crossing paths with death while traveling the Mediterranean Sea, confirms this desire. The pursuit of a job or education opportunity on the other side is laced with an unbridled desire to escape from the reality of a home country infested with repression or violation of rights, political instability, and the emergence of a political class that lacks citizen trust (corruption, absence of a clear vision, coveting for authority), a home country incapable of offering new horizons to its youth, or a home country that robs from its citizens their dream of self-fulfillment or of living in a society with dignity and freedom. Immigration brings about significant changes in the awareness and behavior of the immigration-seeking person and in their immediate circle of family and friends. When this movement turns into intensive mass migration, it causes changes in the receiving countries and societies, as well as in the individuals themselves, as a result of what is sometimes deemed as a "civilization shock" or "culture shock", triggering cultural shifts in different directions.

In 2020, 22% of Arab country citizens expressed a desire to immigrate, according to the Arab Opinion Index report[14]. This percentage is relatively stable according to successive reports since 2011 and is still at the same value as it was before the Arab Spring, indicating that the changes that took place in more than one country did not lead to a solution to

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[14] The Arab Index 2019/2020. Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, Doha; 2020. https://arabindex.dohainstitute.org/AR/Documents/The-2019-20-Arab-Opinion-Index-in-Brief-AR.pdf

the chronic problems, but to a greater tendency to immigrate for political and security reasons emerging from the outbreak of wars and conflicts after 2011 or from the absence of democracy and security, which were not completely absent before that.

Economic and social factors (search for work, improve life conditions...etc) constitute ~73% of the reasons for immigration, vs. 15% for education. The lack of decent work opportunities and low wages prompted temporary or permanent immigration in search of better opportunities. While 12% of those wishing to immigrate in 2020 indicated that the reason is political or security-related[15], these percentages vary significantly based on the respondent's country conditions and the year. **Nour** (from Egypt) attributes the reason for her desire to immigrate to the deteriorating political conditions. She has a stable and promising job, but does not see any hope of easing the restrictions on freedoms, as she says: "half of my friends are in prison![16]" Nour's desire to immigrate because of repression might be considered an individual decision taken on the basis of her political or ideological choices, but the subject is more of a comprehensive social phenomenon. In fact, this phenomenon is explicitly apparent among Syrian refugees, amounting to around a quarter of the total population (~5.6 million refugees as per UNHCR website)[17], who immigrated to all countries of the region and the world because of the war in Syria, an immigration that cannot be considered an individual decision in any way.

The destination choices of those willing to migrate entail complex components, which are not devoid of cultural dimensions, in addition to economic, political, and security dimensions. On one hand, in the 2011[18] Arab Index report (the year of the Arab Spring), 33% expressed their desire to immigrate to Europe, compared to 10% to America and 8% to Canada. For instance, a total of **51% of those wishing to immigrate prefer countries that adopt the democratic state model and the rule of law** (regardless of the regime and its loopholes) and **whose culture is "Western"**, based on the common perception that it is different from the "Eastern" culture (with the necessary reservations regarding these classifications). On the other hand, **only 26% of those wishing to immigrate chose GCC countries as their destination, in addition to a 5% wishing to travel to other Arab countries (see Figure 1 below)**. These percentages offer a clear cultural and political perspective that **contradicts the prevailing stereotypical perception of a cultural aversion between the West and the East, despite its objective and historical basis at times, since more than half of those wishing to immigrate deem the West, its culture, and its economic, social and institutional development a strong force of appeal despite the horrors of irregular migration and possible encounter with death.**

**15-** Arab Opinion Index 2019-2020, Ibid.

**16-** Interviews conducted exclusively for this report's preparation. All citations that do not have a source in the margin are interviews carried out by the researcher who were hired to write the background papers for this report. Unless there is a separate source, no mention to the source will be given.

**17-** UNHCR. Syria emergency. Accessed 20 February 2021 **https://www.unhcr.org/syria-emergency.html.**

**18-** Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies. "Arab Opinion Index," Arab Public Opinion Project, 2011. Retrieved from AOI-2011-report.pdf (dohainstitute.org).

The comparison of the Arab Opinion Index results **between 2011 and 2020 shows that Europe's share as the most desirable migration destination increased from 33% to 38%, while "Western" countries' share (Europe, Canada, and America) has increased from 51% to 58%. Nevertheless, the desire to migrate to Arab countries dropped 14 pp from 31% to 17%** (desire to immigrate to the Gulf states decreased from 16% to 12%), while the desire to immigrate to other countries increased by 7 pp (from 8% to 15%).

The 2019/2020 survey devoted a question to immigration to Turkey, which emerged as an important destination (not included among other countries in the 2011 survey), as its share alone reached 9%, at an equal footing with USA.[19]



Figure 1               Source: Arab Index, 2011, 2019/2020
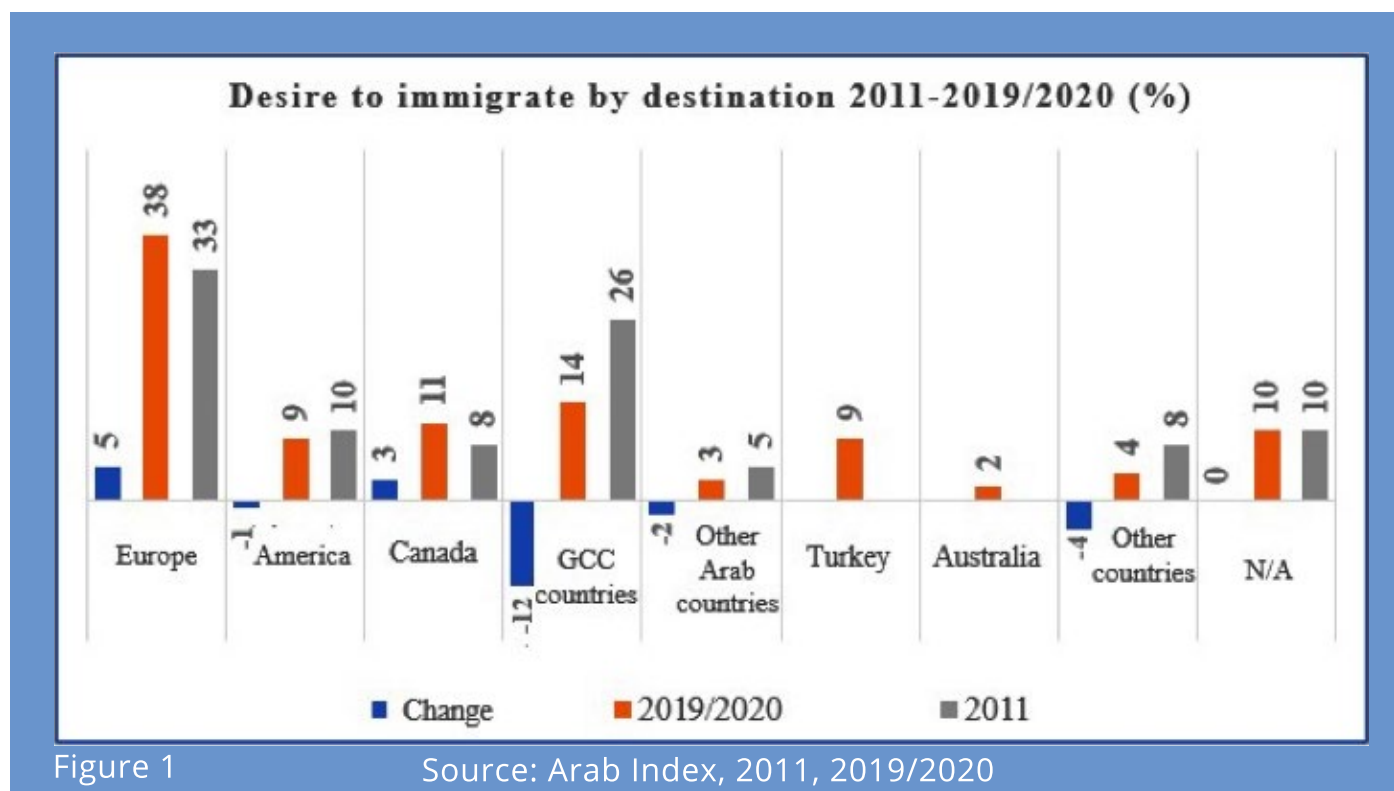
## Accordingly, we can draw two main conclusions:

**1. The first conclusion** is that the factors affecting migration are complex and are not limited to just a single one, and that the cultural and linguistic factor, historical ties, and ease of immigration are influential factors;

**2. The second conclusion** is that the clear preference for immigration to Europe, Canada, and America, contradicts the prevailing stereotypical perception of a cultural aversion between the East and the West (and by extension between Christianity and Islam in some cultural ideologies).

Migration is not a mere spatial/geographical transition in the physical sense, **but rather a transition to a societal-cultural space that is characterized by a wide margin of freedom protected by law, offering opportunities for cultural blooming with multiple options that was suppressed in the country of origin. Migration is not a cultural shift that occurs at an**

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**19-** In the new publishing policy of the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, it is possible to access detailed data on the Arab index not included in the published summary on the interactive page: **https://arabindex.dohainstitute.org/AR/Pages/Tool.aspx**

**individual level (or in the migrating community), but it is related to the fact that the very cultural elements unfolding in the host country were probably latent in the country of origin, and forcibly prevented from developing to their fullest potential and flourishing publicly** as a result of complex reasons related to political oppression and chronic tyranny, to society, relations and social formations, and to the institutions that undertake the production and dissemination of knowledge and values. In this case, education either plays a key role in stimulating change and individual and collective openness, or contributes to the consolidation of conservative and fanatic thinking.

## 3. Education promoting conservative culture (example)

### Introduction

There is an abundance of analytical and critical studies dealing with educational systems in Arab countries. Most of them describe education **systems as traditional systems that adopt indoctrination curricula that do not encourage creativity and freedom of thought and criticism and lack mechanisms for interaction and engagement between students, faculty, administration, and the community as desired.** Another type of criticism is directed towards the **outdated contents and curricula, not only from a scientific and technological perspective, but also in terms of values and concepts that they convey to students, especially citizenship and human rights values.** There is also a traditional view of the hierarchy of specializations, between the vocational and academic tracks or between scientific and literary majors, in addition to other phenomena such as the continued **use of violence and punitive discipline**, the prevalence of private education, discrimination and harassment against girls, etc.

### Pre-analysis: Some facts

"Education has not achieved its full potential in delivering the desired transformation despite the increase in school enrollment rates and the increase in investment in education in the Arab region…"[20] In general, enrollment rates in the countries of the region have improved over the past two decades. The enrollment
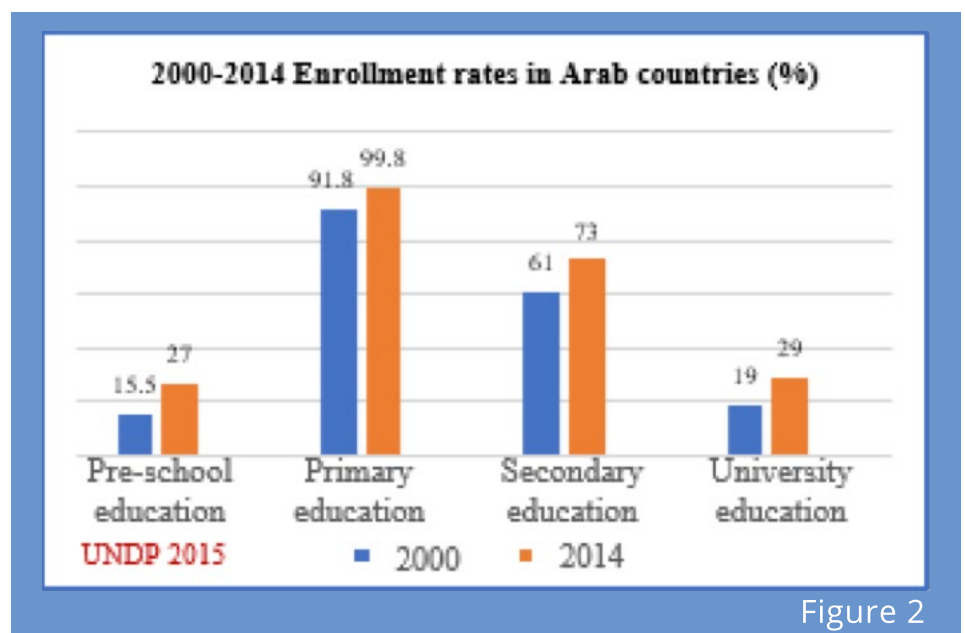
Figure 2

rate in primary education reached nearly 100% in the region in 2014, secondary education reached 73%, and university education reached 29%. However, the enrollment of children in kindergarten did not exceed 27%[21], forming a crucial gap. In reality, it is expected that these percentages have decreased with the ongoing and expanding wars and conflicts, especially

**20-** Arab Sustainable Development Report 2020, ESCWA
**21-** United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Website, **https://www.undp.org/ .**

in Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Iraq. However, problems related to education quality are more severe, as only 50% of students who complete the first stage of secondary education have the minimum required proficiency in mathematics, and only 40% of students complete secondary education[22]. "Middle East and North African students consistently rank among the lowest in the (global educational achievement) assessments. Education systems have remained largely stagnant in the Middle East and North Africa, although much has changed politically and economically, and new technologies have emerged and spread around the world over the past decade".[23]

## Teaching obedience and compliance

Educational theories have developed, successive reforms made to educational systems have multiplied, and teaching methods and means of obtaining information and knowledge have evolved. This has reduced the administrative-imperative nature of formal education, strengthened the characteristics and interactive relations between partners in an educational institution, prevented the use of violence, etc. However, this did not include all countries, societies, and educational systems in Arab countries, **whose educational systems remain mostly traditional, and the reforms introduced were either merely formal or partial, and thus did not change the systems' traditional nature;** the majority of studies agree to this.

The World Bank report "Expectations and Aspirations: A New Framework for Education in the Middle East and North Africa" indicates that education systems in these countries are hampered by behavioral norms and conflicts that are embodied in four sets of tensions, namely between (i) qualifications and skills; (ii) discipline and curiosity; (iii) control and independence; and (iv) tradition and modernity. These tensions and clashes hindered development of education and preparation of students for the future. They are "deeply rooted in the region's history, culture and political economy, although they vary from one country to another, as they have largely contributed in determining social and political relations and in supporting and shaping the education policy in the countries of the Middle East and North Africa since their independence...[24]

They tend- due to their predominantly traditional character - to give precedence to imitation, discipline, certificates, and control over standards that are most in line with modern trends.
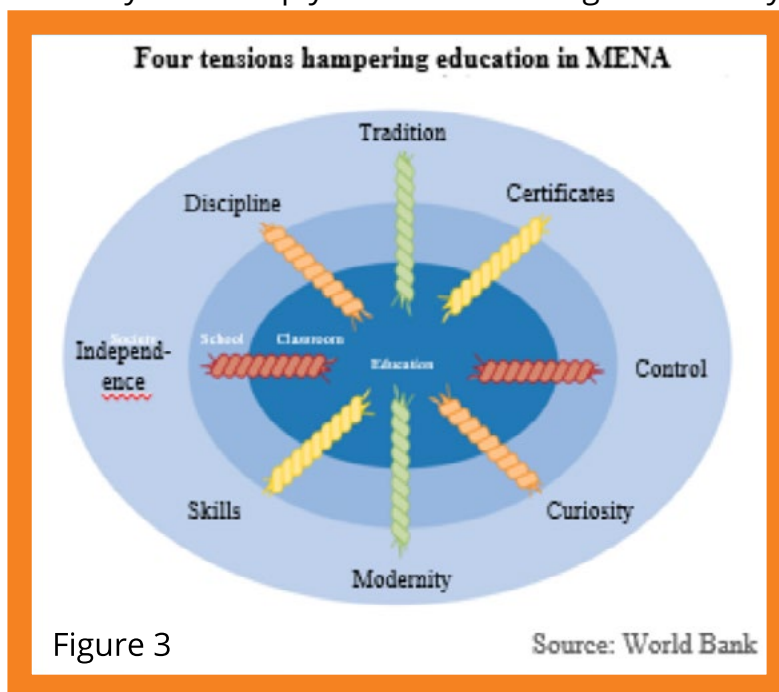


Figure 3

**22-** Arab Sustainable Development Report 2020, ESCWA
**23-** The World Bank - Expectations and Aspirations: A New Framework for Education in the Middle East and North Africa, World Bank 2020.
**24-** The World Bank - Expectations and Aspirations: A New Framework for Education in the Middle East and North Africa, World Bank 2020. https://www.albankaldawli.org/ar/region/mena/publication/expectations-and-aspirations-a-new-framework-for-education-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa

According to an ESCWA report, "the education system in the Arab region has been **designed to slow down the pace of social change**… Educational methods that focus on **learning through memorization aim to encourage respect for authority, as they prevent the development of students' critical thinking skills**… Authoritarian regimes did not content themselves with developing educational curricula that seek to instill conservative values in students, but also used them **as a tool to indoctrinate beliefs**".[25]

According to the report, the educational system, along with the political system, human rights, and patriarchal culture prevailing in society - bears responsibility for the decline in the ability of Arab youth to express themselves freely and to the limited values of equality and tolerance of diversity and difference, which appear in opinion polls or studies on values compared to other regions of the world.

## Fear of knowledge and culture

The ability to interact harmoniously with multiple sources of knowledge and culture is supposed to happen in schools and through the educational system, and scientific knowledge in natural sciences and humanities is supposed to play a **key role in teaching. Education is the primary source of this kind of scientific knowledge and critical thinking, which can balance the traditional or conservative components that dominate family, religion, patriarchal social culture, or the political ideology of the regime or reigning political parties. If education loses its function and its ability to be a source of knowledge, scientific culture, and critical thinking, there will be a major imbalance in the overall individual and collective cultural structure of society.** It also threatens to plunge this structure into stagnation and cultural and social weakness and might lose its ability to renew and keep pace with development inherently, a feature of education systems in Arab countries.

Knowledge and culture, especially scientific - natural and human - can pose a threat to authorities by questioning the prevailing political ideology and/or its social and cultural principles. On Morocco, for instance, this was clear in the battle against teaching philosophy and humanities in universities and high schools, starting in the mid 60s. On March 23, 1965, students in Casablanca went out in demonstrations, denouncing the Ministry of National Education's memorandum aimed at limiting access of all students to secondary education. Demonstrators increased and citizens from various segments joined in. However, the government reacted very violently, and a state of exception/emergency was declared on June 7 of the same year, the parliament was dissolved, and the people, parliamentarians, and professors took the fall for what had transpired. This was followed by a series of measures that reinforced religion in public schools (obligatory prayer in schools in 1966 and preference for registering Quranic students in public schools in 1968), then by prohibiting philosophical education in high schools starting the mid 70s and limiting teaching philosophy and sociology to universities. In 1979, the Institute of Sociology was closed down, philosophy was banned in the universities of Fez and Rabat,

25- The Second Social Development Report:  Inequality, Independence, and Change in the Arab World. ESCWA, 2017. https://bit.ly/3ngQo4A

and philosophy majors were removed from the remaining universities, while Departments of Islamic Studies were opened in all universities starting 1980. The elimination of philosophy constituted a real blow to the cultural and political momentum that the Moroccan political and cultural scene knew, in which philosophy professors played a prominent role trying to pave the way towards spreading enlightening and rational thinking that lays the foundations for democratic transition.

## Schools and education in the eyes of students

Is the perspective of concerned students, who are in a way the primary "victims" of the educational system, in line with the results of these studies and statistics?

With the wide prevalence of social media, the virtual space and Facebook pages - for example - have become a free space for expression, allowing us to take a look inside the minds of students to see how they look at the problems of the educational system openly and in their own language. Below is a presentation and analysis of some of the contents selected from the "Lycéena" page (our lycée[26]) on Facebook, which is the first **Tunisian website** on student affairs, bringing together more than a million members, most of whom are students from all over the country, as well as interested educators and parents. Students speak from a perspective different from their parents': they comment on the appreciation of knowledge, and their comments range from serious - although few in number - to mocking and sarcastic, reflecting their despair and lack of confidence in the educational institutions and in a future based on knowledge. Most of the comments also include an explicit reference or allusion to a refusal and/or rejection of the adopted curricula due to their futility in real life.

## School violence

The students' comments also confirm the outbreak of school violence and the confrontational nature of the relationship between students, teachers, and the administration, as well as among the students themselves (bullying). This reflects the culture pattern prevalent in educational institutions where children, adolescents, and youth spend most of their time and where their personality and culture are honed. **Wiam** writes: "The teacher greatly impacts the morale of the student, especially during exams. Once a professor - who does not deserve to be called a professor - monitored us only because she was supposed to. She showed absolutely no standards, respect, or appreciation. She threw the exam papers in our faces and yelled and growled... Anyone like her should leave the education sector if they want to raise a young generation that loves their country, or they should think about hiring inspectors (teachers and principals) who specialize in dealing with students...I am expressing my hatred and malice to her, and we shall meet again someday..." As for **Firas**, he addresses the violent teachers saying: "... You have to fix your mentality... You make us feel that you are teaching against your will, or as a favor (for us). You are looking for the most trivial things to turn students into demons."

**26-** Lycéena webpage. Retrieved from https://m.facebook.com/lyceena

These comments reflect the confrontational relationship within schools, despite the students' yearning for a different kind of relationship with teachers who can gain respect with their knowledge and flexible conversational method that students may lack in their families or small societies and hope to find in schools. Students prefer and seek a culture of dialogue and blame the school (and society and its culture, by extension) for its absence and sometimes for not responding to dialogue except under pressure.

## Trade-off between arts and sciences

The hierarchical classification of specializations is one of the common stereotypes among education players, and literature or vocational majors are often considered of lower level than scientific majors. This is usually accompanied by gender discrimination that assumes a high percentage of females in literature majors.

**Taha** links the issue to a structural problem as he commented: "This country's literature department has lost all its basics and principles, all due to the poor educational system and the intransigence of some professors in doing their work." Other comments put the regime in the dock, as in Rahma's comment: "The state today is concerned by a citizen who thinks freely and follows scientific rules, a citizen who says no to a dark reality. Unfortunately, it succeeded in doing so due to the lack of ability to reason." (This classification echoes the aforementioned battle against philosophy and sociology in Morocco in the 60s and 70s).

## Conclusion

In addition to the contents of curricula, adopted methods of teaching, and the outbreak and tolerance of violence and discipline in the school environment, **there are two important points that have a significant impact on the cultural formation of learners** and that directly influence the direction of cultural transformation and the pattern of prevailing values resulting from major characteristics in the school environment:

- **The first is the segregation between males and females in certain schools**, reinforcing stereotypes and gender/sexist discrimination, as well as the idea of alienation and separation between the sexes, which is at the core of the patriarchal mindset.

