LANGUAGE AND POLITICS IN THE MENA REGION

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INTRODUCTION

The Arabic language emerged centuries before Islam, and it developed and reached its maturity after the Quran was revealed in Arabic. In that sense, Islam has elevated the Arabic language from an oral tradition to a written system, which gave birth to a civilization.

In the past, the Arab identity meant a common language (Arabic), the Arab tradition, a specific mindset and way of life (Bedouin), and the lineage (real or supposed). Today, an Arab is generally described as a person someone who speaks Arabic as a mother tongue.

This paper's first section talks about changes in the most common language

used in the Middle East region since the beginning of the Islamic era, briefly highlighting the interactions between power and administrative language. The second section develops the language transformations that took place in modern times through contact with European powers. The third section is about current issues related to the Arabic language.

A BRIEF HISTORICAL REVIEW

Following the death of Prophet Muhammed in 632 until 1945, the Arabs ruled the new and young Muslim community for only a short period (632-750); hence, the community mainly consisted of Arabs. The spread of Islam to non-Arab territories during the Abbasid era led to a change in the Muslim population, and Arabs quickly became a minority. Still, the Arabic language flourished under the Abbasid rulers. Arabic and Islam became the culture, superseding local cultures, and the Arabization extended to the newly conquered territories. Soon, political instability led the Abbasid caliphates to gather an army of foreigners coming first from the Khorasan and then from Turkic lands. The caliphates were increasingly empowering this loyal army, particularly within the secular power. Soon, the Persian-speaking Buyids became the leaders of the Muslim world. However, the Arabic language remained the *lingua franca* until the rise of the Seljuks. After that, Arabic became limited to the law/religious sphere. Persian became the administrative language until it was replaced by the Turkic language used by the Seljuks, then the Mamluks, and later, the Ottomans. The Ottoman Turkish, heavily influenced by Arabic and Persian, was the language of the new empire until the beginning of the 20th century.

EUROPEAN POWERS AND LANGUAGE TRANSFORMATION IN MODERN TIMES

The Middle East became a province of the vast Ottoman empire until the beginning of the 20th century, after a long period of agony. In the mid-18th century, the Western powers were already more advanced than the Ottoman Empire but were not aware of it under the shadow of Ottoman supremacy. In the mid-19th century, Europeans became fully aware of their true potential, while Muslim leaders thought they were still the most powerful.

The Ottomans were deeply shocked when they realized how dire the situation in the empire was, and the European powers were in a position to interfere in their internal affairs. They underestimated the Europeans' advancements in science, which took them by surprise. The Westphalian Treaty and the rise of nationalist ideology in Europe put an end to the concept of 'empire' in Europe, making it obsolete.

Desperate, inadequate, and delayed reforms (pan-Islamism) were introduced under Abdul Hamid II but could not shift this power balance in favor of the Ottomans. During the Ottoman era, people living in the Mashreq defined themselves primarily as Muslim, part of the Umma, rather than Arab. Hence, political protests/instabilities were mainly linked to religious minorities and power struggles within the same ethnic groups rather than ethnic identities *per se*.

Internal oppositions to Abdul Hamid II, the last Sultan to exert effective control over the empire, were primarily inspired by European nationalism, leading to the emer-

The Noble Qur'an (koran) books in the east market in Jerusalem.

gence of Turkish nationalism under the Young Turks movement. Territories left to Turkey by the Treaty of Sevres led to a war between Atatürk and the Allies in 1920. The dichotomy between fighting against foreign countries and being influenced by their state model would lead the Ottoman Empire to transform into Turkey, a nation-state. Those who fought the Allies for independence ended up adopting Western values, leading to a series of reforms, from the adoption of secularism to Westernization of dress. The new elite represented by the Young Turks strongly believed that the cause of the downfall was the Islamic culture and its Arabic content and saw the solution in doing what the Europeans did.

Ottoman Turkish was replaced by modern Turkish. Massive changes were introduced in the vocabulary, replacing Arabic and Persian words with new ones, coined through neologism and based on European words without a Turkish equivalent. In 1928, the writing system underwent a profound transformation, with the adoption of the Latin alphabet that replaced the Arabic alphabet. The Latin alphabet was associated with modernism, while Arabic was associated with bigotry. Those promoting the new alphabet met with some resistance from the conservatives, but it still went through. The attachment to the religion by a significant part of the population would encourage, decades later, the teaching of Ottoman Turkish and the return of Islamic values as the core of the Turkish culture.

Western interference, combined with Turkification in some Arab territories, led to Arab nationalism (Arabism). Even though Arab nationalists fought later against European imperialism, Arabism remained a foreign ideology imported from those they fought.

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The Arabic language underwent some transformation as well, but it remained more stable, unlike Ottoman Turkish. Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) is considered a more basic version of classical Arabic. The changes were minimal, like the introduction of punctuation, grammatical particles expressing the future tense, and a less strict syntax/grammar. New words that came directly from the European languages were introduced to name Western inventions (phone telefon, for instance). However, new political concepts were also adopted, which led to a new political language. These concepts were expressed in Arabic but were ideologically Western. Words like "wataniyyah" (patriotism) and "qawmiyyah" (nationalism) replaced the word Umma as it redefines the concept of "Asabiyah," the feeling of social cohesion. The founding of Israel also increased Arab nationalism and the use of Arabic as a language against imperialism. The political discourse against imperialism in Standard Arabic turned a local issue into an issue involving all Arabs, even those away from Israel. The use of MSA has revitalized the will to defend the Arab lands. Moreover, it helped to the reappropriation of key concepts. For instance, the concept of "occupied territory" in Arabic refers to the whole of Palestine, including Israel. In other languages such as English, it excludes Israel.

Arab nationalism and Islamic modernism were the two main competing ideologies in the Mashreq, resulting from the shock inflicted by Europe. Arab nationalism has a common point with the Young Turks movement due to their Western influence.

Arabism and Islamism are the two movements at the roots of most contemporary issues in the Middle East. Unlike the transformation in Turkish, these two ideologies strengthened the Arabic language. Islamic modernism represents the attempts to put Islam back at the center of the political sphere as a solution. It is represented by personalities such as al-Afghani, Mohammad Abduh, Rachid Rida, and later, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Nationalist leaders suppressed this Islamic movement after WWII, giving shape to the Middle East as we know it today. During this period, the political language was almost exclusively in MSA rather than dialect. Unlike the Young Turks, supporters of Islamism glorified the Islamic past to promote nationalism, distorting reality.

Arabism prevailed against Islamism in the Mashreq after WWII because Arab nationalists could not use Islam to mobilize forces, as it was non-Arab-speaking Muslims who had Turkified the region. Moreover, the presence of Arab Christians among the population and Arab nationalists had softened the Islamic characteristics of the region, enabling the unification of all Arabs regardless of their religion. (Later, Michel Aflaq, a Christian Arab nationalist, would describe Islam as proof of the "Arab Genius"). People reconsidered the link between religion (Islam) and Arabic, focusing on the bonds that link Muslim and Christian Arabs, which they saw to be tighter than the one between Turkish Muslims and Arab Muslims. The interference of European nations contributed significantly to the rise of Arab nationalism through the Arab Revolt in 1917 led by Hussein Bin Ali, who was less the Sharif of Mecca than the puppet of London.

In the Mashreq, since the minorities were religious, the emphasis was put on the Arabic language as a reunification tool. In the Maghreb, on the other hand, the minority was ethnic (Berber), so the emphasis was put on a combination of religion and Arabism. Rather than being pushed back, Arabic was instead promoted as the language