- **The second is the fact that student councils in schools (and universities) are either rarely allowed to be established, or allowed to act as dummy councils**, meaning that a young man or woman graduates from high school without any real-life experience in institutional management, which is an indispensable primary democratic experience, and without engaging in any sort of dialogue and negotiation with those who are closer to being a higher authority in their school. **These are all experiences they desperately need to be able to assume their civic role in the public sphere and to contribute effectively to the transition towards a democratic state and society. This brings us back to the assessment made at the beginning of this paragraph, which states that the educational system in Arab countries is designed to hinder, rather than contribute to, democratic transformation.**

# Chapter 3: Analysis of main problems (thematic input)

This chapter adopts a thematic approach to analysis by identifying the most important problems. A problem-theme based analysis will therefore be conducted, covering all the countries under study. It will be supported by a theoretical analysis as well as current studies that follow a participatory approach with ideas and opinions expressed directly by concerned individuals.

**This chapter covers the five main problems faced by South Mediterranean Arab countries and societies, along with their ramifications, as follows:**

**1.** **Identity**
**2.** **Religion and religious ideology**
**3.** **Democracy**
**4.** **Gender equality**
**5.** **Consumerist culture**

## 1. Identity

Throughout history, the formation of the nation-state has been associated with a symbolic component according to which **the national identity** of an individual is defined by whether or not they belong to such nation-state; live within its confines and practice social, economic, and cultural life as prescribed by its constitution and laws. This common belonging among citizens defines them as a group - people (citizens and groups). It represents **a newly-formed identity that transcends (but does not cancel) traditional identities inherited from the pre-modern state.** However, decades of accelerated globalization led to a crisis in this modern national identity, stimulating the emergence of all kinds of supra-state and infra-state identities. And as the concept of state-nation erodes, the sovereignty of national states diminishes, and the economy, consumption, and culture become more globalized, these identities proliferate and grow more influential. **Hence, what was considered at some point in time a post nation-state phase was effectively, in part, a return to the pre-nation state**; it was manifested in the revival of subsidiary identities inherited from the pre-modern era and the pre-modern civil state period.

**Three categories of identities must inevitably be examined by the researcher:**

• **First**, **the familial, clannish, or tribal identities**, and by extension all identities that have a local spatial character and are originally based on kinship ties;

• **Second**, **the national, ethnic, or racial identities**, which are sometimes characterized by linguistic specificities (the particular language of a concerned group); and

• **Third**, **the religious or sectarian identities.**[27]

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27- In addition to the three identities described, the sexual or gender identity must be mentioned for its significance. This fourth identity, on the other hand, has a unique status that pervades other identities, including modern civil identities, and therefore falls outside the context of this paragraph, despite the fact that the report devotes significant space to this topic in following parts.

These affiliations/identities are both **infra-state** and **cross-border in nature** (some ethnicities and nationalities are present across the borders in multiple neighboring countries, as in the case of the Kurds who are spread in Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran; some tribes or ethnicities like the Nubians who are present across Egypt and Sudan; or tribes and clans scattered in more than one country as well). Finally, **they can also have a supra-state character. This is the case of the Islamic religious identity**, which is a sort of **international (religious) identity** that goes beyond the nation-state idea, especially as it manifested itself in extremist armed movements (ISIS being one of its most recent manifestations).

The following section of the report will focus on primary identities that are often inherited and not voluntary, as they are closer to the prevailing concept of identity compared to other affiliations (secondary or voluntary) that are not often considered as a constituent part of the person's identity (for example, belonging to a union or a party is different than belonging to a family, clan, or sect, apart from exceptional cases such as affiliations to ideological parties). **Identity in its common meaning is an expression of a "fixed" essence in the individual which represents, in the individual's or the group's opinion, their authentic intrinsic nature and their deep-rooted culture that determine their attitudes. One conceives this essence as a natural given that is not acquired during the course of their personal life and through social relations that contribute to shaping them as a social individual.**

Culture - as a conscious lifestyle and practice - becomes **an identity when it develops into an all-encompassing component of the individual and collective structure of the self and when the gap between the individual and their group grows smaller, an identity being usually collective in nature rather than individual.** The idea of individual identity is found in individuals who are relatively free from organic assimilation into the group, who value their individuality and see it as the expression of all the uniqueness they have acquired through their real-life experience by interacting with collective identities and cultures inherited from their family and social and cultural environment, including religious or sectarian ones.

## Overlapping, complementary, dissonant identities

**Jamil** (a young Syrian living in Germany where he migrated after 2011) says[28]: "Before the outbreak of the revolutions, I was the Syrian, the theater actor, and the young man imprisoned in a long list of traditional identities that were imposed on me, that I did not choose. And when the revolution began, the identity of the political activist, the relief activist, and the artist emerged to the surface. Other identities remained, but their positions changed. Changing circumstances reinforce one identity and bury another." He adds: "A human needs a clear identity in order to belong to a group that protects him - such as a sect or religion - but in Germany, the state protects me with the law regardless of my ideological or ethnic affiliation. I am protected here by human rights principles, while in Syria I needed to belong to a sect and a family."

**Jamil's** opinion reflects the plurality of his identities and the change that occurred in the relation between them. It also points out his shift from the inherited collective identity to his modern

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**28-** As stated earlier, the present report includes citations from personal statements made by individuals who were interviewed by the researchers preparing the report's background papers or by the Network team, unless otherwise indicated.

individual identity expressed by his uniqueness (i.e., his own personality) and the transformation mechanism that was first stimulated by developments inside Syria (regime crisis and violent multilateral conflict), then the spatial transition from Syria to Germany, which is also a transition from a specific political-cultural sphere to another. The universal principles governing social life and the state (such as a constitution and a legal system protecting everyone) play a decisive role in the transition from self-identification as a non-unique member of a primary group (a sect, a family, etc.) to a citizen - an individual who needs nothing but to be protected by the law. In other terms, **the primary identity does not determine the nature of the state and social relations; it is rather the latter that determines the former to a large extent. However, new identities do not cancel older ones; they transform and change their hierarchy in public life, modify their functions**, or in the least interact with them.

The objective basis of the plurality of identities lies in the socio-historical reality of a given country or society. All of these affiliations do not necessarily develop into full-fledged and effective "identities" in public life (in particular). Their existence and effectiveness may remain limited to the private sphere, as a mere sub-culture within the general culture.  However, the possibility of their transformation into an active identity is greater when two or more components (national-ethnic, linguistic, religious, sectarian, etc.) meet in one group, especially when combined with a historical, social, or political specificity, be it related to enjoying certain privileges or suffering from deprivation and discrimination.  In these situations, such sub-identity may have a current function that overshadows other identities, especially the modern civil national identity, whether in terms of defending privileges or - which is the predominant case - creating mechanisms of solidarity against what is deemed as injustice or discrimination by the authority or another dominant "identity". Totalitarian ideologies of religious, nationalist, or political-ideological character can turn into a highly effective type of identity in some cases, overriding or even banishing all other identities. This was particularly the case in a number of South Mediterranean countries where these ideologies obscure the idea of a citizenship based on the principles of justice and equality before the law, and eliminate individual uniqueness in favor of a group that identifies itself with the traditional or new authority. **And here lies an illustration of the interdependence between culture, identity and democracy.**

## Self-identification

Palestinian researcher Alaa Al-Senussi believes that in traditional societies, it is easy for an individual to find their identity simply by defining their family extension... In fact, families in Arab societies not only inherit their lineage, but also religion, sect, political and cultural orientations, and in some cases, profession. Although identity is the outcome of meanings that the individual draws about himself based on their interactions with others: "identity is transformed and interacts with reality and history."[29] The common perception is that it expresses the fixed essence of the group to which the individual belongs, a fundamental identity that is similar to itself despite the change in some of its secondary elements, and it is only really defined by being different from another identity. **Collective identity - as materialized in the predominant practice - is the expression of the collective ego that is different**

29- Abdul Hakim Amin, Virtual Identities in Arab Societies. Dar Al-Amane, Rabat 2017

**from/contrary/opposite to the collective other.** There is no doubt that some perceptions and capacity-building programs adopted by civil society and international organizations that preach or train on "accepting others" as an alternative to intolerance and hatred ultimately perpetuate dual identities (me/others), even though its explicit goal is the opposite. The idea of getting to know the different other and accepting diversity and pluralism is in its essence a consolidation of the ego and a training to accept the difference from the egoistic position, rather than transcending the principle of identity as a fixed value and transforming it into a historical-social expression or product that is inevitably transformed, thus making the me/other duality a false simplification of reality.

## Identity and youth after the Arab Spring

Arab revolutions had a tremendous effect on the relationship of youth with identity, that is closely linked to the popular movement's view of the crisis as a comprehensive one with a very strong cultural component. The demands for dignity, regime change, freedom, social justice, livelihood (bread) and work... are interconnected in an implicit holistic effort aiming to get rid of the prevailing state model as well as its cultural component and all the troubled individual and collective identities imposed by this model.  In the opinion of the protesters, the modern civil democratic state (a unified demand of Arab Spring uprisings from Morocco to Yemen) highlighted the desired transformation, albeit in a general and ambiguous sense (in the positive sense of ambiguity, i.e., a source of multiple and creative inspirations), towards adopting a version of the state and community organization model similar to that in European constitutional democracies on the northern bank of the Mediterranean. The inclusion of a cultural dimension in the change agenda and the pursuit of a new societal model is a key factor in raising the problem of identity as a fundamental issue in the journey of transformation sought by the Arab Spring uprisings.

**Nour** from Egypt believes that an individual possesses multiple identities that interact with their surrounding circumstances, such that one or some of them prevail and manifest themselves: "I used to proudly identify myself as Egyptian during the revolution.  I was in harmony with the collective identity of Tahrir Square and other squares. I thought that my many identities as a woman, as an atheist, and as a photographer would find some space. But after the revolution's defeat, we redefined ourselves with parts of the identity for which we were persecuted. She adds: We define ourselves once again by expressing our opposition to the regime... but I stopped defining myself as Egyptian: I now say I am from Egypt; The national identity is too shallow for me, perhaps because I do not agree with the current form of the nation."

Youth participating in the study distinguish between inherited identity vocabulary and those they choose, such as ideological affiliation. Edward from Lebanon says: "I inherited Christianity from my family, but years of revolutions have driven me to non-religion, and I have become an activist for social justice." As for **Mona** from Palestine, she says: "My Palestinian identity colors the rest of my identities... I am proud of being Palestinian, but in the eyes of a non-Palestinian, I am a terrorist and barbarian, a woman whose only concern is marriage, and a person immersed in pain and living on the margins of a world that is unaware of what is happening in

it." Therefore, today I first define myself with my work, with my intellectual convictions, and then by my Palestinian identity. I try to fight stereotyping by revealing the richness of the Palestinian identity, which encompasses dozens of identities. I recently wrote next to my name: I fight against occupation, I work in digital security, I draw with pencils, and I ride bicycles."

The previous testimonies are examples of multiple identities and the journey a person embarks on to transform from the inherited collective identity to the chosen modern individual identity. This alienation from the collective identity emerges the more a group contradicts or suppresses a person's individuality. This may manifest in the "defeat" of the January revolution in Egypt or in the tug of war Mona is experiencing between feeling proud for resisting occupation on one hand and what she did not explicitly say on the other hand about the strong degradation in the symbolic and human dimension of the Palestinian resistance, which has weakened its attractiveness and ability to express the individual identities of Palestinians. This comes as a result of the deep impasse in the relations between Palestinian political parties and the problems arising from the presence of an authority lacking the powers to coordinate with the Israeli authority, thus leading to a very strong confusion in the identity of the Palestinian fighter for the liberation of Palestine, once a cultural and identity role model during the prime of the Palestinian cause at the hand of the Palestine Liberation Organization and its artistic and cultural expressions between the 60s and 80s in particular.[30]

The problem of identity presents itself in a different way in the case of **Rami** (the Egyptian Nubian poet), who painfully sees that the Nubians in Egypt were deliberately marginalized and their just demands for return or compensation for their lands that were gradually seized to build the High Dam were ignored. As a result, the Nubian tribes scattered across Egypt. According to Rami, they are not only a minority, but a dispersed minority whose members suffer from displacement, discrimination based on race and color, and poverty. Nubians lost their historical source of livelihood, which depended on the Nile, and went in search for marginal occupations that barely make ends meet. Despite their harsh reality, Nubians strive to preserve their identity through their language, music, and cultural vocabulary that struggle to survive. **Rami defines his identity as "Nubian" in the first place, and then Egyptian, but he realizes that his Egyptian identity transcended everything during the revolution (January 2011)** and that he longed, like all other Nubians, for equality, justice, and eradication of all discrimination against Nubians in Egypt. However, the years following the revolution were enough to push him and his tribe back to their circle of ethnic identity, believing that achieving equality of rights was impossible: "When the Nubian families scattered across Egypt, all that remained of Nubia were cheap utensils that resembled those of our ancestors and the bright colors we painted on the walls to remind us of our spacious houses overlooking the Nile, with halls open to the sky. I fear that my younger nephews and nieces will lose their Nubian identity. I am afraid of their angry affiliation to a homeland that only neglects them more and more. What is left for them? They have nothing but a brown skin to remind them of their past identity and bring them discrimination, bullying and exclusion."

**30-** See popular solidarity in the Arab world from the Renaissance to the Arab Spring. Adib Nehme, Ziyad Abdel Samad, Malik Al-Saghiri, Muhammad Mersal. Dar Al-Farabi, Arab NGO Network for Development. Beirut, 2016.

The more lacking democracy, social justice, and equal rights are, the stronger a sub-identity becomes, as it develops into a hegemonic identity and a tool of collective effectiveness and takes a confrontational stance against the prevailing political and societal regime, which loses its inclusive national character. **Also, the more countries, regimes, and societies tend to truly recognize diversity, the principle of equality, the rule of law, and democracy**, the less severe is the clash between identities and the cultural components of a society and a country. As for the Amazighs in Morocco, **Khalil** (the Moroccan political activist) says that the reforms undertaken by the Kingdom of Morocco, such as the adoption of the Amazigh language as an official language in the constitution, contributed to absorbing Amazigh rage and defusing the potential explosion. The Moroccan constitution considered the Amazigh culture a heritage for all Moroccans and the Amazigh identity a component of the country's identity, marked by a plurality of languages and ethnicities[31]. He adds, "We made peace with the Amazigh component of the Moroccan society. These reforms have helped us to reconcile with ourselves as Amazighs. My Amazigh identity has become an addition to me rather than a burden or a reason for discrimination or exclusion."

## Identity in the age of technology and internet

Technology has introduced new opportunities to discuss and define identity, as well as to learn about the multiple identities of an individual. Technology has enhanced the abilities of any small group (or large in number) to communicate with like-minded others in other parts of the world. For example, Nour from Egypt says: "We do not know the exact number of Baha'is in Egypt, but my Baha'i friend and her family have extensive relations with the Baha'i community in many countries. They are like a large family that meets electronically every now and then, as if to compensate for their sense of marginalization." On one hand, the virtual space provides a venue for expressing the identity of the group (and the individual) beyond the borders of the state in which they live, and expands opportunities for forming a complete identity, even in theory, unbound by restrictions of the countries they live in.

On the other hand, the political, social, and cultural restrictions that besiege Arab youth make internet platforms an important outlet with no alternative in most countries. These platforms contribute to the formation of a virtual community whose members share interests and convictions, while technology provides a partial identity for young people and compensates them for their real, but suppressed, identity(ies).

**Mona** (a digital security expert from Palestine) warns of this virtual space provided by technology, explaining that the current media is turning people into groups living on siloed islands. Modern technologies are able to detect the trends of individuals who use them and provide them with materials that are consistent with their tendencies, thus instilling the false conviction that they are part of a broad base of individuals supporting their ideas and visions and part of a larger community... These technologies place a person with like-minded individuals, making them believe that they are a member of a large group. These virtual islands are formed, especially on social media, in a double process: the first is the pursuit of similar-minded individuals to meet and create a safe space that does not question or challenge their convictions; the second is a

31- Ikram Adani, Amazigh and the Problems of Identity and Citizenship, As-Safir Arabi, 2015. **https://bit.ly/3C6PldU**

path deliberately imposed or stimulated by two parties. The first party is the admin or sponsor of the page in question, whose intervention is often direct and similar to the censorship and direction exercised by the owner of a traditional newspaper over its content and publications. The second party is social media regulators who influence users at a global level and who depend on algorithms to guide them in an indirect and more complex, but more effective and comprehensive way.

## Identities in the virtual space are more extremist

The characteristics of the virtual space, especially social media, enable it to act as a venue where like-minded people come together, generating a special dynamism for the development of its members' ideas and attitudes towards extremism and radicalism. This dynamism is also driven by the lack of content controls (with some exceptions) and catalysts injected by those in charge of the page in question or the most organized block in it.

**In this sense, social media (and the virtual space in general) are not more honest in expressing the actual reality, as they can be considered biased to the most radical ideas, and the content they deliver often lacks internal consistency.** However, this space, for the same reasons previously mentioned, also represents an important source for research into the dynamics and opinion trends that form at the bottom and margins of society, and among the age groups that most frequently use it (youth and adolescents), which represent a component of the realistic picture of societies and culture without abridging them all.

We will further explore this characteristic of social media through two examples.

**Example 1:** On December 18, 2018, **AJ+[32] published a video produced by Al Jazeera channel and entitled "For a white and Christian Europe - the French Generation Identity: Calls for anti-immigration and the murder of Muslims"**. The title not only bears a guidance, but even a direct provocation of intolerant reactions. This is an example on the aforementioned impact of an intervention from the page owner or sponsor on the page content and its increased bias. Although the information itself is true (i.e., the emergence of this extremist group in France), the page in publishing this video is not reflecting the fact that this group only represents a small fraction of the French political and cultural spectrum.

As expected, this video **sparked** responses and comments of a similar nature, i.e., insistence on the Arab or Islamic identity vs. the European/French Christian identity referred to in the video. **Some responses included historical references to colonization. Zeno** (Algeria), for example, commented: "We are ready to return to our home countries provided that France no longer interferes in our issues or benefits from our resources and compensates us for everything that was stolen from us from 1830 until today." **Hajr** from Algeria also commented in French "When they leave Africa and the rest of the world, then we will leave France." Meanwhile, other responses used Islamic references in a more radical discourse on identity, including statements on fatalism. According to **Mohammed** from Morocco, the French group is

**32-** AJ+ webpage: **https://www.ajplus.net/**

acting the way it is because they, i.e., Europeans, "realized how dangerous things have become because their hour has come and Muslims will have the last word. All the small signs are here, and they realized that Islam will have the last word and that the truth is second to none. They realized how fast Islam is spreading in Europe and Canada."   Mohammed's comment sparked opposing responses, including one from Dali from Tunisia who said "Ignorance is a catastrophe, my brother... Europe dislikes Muslims because of people like you who do not respect their host countries, and that at the expense of good people." Mohammed's comment also triggered many polarized comments, some supporting Mohammed, others supporting Dali, as well as many sarcastic comments. **Sarcasm and mockery are very common in comments posted on social media, and perhaps a user's favorite way to avoid entering into a serious discussion, albeit within the limits of social media.**

In spite of the similarity, common bias, and implicit or explicit choices of the page, there is no actual homogenous identity as reflected in the comments.  Although one may conclude from the attack on Europe generally and France specifically the presence of a unified and consistent Arab identity in the face of others, interactions show otherwise. In response to a Sudanese young man who wondered why immigrant Arabs don't immigrate to GCC countries instead "where life is good", **Khulood** from Tunisia said "The slavery and ignorance of GCC people never were or will be the solution." **There is an obvious sign of fractures among Arab populations from different countries, which significantly undermines the idea of one core Arab identity vs. Western identity. This is also noticeable at the national level. In fact, many divisions exist within the same country, which effectively abolishes the idea of a unique Arab or Islamic identity vs. a European or Western identity. This division is merely ideological.**

**Example 2:** Interestingly, this ideological division and reduction into two core opposed identities cover major and minor issues at once. In this **second example**, we look into polarization in social media comments to a video of a virtual concert by Korean band "K Pop" posted on AJ+ Arabic (the key regional channel included in the social media analysis) on October 11, 2020, where comments were largely generalized. According to the comments posted on the video, the band is an invasion or attack against the Arab-Islamic identity and culture by spreading corruption. "What culture are you referring to? The culture of a man with feminine hair wearing lipstick?!", said **Majdi** from Tunisia. Other comments referred to the refusal of "other cultures due to the fear of affecting the Arab-Islamic culture that must "set limits" to practices brought by a "dangerous and foreign other". **Chahine** from Palestine said: "Imagine that most K Pop fans are Arab youth. With time, this generation will do the same as this band". Meanwhile, other users refused this band because **"it is spreading moral degradation and sexual perversion**, rather than spreading Korean culture." Other comments added: "Koreans are known for being radical and racist, especially against Muslims..." Some users also deemed the unprecedented promotion of this band to be merely commercial, in a manner similar to the previous promotion of American culture which produced a mentally disabled generation. They considered that praising this culture will produce a sexually and mentally perverse generation, and that children must be protected from it. **Conspiracy theories are always present in the identity debate.**

On the other hand, an intense debate also took place from the opposing point of view, with page followers from the same countries ridiculing the previous comments and opinions. The reactions to this post can be divided into two key categories: 1) The video is about a music genre that we simply may or may not like, and the matter is not worth this fuss and aggressiveness, and 2) A similar debate defending the band and responding to racist statements against the band and Koreans arose. For example, Nour from Jordan made a comparison between band members and Arab young men, and commented: "Unfortunately, each one of these band members is worth 20 Arab men, and these are singers, not even specialized in a specific field. Excuse me, but you think you're better than them simply because you believe your culture is superior to theirs." Sondos from Hebron also commented: "You're making a big deal out of this simply because you cannot accept a different culture."

What's interesting here is the intersection of different societal levels and the similarity in reactions to minor and major issues alike, as well as the particular use of historical and religious references to support this clash of cultures as a core and deep battle, the idea of a unified identity despite differences in environment and actual diversity, and conspiracy theories. **The above not only reinforces the hypothesis that the virtual space is more radical and polarized than real life in certain societies, but also identifies existing and expandable ideas and opinions to the extent enabled by a given environment.**

## 2. Religion and religious ideology Towards an objective understanding of religious devotion and the role of religion

Religion still plays a critical role in the social and political life of Southern Mediterranean countries: 86% of residents in Arab countries consider themselves religious (23% are very religious and 63% are somewhat religious) according to the Arab Index for 2019-2020. The share of very religious residents dropped to its lowest in 2011 (Arab Spring year) at 19% and reached its highest in 2014 and 2015 at 24%[33]. This idea (the importance of the role of religion) is highly accepted in most references covering the role of religion in Arab countries. In fact, the formal political and ideological discourse of these systems revolves around religion. Most state constitutions refer to Islam as the state religion or describe Sharia Law as a key or primary source for national legislation, reaffirming the strong presence of religion (specifically Islam) in formal political discourse. Furthermore, it is worth noting that different Islamic parties have a strong and effective social and political presence. This includes violent extremist Islamic groups which are an expression of the impactful role of religion in the course of events in Arab countries.

However, numerous pitfalls can impair objectivity in understanding and analyzing the reality of things in favor of an ideologized understanding based on paradoxes or exaggerations. One of these pitfalls is the failure to differentiate between religion and religious ideology, nationalism (Arab or other) and Islam, and religion/social belief and religion in ideologized political use in religious political group (e.g., Muslim Brotherhood, Salafists, popular struggle Islam, or

**33-** AJ+ webpage: **https://www.ajplus.net/**

extremist jihadists), i.e., a difference reflected in the linguistic differentiation between Muslim and Islamist. Add to this the generalization of different attitudes, opinions, and practices of a limited number of terrorist organizations under the umbrella of Islam to all Muslims or Arab nationalists, etc.

We refer specifically to the approaches that isolate religion from its political framework (its current political functions as an ideology) or from culture and the cultural factor with its all-encompassing nature, as well as approaches that reduce all religions to one specific religion (Islam) and neglect the existence of other religions (Christian, Jewish, Baha'i, and so on), and approaches that **do not recognize sectarian affiliations whose effectiveness seems to be more powerful than general religious affiliation** (for example, sectarianism in Lebanon and Iraq and its political and cultural role, or the Shiite or Sunni sectarian affiliation that is most present in the region's conflicts with its political content and overshadows the affiliation to the common religion, Islam). We must not overlook the fact that the role of religion-sect includes Islam and other religions, especially Christianity, where they have a tangible and influential presence (Lebanon, Egypt...), or Judaism (and we have an extremely radical model in the State of Israel which defines itself as a fundamentally religious state).

**Religion is not an essence that remains static, fixed with time, nor is it a principle that explains (almost) everything; it is rather a social, historical, and cultural phenomenon that needs to be interpreted as part of its changing context and current functions, and should not be dealt with as a fixed, simple, and flat reality.** This is the reality of religion in Southern Mediterranean Arab States, far from simplified stereotyping.

## Is Change Starting to Take Place After the Arab Spring?

There is controversy and reciprocity between transformations in the political field and in the religious field, as transformation in one of the two fields extends to the other and affects it significantly. About half of the Arab youth (49%) say that religion is losing its influence in the Middle East: "I agree with those who say that religion has lost a lot of its influence after the Arab revolutions." This is how Rami (an Egyptian poet of Nubian origin living in Cairo) answers, describing the revolutions as being originally a revolution against political constants and intellectual postulates. As a result, groups of youth expressed their religious doubts, and some of them even publicly declared their actual abandonment of religion. Some of them gained respect and became a role model for others, which certainly paved the way for others to follow in their footsteps declare their religious doubts as well. He cites here "the widespread abandonment of hijab that Egyptian society witnessed and is still witnessing, which began timidly in the months following the revolution and then soon spread in the governorates, without reaching the villages where hijab is prevailing as cultural symbol rather than a religious one."

Whereas the assessment of Sana', a Tunisian feminist, is "contradictory" (at least explicitly), as she believes that "the revolution unveiled the Tunisian society which for decades had been hidden behind a false religious liberal state. Thus, underlying religious convictions were uncovered and soon announced themselves on and outside social media." Some link this reaction to the

restriction of religious expression during the rule of former presidents Habib Bourguiba and Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali and believe that the revolution put an end to decades of oppression, driving intrinsic convictions to emerge to the surface. According to this view, religiosity (which is implicitly assumed to have special political or cultural connotations) is inherent in the Tunisian people, and secularism is a western culture imposed on Tunisia by Bourguiba and Ben Ali and does not express Tunisia's true identity.

While the return of religious manifestations, which undoubtedly include an ideological and political dimension, was one of the Tunisian Revolution's consequences, the Revolution in Libya yielded religious confusion. **Mohammad**, a young Libyan journalist believes that "the Revolution contributed to the exposure of Libyan youth to various intellectual visions that shocked and sometimes confused them.   Religiosity in Libyan culture has been linked to conservative tribes, and they have become one, with inseparable components. The revolution confused tribal as well as religious views and shed light on the concepts of citizenship and equality, but they weren't instilled deep in society to yield a different culture."

## Religiosity characteristics in opinion polls

**The distinction between social religiosity and politicized and ideologized religiosity is necessary in order to understand the role of religion in society**. The Arab Opinion Index report for 2019/2020[34] included a question to identify **the most important criteria that distinguish a religious from a non-religious individual.** The results showed that 40% of respondents defined a religious person as a person who regularly performs religious duties, i.e., prioritizing **the ritual aspect**; while 30% considered that the most important characteristics of a religious person are moral such as honesty and integrity **(ethical aspect)**, and about 25% gave priority to how a person treats others (good treatment, respect for kinship with relatives and family - **social-relational aspect**).The latter category is the closest to what can be considered social religiosity ("religion is about the way you treat others") in line with family and social customs, while the first category is the most willing in principle to accept the most behaviorally and politically extremist interpretation. The second category falls between these two thresholds, as general conditions and/or individual moral characteristics can shift towards social adaptation and tradition respect or towards a call for change in behavior and values in case of conflict between the priority of following religious purposes (Maqasid) as they are interpreted or keeping up with the current situation.

It should also be noted that religious faith and religious ideology are both closely related to sectarian divisions, as **we rarely find religiosity in its pure religious form as much as we find it in its sectarian-denominational form. Religious-political movements are usually formed according to sectarian divisions**, as they are parties that follow the Twelver Shi'ite sect (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist), or Salafist or Sunni jihadist movements, or the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood movement, or the Maronite, Armenian, Shiite, Sunni, Druze, or Alawi sectarian political parties, etc... as is the case in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq, etc...

**34-** See the teenage Arab girl, ibid

There are also disparities in perceptions and attitudes between sub-regions and countries, based on their situations and the degree of their religious or sectarian diversity, their political system, or other factors that make each generalization subject to deviation from objectivity. The idea of separating religion and politics highlights the idea of a civil or secular state and places us before a transformation in culture and values that have not yet had the conditions to allow it to be expressed theoretically and abstractly in accepting the civil/secular idea. However, the acceptance rate of religion and politics separation is high (49%), which is often the result of experiences with religious or sectarian parties whether in institution governance or conflict in society including confrontations, conflicts, civil wars or extremist behavioral practices.

Attitudes towards religion and political organization in Arab countries 2019/2020[35]
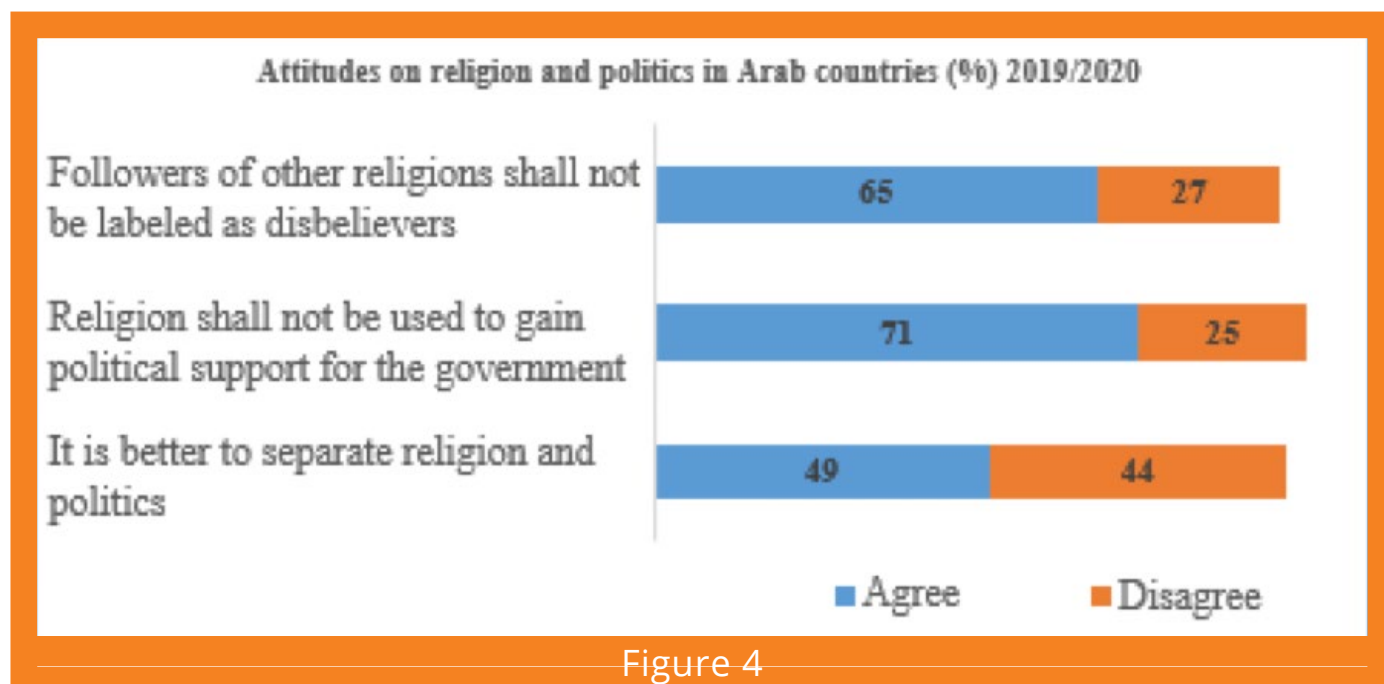


Figure 4

Source: The Arab Opinion Index, 2019/2020

**In short, we see that religion is not the first and sole determinant that acts independently from other factors. Rather, the role of religion can be interpreted through the political and social history of the country in question, as well as the characteristics of its political system, political crises, and developments that coincide with the time at which these surveys were conducted.**

## Political and psychological religiosity functions

Religion is one of several social action factors. It is not supposed to be isolated when taken into consideration, but rather through its interaction, i.e. influencing and being influenced by all other factors. Through this interaction, its role and multiple and distinct functions are determined according to place and time. There have been profound transformations in religion and religiosity structure in countries of the region, and they cannot be understood outside the context of globalization and its transformations, the regional-international geostrategic conflicts, or the political (and other) developments within each country separately. **The**

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**35-** The questions include 6 possible answers: Strongly agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly disagree, Don't know, and Refuse to answer. Agreement responses are represented with the sum of "Strongly agree" and "Agree" answers; Opposition responses are the sum of "Disagree" and "Strongly disagree" answers.

**current religiosity (Islamic in particular) is therefore different than the inherited religiosity. It is a very contemporary religiosity that is another manifestation of globalization and the post nation-state era.** We will find clear examples/evidence thereof at the level of awareness prevalent among citizens, especially youth and adolescents.

The report on Arab Adolescent Girls (2003)[36] has previously dedicated a special chapter on values, including looking at religion from the eyes of adolescents. It is important to revisit this report as it was developed in a participatory method (interviews with adolescents from 7 Arab countries) between 2001 and 2003, i.e., at the time of transformation at the beginning of the new millennium (the era of Al-Qaeda - Bin Laden - Jihadi Islam). The report - and its findings - clearly distinguished between traditional-social religiosity aligned with family and traditions, and the new Islam that is openly and sometimes crudely rebellious against them. It also pointed out that the source of religiosity has shifted from the family and the local clergyman to satellite channels and political Islam organizations. **The report also referred to the confusion of the meanings of religion and faith with customs and traditions. Adolescents often confuse - and even never distinguish - between religious teachings and inherited traditions or prevailing social norms.**

In light of the political and economic crises, the internal cultural crises and those resulting from globalization, **traditional Islam no longer constitutes answers to challenges, therefore religion has emerged as a coherent ideological system that provides them**. "Religious movements of a political and political-cultural nature...transcend national borders, and are closer to the (integrated) value system. If the believers' attitudes and behaviors in different countries vary and are affected by local environments and individual and household characteristics, the attitudes of those affiliated to religious and political movements are similar in several aspects... (Moreover) The highest degree of similarity between stereotypical attitudes is found within this group from different countries. We also find a degree of interdependence (consistency) in the attitudes of an individual between one domain and another, even if the source of this similarity is the commitment and adherence to religious scripts regarding what is Halal or Haram or the iteration of unified positions on comprehensive issues.[37] **Religion is the closest to a comprehensive popular philosophy, and in this sense, it represents a reference frame - even if it is irrational according to certain views - that provides answers with a certain degree of consistency to all questions**. In a specific sense, religion turns into a comprehensive ideology and moral standard **that instills in its believers a feeling of reassurance, contentment, and self-confidence and even superiority** over those who disagree with them; and this is where its strength (and weakness) stems from.

**36-** The Second Arab Women Development Report - Arab Adolescent Girls: Reality and Prospects Center of Arab Woman for Training and Research, CAWTAR, 2003..
**37-** See the teenage Arab girl, ibid

## Religion and religiosity: Youth perspective

Nour, the young Egyptian photographer, believes that revolutions did not erupt everywhere in Egypt; rather there are areas that have become more secluded due the declining development situation therein, such as remote villages and governorates. After the revolution, the economic conditions deteriorated, giving the upper hand to religiosity and reclusion. However, she adds: "Religiosity waves made their comeback, even in the capital and big cities after the revolution relapsed and opposing political groups were persecuted. This prompted some people to join the opposition by identifying with groups they saw as persecuted."

Nour describes the youth as angry, while the tight security grip only feeds their irritation: "Extreme religiosity or atheism are both ways to escape contradiction experienced by the Arab youth who ignited revolutions and changed rulers. Nevertheless, the youth are still facing security persecution and marginalization, as if it is a punishment for the entire young generation".

**Jamil**, the young Syrian, talks about his peers who joined armed religious groups, with violence as their means of opposing the regime: "We were a group of youth dreaming of a democratic Syria, and since we all worked in the theater, we developed "home theater" a few months after the rise of the revolution.  We used to write plays and perform them in the houses of some citizens. The experiment was a huge success and Syrians enjoyed discussing freedom, equality and democracy. However, what seemed to be a promising new path for change turned into a war that tore apart the experience and the group. Our directions were dissipated: some of us, including myself, were arrested, others joined the regime army, while others joined the Islamic opposition army". In this sense, the reaction of a group of like-minded young people can be very different to repression, civil strife, or foreign wars. This simply means that affiliation with religious organizations or conversion to behavioral and political religiosity is not necessarily the result of an intellectual conviction, as much as it can also result from a shock, setback, or flight forward. It can also be caused by an incentive to join a movement enabling youth to exert the highest possible influence - according to their assumption - on the situation course. It's a quest for power and authority, as well as a search for belonging, protection, and tranquility. This is a political, psychological, and realistic path at the same time, and extremist religious organizations use these mechanisms to attract fighters, including European society members themselves.

## Conviction, means, and ready self-defense

**Hanan**, a young Jordanian computer engineer, questions **the religiosity of male youth, and describes it as a selective, formal religiosity** that only aims to enhance their presence in society as religious youth, and seeks primarily to tighten control over women. Although the patriarchal culture is completely sufficient to impose male domination on women, religion adds to that domination a sacred and irresistible power that weakens women's resistance and often freezes it completely. "...I was threatened with divorce when I wanted to take off the hijab and my husband found the full support of the males in my family. The strange thing is that my husband does not pray, and he drinks Arak (a kind of alcohol), but he does not leave the prayer beads from his hand, and invokes God in all his dialogues as if he believes that his actions are inspired by God!".

The essence of the problem here is not about the husband's religious convictions as much as it is the use of religion to fortify his patriarchal attitudes by virtue of its sanctity. Only in this case, the family's solidarity with the wife can be overcome through the combination of the patriarchal culture of the males of her family with religious immunity, which here plays a key role in resolving the situation against her. **We can assume that this function of religion - strengthening culture, behaviors, customs and traditions on the one hand, and reinforcing political or social authority or any other authority on the other hand - is reiterated in all fields**. In this case, we witness a combination made up of a special interpretation of religion, confusion between religion, customs, and traditions, and the use of religion as a defensive weapon against any **"external threat to identity", defending real or fictitious privileges, or against breaking from or rebelling against norms and authority.**

Such defensive attitude is found in **its most obvious and extreme forms in the cyberspace**, where the most extreme religious conceptions are frequently used to justify all kinds of prejudice. Moreover, religious arguments emerge in interactions between the concerned country (the East) and the West (Europe) and is linked with colonial history, current relations between opposites of the Mediterranean, or even attitudes towards the phenomenon of terrorism whether in defense or attack. There was a distinct specificity in the use of religion and religious discourse in everything related to the gender equality issue. **This is nothing but an affirmation that religion serves as a popular philosophy or an inconsistent system of normative values that are used pragmatically to justify behaviors, attitudes, and prejudices.**

## 3.Gender equality
### Prelude

As these parts of the article were penned, the Egyptian feminist, writer, and physician Nawal El Saadawi passed away (March 21, 2021), constituting an occasion to recall the conflicting debates and attitudes, including extremist ones, of this feminist that had, more than anyone else, fought and rebelled against prevailing ideas when it comes to gender equality and women's rights, provoking anti-equality and women's rights voices. Nawal El Saadawi has around 310,000 followers on Facebook, and her posts get thousands of likes and hundreds of comments. **However, she was controversial in every sense of the word. She stood radically against three taboos all at once**



Figure 5

الجزيرة مصر
@AJA_Egypt

هاجمت الأديان وطالبت بتقنين الدعارة وشككت في القرآن.. الموت يغيب الروائية المثيرة للجدل #نوال_السعداوي بعد 90 عامًا من الأفكار المناقضة لثقافة المجتمع

Al Jazeera English
@AJEnglish

Nawal El Saadawi, Egyptian author and women's rights icon, dies aje.io/yl828

Duplicity in positions targeting two different audiences

**(religion, sex, and politics), facing violent reactions from different religious, masculinist, and political backgrounds, though religious arguments were mainly used as a counter to the feminist ideas she has advanced.** These parts are intended to explore the mindset that upholds discrimination against women and its cultural (and intellectual) origin, as well as its political and pragmatic origin, while maintaining the general methodology and participatory aspect of this report.

## Example 1 of cyberspace debates

AJ+ Arabic (followed by 11M people – main regional page covered by social media analysis) is sponsored by Al Jazeera Network and biased towards a combination of Islamic and pan-Arab views. The death of Nawal El Saaadawi was posted on the page, along with an introductory video about the activist, the content of which was carefully selected to reflect a political pro-Sisi and anti-Muslim Brothers viewpoint. The post got 7,000 views (up to the morning of March 23), 2,500 comments, and 350 shares. Ideas advocating gender equality have been mainly countered by religious arguments mostly focused on behavior and appearance-related issues, including the hijab: (In reply to a previous post calling for not judging Nawal El Saadawi and leaving it to Allah, as she is dead now), **Douaa** says: "She rejected and fought the hijab. She even said it hides the beauty of women. She promoted obscenity and assaulted and attacked religion. She fought the laws of Allah and tried to enact the laws that please her." Sarah also comments, "She fought the hijab, considering it an innovation handed over by one religion to another… She died after a long battle of trying to manipulate and instill dirty ideas in girls' minds and tempting them with empty slogans, most importantly 'nudity and sex'… She is no longer here, but the hijab still is… She is no longer here, but the Quran still is… She is no longer here, but Islam still is…"

This appearance-focused religious view originating from the hijab leads automatically to sex, family, and tradition arguments. **Qoot Al Qoloob** adds that she is acquainted with "Nawal El Saadawi family members who graduated from Al-Azhar and have disowned her. She was also expulsed from her father's funeral." This is not only a disengagement from religion, but also from family (and traditions). On an intellectual level, she approached matters that she knows nothing about, according to **Mustapha** who says, "she tackled metaphysical issues that she had no idea about and interfered in Allah's affairs… She acted arrogantly after earning her diplomas, and if she had the minimal insight, she would have known that Iblees (Lucifer) acted the same way before, showing arrogance to the angels and Adam and disobeying Allah, while perceiving himself as favored over all creatures and having the ultimate knowledge, but eventually, he was punished by being ousted from the domain of Allah's Mercy and cursed until the day of judgment." The study of the morphology of countering gender equality and women's rights leads to three concepts: appearance-focused religion, family/social customs, and ridiculing of human knowledge vs. the acceptance of Allah's will. It is a trilogy based on mutually supportive axioms that create a naive and unnegotiable certainty because it preemptively marginalizes science and scientific argument to an unprecedented extent.

On March 18, Egyptian journalist and writer **Amal Owaida** published on her page a photo of the two attached blog posts. (See Figure 5). In such a "culture", the margin for dialogue seems almost non-existent

كذالك آلام الولادة التي تتذمر منها النساء، أعرف طبيب نساء قال لي أن ألم الولادة ليس بدرجة لا يمكن للنساء تحملها كما يدعين بل آلامها طفيفة جدا و في حدود قدرة النساء اللاتي لديهن قدرة ضعيفة على التحمل من الأساس مقابل الرجل. طبعا هذا لن تعترف به أي امرأة لكن الطبيب أتى بالخبر اليقين من زوجته، و نعرف أن النساء تستغل عدم قدرتنا على المقارنة فتدعي من العذاب ما لا يكون.

٤٣ د    أعجبني    رد

ملاحظة نسيتها، قال لي أن آلام الولادة مصحوبة بلذة كبيرة!!!

Figure 6

due to the absence of rationality, logic, and science. These attitudes emerge when it comes to women and their rights, where the conservative religious interpretation aligns itself with the patriarchal culture, forming an incubating environment for the production and exchange of such comments and positions that enjoy intuitive immunity among its practitioners, even if without actual conviction in them. **It is an expression of power and male supremacy and the enjoyment of real or illusory privilege over women in society. They simply profess such thoughts without any sense of absurdity (not to say impartiality).**

## Women... modernity... politics

The superior attitude towards women, their status and roles is a major characteristic of the ideologies of ruling authorities, primarily due to political considerations. It is not possible to consider the current discrimination against women and the continuous quest to control them and their bodies as a linear extension of inherited traditions from previous eras. First and foremost, it reflects contemporary ideas and practices that serve current political functions, **the patriarchal ideology being a fundamental component of the structure of power in these countries, where the ruler borrows the image of the father (denying citizenship) and the father is granted an authority similar to the ruler's in controlling his family members**, especially the women and younger members. This authoritarian trade-off **replaces male dominance over females in the private sphere with the authority of a tyrant over a society as a whole** and over men specifically in the public sphere. Therefore, **any prejudice to the patriarchal authority in the private space (family, extended family, clan, tribe, immediate local domain) constitutes a direct threat to the legitimacy of the ruler and his regime, posing a risk of disruption.** Controlling women in the private and public spheres is a necessity intending to restrict democracy and human rights in the state and society in general. Those in political power and cultural power join forces to achieve this, and here comes the role of religious institutions, religious movements and parties, authorities of clans and tribes, and other primary social groups.[38]

## Women and the Arab Spring

When it comes to the Arab Spring revolutions and the overall picture of the movement in all the countries enveloped by the uprisings on the Southern bank of the Mediterranean (and in other Arab countries as well), we cannot overlook the following established and robust facts:

**1.** Women had a very broad, active, and recognized participation in the movement.

**2.** Issues of gender equality were very present in the general demands for change and respect for human rights. They were not categorical or partial issues, but rather were a component of general demands for change.

**3.** A significant number of women were present in sit-in squares, including in unexpected countries (e.g., Yemen or Sudan), as well as in other countries (e.g., Egypt, Iraq and Libya, etc.)

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**38-** The Neopatrimonial State and the Arab Spring, Adib Nehme, Dar Al Farabi; ANND, Beirut 2014 (pages 96-100 in particular)

In this vein, many wrote, for instance, about **women and girl harassment being totally absent in sit-in squares**, including in a country like Egypt where this phenomenon is normally widespread. The lesson learned is: **when hundreds of thousands of citizens took to the streets during the revolution days, harassment of women and girls disappeared. And when people left the streets, this phenomenon returned**, and was even provoked systematically to keep women away from the streets and regain control over the public sphere again. **Two lessons can be drawn from these facts: first, the assumption that harassment is a popular culture is wrong; second, expelling women and preventing them from having an effective presence in the public space was a preparatory measure to pave the way for the regain of authoritarian control over the streets.**

Such facts are not fully in line with the assumption that discrimination against women and belittling their status is the prevalent culture in society; or at least it can be said that these facts question these stereotypical perceptions, which seem simplistic, yet the reality is a bit more complicated. As in previous stages and occasions, women participation in uprisings and revolutions did not always mean that their demands were included among the priorities of the transitional stages. Rather, the years following the street movement witnessed a rise in violence against women in a way that contradicts their heavy presence in the squares during the revolution. In some cases, reforms and changes leading to better gender equality were ignored or postponed, leading to a rise in calls for amending laws restricting freedoms and those discriminating against women. These demands, aspirations, and others were met with a harsh security grip, following the return of the old regimes, and a societal attack that re-pushed back the discussion of women's rights and equality, armed with the axioms of the well-known masculine culture.

Hanin (from Jordan) says: "I lived my life in my family's home negotiating with my father over my most basic rights, starting with my engineering studies, which were met with stiff resistance, and more recently with my desire to run for local elections, for which I was subjected to the most severe forms of physical violence by my older brother. Now my husband plays the role of my father and my male brothers. My negotiation skills with my husband have developed, but in the end, I live according to the standards he sets for me, and the society before him." In this case, Hanin was subjected to violence when she tried to seek a role in the public sphere (running for local elections), as this is par excellence a male's sphere that emphasizes the political function of patriarchy in perpetuating the clannish-familial foundation of the political power structure at the national level. This comes in addition to women's public renouncement of the prevailing tradition that is difficult to tolerate and the choice of studying engineering, whose negative effects on the family image and damages can be limited to its surroundings.

## Women and the work field

This negative discrimination against women includes all fields and is not limited to the private space within the family and what falls under the umbrella "personal status". AJ+ website published a pedagogical video that presents global data and statistics on the wage differences between women and men in the same job. The following post was attached to the video: "When

a man and a woman work in the same job and at the same rank, women are very likely to be paid less than men. The problem of gender pay inequality is a historical dilemma that limits women's empowerment. That is why the United Nations hopes to shed a light on it through the International Equal Pay Day.

**In this case, people who interacted with this post/video are divided into categories:**
**- Advocates for equality, who are few:** only two young men strongly defended the issue, using the principle of human rights sometimes and realistic examples at other times. They are **Majd** from **Palestine** and Omar from Egypt, but they quickly withdrew themselves from the discussion due to the large number of people classified in other fields below and the direction the debate was heading to, away from the standards of dialogue and discussion.

**- Mockers, scoffers, and provocateurs, who are many:** "I'm sorry, but in Algeria women are paid the same, if not better, and exert less effort than men. How is this just?" asks Saleem from Algeria, with much criticism from his country's women.

**- Opposers using various arguments:** including **Menem** from Algeria, whose rejection of equality was absolute: "This is an indisputable fact – men are better. Period. Enough talk about associations and the like. Men are the alpha (meaning the first and the superior) of society. Leadership and power are theirs. We respect women, but when it comes to leadership, men are at the top of the pyramid. There is no such thing as equality. Integration Yes, but equality NO. Period".

The exchanged arguments reflect support in certain situations, and not absolute support to the value of equality itself. **Not only did males reject it, but females also expressed rejection or reservations.**

**Comments with a religious reference dominated the discussions:** "Allah commands justice, not equality, and men are the guardians of women....", commented **Saleh** from Palestine, while another pseudonymous Palestinian said, "No matter how hard a woman tries, she will never attain man's level at work... men are the guardians of women because Allah has made one of them excel over the other". Gender was also a very prominent theme in the comments on the video, which was liked by girls. We noticed that the discriminatory discourse against women was prevalent in the male comments based on Islam and Sharia, as well as the logic of guardianship over the latters and over women. The most important thing is that **this issue was brought up without it being presented in the video. In fact, the issue of work, wages, productivity, etc. is not a religious matter. Yet, the religious argument is always there to defend conservative and masculine attitudes when it comes to women, whatever the subject of discussion may be.**

## Women's rights are by inherently a sexual matter

These attitudes and debates raise questions about the nature of the intellectual and cultural background that underpins them. Two points are worth noting in this regard: **first**, whatever the subject under discussion is (familial, personal, economic, political, etc.), it turns into a **sexual topic** (and moral, based on the vocabulary used by people with such beliefs), as if women are sexual beings by nature and essence, which dominates all aspects of a woman's activity and individual and social life; second, sexuality, which is considered a moral affair, is in turn a religious matter par excellence, so the **transition is directly made from any position related to women to sex and ethics, and then to religion.**

In a direct post accompanied by a video, **"Al-Salet News Season Three - Episode 17 - We Don't Want Freedom: Freedom is a major cause of death or sudden disappearance. Avoid it[39]..."**, the video talks about a bundle of freedoms with their definitions before criticizing their practices in the Arab region in a way that promotes their complete opposite: freedom of expression and opinion, freedom of belief, sexual freedom, political freedom, freedom of litigation, freedom of the press, and freedom of women.

**Al-Bahi** from Tunisia argues with the program's producer and presenter, **Nicolas**, saying: "I agree with all of your words...except for your statement on sexual freedom... Here I disagree with you, my brother ...We all are for freedoms, but sexual freedom has no place among us[40]". And **Muaaz** from Palestine asks him directly: "Nicolas Khoury, are you a Christian???!", as if unveiling the reason for this position: since Nicolas is a Christian, he is "stranger" to the Islamic identity, in this case. Thus, he is considered a stranger to the status of women in Islam. To Muaaz, this is a sufficient explanation and there is no need to discuss the content of Nicolas' position itself.

The manifestations of personal freedom for many commentators are not important, nor are they a serious topic for discussion, and the evidence for this is that all kinds of freedoms included in the video are ignored. Women and religion constitute the red line of freedoms, making the idea of addressing them impossible, with voices warning any "trespasser" based on the logic of guardianship. **Freedom is restricted by conditions embodied in adherence to Sharia on the one hand, and not approaching women on the other.**

## A new spirit born from the womb of revolutions

A new spirit was born during the public street movement in the Arab Spring revolutions. **Samira** from Algeria talks about the "feminist square" that was established during the public movement in her country. She says: "The feminist square was a space created by feminists to present issues intensively and to meet each other at a specific time and express their demands, on top of which were demands for equality. We made the feminist square more present. Our tent was in the middle, and we called it the feminist square. This allowed us to define the challenges

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**39-** We Don't Want Freedom, Al-Salet News, Season Three, Al-Jazeera Plus website via Facebook.
https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1414235951953279 \
**40-** The irony is that when you look at his website, you will find that his words frequently contain obscene words.

facing women in Algeria. The feminist square restored the relationship of Algerian women with politics." She adds, "The positive thing about the movement is the change in the position of the term feminism, as feminism has become a political and public term, as if the revolution allowed the recognition of feminism as a movement."

Algeria was no exception. All revolutions have contributed to changing the status of women within society. **Muhammad** from Libya says, "On the eve of the revolution, society was surprised by the active participation of women in all protests and organizations that extended from the square to social media. I was surprised that my mother and my sisters were as patriotic as I am. Until then, I had lived my life thinking that patriotism is only a masculine feeling." The same surprise hit **Jamil's** family from Syria, "who believed that women during wars and conflicts were only victims. But the Syrian crisis revealed to his family that women are equally effective, and that they pay the price for their participation multiple times more than men." **The same events were repeated in Sudan and Iraq, and in the countries of the first wave of the Arab Spring from Tunisia to Egypt to Yemen, where women were actively present in the sit-in squares. (The awarding of Tawakkol Karman - Yemen** - the Nobel Peace Prize at the time expresses recognition of the role of women in Yemen and in all Arab spring revolutions.) In Lebanon too, women have provided an impressive example of organized participation. However, this does not mean that the transition in this direction has been completed, especially with the movements in the streets dwindling.

## Women and individual and democratic freedoms

**The debate that erupted in response to the 2018 Tunisian report "Individual Freedoms and Equality[41]"**, based on the initiative of the late Tunisian President Al-Beji Kaeed Sebsi, shows the overall view towards the correlation between the position on women and modern (and democratic) transition, especially the discussion that took place on social media pages, free from censorship and allowing the observation of radical attitudes without euphemism. On AJ+ page, **a post** commented on the initiative of the Tunisian president, which stated: "We have nothing to do with religion, the Qur'an, or Quranic verses..." The Tunisian president announced his intention to present the draft law on equality in inheritance between women and men, limiting the idea behind the report to equality in inheritance - although it is a sub-point in the report, though



Figure 7

Slogans on walls in Beirut during October 17, 2019 revolution

41- Report of the Committee of Individual Freedoms and Equality, Republic of Tunisia, Presidency of the Republic - Tunis, June 1, 2018.

an important one, which makes the discussion take place from the beginning within the framework of religion and Sharia. This, by the way, is what actually happened in Tunisia, where the forces opposing the report focused almost exclusively on the aspect related to gender equality, equality in inheritance, sexual rights, etc., at the expense of its more comprehensive content related to the recognition of individual rights at the core of the human rights system. Analysis of 2,700 comments and focus on the comments of the young people from study countries (Tunisia, Algeria, Palestine) allowed the classification of the opposing and supporting interactions within the following arguments:

- **Not the right time (prioritization),** as **Nisreen** from Tunisia stated: "The country's priorities are many. It is mired in debt, poverty, corruption, unemployment, poor education, deteriorating health systems, marginalized youth, and a country that has been classified as a tax paradise…, while our respectable president is only concerned about homosexuals and that we should strive for equality!… I agree, but when will you enact a functional law against corruption?… Or is this matter not urgent, and equality is more important?!… A hypocrite and a mole. Whoever is looking for reform should start with education and health."

- **Against religion:** The President, in his report, contradicts religion and deserves to be cursed into annihilation, death, and illness, according to some people who revoked any connection with him, as did **Ra'ed** from Palestine, who addressed the President directly: "You object to the rulings of Allah, and you support the rulings of humans who merely implement the directives of tyrants??? I wish onto you a disease so that you may know that Allah is true and does not oppress anyone. Allah is the just, the most merciful, and the Lord of earth, heavens, and all human beings".

- **Supportive: Amid** from Palestine welcomed the initiative: "Congratulations to Tunisia, wishing the same for the rest of the Arab countries… The Arabs have been destroyed by nothing but the religious sheikhs and their fatwas, as they did in Syria, Libya and Iraq! Europe did not advance until it removed the clerics from power and built them a state for themselves in the Vatican. If you want religion, you can find it in the mosque or church, whichever you may prefer, but matters of governance are not your specialty." His comment received 700 likes.

**Some positions directly discussed the core issue of individual freedoms** in general. According to them, we have come face-to-face with a Western conspiracy to destroy family values and our authentic traditions, or at least with groups trying to imitate the West, as seen by Sami from Algeria, who considers that "western society is drifting into the abyss, especially the European Union and the United States. Here they are, pressuring the rest of the countries to adopt their so-called individual freedoms… They know very well that family is the core of society, so they do not care about anything in state policies except the laws that regulate society in this context, while pretending to defend individual freedoms. They wage wars and spread death in countries that disobey their orders, and they attract immigrants while feigning humanity. Nevertheless, this is just a plan to fill their demographic void, especially with intellectuals and professionals. Standing before this stupid policy and the idiotic and gullible Arab public, the question is: What price did these degenerate countries pay Al-Sebsi to make this statement?".

**The report on Individual Freedoms and Equality reflects the complex relationship between gender equality and the transition to modernity and democratization,** as it appears that this correlation is strong and direct. The liberation of women was one of the priorities of the **Renaissance Era** in the Arab countries at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century: this movement **sought modernization of the value system and the development of a state and institutions built on constitutional democracies within a liberal political regime. The failure of the Renaissance to achieve its goals paved the path which Arab countries took, leading to the re-emergence of patriarchy and masculinity, democratic failure, and eventually to the Arab Spring.[42]**

## 4 .Democracy, citizenship, and human rights
### Context

This section addresses the political dimension and its institutions directly, which is related to the democratic transformation of countries, regimes, and institutions, as well as societies. It also addresses perceptions regarding democracy, citizenship, freedom, corruption, and human rights, all of which are topics that were heavily present in the first and second wave of the Arab spring. The slogan and key common goal of all uprisings in the region, from Morocco to the Gulf, was the establishment of a **"modern democratic civil state"**. These revolutions or uprisings and their slogans embodied **dignity, freedom, social justice, the right to work and employment, democracy, anti- corruption, etc.**

In our assessment of Arab citizens' opinions, especially the youth, as manifested in the revolutions, there is no ambiguity: **all revolutions sought one direct political demand, i.e., to overthrow regimes and rulers. This demand intensifies the purpose of the movement which inevitably uses political change as gateway towards achieving the ultimate objective of building the modern democratic civil state.** The unclear details of this modern democratic civil state do not negate the nature of the historical answer provided by the peoples of these countries to the alternative they want from the current regimes, which, despite their diversity, shared common features: the lack or restriction of democracy, the disruption of the transfer of power and actual pluralism, the violation of citizen rights, and dealing with citizens as subjects and followers. We have already mentioned in the previous paragraph on immigration that options for immigration to Europe and other countries share a common feature: the destination countries are constitutional democracies (despite reservations on their performance and stance), confirming that the European constitutional democracy model is the closest to the optimal form of regimes sought by millions of demonstrators across Arab countries.

On the other hand, and contrary to the prevailing stereotype, neither the religious, national, nor social-class idea was the strongest and truest expression of citizen choices in these countries because the widest mass revolutions in each country adopted **civil slogans related first to reform or change in the political system at the national level**. This is a constant

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**42-** The Neopatrimonial State and the Arab Spring, Ibid; Arab Women Development Report 2019, Ibid.

fact that is more expressive than any research, study, or opinion poll and that **completely undermines the idea of Arab exception and democratic malfunction**, at least in relation to the aspirations of the people themselves. In fact, **what happened and its aftermath are the result of a "counter-revolution" that does not reflect the natural development of these uprisings**. The spontaneous and natural choice of the people who managed to liberate themselves from the pressure and coercion imposed on them was constitutional democracy, justice, and rights. These is the natural and real citizens' choice, and most likely other options, that were previously and are still prevailing today in more than one country, are imposed and incidental, and not the other way around.

## Democracy in opinion polls and studies

According to the Arab Opinion Index 2019-2020, 89%[43] of Arab citizens are able to provide a meaningful definition of democracy as a guarantee of political and civil freedoms, equality, and justice among citizens. Democracy was also coined with the expressions: 'participation' and the 'institutional aspect of exercise of power', especially the transfer of power, oversight, and the separation of powers. It showed that 76% supported democracy, while 17% were against it, and that 74% consider the democratic system the most suitable for their countries. As for the evaluation of the regimes in their countries, the overall evaluation in the Arab region scored 5.8 out of 10 in 2019-2020, compared to 2011.

**Also, only 20% of citizens agree that the democratic regime is incompatible with Islam.**

## An attempt to understand objection to democracy

In this report, we do not measure the size of this objection; we rather identify a thinking pattern and its relevant arguments, which are clearer on social media, where there is no censorship as previously mentioned repeatedly, where similar ideas gather, and mutual encouragement allows the manifestation of opinions in their maximum and clearest form.



Figure 8

A post on democracy was published on July 1, 2017 on AJ+ page under the title "Democracy as a product: one of the most popular products in government regime stores"[44] along with a pedagogical video about democracy's concept, emergence, specifications, pillars,
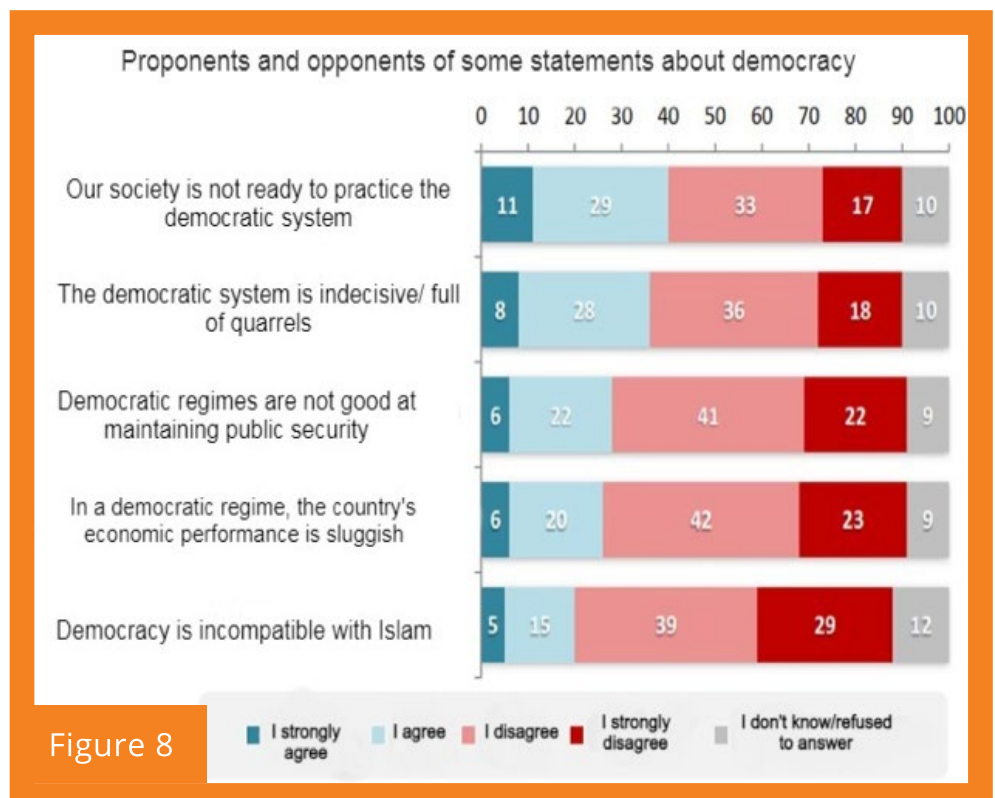
**43-** Arab Opinion Index 2019-2020, Ibid.
**44-** AJ+, "Democracy as a product", AJ+ page on Facebook
   https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1465986973444843

institutions, mechanisms for its protection (freedom of expression, belief, assembly, and independent judiciary), and its desired results (e.g., political stability, economic prosperity, guaranteeing civil freedoms, and fighting corruption). The video also expressed opinions about "this product" and got more than 8,000 likes (endorsing its content) and 1 million views. **Objections are multi-referenced and based on religion** (Islam in particular due to its predominance in the countries of the region), as "governance must be legitimate" meaning according to Sharia, as mentioned by **Amin** from Algeria and **Hakim** from Morocco, who emphasized that "democracy means the rule of the people, which is wrong because the rule is only for Allah through Islamic Sharia." Raghad from Palestine adds: "Implementation of Allah's Sharia is the right solution for the nation. Do not talk to me about democracy, secularism, or anything else. Islam is the solution." However, Shiraz from Tunisia rejects this idea in a sarcastic way, writing in Latin letters and refusing this government regime. The discussions escalated into an attack that we were not able to access (They were deleted due to inappropriate language). **We draw attention to the fact that this violent and exclusionary debate occurred within the same society, not between two different societies (we - the East, they - the West).**

Another reason for objecting to democracy is considering it a **Western product** stigmatized by criticism of the West and its colonial history and ridiculing the idea of democracy and uncovering its true nature as a lie. **Walid** from Algeria says in response to those who call for democracy: "So far, democracy has not been implemented to its fullest extent, not even in the United States, an advocate of democracy. In our countries, the illusion is clearer and crueler, as "democracy does not exist, but is rather a slogan in the discourses of the ruling regimes that pave the paths to democracy based on their own views. They allow you to express yourself in the street, and when it gets serious, security forces and the judiciary are on the lookout, forming a wall in the face of democracy". **Yahya** from Palestine recalls the arguments of supporters of monarchy and aristocracy in previous eras that still resonate today: "Democracy makes the ignorant or the criminal in society the voice of the successful, educated, and successful person. It prepares the likes of Trump to become the president of the greatest country!" **Objectors of this type range from those who believe in the role of the elite instead of numbers, and those who suggest a religious or patriarchal background, seeing democracy as a justification for disobeying the good ruler, whether religious or not.**

It was noted that the comments through which commentators attempted to return to the core of the discussion topic were few and did not receive the response that polemical comments received, as if there was a way out from every scientific and calm discussion. An example is the comment of **George** from Egypt, who criticized the video and considered it unscientific: "What is this silly video?! Tyranny of what? Democracy is based on only four foundations: secularism, enlightenment, social contract, and liberal democracy. The latter prevents tyranny of the majority, otherwise it becomes fascism. Democracy is the rule of the majority without prejudice to minority rights. The Islamic state is just an illusion in the imagination of some that has been refuted by logic and truth... Otherwise, it will produce another Sudan, Afghanistan, or Somalia (meaning that these are models of the imagined Islamic state, which are not convincing) ... Rule

of the people in favor of the people in democratic countries does not oppose free logic, so the people cannot obtain a referendum to abolish the rights of minorities…". George's argument here is rational and is based on reason and logic (Regardless of agreeing/disagreeing to what he says), a kind of discussion that is rarely viewed on social media pages. However, it shows two things: **the first is that the idea of democracy and its critical understanding are present in Arab societies**, and there are people who have the knowledge and the ability to defend it; **the second is that this debate about democracy is not a debate between East and West, nor between North and South. Rather, it is a debate, discussion, and conflict within the same society, and there is neither an original not an imported stance. All positions are components of political discourse and the wisely diverse culture of society, which cannot be reduced to a single stereotyped perception, whatever its source.**

## Confusion and possible relapse

The revolutions, in which the youth played a major role in their leadership, called for changing the rigid political systems that failed to improve the social and economic conditions of a wide range of marginalized social groups. The protests in search of freedom and democracy overthrew the leaders of four Arab countries. However, the transformation of the Arab revolutions in several countries (Syria, Libya, Yemen) into armed conflicts drove a significant segment of Arab youth to encourage stability at the expense of democracy. Now, after years of revolutions, 39% of Arab youth believe[45] that "democracy will never succeed in the region", according to an ASDA'A Burson-Marsteller survey[46].

"The time during which we as young people aspired to participate in politics is over", **Nour** from Egypt says, "Which participation would that be in light of the threats of arrest we have been receiving for years if we express an opposing opinion! The idea of participation has become frightening and miserable. We have to be completely silent to stay outside prison." Although Nour's opinion expresses an extreme situation in Egypt, 75% of the population in Algeria, Libya, and Sudan believed (in 2019) that their country has become closer to dictatorship than to democracy. In Morocco, about 50% of the population believes that their country is closer to a dictatorship at the present time, according to the Arab Barometer, which monitored a shift in the opinion of citizens compared to the 2013 survey.[47]

"I left politics for good", says **Samira** from Algeria. "I never understand how our politics challenges all attempts at change. Many of us tried, but we failed". This sense of failure can push young people back to square one, where they as far as possible from political life. The years following the revolutions revealed that the old politicians regained their power and used the same old tools. This made young people re-experience feelings of marginalization, filled with bitterness and deep disappointment, causing some to immigrate abroad or isolate themselves completely and indulge in other projects, closing the door on politics and participation.

**45-**Khaled Al-Ghali. "Arab Youth… What is their impact in society and how do they view politics?" Raise Your Voice, August 5, 2016. https://bit.ly/3aZMxmE
**46-** Ibid
**47-** BBC Arabic. "Have freedoms deteriorated in countries of the Arab region?" Arab Barometer, 2019. https://bit.ly/3jn5Dba

However, this disappointment particularly characterizes those who experienced street protests in their first wave ten years ago. Today, there is a new generation of young people who did not share the same experience, as one generation these days isn't timely defined by twenty or twenty-five years, but with shorter periods of time due to the speed of transition on every level. Therefore, we encountered a second wave of the Arab Spring in other countries (Algeria, Sudan, Iraq, Lebanon), and indeed found a succession of protests of varying importance in each country.

**We have referred to these facts to exercise caution and avoid generalization of frustration and political evasion, whereas the factors that motivate protests are still present, and the moment of their transformation into a public political action in the street or institutions cannot be expected.** We also referred to the succession of anger stages and effective protest with hope, despair, frustration, etc. **to emphasize the importance of the psychological and psycho-social aspects in everything that happens and in every possible development in the future, including the success or failure of the democratic transition path and overcoming the obstacles that stand in its way**, starting with the absence of democracy in the political regime and society, to the widespread corruption in institutions, economy, and society.

## Corruption and good governance

Fighting corruption is a very popular and direct form of expressing demands for reform and the rule of law, and a main purpose for demanding the departure of rulers and change in regime. **Samira** (Algerian feminist activist) says, **"The Algerian revolution** is a revolution against corruption and against the continuation of the presidential term of former President Bouteflika and the corrupt elite surrounding him." **Similar protests erupted in Iraq, Lebanon, Algeria, Sudan, and Tunisia, the main cause of which is the rampant corruption in the system that governs the country.**

Corruption is not considered a transient and superficial phenomenon, but rather goes beyond opportunistic corruption, as this phenomenon reflects a deep structural alliance between political and economic elites to secure economic and authoritarian interests. It is known that the ranking of most Arab countries according to the Corruption Perceptions Index issued by Transparency International is among the lowest in the world. **Mohammed** from Libya says, "Corruption was the first thing I noticed when I reached adulthood. I had friends who moved to important jobs only because of their family or tribal affiliation, and I was deprived from the chances I deserved because my family name isn't of much value in their opinion... Corruption and the security-governed regimes are the reason for the Libyan revolution. In fact, they are the cause of all revolutions."

One should note the **special meaning of the term "corruption"** in Arab South Mediterranean countries, which is different from that in constitutional democracies. **Fighting corruption means changing the regime in these countries**, while in constitutional democracies where the principle of the supremacy of law prevails, it means fighting corrupt individuals who break

the rules of law and order. **The reason for the difference stems from the variation in the nature of the state and the regime in these countries (neopatrimonial), meaning that corruption has a structural and organic characteristic in it; it is neither urgent nor a breach to its rules and laws. Therefore, the eradication of corruption is more directly related to democratic transition than it is in the countries of the Northern bank of the Mediterranean, which is something that these countries that propose to combat corruption using traditional tools (e.g., establishment of independent entities to fight corruption) often do not pay attention to. Every day, it becomes clearer that these countries are incapable of addressing this phenomenon simply because they do not take into consideration the qualitative difference in its nature and its various manifestations across countries on both sides of the Mediterranean, and because there are countries that do not accept the existence of entities that are truly independent of authority and rulers.**

## Freedom, tolerance, etc.

It was previously mentioned that democratic transition in Southern Mediterranean countries necessarily includes **a social and cultural transformation** and is not limited to the transformation of the political regime only. **In the traditional activities of the political parties that had a great influence post-independence, political and socio-cultural liberalism was weak and associated with alienation and relationship with colonialism charges**, in addition to charges of deviation from social justice and public interests. This was obvious in several characteristics, the most important of which are:

• **The absence of political pluralism** and political and electoral systems that would allow the effective and peaceful transfer of power
• **The absence of culture** in building the national state in favor of national, social, religious, and ideological components, compared to the Renaissance (e.g., lack of  religious reform, intellectual enlightenment, gender equality outside the ideological framework, etc.)
• **The dominance of collective ideologies that reduce the importance of the individual and individual freedoms**. The individual is seen only within a group that has priority over him, and where individualism and individual freedoms are considered Western distortion: **liberation is more important than freedom, and public liberties are more important than individual liberties.**

**The abortion of the religious reform movement in favor of political power by religious institutions paved the way for the revival of conservative and strict perceptions of religion. The marginalization of (political and social) liberalism prioritizing the group over the individual has entrenched undemocratic practices and culture in society and negatively affected the formation of an alternative culture.** We see an extreme manifestation of this in social media in the debates about freedom, tolerance, extremism, terrorism, and other similar issues related to the cultural dimension of democratic transition.

When the 2017 post (examples always come from the AJ+ page) talks about the declining level of freedom in Arab countries, it only gets 35 interactions, even though 1,500 people watched the attached video. The typical reaction here – as Rachid's from Algeria – is to question the source of this assessment, since "Freedom House is a purely Zionist organization". Although Freedom House's classification and much of the global evidence are based on implicit or explicit biases that can be scientifically critiqued (they are generally euro-centric), **the objection here is not science-based, but rather an ideological** rejection. We also can find a religion-based rejection.

This exclusionary cultural pattern is manifested at its peak in commenting on extremist events, where there are no signs of tolerance and solidarity with others in extremist positions, especially when we classify them within the category of the different "others" for one reason or another. Examples of this are some of the debates and positions that were commented on a blog post about the attack on a French professor who was discussing with his students the limits of freedom of expression. He showed the well-known mocking caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad, and someone chased after him and slaughtered him in the street. Many comments were made about the attack, describing it as a conspiracy theory whose aim is to legitimize a new campaign against Muslims residing in France, whose features began with the statement of the French President in which he attacked Islam (according to the opinion of the bloggers), immediately prior to the incident. **According to this logic, the matter turns into a fundamental conflict, because France is secular and it deals with hatred towards Muslims, and this hatred dates back to the era of the Crusaders. We draw attention here to the European armies in the Middle Ages who called themselves the Crusaders (after the Christian cross). As for the Arabs in those days, they were called the Franks, meaning they did not know them religiously, but rather as invaders coming from another continent.[48]**

**However, these extremist ideas were not the only ones posted on the page, but there were direct responses** (again, this debate is not a clash of civilizations, but rather a conflict within one country and society), that contained violence against what they considered to be a justification for crime and a culture of hatred and extremism. **Quite a few of the responses used the same religious reference**. **Murtada** from Iraq commented: "All Muslims' comments lack any condemnation of the terrorist act. On the contrary, all of them are taking the role of the victims in their comments, despite their terrorism!!!!".

## 5. Globalization and consumerist culture
### Prelude
At first glance, by reading the previous paragraphs, it seems that Arab societies and their youth are still living in the culture of previous eras rather than being at the core of the modern world, globalization, and its culture. However, that is not true for two reasons. **First, the inherited cultural elements** from previous eras are still very present and effective today, but perform

**48-** See, for example, the novel by Amin Maalouf, "The Crusades Through Arab Eyes".

current functions, especially political functions related to the renewal of authority and its legitimacy, i.e., they are elements of a culture inherited in a contemporary style that perform current functions. **Second**, this description represents only one side of the picture, whatever our assessment and evaluation of its size and role. **The culture of consumer globalization** has proliferated over a broad scope, along with its culture and content, driving the world to follow its path, use its tools, consume its products, and adopt its methods and discourse.

There are other "cultures and discourses" that are also closer to **the values of classical modernity, citizenship, and human rights**. The following paragraphs are devoted to illustrating "the culture of consumer globalization in Arab countries across the Southern Mediterranean" by analyzing the content of Instagram users' posts in the region, particularly in three countries: Tunisia, Algeria, and Palestine.

## A subculture within a subculture

Social media constitutes a space to form a "virtual culture" that has its own characteristics. We have referred to some of its features, such as grouping according to similar tendencies, extremism in the expression of opinion, outbreak of verbal violence, etc. However, even within social media, we will witness a second and third branching of cultural inclination, and one of its examples is what **Instagram represents as a virtual venue with its own culture, which is most closely linked to the culture of consumption and to the current globalization pattern** at the expense of the explicit distinction based on other identities, thus promoting levels of similarity between its users higher than those in other applications (e.g., Facebook), where diversity, or even the contradiction in trends, is more acute. In fact, we find some manifestations of this phenomenon in the negative comments exchanged between Facebook supporters and Instagram supporters.

Instagram presents an image of society and youth different from the image of the religious fanatic, those who boast about their group and traditions and do not appreciate their importance as an individual, or who prioritize their citizenship and their social and political effectiveness. Here we are at the core of the globalized culture of consumerism, which is one of the components of the true picture of South Mediterranean societies and culture(s).

Talking about active Instagram users is often associated with the terms "content creators" or "influencers" who fall into many categories, including artists, journalists and some "public" figures who are often young[49], as well as a segment of "ordinary" young people who become stars and are attracted by marketers for their large number of followers to promote their products.

## Instagram in Palestine

In 2016, Instagram became the second most important social media site in Palestine, with a female predominance of 60%. The most viewed pages[50] are aimed at marketing and entertainment and publish personal stories.

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**49-** StepFeed, "Some of the Most Successful Arab Social Media Trailblazers," June 2017. **https://stepfeed.com/our-list-of-top-20-arab-social-media-stars-9463**

**50-** We chose pages not associated with celebrities, like well-known artists and stars.

**Haya and Maram** from Palestine, who have a shared page called "Two Sisters", are the most followed among girls in Palestine (their account reached one million followers in September 2020[51]) and are famous for their challenging videos (games, eating, studying, redecorating the room at the lowest costs...) on their YouTube channel. Their Instagram page is a photo album of "two stars" veiled in a fashionable way, one photo of which can get 100,000 likes, not to mention the myriad of comments complimenting them.

Likewise, **Asma Al-Ayoubi's[52]** page, a 21-year-old girl from Gaza, is limited to her personal photos in the form of a "show" with some videos in which she shares moments, for example, with her fans in a "village" where she spent a whole day, at the end of which she appears among the pastures as if she were in a video clip, to get nearly 16,000 likes. Almost all photos feature the "star" that Asma seeks to become. However, Asma publishes some "social" videos (e.g., about autistic children) or "patriotic" videos (a video about Ahed Tamimi), as well as some content on violence against women. Her latest video on violence has received sarcastic male comments from her followers to demonstrate once again the extreme sensitivity to the issue of gender equality that transcends all spaces.

Among males, the page of **Mahmoud Issawi[53]**, a 19-year-old Palestinian, is an eye-catching page. He is a young "model" who lives abroad and is followed by more than 1.8 million people, most of whom are from his country, because he specializes in telling stories, pictures, and videos that reflect the reality of Arab homes.

**The globalized consumerist culture is widespread in Palestine**, as shown by the large number of followers of individual pages on Instagram. **The fact that some of these page owners wear Hijab was not a determinant preventing these owners from being part of the consumerist culture but was rather a factor that naturally coexisted with it.** Consequently, unilateral **interpretations of the hijab as a coherent cultural expression of the lifestyle are in a way reductionist**. Considering that Palestine is a country living under occupation, siege, and permanent confrontations with a foreign enemy, **the virtual venue witnesses limited presence of the national cause and confrontation of occupation**, as well as serious cultural and social issues (according to the adopted classification).[54]

## Instagram in Algeria

**Farouk** is a 21-year-old Algerian with 2.6[55] million Instagram followers. His page shows pictures of moments he experiences on his own or with his family, in addition to videos of his travels, comedies, and other advertisements. He had also posted an awareness-raising video about

**51-** Posts, Two Sisters Tube, [Instagram profile] https://www.instagram.com/two_sisters_tube/
**52-** Posts, Asma Al Ayoubi, [Instagram profile] https://www.instagram.com/asma.alayoubi/
**53-** Posts, Mahmoud Isawi, [Instagram profile] https://www.instagram.com/mamoisawi/
**54-** National aspects are not absent from social media in Palestine, especially during periods of intense conflict. Rather, all electronic platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tik Tok, etc.) are used to publish positions, contents, and news about violations, injustice, and victims by young Palestinian men and women inside Palestine and in the world, where people sympathize with them (e.g., May 2021 confrontations that started in Al-Jarrah neighborhood in Jerusalem and expanded into a state of protest that included all Palestine, in addition to a military war with Gaza). However, the paragraphs contained in this research shed light on a neglected aspect that refers to the multiplicity of cultural components and opinions in Palestine as in other countries and the strong presence of the globalized consumerist component that coexists and interacts with the rest of the components and with developments.
**55-** Posts, Rifka Bjm, [Instagram profile], https://www.instagram.com/rifka.bjm/

the Covid-19 pandemic titled "Stay home" which has been seen by nearly a million followers, as well as other humorous videos about quarantine watched by thousands of people and a Tik Tok video. Once you have followed his "Rifka" page, you can see that he also has a YouTube channel and he is invited to host parties, thus undoubtedly becoming a stage star.

**Marwa**, 22, defines herself through her Instagram page as a "student and influencer"[56], with 2.3 million followers. She is an Algerian who lives in France and is ranked among the 25 most followed people on Instagram in Algeria (in a list containing artists, athletes, and media-related figures). She is interested in fashion and makeup, but shares with her followers many other contents, such as organizing her home, recipes she cooks, her visits to Algeria in detail, the "wedding bath of her relative", the Algerian traditional clothing, wedding ceremonies, places she visits like restaurants, picnic outings with friends, trips to the beach, and the mood inside her home in spontaneous moments caught without make up. She also uses certain spaces to advertise her YouTube channel.

As in the case of Palestine, there are millions of followers to individual pages in Algeria, from which the largest number of hardline comments were extracted during the discussions of religion, gender equality, terrorism, etc., and stated in the previous paragraphs regarding Facebook. Beyond that, we are struck by the pervasiveness of the very strict thinking we encountered on the AJ+ page. This was a cause for concern, as it indicated the spread of these ideas in society. However, in the case of Algeria (one country), **two individual pages of a young Algerian man and woman posting light, entertaining, social, general, and marketing topics were followed by about 5 million people, equivalent to almost half the followers of the AJ+ page, despite all its capabilities** (noting that some famous artists have more followers, such as the page of Mohammed Assaf in Palestine with 4 million followers, and Soul King in Algeria, a rapper and dancer, with 6+ million followers on Instagram). **All of this should prompt us to question the stereotype that assumes that intolerant thinking in its various manifestations is the true and almost exclusive representation of Arab societies and their culture.**

## Instagram in Tunisia

**Rabii's** fame crossed Tunisian borders and reached other parts of the world, especially media outlets, through his Instagram page[57]. However, only about 200,000 followers follow his page (vs. **Beki's** page from Tunisia, which will be mentioned below, is followed by 1,400,000 followers). He specializes in travel and in introducing every spot in Tunisia in particular, in addition to sharing his experiences of traveling to other countries with his followers. The news of the dreamy traveler Rabii reached French channels, some of which did not hesitate to publish their investigations of his page. The French TF1 described him as "the star of influential explorers in the Mediterranean." He asserts that "he wants others to see the real Tunisia, the Tunisia that he knows". Thus, we can conclude that there is an exchange conducted between Instagram and traditional media outlets, especially television networks, as Instagram has helped series producers in getting to know some of its users and made it easier for them to find work.

**56-** Posts, The Doll Beauty, [Instagram profile], **https://www.instagram.com/thedollbeauty/**
**57-** Posts, The Dreamer Wild and Free, [Instagram profile], **https://www.instagram.com/thedreamerwildandfree/**

**Belkis or Beki[58]**, a 21-year-old with more than 1,400,000 followers, reached this number of followers in less than three years. She started from YouTube in 2016 with a video of a student criticizing the educational system with its busy schedule, the hardships of students, and teachers each believing their subject is the most important. **Belkis gave up her studies to pursue a field that her family did not understand nor like**. Becky turned her virtual world into a profession where "others" did not see it possible, considering that there are no laws to regulate it and it is not a traditional job. In her opinion, this is in itself a contradiction since these people follow her and still do not admit that this is what she does for a living. For her, it is a self-employed profession that is tiring and requires time to interact and respond to emails and phone calls, write content, and think about their production and broadcast. Here, we draw attention to the fact that the "toolkit" (work requirements) on Instagram may sometimes require the adoption of an "artistic" name that is different from the page owner's real name; it could be an abbreviation, shortening, or modification that is easy to use in non-Arabic languages (e.g., Faf for Farah Belkadhi, Beki for Belkis). However, others keep their original names.

**Chaima Mansour[59]**, a 26-year-old from a popular neighborhood whose followers reached 300,000 in two years, reflects her reality as it is on her Instagram page. After five months of daily live broadcasts until early dawn, the number of her followers increased. Chaima offers cosmetic advice "at the lowest prices", based on natural recipes from ingredients that are available in all homes. Her goal is to convey the message that "you can make yourself look beautiful". **Even when contracted with skincare brands**, she strives to offer a "home-made" alternative to those who cannot afford it. It is noteworthy that **Chaima extends the scope of her content in beauty and cosmetics to popular circles based on a cultural perspective that considers that beauty should be available to everyone** (despite trying to attain an image of what is considered beauty), However, **the commercial and consumerist dimensions of social media are not unknown from savvy business owners who do not miss an opportunity, so we see certain skin care brands contracting with famous Instagram users to promote their products.** It's business!

## Summary on Instagram

The examples and evidence previously presented show that Instagram is a sub-culture within the culture of social media. Compared to Facebook, for example, it seems to be more attractive to youth than older people, as well as to young women and girls more than boys and men. In general, Instagram avoids serious or controversial issues and debates that cause frustration, and instead shifts the attention of its followers to private lifestyles and to the details of ordinary daily life. **It primarily addresses what can be considered the individual consumer, more than it addresses the individual citizen.**

**Here is a summary of some key takeaways:**

**1.** Instagram is a promotional venue, first for oneself and second for followers, based on converting them into a product subject to supply and demand to achieve multiple goals, namely to gain profit. Presenting the self in all its details and situations, especially positive ones, aims to achieve another goal or a set of psychological and profitable goals.

**58-** Posts, Beki Ksri, [Instagram profile], **https://instagram.com/beki_ksri?utm_medium=copy_link**
**59-** Posts, Chaima Mansour, [Instagram profile], **https://www.instagram.com/chaima.mansour11/**

**2.** The "real" world cannot be projected onto the virtual. What counts as important in the real world is not necessarily of interest to Instagram followers. It is as if we are on the verge of having a real world and another parallel to it, a youth world that may sometimes be the only world that addicted followers know.

**3.** There is an overlap between virtual and real worlds, embodied in two issues: the first is transforming rooms, especially for girls, into a world that meets the requirements of photography and interaction; the second is the quest of each to have a point of reference in real life linked to their virtual world: painting, sports, ordinary moments of meditation, sharing time with friends (often in a comfortable place away from noises), green spaces, public parks, etc. Some of them also switched from the virtual to the real world to carry out activities that touch a larger audience, such as holding discussions with young people or hosting parties.

**4.** The presence of the "star" in photos and videos is of great importance in interacting with them, whether with likes or comments.

**5.** Instagram has turned into a virtual and realistic commercial and advertising market in every sense of the word. It addresses young people, and they, in turn, interact with it and respond to its incentives and marketing.

**6.** Instagram, as a promotional and consumerist tool, changes the function of some habits and practices, such as turning sports and its importance to health and psychological and physical balance into a key for an attractive look, which is at the core of the globalized consumerist culture, organically linked to the consumption of certain products (e.g., clothing, shoes, diets, food, and even some drugs).

## General summary of the chapter

As previously explained, this chapter adopted the thematic approach in dealing with matters related to culture and values as they relate to the transition towards democracy, citizenship, and human rights. The research and analysis covered the real and virtual spaces at the same time, with identification of the distinctions between them and within each space.

In the following, we highlight some takeaways from this chapter:

**1.** It is necessary **to avoid generalization and limiting the assessment of the cultural situation and its relationship to democratic transition through one source, no matter how important it is**. This would give a livelier and more objective picture of the cultural reality.

**2.** **There is a discrepancy in the overall image of the general cultural scene according to various sources**. On one hand, scientific observations and analyses of Arab revolution discourses, along with other facts (e.g., immigration), paint a more positive picture and suggest (from the report's perceptive) that the spontaneity that marks the choices of people free from oppression and pressure, even in large numbers on the street, clearly targets civil life, citizenship, rights, and dignity, more than what field studies and surveys show. On the

other hand, these studies and surveys show a balanced diversity of opinions more than the analyses of social media content, where radical attitudes have the upper hand.

3. Despite the complexity of the study on **social media**, and therefore the extreme caution in avoiding generalizing the image it reflects and projecting it onto reality, and despite the fanatic perceptions that have emerged, especially the exaggerated opposition to democratization and gender equality by religion, there still is a balance between these trends and the globalized consumerist trend shown by the Instagram study. This means that **the stereotype about the dominance of conservative and traditional cultures in the virtual space defies reality, given the prevalence of the globalized consumerist culture as well.**

4. **The virtual space is primarily a cultural venue for the youth**, and it must be given attention and studied critically and scientifically, away from marketing and advertising. It is a product and promoter of culture in the expanded sense adopted by the report. It is also a field for the formation of secondary sub-cultures, and a generator of dynamics that help to create ideas and push them to their limits within similar groups (herd mentality).

5. There is **high inconsistency in the system of values  and ideas adopted by different groups and categories**, although **there is consistency among adherents of religious ideologies**, at least in terms of behavior and several other aspects. Religion is deemed a popular philosophy that can fill any knowledge gap and provide canned responses to every question asked (even if unrealistic and illogical). **There is also consistency and harmony in the "consumerist culture" on individualism and globalized stereotyping**, away from major issues (e.g., fashion, commodity consumption, shared culture).

6. **The trends that can be classified under the category of civil life, citizenship, human rights, and development do not appear as strongly organized and active groups in the virtual space and relatively in studies and research, but they were, based on observation, the strongest and prevalent in moments of spontaneous liberation from restrictions and coercion and in moments of massive public presence in the street. It seems that with the withdrawal from the street and the transition from spontaneous movement to work through institutions (including elections), the influence of such ideas receded in favor of other trends.** We do not have a definitive answer to this phenomenon, but it requires contemplation and in-depth research, including **not limiting the analysis to representative democracy and participatory democracy, since Arab Spring revolutions seem to be closest to direct democracy**. This point requires further verification and research.

# Chapter 4: Analysis of case studies ("Spatial" approach)

This chapter explains the "spatial" approach to the analysis, and includes two case studies. The first case study is about the old city of Casablanca in Morocco, and the second one is about Tripoli in Lebanon. Both case studies include a presentation of the national context and the main issue addressed. The Moroccan case study focuses on the development of the ancient city, its tangible and intangible cultural heritage, and the relevant public policies. Meanwhile the Lebanese case focuses on identity problems and the stereotypical image of the city as a stronghold of religious extremism, shedding light on the cultural spirit contradicting this image.

## Case study: The old city of Casablanca
## Cultural legacy and social transition in Morocco

### National context: Stages of influence

Civil and cultural activists in Morocco stress on the strong interlinkages between developments in these two fields and their forms of expression, work, and activities on one hand, and the course of general political developments in the country on the other hand. They believe that Morocco has been affected by three recent developments that are important to democratic transition and the related new forms of cultural work and civil activism:

1. The ascendance of King Mohammed VI to power in 1999 and the beginning of the country's so-called "new era".

2. The Casablanca terrorist bombings on May 16, 2003, which constituted a detrimental setback in the path of democratic transition and human rights in Morocco (and in the world), as it raised huge concern about the growth of extremist and violent political Islamic organizations, followed by the promotion and prioritization of security directives.

3. February 20th movement that coincided with the first wave of the Arab Spring revolutions and was influenced by them; the immediate reaction to this movement came in the form of responses to the demands of the Moroccan street, especially the decision to amend the constitution.

These developments set new opportunities for the democratic transition, but risked jeopardizing this path at the same time.

### Diverse cultural background

Morocco is strongly affected by attraction between various cultural views due to its historical and demographic characteristics, its geographical location, and its political and social development paths:

1. **Morocco is a country with a diverse population**, including the coexistence of the Arab and Amazigh and their multilingualism. It also combines Arab affiliation (League of Arab States)

and African affiliation. There was a natural blending of various components of Moroccan identity, especially after the official recognition of the cultural rights of the Amazigh and considering the Amazigh language an official language.

2. **Morocco's geographical proximity to Europe** and the history of its relations with it during the stages of colonialism, protection, and beyond, including the widespread of the French language in official administrations and among people, makes it impressionable to European culture, whether in its **modern manifestation** (i.e. values of enlightenment, citizenship, democracy, human rights, etc.), or in the **currently dominant globalized manifestations** and its economic choices, market culture, consumption, and individual benefit. Moreover, the history of previous relations in the colonial and protection phase remains a latent heritage that can be exploited politically and culturally by some parties.

3. **Morocco also has a very ancient history and a rich historical inherited cultural diversity.** This traditional cultural component constituted a heritage, lifestyle, and rules of behavior for very broad groups of population, especially in the countryside and popular neighborhoods, including what religion represents in its new institutional, popular, and political manifestations. We can **distinguish here between several types of religiosities** to which practices and behaviors of varying degrees are connected:

   a. **Firstly**, the King is also the Commander of the Faithful; he leads the official religious institution coexisting with the regime and characterized by "fairness and moderation", according to adopted classifications.

   b. **Secondly**, there are all the variations of traditional folk religiosity, especially in rural areas, including Zawiyas, Sufis, Moulays, and other beliefs and practices of popular religions that blend with traditions and customs.

   c. **Thirdly**, there are political Islamic movements (the Muslim Brotherhood) that are represented by the Justice and Development Party and its ideology. It combines an ideology that addresses popular consciousness through behaviors, rituals, and conservative interpretations of religion on some issues (e.g., gender equality and individual freedoms) with the act of being a political party that represents and participates in constitutional institutions (parliament and government), along with all the accompanying political pragmatism and moderation in discourse.

   d. **Fourthly**, there also are groups more extreme than violent jihadists, who, although oppressed after the 2003 terrorist attacks, still exist as an ideology and culture and appear from time to time, whether in organized groups in small numbers or in the form of isolated individuals affected by these violent trends through multiple channels, some from abroad.

## The old city of Casablanca: historical data

The old city has an important symbolic role, as it represents a key component of the city's identity, history, and urban, cultural, and social heritage. The changes that occurred in its position in the urban fabric and its relationship with the modern part of the city underline important aspects of government and popular interaction with culture, considering the living representation of historical culture the city embodies, and given the transformations that have taken place during the transition from ancient (often surrounded by walls and with entrance and exit doors) to modern and globalized cities.

## Urbanization and population

Walking around Casablanca's Old City, you get the feeling that you're entering a slum, with its narrow alleys and compact shops, old unrestored buildings and houses, arched stone door frames, and narrow windows. Most of them date back to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Therefore, it allows an important historical reading of the architecture on which these buildings were designed, which not only reflect the characteristics of Moroccan architecture, but also refer to a hybrid and pragmatic architecture due to its association with the colonial period and to developments manifested in the need to respond to the commercial boom that the region knew at that time, thus attracting a new population of Moroccans and foreigners and increasing demand on the construction of houses, without prior planning to accommodate these arrivals.

The population of the Old City in 2020 reached more than 170,000 people, and about 31% of families live in one-room houses without toilets or use a shared restroom. Illiterate residents represent 25% of the city's population, while only 5% have finished their higher education[60], thus explaining the volatility in which they live, as most of its youth continue to engage in seasonal activities or activities limited to the area, considering that it is a market of diverse trades. In fact, young people may work in selling vegetables, fruits, traditional products, local products (e.g., wallets and handbags), or imported products (e.g., glasses, cell phone accessories, etc.). These are the professions practiced in the alleys and squares of the Old City, most of which are marginal and unstructured.

## Attention to heritage: which direction?

The Old City was formerly a city with complete elements according to the characteristics of the time in which it was founded, while today it is one of its neighborhoods and Casablanca has expanded to several times it's previous size. Perspective towards the city, its function, and value changed according to two phases: the **first phase** was characterized by a maximized understanding of modernity and contemporality coupled with a decline of interest in the Old City's cultural and heritage value and its economic role, especially with the expansion of trade and modern economic, service, and industrial activities, in contrast to the craftsmanship and traditional activities that used to distinguish it. **During this phase, infrastructure, and quality of life in the old city deteriorated,** and its urban features were neglected or destroyed and

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**60-** The illiteracy rate among males reaches 14% and 30% among females, which is a high rate for the largest city in Morocco, its economic capital, and a global city. (Official statistics of the High Commission for Planning on Casablanca – data provided by Morocco Population and Housing Census 2014)

replaced, where possible, in favor of new commercial and economic activities. **The second phase was marked by a revived interest in the old city** for two main reasons: first, the need to avoid social and political instability resulting from deteriorating conditions, marginalization, and severe social inequality and to implement the social orientations of official policies in the face of poverty, shantytowns, inadequate housing, etc.; **second, the rediscovery of the importance of heritage and culture as an economic activity and a key tourist attraction**, stimulating interest in these areas and rehabilitating them so that they can play their new role.

During its set-back, the city's infrastructure deteriorated and was damaged. One of the striking examples of the neglection and destruction of cultural monuments is the destruction of the two cinema halls in the city: Imperial and Medina Halls. This triggered demonstrations considering the architectural and heritage value of these halls, which had been opened at the beginning of the twentieth century, thus leading to the issuance of a resolution in 2014[61] commanding the classification of a number of cinema halls as historical monuments that should be preserved. Morocco has devoted support for cinema halls to ensure they continue to exist on the cultural and artistic scene. This decision also came after converting a number of cinema halls into residential compounds, re-invigorating the pockets of real estate investors, such as "Al-Shaab" cinema near the Old City transformed into a residential community, "Al-Shawiya" cinema transformed into shops, "Al Bahia" cinema transformed into a residential building, "Al-Zahraa" cinema transformed into an event planning company, and "Al-Bayda" cinema transformed into a storage warehouse, while other halls were shut down.

Among the most important monuments that were demolished (1984) was the Municipal Theater, a five-minute walk from the Old City and a cultural landmark inaugurated in 1920. It had distinct architectural features and contributed to the dissemination of cultural enlightenment; it brought Moroccan citizens closer to cultural and civilized modernization that the Arab world was familiar with at the time, without neglecting the traditional culture that prevailed in Morocco and manifested in the art of singing and "Al Halqa"[62] arts as a form of popular theater in harmony with the public spaces in which they were performed.

Not far from the Old City, and in the core of Casablanca, a large and modern theater is being built[63] in Mohammed V Square and holds the name "The Grand Theater of Casablanca", as it contains two large halls for performances and another for modern music, as well as small training and meeting rooms, commercial stores (two cafés, a fine restaurant, an art shop, etc.), an artist and technician suite (dorms, technical areas, storage, etc.), and a parking lot. However, the question remains: does the daily income of Moroccan people allow them to go to theaters and cinemas as a family activity, as the case was in the seventies and eighties of the last century? Or are we creating venues that promote ostentatious behaviors and the culture of consumerism and vain?

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**61-** The resolution was issued on May 1, 2014, in the Official Gazette No. 6252
**62-** Al Halqa is an ancient Moroccan art and a form of folk theatre. It is associated with people skilled in the art of storytelling, miming, figurative art, and sarcasm. It was performed in public in some ancient cities.
**63-** Construction of the Grand Theater of Casablanca started in 2014 to be inaugurated, as the Covid-19 pandemic prevented its opening.

## Rehabilitation of the Old City: an important but late project

The economic and social developments over the past decades have led to a major urban and demographic transformation in the old city of Casablanca, as a large segment of its original inhabitants have left and have been replaced by displaced people from the countryside in search of job opportunities or commercial, craftsmanship, or service activities, thus aggravating the problem of random construction without engineering design, as well as the deterioration of these buildings.

In 2011, a large project was launched under the name "The Royal Project to Rehabilitate the Old City" and aimed at achieving a better integration of this area into its urban surroundings and granting the rich historical heritage in it its rightful value. This project comes after the escalation of the voices of the collective fabric[64] and is associated with a number of advantages, given the significance of its strategy and the fact that it targets buildings as well as individuals, focuses on buildings of historical and urban heritage, and at the same time targets health, education, culture, and living standards.

## Impact of these initiatives on the population and youth

Changing the features of the port of Casablanca and moving the fish market to Sidi Othman, about 15 kilometers away, caused the young generation in the Old City to lose some of the activities they used to practice, such as selling fish. Young men and women either engage in income-generating activities such as selling clothes and vegetables or work as unlicensed "tourist guides", prompting them to learn languages on their own to communicate with tourists. In the face of poverty and need, some women, under the supervision of associations active in the social field, resorted to transforming their homes into workshops for making Moroccan sweets or sewing traditional costumes and clothes and distributing them to sellers. These are the activities that became a source of livelihood for Moroccans and provided job opportunities for some young women. However, the deportation of the residents of the Old City whose homes are at risk of collapsing makes them feel excluded, marginalized, and alienated. Those deported or threatened with deportation consider it unfair to them to be relocated from neighborhoods in the center of the city to marginal neighborhoods in rural regions that lack all facilities, with little to no job opportunities and an increased unemployment rate, as well as doubling the suffering of those working in the city center due to traffic congestion in Casablanca.

## Back to the holistic context

Some of the renewed interest in tangible and intangible heritage and culture does not necessarily reflect an appreciation of culture in itself nor an elevation of its developmental, modernizing, and transformative role in society. Rather, it may be primarily a commercial and economic interest in culture and heritage for investment and attracting tourists and financial resources. In this sense, the importance of the transformative function of culture declines in favor of other functions, often economic and commercial, and sometimes political and social, in the service of existing patterns of relations stability. This is not limited to national governments, but the entry of donors, international companies, and international

**64-** Old Medina Rehabilitation Project – p. 2.

non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to the "cultural investment" scene often intersects with this trend or at least coexists with it. This trend is faced with emerging objectional phenomena, some of which are direct and political (e.g., February 20 Movement) while some take the form of widespread factional or popular cultural expressions that carry political, social, or cultural undertones of an opposing nature to direct restriction or assimilation and containment aimed at making the cultural movement part of the prevailing scene and not at implementing radical changes.

## Cultural transformations

Our interviewer Inas (associative activist) talks about the transformations of culture and cultural activities during the last two decades. In theater, for example, since the sixties and seventies there has been a theatrical movement that expresses a vital cultural dynamism emanating from universities and theater institutes and their graduates. Professional and amateur teams were numerous and stemmed from the core of society, and they were producing Moroccan theatrical scripts, in addition to translated scripts, and they were accompanied by an active movement of film clubs. However, this movement, since it is a cultural movement with a margin of independence, has declined since the beginning of the nineties.

**Naima** (theatrical artist) mentions that theatrical activity still exists today, including that related to the activity of civil society and associations and to issues of civil rights and culture. However, there are important differences compared to previous years, as several theatrical performances have become linked to projects and programs, most of which are funded by foreign French, German, Spanish, or other institutions. Funding, whether governmental or foreign, has become an indispensable pre-requisite for theatrical cultural activity in particular, given that it requires higher budgets than other activities. Naima adds that the overall cultural climate has changed today, and new actors have entered the scene, and there are different criteria for evaluating success and effectiveness, as social media and the internet play an increasingly important role. All this results in moving away from professionalism and career standards, the decrease in performances in common spaces, which social media strongly contributed to, and other factors, including school curricula and political transformations.

## Containment strategy

Political transformations after 2000 attempted to accommodate and institutionalize "rebellious" cultural expressions (in the cultural sense) and allocate a place for them in the government's directions by primarily adopting a containment policy instead of direct confrontation, restriction, and prohibition.

The Boulevard, a street arts festival specifically aimed at young people, represents one of Morocco's most important modern urban events. The first version of this festival began in 1999 at the site of the old slaughterhouses in the city of Casablanca and took the form of competitive matches between youth bands of different genres and graffiti painters. It has since evolved (the last of version was in 2017) and has become a national and international event for various types of music (rap, Gnaoua, techno, rock, etc.), as well as very diverse activities, including

kiosks to display crafts, food, and graffiti. The officially sponsored festival has turned into a semi-official festival, along with other music, film, theater, etc. festivals, such as **the Mawazine Festival in Rabat, The Fez Festival of Sacred Music, the Essaouira Festival Gnaoua World Music Festival, the Marrakesh and Tangiers Festivals**, etc. These festivals distributed across Morocco **enjoy official sponsorship from central or local authorities and have prominent public and political figures occupying major positions in their administrations.**
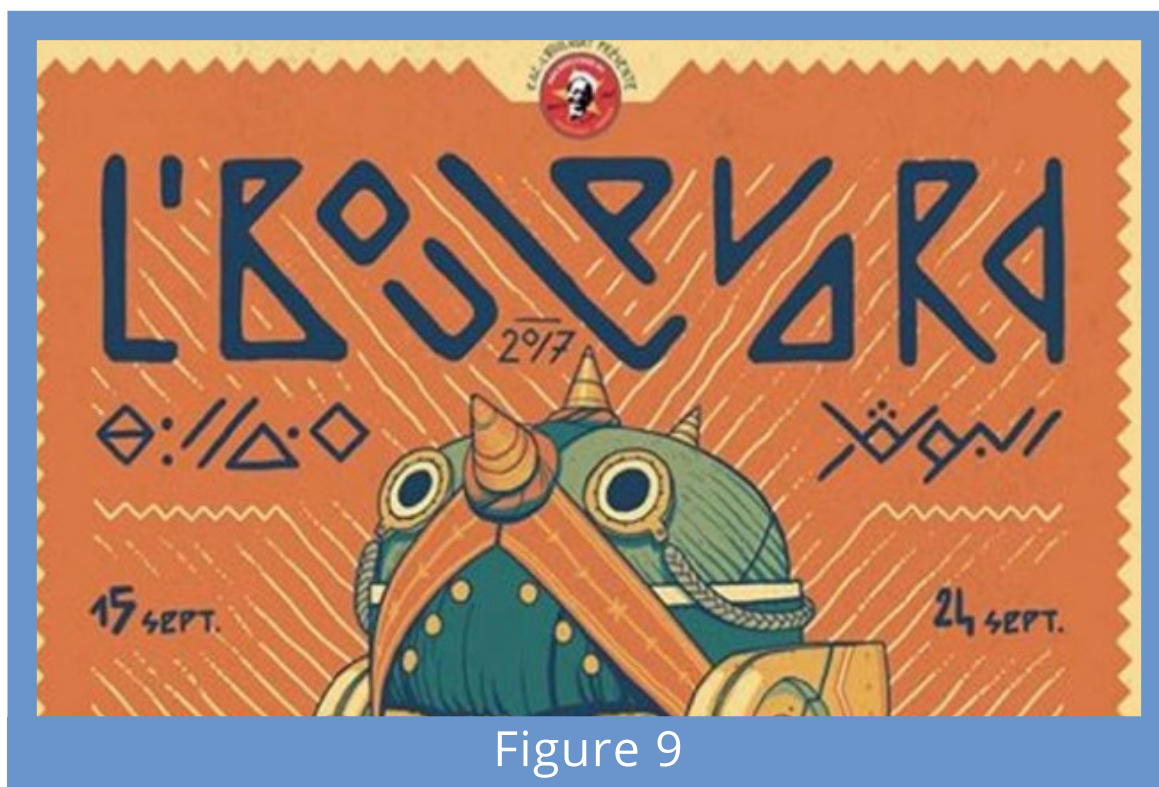

Figure 9

**At the popular level, free artistic activity reached its peak in 2011 during the period between February 20 Movement and the formation of the new government, after the constitution was amended in September and the Islamist Justice and Development Party took over power post elections.** During these transitional and restriction-free months, all kinds of creative and cultural activities saw a spontaneous spike in the streets and public spaces. Groups started to organize shows and showcase their artworks; some even organized open poetic readings and theatrical activities. That period witnessed an unprecedented activity on social media platforms and initiatives of all types (as it was the case in different countries during the first and second wave of the Arab Spring). The presence of this type of initiatives was greater in cities, but the countryside was not devoid of them, and some activities took a special character in areas where the majority of the population was Amazigh.

**This movement was brought under control after government formation, with occurrences of direct ban**, as some bloggers and journalists were banned, some were prosecuted, and others left Morocco; Associations deemed "culturally" extremist were also dissolved, such as Racine Group (2018) that was eliminated and banned from activity since it tackled sensitive topics that were considered cultural and political taboos, although it was a group of limited scope and often discussed such topics in closed or semi-closed areas.

## Culture of margins

Nevertheless, artistic expression of dreams and positions always finds its path in unexpected ways. **Neighborhoods and marginalized groups were part of this context. Stadiums were the incubator and catalyst of other forms of artistic expression through the chants of football fans.** This phenomenon was replicated in other North African countries (in Tunisia, President Ben Ali was criticized on stadium bleachers; in Egypt, Ultras (organizations for football fans) were actively present in street movements; in Algeria; etc.). In Morocco, fans of several sports teams created songs and chants that formed a cultural expression of objection to the situation. The most prominent of expressions was the **song of the Raja football team of Casablanca entitled "I was wronged in my country" (Fi Biladi Zalamouni)**, which protested the overall deterioration of the situation in Morocco. This song has echoed inside and outside Morocco, considering that it is a popular cultural expression with equivalents in other countries as well.

في بلادي ظلموني  -فريق الرجاء البيضاوي

| | |
|---|---|
| يا في بلادي ظلموني | Ouh, Ouh, Ouh, Ouh |
| لمن نشكي حالي؟ | Ouh, Ouh, Ouh, Ouh |
| الشكوى للرب العالي | Ouh, Ouh, Ouh, Ouh |
| هو داري بحالي | Ouh, Ouh, Ouh, Ouh |

| | |
|---|---|
| المواهب ضيعتوها | البلاد عايشين في غمامة |
| بالدوخة هرستوها | ...ين السلامة |
| كيف بغيتوا تشوفوها | ...رنا يا مولانا |
| يا فلوس البلاد قاع كليتو | ...فوا علينا حشيشة كتامة |
| للبراني عطيتوها | ...نا كي اليتامى |
| Génération معتوهة | ...سبوا في القيامة |

Figure 10

## Summary

In the pre-1999 decades, **civil and cultural activists did not conceal the political and transformative nature of their movement and activities in two complementary directions: democracy (at the political level) and the values of modernity (at the cultural and social levels).** The transformative function was the most prevalent and manifested in movements of thought, philosophy, writing, theatre, music, the arts, etc. It was not restricted by the work of NGOs and mainstream-type associations, nor did these activities consist of projects funded by donors. The veteran generation of activists who compares the previous situation with the current situation underscores that the previously evident separation lines between the cultural movement and the authority have become ambiguous and overlapping today; there has also been a significant change in the nature of the players' working methods, as well as in the manifestations and expressions of the cultural movement.
In this context, three developments are worth noting:

1. **Strong involvement of the state apparatus in the fields of civil and cultural action and the assimilation of some of this action and its influential players.**

2. **Strong involvement of international players and their affiliated institutions, particularly cultural entities, or international NGOs.**

3. **Growing cultural confrontation within the society itself, precisely between modern and conservative trends in the social and cultural field, as a result of confusion in**

**relations and positions between civil movements and government authorities (central or local) and with donors** (e.g., gender equality, individual freedoms, modernity and its requirements, advanced civil state, etc.); it replaced the margin of political division between civil society and authority, which was more evident in the previous stage.

4. **Rise of the "project" approach, funding, and partnerships with governmental and external actors, along with the emergence of atypical cultural phenomena, whether on the virtual space, in stadiums, or in neighborhoods, leading to a culture of the marginalized.**

5. **On the other side that seeks to reclaim the transformative role of culture, the popular movement (February 20 Movement in Morocco) represents an atypical cultural case in two senses.** First, the movement directly presented the values of modernity, democratic transition, citizenship, and human rights. Second, it constituted in itself a space for innovative and popular cultural and creative activities, ranging from graffiti, songs, awareness campaigns, and community interaction in the streets and squares towards conspicuous democratic transition and culture of rights.

## Case study: Tripoli, Lebanon
## The problem of identity and extremism: culture against stereotypes

Tripoli - Lebanon, at some point also called Lebanon's "Kandahar", was selected as a case study because of its stereotype as an incubator of terrorism and for the poverty and marginalization that characterize it. This stereotype of Tripoli raises complex problems of both social and cultural nature about its identity and image compared to its actual reality. In the October 17 revolution, Tripoli was also called "the bride of the revolution", as it reflected an image that goes completely against the (Kandaharian) stereotype, in a shift that calls for contemplation.

### National context

The important questions regarding politics and culture in Tripoli are founded in the historical journey of Lebanon's establishment and political system.

The Lebanese political regime was founded on the federation of political families with local hegemony and power and of different religious sects in Lebanon, and then the regime adopted the sectarian system to build state institutions. **The traditionally predominant thinking pattern**, whether in the political sphere or the social-cultural one was coexistence between sects. However, this **did not stop modernism and its values to enter and grow within society, institutions, and at the level of the political discourse.** This is partly due to the fact that Lebanon is a touristic and open country, with a liberal economy primarily focusing on the mediator role, commerce, and banks. This kind of operations requires a significant level of cultural similarity with the economies of northern/western countries.

The eruption of the civil war on April 13, 1975, was a sign that the traditional political regime (the 1943 regime) had drawn its last breath, as had the regional economic role of Lebanon. This required abandoning this system and adopting a more developed one. The end of the war in 1990 (upon the Taif agreement) meant that Lebanon entered a new phase consisting in a direct Syrian mandate on political life, the emergence of Hariri political project with former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri's arrival to power, and him presiding the majority of successive governments between 1993 and 2005 (year of his assassination). **The Hariri political project was first and foremost an economic project. It brought a new and untraditional culture based on business, exceeding traditional sectarianism from an economic perspective without clashing with it, and promoting Lebanon's strong ties with global economy using new ways that were not available prior to 1975.**

This path ended in 2005 with the assassination of Rafic Hariri and the series of subsequent assassinations. **Assassinations became a new way of political and social subjugation, spreading a culture of fear and silence, imposing police state practices at the expense of democracy, citizenship, and freedom.** During the last decade and a half of Lebanon's history, the traditional system and its culture were not replaced by another reformist one aiming for democratic and citizenship values but was rather replaced by a police and security culture and practices that were largely totalitarian, followed by a series of political, institutional, and economic crises, aggravated even more by the Syrian war near the borders and its political implications.

**Eventually, a political, financial, economic, social, and cultural crisis erupted with the October 17, 2019 revolution. Lebanon is still going through the developments of this unprecedented phase of its history.**

## The conflict over the identity of Tripoli

The conflict over the identity of Tripoli was never in its essence a conflict within the city. It was rather an external macro-conflict aiming to paint a stereotypical image of the city and its residents. Many methods and schemes were deployed for this end, and many factors contributed to it in different phases:

- **Firstly**, **marginalization** and decline in development indicators

- **Secondly**, the city was **relatively kept away from the path of war and national political conflict** with its early exit (and the North in general) from the two-year division, which **instead of becoming a factor favoring economic growth and development, led to more marginalization of Tripoli and the North, particularly upon the Taif agreement**

- **Thirdly**, this relative political and geographical distancing from the capital, decision-making, and influence centers located between Beirut and the South, led to **the possibility of a more extremist use of Tripoli as a space for peripheral Lebanese and regional conflicts with less risk of negative disruptive implications on the regime. In this context, between**

**1983 and 1985, the Islamic Tawheed Movement controlled Tripoli. This movement then succeeded in establishing the "First Islamic Republic" in Lebanon in this city in an attempt to completely change its identity and culture.**

- **Fourthly**, **the transformation that occurred after 2005** (the Hariri assassination) **did not lead to major changes in the situation of Tripoli**, which remained in a peripheral position in the political projects of influential political parties and its people only served as supporting spectators. Thus, Tripoli remained a place for security turmoil with political implications.

- **Fifthly**, **upon the eruption of the war in Syria**, Tripoli was generally supportive and in solidarity, on the political and popular levels, with the Syrian people and various opposing parties. **This created a favorable environment for certain Islamist movements to strongly re-emerge under the pretext of solidarity with the Syrian people.**

- **Sixthly**, **the economic and developmental marginalization** continued, which resulted in making Tripoli one of the poorest regions in Lebanon (in addition to Akkar and Danniye) despite being a large city. Thus, **Tripoli as a poor, marginalized, and neglected city became a major factor in forming the overall image of the city and in the perception of its people and their living conditions, and this strengthened the grievance discourse.**

## Prior and subsequent stereotypes

The image of Tripoli was branded by three negative characteristics:

1. **Marginalized city relatively isolated from Lebanon** as if it is closer to Damascus or Istanbul than it is to Beirut.

2. Kandaharian branding making it a **favorable environment for Islamist extremist terrorist groups** with connections to similar groups in Syria.

3. **Poor and unfairly treated city** deserving pity.

The stereotypical discourse painted an image of Tripoli marked by three features: isolation from the rest of Lebanon, an Islamic religious character, poverty, and marginalization. However, an objective look at the city's path and reality reveals a **decades-long vibrant social and cultural life**, even prior to the changes caused by the October 17 Revolution and the transformation of Tripoli into the "Revolution Bride". The city is home to an exceptional cultural movement, both at the level of local newspapers (such as Al-Bayan, Al-Insha', Al-Raqib, Al-Tamaddun, etc.) or at the level of its cultural centers, annual book fairs, and cultural and artistic activities of all kinds, whether before, during or after the 1975 War, albeit with varying players and institutions. Nevertheless, the repercussions of the conflict between Jabal Mohsen and Bab al-Tabbaneh (in its both rounds in early 80's, then between 2007-2014) inflicted significant and serious damage to the political, social, and cultural life, exacerbated by some profit-oriented financiers, as well as a number of inadequate international projects for cultural heritage conservation.

**One of the great losses endured by the city was the closure of cinemas** in Al Tal Square and along the boulevard that separates the old and the new parts of the city. Cinema halls in poor neighborhoods were closed before that, but the closure was enforced across the city in the 80's for security reasons, so Cinema Colorado, Rivoli, Palace, Opera, Empire, Metropole, Capitol, and Shehrazad were all closed, and their entrances sealed. Cinema Victoria and other cinema halls in Al- Mina were closed as well. The Rivoli Cinema, a heritage building, was later demolished despite protests, and the historic "AlInja" theater had previously been demolished for commercial-real estate reasons as well (compare with the old city of Casablanca).

**Some clubs and cultural centers maintained a reasonable amount of activity** throughout this period, with the entry of new players operating based on more modern rules. In this regard, we mentioned the 140-year-old **Nawfal Palace**, facing the historical clock tower in the Al-Tal. However, it has been suffering for years from neglect and stagnation. In the past, it hosted seminars, lectures, training workshops, and educational and musical theatrical performances, and hosted a public library for students. Another importance cultural edifice is **Al Rabita El Sakafia** for Islamic education graduates, founded in the same year as independence in 1943, considered one of the most prominent centers in Tripoli's cultural history, and was and is still organizing its annual book fair. Besides these two institutions, the city was home to other eminent institutions, including the **University's Club, the North Lebanon Cultural Council**, and other widespread associations active in all fields, including women, youth, and environmental associations, cinema clubs, and a distinguished club for classical music, not to mention theater groups and cultural activities conducted in all educational institutions.

With the recent wave of **cultural action supported by political parties** that also enjoy international support, the **Safadi Cultural Center** was established in the Dam wal Farz area and the Armenian Archaeological School building in **El Mina was converted into a house of art** and later into a cultural center. These two institutions are active, but politically connected with local political leaders (Mohammed Al-Safadi and Najib Mikati) and operate according to rules different from the traditional cultural work that the city knew in the past.

Tripoli's **historical urban heritage and ancient markets attract great interest in the city and still constitute a major commercial hub**. There are dozens of historical mosques and churches in the city from different periods including modern times, near each other in old and popular neighborhoods as well as in new ones. **The old city (Tripoli Citadel, Barsbay Tower in the port, the khans, the hammams, the old neighborhoods and their crafts - soap making, copper making, pottery in El Mina, etc.) was the subject of Tripoli cultural heritage revival project** funded by the World Bank. This project provoked a major controversy between supporters and opponents, and was criticized for its many loopholes, including its lack of realism. **The project was also criticized for overlooking the importance of linking culture to people's lives and livelihoods beyond the mere restoration of buildings. Ultimately, the project failed to achieve the desired outcome.**

Moreover, Tripoli International Fair, which was designed by the international Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer, represents a significant modern heritage in the city. The fair, whose construction began in the early 70's, boasts a stunning engineering design, but was left incomplete and neglected to this day. It is a glaring example of the neglect


Figure 11: Tripoli International Fair – Arch. Wassim Naghi's page

and marginalization that the city endures, although it is an unparalleled landmark in Lebanon.

## The bride of the revolution

The October Revolution is a major turning point in awareness and practice in Lebanon, and this is also true for Tripoli. However, **its new image - the bride of the revolution - was in some sense latent or dominated by the previous stereotype, which turned out to be unilateral and to a large extent forced on it**. While the city seems culturally stagnant, the October 17 Revolution contributed to highlighting, refining, and developing the new image, but it did not create it out of thin air.

## First: artistic expressions

The image of an extremist city expresses itself first and foremost through the ban of various arts and artistic expressions. However, Tripoli has known modern forms of artistic expression that transcended previous conventional forms of cultural work.

### 1. Al Fayhaa Choir

"Al Fayhaa Choir" is an international choir that changed the lives of dozens of Tripoli's youths and painted a picture completely different from extremism and seclusion. The choir was founded in 2003 by **Maestro Barvek Taslakian** (Lebanese Armenian from the village of Anjar who moved to live in Tripoli). It is an a capella collective singing group, which is singing without the support of any accompanying musical instruments. Two years after its establishment, the choir was able to win the second-place award at the Poland Festival in 2005, then two awards at the same time in 2007, and other awards through which the choir was able to portray an exceptional image of Tripoli as a diverse city with a rich cultural background, heritage, and openness.

The choir is formed by around 40 young boys and girls from various regions, including Palestinian residents in Lebanon, particularly from the camps located in the North and in proximity of Tripoli and Al-Minya, namely, Al-Baddawi and Nahr Al-Bared refugee camps. They sing, in their own way, Arabic, Lebanese, Iraqi, Palestinian, Egyptian, and even Armenian heritage. Maestro Barkev indicated that "Al Fayhaa Choir" is the only one in the world that sings in Arabic without musical instruments, "that is why, they declared us nearly 7 years ago in Germany, an innovative choir school, as well as in Barcelona in 2014". The emergence of a choir of this kind and of this level

and in the city of Tripoli is no ordinary event, particularly as it reached the international scene. The choir struggled for a long time to impose its independence and prevent any commercial and political influence, and it did not always receive the required support; however, its international renown made ignoring it impossible. The choir expanded to currently include four branches: main branch in Tripoli, Chouf-Mount Lebanon, Beirut, and Egypt.

**The choir contributed to raising the awareness of Tripoli youths of both genders**. The Maestro says: "a member of the choir was from the Abi Samra region in Tripoli, and before joining the choir, he was a religious fanatic. Then one day, he came to the choir by chance, and I forced him to sing despite his shyness and his refusal. Once he started to discover his talent, he gradually started to distance himself from his old environment which instilled in him fanatic ideas, and he is now a musician and the children choir conductor". Moreover, in Nahr Al-Bared camp: "I had a student who dropped out of school. I agreed to teach him music if he continued his education, and he became a musician and engineer and saved himself from the dark abyss that was awaiting him."

**Muhammad Mawas** (35 years old) acknowledges that his personal experience with the choir completely changed his life since he joined it ten years ago. At the time, he had no idea what a "choir" was: "I joined the choir ten years ago. Prior to that, my life in Tripoli was only about going out to the cafe, playing "cards", and smoking. I was also inclined to extremist ideas... During Jabal Mohsen-Bab al-Tabbaneh battles, **I used to train young men to carry weapons, and brag about my knowledge of martial arts.** Today I feel very proud when I talk about my experience, **after I lived a profound transformation from a young man who was going to become unemployed or terrorist to a young man who is currently a musician, teaches music, and spreads a culture of peace, coexistence, and diversity.** This transformation was not easy."

Muhammad Mawas is today a music teacher and has an institute in Tripoli where he teaches music to children.

**2. Tripoli Film Festival: When cinema changes the profile of a marginalized city**
Since its launch in 2014, as the Jabal Mohsen-Bab al-Tabbaneh clashes came to an end and the implementation of the security plan in Tripoli had started, the Tripoli Film Festival occupied year after year a special space in the capital of the North. It contributed significantly, through cinema, to breaking the isolation in which the city was immersed due to violent security events and the presence of armed groups.

**Elias Khallat**, a cineaste from Tripoli and the founder and manager of the "Tripoli Film Festival", indicated that the festival was able over the course of seven years of annual events (to date), to actively accumulate success, thus reaching global renown through its annual tours and hosting major cinema experts from the Arab world and abroad. **The festival brought cinema to marginalized neighborhoods where people live in extreme poverty, by launching a new culture in these neighborhoods, i.e., "Cinema on the Stairs".** The initiative consisted

of open-air shows on internal stairs in Jabal Mohsen, Bab al-Tabbaneh, and al-Shaarani neighborhoods, where some carefully selected films were shown, addressing young men and women in these areas and disseminating the cinema culture in popular neighborhoods. Khallat also indicated that young people of the region interacted with this cinematic event, which was exceptional and surprising even to the organizers: "Some of them mocked us when we arrived and considered that we did something worthless, while they only cared about carrying arms, but their eyes were soon enough glued to the screenings. They automatically sat and called each other, then asked us about the date of the next screening in their area because they had never known what a cinema hall is."

Similarly to "Al Fayhaa Choir", the impact of the film festival was sensed in the general image of Tripoli and had a positive impact on the lives of individuals, as it is the case with filmmaker **Fatma Shehadeh** (26 years old), who was able to reach the global scene through the opportunities given to her by Tripoli Film Festival. After screening her graduation film "In Loving Memory" (Zikra) in five festivals around the world, other festivals want to list it in their screenings. Fatma, who shared her films in these festivals, was a member of "Al Fayhaa Choir" too, which she considers to have changed her life and brought her closer to arts and creativity. She sang with the choir for years, and was able to direct a group, but she considers music her hobby, while cinema is her passion. She sees the festival as an invaluable project which Tripoli deserves, particularly in marginalized areas where people await annual screenings: **"Every time we went to marginalized areas in Tripoli to screen films outdoor, I saw in the eyes of young people an unusual spark, combining fear and need for change.** I always feel that they are creative and talented, but they are deprived of any chance, and their interaction with intense films is always surprising. We always awaited their reactions to them, and I am always inspired by them to make stories for my future film projects. Perhaps they may someday contribute to any change in our city."

## New artistic expressions

Rap is considered one of these phenomena. It became widespread upon the Arab Spring in many countries and cities, including Lebanon and Tripoli. Although rap is a form of street art born in the black (African American) neighborhoods in the United States as rebellious expression in terms of form and content against reality, its interaction with youth environments in other countries and societies has also succeeded. Contrary to what comes to mind that fans of this kind of art are from the middle-globalized class, we see that in Lebanon, the most prominent users of this form of expression are from marginalized and poor environments and areas, a fact that makes this form of expression authentic and engraved in the lives of young people from these areas.

**El Rass (aka Mazen El Sayed)** is a rapper from Tripoli. He is one of the most prominent rappers in Lebanon, along with **"Nassereddin Al Touffar"** who is from Baalbek-Hermel, another rural marginalized district in the Bekaa Valley. El Rass addresses controversial topics: in one of his songs titled "Bilal"[65] he tackles issues like racism, violence, oppression, religion, and human

**65-** El Rass, Bilal [Video], May 27, 2020**. (YouTube) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UvFr-knFQZE**

dignity. In addition to that, he addresses important issues in our society such as police violence, corruption, and Lebanese "savviness" that allows those who are "politically correct" of the elites with power to deal with others from a supremacist perspective and overpower them: "Vote for the Beik in the concrete jungles, in Bedouin oases, or in cotton fields in minarets chains." **El Rass and other rappers were the rising stars of protests in the October 17 Revolution in different Lebanese regions, where thousands gathered to listen to them.**

In Tripoli, there is also a rap group called Straight outta Tripoli, formed of seven members: three from Jabal Mohsen and four from Bab al-Tabbaneh (the two opposing sides of armed clashes in the city). The band participated in the MARCH festival in Syria street. Their songs tackle their hardships with love during war, and one of their songs contains heavy criticism of Lebanese security forces and the unjust practices they resort to when conducting arrests. Moreover, another rap band is present in Tripoli and holds the name **Ghoraba2 from Akkar** (Strangers from Akkar). The productions of these bands are available on YouTube in professionally recorded songs or in live recordings during protests where audiences interacted strongly with the lyrics and rhythms.

In addition to rap, the traditional cultural and folkloric form of expression holds a strong presence with **Barrak Sobeih** (an activist and member of Cross-Arts Association in Tripoli - managed by activist Jean Hajjar), who plays the role of the **Hakawati** (storyteller) to deliver messages to citizens through folkloric heritage stories or new ones. The association works on training youth to perform the role of Hakawati to keep this form of heritage alive and use it to communicate with people, particularly in popular poor areas through storytelling in cafes and public gatherings.

These art forms are very diverse but coexist and interact in Tripoli. They transmit values and perform similar functions despite being different.

## Online press

In recent years, local non-traditional media outlets have played a prominent role in Tripoli and its surroundings and have had a significant impact on public opinion.

### 1. Media covering clashes

During the clashes between Jabal Mohsen and Bab al-Tabbaneh (2007-2014), social media pages of local groups witnessed verbal clashes even more violent than the on-the-ground ones. These contributed to causing sedition and stirring up actual clashes through incitement or spreading deceitful information.

The most prominent groups playing a role in the armed clashes through WhatsApp and Facebook, were groups like "Tripoli 24", "Fayhaa Tripoli Network" and "Free Tripoli Radio". Moreover, certain pages aimed to exacerbate sectarian incitement, including pages like "Tripoli Damascus News Network", "Tripoli, the Fort of Bani Oumaya", "Tripoli - Damascus - Califate" managed by people with close ties with ISIS. During these clashes, WhatsApp was one of the

apps upon which fighters relied the most in Jabal Mohsen and Bab al-Tabbaneh, and people in the area were influenced by the videos shared through it.[66]

This role played by "local media" grew in significance over the years in various northern regions, particularly that mobile phones became available to all people in these marginalized regions located at the lines of confrontation. These means were also powerful tools in the hands of security authorities as the large percentage of the arrests related to the local clashes in Tripoli was made based on accusations of mobile "communication" with Islamic organizations, whether inside Lebanon or in Syria. So mobile phones became a security "trap" to arrest those accused and suspected of being implicated in clashes or showing any desire to join Islamist organizations

## 2. Uprising media

It can be said that the October 17 Revolution had an impact on enabling social media platforms to play a role in transforming Tripoli and the surrounding areas from a marginalized and isolated city to a city that is reclaiming its role as a focal point of the uprising, attracting protestors from all over Lebanon. News groups became an important source of information for citizens to follow events, organize, and plan. **"T.N.T - Moubadiroun (Initiators)"** is an example of such groups. Moreover, it is not very difficult for anyone at Al Noor Square to recognize its reporters and cameramen wearing the unified vest.[67]

Initiatives are continuously launched and may take more mature forms: for example, internet and social media were used to organize debate sessions on local and national issues, particularly after removing the tents from Al Noor Square due to the COVID-19 pandemic and other factors (e.g., international discussions organized by the **Saha w Masaha (Square and Space) initiative** on Zoom and Facebook), in addition to **Kabse[68] podcast initiative** launched at the onset of 2021. This initiative relies on pre-recorded podcasts broadcasted on the internet and addressing issues relevant to Tripoli and the Lebanese crisis, as well as many other initiatives of the like still active today.

## Second: At the lines of confrontation

Recurrent clashes between Jabal Mohsen, al-Tabbaneh, al-Mankoubin, and al-Qubba left their mark on all aspects of life in Tripoli and the North in general. They also catalyzed many initiatives that opted for the cultural and civil approach to deal with this violent and sharp division in the city and address its effects, especially with the cessation of military battles and the implementation of the security plan in 2014, which paved the way for field work in the region and with its youth.

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66- See detailed report on the role of social media in Tripoli clashes: Nazeer Rida: Alternative Media in Tripoli: Spur of the moment news. Al Modon Online. October 27, 2014. **https://cutt.us/vu43z**

67- See detailed report on the alternative revolution media in Tripoli and its role in changing the city's stereotypical image: Bashir Mustapha: Tripoli Journalists and Activists Created its Revolution: No Red Lines! Al Modon Online. November 1, 2019. **https://cutt.us/mXX7K**

68- Kabse is the first podcast in Tripoli, prepared and presented by the Lebanese researcher and journalist from Tripoli Jana Al Dhaybi (28 years old), with support and funding from the British Council. The podcast uses YouTube, social media platforms, and podcast platforms and aims at creating an alternative venue for discussions, sharing experiences and stories that paint an image of Tripoli different from the stereotypical one, shedding light on social and cultural issues, and addressing sensitive problems by humanizing them away from violence and hatred-based discourses

## 1. Ruwad Al Tanmeya

 The " Ruwwad Al Tanmeya" association is located on Syria Street on the front lines separating Jabal Mohsen and Bab al-Tabbaneh. The center has two entrances, one to the Jabal Mohsen side and the other to the Tabbaneh side. This is a practical arrangement imposed by the location of the association, allowing the youth there to return to the area in which they live without being exposed to danger in case clashes erupted and they were caught in the middle. Perhaps this description provides a preliminary idea of the nature of the work done by the association and the nature of issues and challenges they face and those the youth in the opposing neighborhoods face due to their involvement in violent political and sectarian confrontations, living a few meters away from the other side.

The association seeks to overcome marginalization from which youth from both genders suffer, through education and youth volunteering programs and organizing grassroot action with residents of relevant neighborhoods. Ruwad al-Tanmeya are a model of civil involvement based on citizen initiatives, where youth beneficiaries who were granted vocational and university scholarships devote several hours every week for community service to create safe learning spaces for children and adolescents, and launch campaigns serving civil society and contributing to social change.

**Nadine Ali Deeb**, project manager at Ruwad association, indicated that Bab al Tabbaneh is more vulnerable than Jabal Mohsen. In Bab al-Tabbaneh, contrary to Jabal Mohsen, according to Deeb, "there are no opportunities for young people to pursue education simply because there are no vocational schools in the region. Most families do not have any kind of resources, heritage, or investments that can be employed to help their children, to the extent that education in Bab al-Tabbaneh became almost a luxury and inaccessible to most of the population."
Al-Ruwad leaves an effect in the lives of young people, and sometimes in their families and surrounding environment as well by strengthening tolerance and acceptance of others and seeking to reconcile the youth of both regions.

## 2. MARCH association

 MARCH chose a cultural approach to achieve similar goals in the same region, through "Kahwatna" (Our Café) project in 2016, an artistic-cultural café on the front lines that brings together young men and women from Jabal Mohsen, Bab al-Tabbaneh, and al-Qubba, the regions most affected by the local conflict, and used it as a launching pad for dialogue sessions, artistic and theatrical activity, and open meetings between young people and with well-known Lebanese activists and artists.

The president of the association, **Léa Baroudi**, explains that "art has been able to transform hostility into friendship between the people of the two regions through our café." They initially gathered to co-author and perform a play inspired by their lives entitled **"Love and War on the Roof"** (2015). Most of the young people who took part in the play had previously participated in fighting during the violent rounds of clashes in the city. The play is about the love story of Ali from Jabal Mohsen and Aisha from Bab al-Tabbaneh (it is needless to say that the names

have clear sectarian connotations). The play ends with their deaths due to the clashes in what is supposed to represent a shock of conscience to stop the senseless fighting. After the play's success, the number of participants increased from 16 to 35 young men and women. MARCH came up with idea of "Kahwetna" and "Fajjer Mawehbak" (Show us your talents) Festival. To sustain the cafe, it brought young people together to train them on music, singing, and acting with Georges Khabbaz (a known Lebanese artist) and other artists as well. The festival was organized on Syria street - the line of confrontation - and a wide audience from Tripoli attended it in this abandoned and destroyed part, where people only went when necessary or if they lived there.

### Third: When the sit-in square saw light in Tripoli

The fourth night of the uprising (October 20, 2019) witnessed the highest mass momentum ever gathered in Tripoli in the Abdel Hamid Karame Square (Al Noor Square). More than 100,000 people were protesting, carrying solely the Lebanese flag. Al Noor Square received the most spotlight in Lebanon, and although that the word "Allah" is erected in the middle of the square and the phrase "Tripoli is the bastion of Muslims" is under it, loud music was played by a DJ, people danced dabké, and shouted "I am not Sunni, I am not Druze, I am not Alawite, I am not Shiite... I am Lebanese".[69]

### Special characteristics

We shall examine three main characteristics that made Tripoli's contribution to the revolution special:

1. Tripoli was the first city to **bring down images of its traditional "leaders" as well as its current and former deputies and ministers without exception, expressing a renouncement of traditional loyalty** and rebellion against the political and sectarian system. It maintained that discourse throughout the revolution in a step towards direct citizenship and belonging to the state. **This is a phenomenon unmatched by any other region of Lebanon during the revolution days.**

2. The sit-in square in Tripoli **has maintained a renewable and uninterrupted mass momentum over a period of weeks and months. That set it apart from other squares and made it the most renowned squares of revolution until its intensity** waned in Tripoli and all over Lebanon due to the Covid-19 pandemic, political complications, and the oppression with which the revolution was met.

3. Tripoli's men and women, both young and old, **participated in all revolution squares reaching the extreme south. Moreover, there was recurrent and continuous presence of protestors from other Lebanese regions in Tripoli.** This is another clear expression of a sense of strong belonging of Tripoli to Lebanon and portrays an image contrary to the isolation and stereotype imposed on Tripoli as an extremist and close-minded city.

69- Jana Al-Dhaibi. Tripoli regains its stolen title: the second capital of Lebanon. Al-Modon Electronic Newspaper, October 20, 2019. https://cutt.us/c9aiD

## The square and citizenship initiatives

The first and most prominent initiative, and the most active one, is the initiative of **Obeida Takriti** (29 years old) to erect a tent near Al Noor Square and name it **"Saha w Masaha" (Square & Space)**. This tent remained there for months without interruption, with daily activity from 5 PM until 10 PM and even later, organizing open discussion sessions and hosting experts, academics, and renowned people from various fields of expertise and regions. Obeida said "I wanted us to create other spaces using protest venues, and for Saha w Masaha to be a space for creation and production of a new and clean political discourse, strengthening the popular basis of the revolution against the regime. Tripoli in particular lacks political discourse, and people regard politics as something distant, far away from them, as a result of the regime's mistreatment of the city".

After the removal of the political discussion tents, the page **"Saha w Masaha" was created on Facebook**, on which live and continuous political and civic discussion sessions are held to this day.

## "The revolution kitchen"

Starting from October 17, 2019, the number of tents increased significantly, with different goals and activities for youth and students to express demands and hold discussions about political and social issues and the situation in the city. However, at the edge of the square, the largest tent was erected for months on end with the slogan "Guardians of the Revolution", from which a delicious smell of food and cooking spread in the square, to provide large quantities of food for protestors.

At the entrance stood for months a strong lady guarding the tent. It was **Linda Borghol** (47 years old), a retired public servant of the Ministry of Social Affairs. She previously ran for the elections to become the mayor of Bab al-Tabbaneh, and she proposed to establish this tent: "Since day one of the revolution, I took to the streets like any rebellious citizen angry against the regime, and with me came many young people with whom I used to go on scout camps. We used to sit on the pavement with no tent. Later, several local associations in the city, through a friend, donated tents to us." In the first few days, this group started to collect money from its own members to buy ready-made sandwiches... and when the scope of protest grew, Linda came up with the idea of establishing a kitchen in the square. Instead of collecting money, "I asked donators in the square to provide us with cooking ingredients, each depending on their ability, even if from their own houses, then Dar Al-Zahraa donated the pots and gas". She adds "everyone in the square could eat from our kitchen, and we refused no one in need or asking for food because it is the revolution kitchen, and it is owned by all people protesting the reality of Tripoli. Then our circle of support grew even more, and we became able to provide 2,500 meals per day. Women from Tripoli, Amchit, Batroun, and Beirut donated raw material after I reached out to them, and we bought meat from the donation boxes."

**These examples of initiatives where present in all squares of protest in Lebanon**. They showed an advanced level of participation by youth in this journey. This ended the chronic

marginalization from which they suffered over the decades and highlighted the special role played by women and the role of revolution in encouraging them to participate in the public realm.

## Tripoli women

Women participation in Tripoli bears an additional significance. Tripoli, just like all Lebanon, is ruled by a patriarchal mindset that restricts the life, freedom, and role of women. Besides, the conservative and extremist religious identity imposed on women during the previous decades subjected their participation to further repression and



Figure 12

oppression, in addition to the prevailing idea that poor and popular communities have little interest in issues such as the emancipation of women and the promotion of women's rights, especially if poverty is combined with wars between neighborhoods and ongoing conflicts that increase the possibility of domestic violence, disintegration, and countless other problems.

The transformations brought about by October 17 uprising in Tripoli affected the situation of women, and their presence in the public sphere increased across regions and classes. During the uprising, specifically on November 10, Tripoli witnessed a large women's march (with the participation of thousands of male and female demonstrators) throughout city streets and inner neighborhoods, led by women who protested in Al Tal square - the commercial center of Tripoli, followed by a march through city markets and neighborhoods, headed by a sign that said: "Women are on fire! Peaceful national protest!".

Tripoli witnessing a women march in which men were allowed to participate was no ordinary event. This city was for a long time stigmatized as a conservative, overly religious, and extremist city; nonetheless, a march dedicated for women was organized there. Women from all communities and sects participated, whether believers or non-believers, veiled or not veiled, young or old, holding national and political slogans and demanding their stolen rights and a fair "civil state" that can do them justice. They shouted in unison: "Our revolution is a feminist revolution. Listen, you patriarchal state, you patriarchal regime, our revolution is a feminist revolution. We are not afraid. We do not kneel. We will not be silent again. Raise your voice! Stand up for your rights! Raise your voice until you no more can. We will kiss this regime goodbye! We want a civil state. We want women to pass on their nationality! We are the voice of freedom. Our revolution is a feminist revolution."
Yes, this happened in Tripoli.

## Revolution arts once again

As it is the case with Beirut, Tripoli became a space for young talents to emerge in many disciplines. We will focus on two art forms of expression: graffiti and revolution songs.

## Graffiti

The walls of the city became canvases for expression through painting, colors, and announcing positions. Tripoli witnessed the presence of painting in the streets in the past, as many other initiatives were launched, including one launched by the municipality in collaboration with the Arts Institute in the North and aimed at building walls of mosaic art in the streets of Tripoli. Other initiatives were proposed and implemented by individuals who painted the stairs of the city (Al Tal Cafe stairs several times and other poor neighborhood stairs). The Beaux Arts association initiative painted the walls damaged by war in Qubba in the streets surrounding the Lebanese University, in addition to others. All these local and special initiatives in Tripoli represent additional evidence of the city's cultural vitality in previous years.

When the revolution erupted on October 17, the walls of the city became canvases where people expressed their concerns and problems by transforming building facades, streets, and public spaces into works of art also found in major cities. Mohamad Al Abrash is one of the most prominent graffiti artists in Tripoli, and he is from Bab al-Tabbaneh. He considers painting a means to express and


Figure 13

highlight the suffering of his neighborhood through paintings on the walls, and thus graffiti became his profession. He worked on the painting on the facade of the Ghandour building (abandoned for many years) located at Abdel Hamid Karame Square - Al Noor Square. Al Abrash covered it with the colors of the Lebanese flag and with drawings and slogans from the revolution announcing a national identity contrary to its precedents.

## Revolution songs

In addition to above mentioned forms of artistic expression (particularly rap bands), there were other forms of expression directly related to protesting, including the DJ in the sit-in square at night and the songs and chanting during protests.

Thousands gathered daily at night in Al Noor Square, so finding a platform to relate speeches and drive the crowds was required. For instance, **Mohammed Ismael** used this platform to guide and drive the crowd with unprecedented efficiency, which made other protest squares call upon him to host their nightly protests, including one in Beirut in the Martyrs Square

where thousands of people used their phone screens in unison to create group scenes in harmony with the blasting music and songs. These are modern youth forms of art expression which the revolution contributed to transferring from sports halls and clubs to popular streets.


Figure 14

Finally, national and known revolution songs were blasted in sit-in squares (particularly Marcel Khalife, Sheikh Imam, and others) or words of some famous songs were changed to fit the occasion. Besides, the revolution produced its own songs that were more relevant to the events and to the revolution itself. **Tripoli stood out with the song "Aatoni Forsa"[70]** (Give me another chance) which became viral in the first few weeks of the revolution, demanding the resignation of Saad Hariri's government. The song was composed and performed by Ibrahim Al Ahmad from Tripoli and tackles the situation of the government at the time in a very creative way.

## ... Responding to freedom with oppression and destruction

What we learned from Tripoli (and Lebanon and other countries) is that a glimpse of freedom is very dangerous to oppressing authorities of any kind:

• When protests lead to a new level or kind of awareness among citizens, and to rebellion against traditional loyalty, similarly to the uprising in Tripoli against all its decade-long leaders;

• When political opposition is paired with the birth of a new culture and alternative right-based system of values;

• When people taste freedom and discover its true sense, untainted by oppression and ideology;

...the end of oppression would have become near, and a violent, efficient, and necessary response would be essential to destroy that path.

This is what happened in Tripoli in particular (and in Lebanon). It was necessary to put an end to this image of "revolution bride", in preparation to returning to the isolationist image of an outlaw city as a punishment for belonging to the state and not to sectarian, partisan, and regional fanaticism. In Tripoli, two specific methods that were harsher and more extreme than any other region were used (this can be explained by what was already presented in the beginning of the case study):

• **Excessive use of violence by military and security forces**

• **Spreading chaos within the movement and sit-in square** through groups affiliated with parties in power or authorities to deviate the collective movement and its forms of expression

**70-** Domou' El Wared. "Aatoni Forsa" song [video]. November 11, 2019. **https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mARB3IuAVOg**

from their natural path, thus leading to decreasing popular participation in the streets and the exclusion of the cultural and civic dimensions of the movement and their content.

These events coincided with the rampant financial and economic crisis and collapse, the Covid-19 pandemic, in addition to lack of political and institutional future, boiling up to confusion and frustration. The period following October 17 created an image of Tripoli that defies the previous stereotypical extremist image. This case study explains - particularly when reviewing the historical and inherent cultural climate in the city - that this new image is the most objective and genuine expression of the city and its residents, while its extremist stereotypical image was nothing more than fake, distorted, and imposed pre-judgements.

# Chapter 5: Conclusions

*"Culture exists and lives in minds. Minds exist and live in culture".* - Edgar Morin

## Introduction[71]

This fifth and final chapter includes some conclusions related to the obstacles that prevent culture from playing an effective role in democratic transition in Southern Mediterranean Arab countries, especially the challenges culture faces in contributing to social transition towards democracy. We will distinguish between two categories of obstacles: obstacles that fall within the realm of culture and obstacles from outside the field of culture but affect it. However, we believe that this differentiation is only procedural, and that interactions between the world of culture and the real world are limitless.

## First – Obstacles that fall within the realm of culture

The most important obstacles that fall within the realm of culture can be summarized by the adoption of multiple policies or strategies, namely:

### 1. Cultural hegemony

The definition of culture as an effective system in society that influences citizens' opinions highlights a fact that should not be hidden: "Culture can be a more dangerous concept than we think. It is more dangerous than people realize..."[72]. Cultural hegemony has different origins: it may be religious, national, economic, or social, but despite its differences, it remains a set of cultural actions that are primarily used by non-implicit cultures to stifle or close off opposing cultures.

### 2. Insularity and isolation

Contrary to hegemony characterized by actions directed at other cultures, culture, under insularity and isolation, steps away from playing its role in democratic transition due to a reflexive obstructive action that deeply penetrates culture, pushing it towards isolation and driving its refusal to open-up to other cultures, thus distancing itself from community engagement in democratic transition.

### 3. Intolerance

Intolerance can be defined as a cultural position that results from the transition from (natural) cultural affiliation to a (voluntary) culture of belonging, i.e., the individual is no longer defined by having a culture that he shares with others but becomes defined by a group that has an exclusive culture of its own. Under tolerance, power shifts from a common culture to a common affiliation, generating many forms of intolerance, such as sectarianism in religious cultures, racism in national cultures, regionalism in regional cultures, masculinity in gender cultures, etc. The first indication of intolerance is dividing the world into two parts: "us" and "them," accompanied with generalization, hatred, and contempt.

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[71]- This chapter remains as written by the researcher who prepared the main paper, the late Hassan Abbas, without interference from the preparation team.
[72]- Eagleton, Terry, "Culture", translated and presented by Lutfia Al-Dulaimi, Dar Al-Mada, 2018.

## 4. Prevalence of stereotypes

A stereotype can be defined as a quick and easy way of thinking and perception used to explain an individual's action or behavior by referring to a general, often cultural, characteristic of the group to which that individual belongs. The stereotype contributes to the formulation of a group's perception of its identity by opposing other identities and considering all characteristics that are different from its standards and values an "innate nature" rather than an "acquired culture". Stereotypes thus become a serious threat to coexistence in one society and in neighboring and different societies.

## 5. Politicization of cultures

Culture, like any human activity, has a political aspect reflected in its position on general issues faced by individuals and groups. This is a natural characteristic that does not interfere with the role of culture in democratic transition. However, this acquires another dimension when cultural components, with their perceptions, beliefs, emotions, and skills, are "extracted" from culture and inserted into active politics. Politics is a field of changing worldly arrangements, conflicts, and interests that do not know stability, while cultures (especially religious) are eternal and transcendental values that cannot solve objective problems arising from changes to the world... "There is a difference between recognition of cultural and sectarian pluralism based on equal citizenship on one hand and transformation into political groups that replace a multiparty political life and plurality of opinions, programs, and projects for the interest of the nation as a whole"[73].

## 6. Position towards heritage

Heritage is defined as **everything that was handed down to a society from the past and is still active in it**. We can observe three main opinions on heritage, ranging between dependence (a past tendency), boycott, and renewal.

However, despite all the fundamental differences between these positions and their ramifications, there are many common denominators that unite them, the most important of which are:

- **Prioritization of religious heritage:** ... to the extent that the term "heritage" almost matches the term "religion," and sometimes even the term "religiosity," despite the difference between the last two terms.

- **Centrality on Islam:** The writings that highlight the religious dedication of heritage look at it almost exclusively through the lens of Islam, whereas the societies in our countries, especially those belonging to the eastern Mediterranean, are teeming with religions and sects, and even with peoples, in a unique mixture that is unmatched across the world. Nevertheless, heritage becomes religion, and religion becomes Islam. **Failure to recognize the diversity of society and of its cultural heritage leads to marginalizing the different others and their cultures and weakens the effectiveness of culture in democratic transition.**

**73-** Bishara, Azmi. "In the Arab Question: Introduction to an Arab Democratic Statement", Center for Arab Unity Studies, Beirut 2007, p.160-161.

## Second - Obstacles outside the field of culture

External obstacles to culture may stem from national political authorities and from globalization, including the public space in which the contemporary world evolves.

### 1. Political authority

The relationship between culture and political authority is always under the sway of the latter, which has the upper hand in the country. The political authority "does not look approvingly at culture due to the feeling (well-grounded one) that culture represents a parallel authority of equal power, materially and symbolically. This is combined with its awareness that the project of a new political authority always starts with culture[74]." Considering that any authority seeks to perpetuate its power and to impede the rise of any potential substitute, it resorts to several oppressive practices against latent or declared libertarian cultures in society, including:

A. **Censorship**: It is a typical practice adopted by political authorities in confronting every event or social activity that they regard as challenging to their mindset in addressing culture. The terminology used by Arab authorities is full of broad expressions with no realistic criteria controlling them, such as "the prestige of a nation", "civil peace", "social security", "national sovereignty", etc., all used to justify censorship of basic freedoms. Freedoms are not absolute even in the most democratic countries, but the margins available for expression vary according to the degree of authoritarianism practiced, and if the two preventive controls (**preemptive control** that prevents the matter before it happens in the form of published written laws and fair justice system and **corrective control** that prevents the matter after its occurrence and requires committees, security services, and police to pursue, and perhaps arrest and kill violators) are the two common forms of control, **there remains a third form, which is the most dangerous of all: self-censorship**. Self-censorship is self-repression exercised by the citizen on himself, to the extent that he internalizes laws and becomes part of a culture that regulates the affairs of his life.

B. **Containment:** It consists of manipulating engagement between authority and cultural components: authority appears to the component as an agent helping it achieve a goal it seeks, while it exploits this "tolerance" and uses it as a weapon to limit its aspirations and hinder it from achieving this desired goal.

One of the methods used in containment is what has become known as the "folklorisation" method, whereby authorities responsible for cultural management of a country adopt a cultural expression or practice and transfer it from its traditional environment to a showy environment under the supervision of the state, presenting it as a polite and polished model of the country's culture, while it oppresses that same expression/practice in its original environment. Authoritarian countries in particular have adopted this method, establishing governmental groups for folk arts.

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74- Belkeziz, Abdulilah, "In the Beginning Was Culture", Afriqia al-Sharq Ed., Casablanca, 1989

**C. Repression:** There are many forms of repression, including the lowest forms of violence mandated by the law and the highest forms of cold violence. Arab authorities have unprecedented histories of violence, and they do not cease being violently "creative". There are testimonies and narratives in Arabic literature that convey many examples of violence in prisons[75] in most Arab countries.

## 2. Globalization

Globalization has paved the way for previously unavailable opportunities for spreading and disseminating culture. However, the link between globalization and economic forces controlling its mechanisms and paths has created real obstacles for culture to play its role in democratization and liberation, including:

**A. Unification of cultures:** Unification of cultures means driving cultures towards a monolithic form imposed by the culture that is stronger and more capable of occupying positions in distribution networks. We can observe this, for example, in the tendency of tourism industries around the world to be similar in their tools and services, or in the disappearance of many traditional forms of children's toys in favor of games that represent cartoon and manga characters shown on television channels. Nevertheless, perhaps the wide use of English (globalization language) at the expense of mother national languages is the clearest, and even most dangerous example of this unification.

**B. Obliteration fragile and weak cultures:** Globalization provides the appropriate climate for the concept of "survival of the fittest" at the cultural level. Weak cultures that do not have the capabilities that allow them to spread and receive support face shrinkage, confinement, and fading away[76].

**C. Culture of consumption:** Globalization creates its own culture, which is the culture of consumption that threatens the existence of cultural privacy, since transformation and change are the basis for its dynamism. People participating in globalization must abandon their privacy and catch up with the renewed values that are presented to them, no matter how strange they may seem. Consumerism "is not a matter of satisfying desires, but rather of arousing desire for other desires, especially desires that cannot be satisfied[77]." By instilling changing globalized values, this culture not only alienates people from their original cultures, but also turns them into dispossessed people, who as if hypnotized, run behind commodity tyranny instead of fighting for liberation from the existing tyranny.

**75-** For example, but not limited to: Abdul Rahman Munif's "East of the Mediterranean" (1975) and "Al-an … huna", (1991); Faraj Bayrakdar's "The Treasons of Silence and Language," (2011); Mustafa Khalifa's "The Shell" (2008); Rosa Yaseen Hasan's "Negative" (2008); Nawal El Saadawi's "My Memoirs in the Women's Prison" (2000); Ismail Fahd Ismail's "Light Marshes" (1979); Kamal Al-Sharni's "Ahbab Allah" (2012); Ayman Al Otoom's "My Two Cellmates" (2012); Malikah Al Kadi's "Cruel Walls" 1999; Ahmed Marzouki's "Tazmamart: Cell No. 10" (2012).
**76-** UNESCO, "Culture and Development: The Future We Want and the Role of Culture," UNESCO Database, 2017. http://www.unesco.org/new/fr/culture/themes/culture-and-development/the-future-we-want-the-role-of-culture/globalization-and-culture
**77-** Bauman, Zygmunt, "Liquid Life", translated by Hajjaj Abu Jabr, Arab Network for Research and Publishing, Beirut, 2016, p. 127.

## Conclusion

Cultures are deadly. This is a fact, and the history of bloodshed in the conflict of cultures across the world takes up an important part of history. On one hand, some say that the clash of cultures is humanity's destined fate and that looming conflicts will not be less catastrophic than their predecessors. On the other hand, culture has been the most effective activity for human progress, happiness, and peace. Neither culture nor cultural pluralism is the root of calamity, but rather the transformation of culture into a tool (that serves politics and ideology) and mismanagement of pluralism demonize cultures, turn them against each other instead of getting to know each other, and drive them to fight instead of integrate.

These facts about the role of culture on the international scene also apply to areas, regions, and countries. Culture or the multiple cultures will not build democracy by themselves but can set its building block if the appropriate regimes, mechanisms, and conditions are available. The goal is not that of a romantic dream that favors culture and focuses on its positive face, but rather an urgent and inevitable existential crisis. As long as people live in countries where they share work, wages, and all life facilities and aspire to live with equal dignity, they must accept each other and agree to build a political system that does not ignore people's differences and does not overlook the common ground they must all agree to: building a state of citizenship. For culture to play this role, it is necessary to start dismantling all obstructing obstacles in various ways, including:

1. **Focusing on citizenship education** that allows individuals to become loyal to their homeland and not to their natural cultural components.
2. **Disengagement between multiple cultures present in society and the political regime;** events have proven that any political consensus between natural cultural components is only a timeout between rounds of fighting.
3. **Creating sufficient spaces for cultures to express themselves**, since suppressing a culture only delays and amplifies its eruption,

In 2011, revolutions in the Arab world rose in successive waves, leading, alongside the reactions they evoked, to democratic change in some countries and setbacks or wars in others. Despite the different direct causes that led to the outbreak of revolutions in each country, human dignity was the deep and shared cause among all revolutions. Masses demanded citizenship across all the lands of the revolution.

**During revolutions, people rallied together holding their cultural pluralism, but they unilaterally demanded a modern democratic civil state, thus presenting a practical model for the role of culture in democratic transition: each has his own culture, but everyone has a policy on which they agree.**

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# Culture, development, and social transition towards democracy

## Final Report

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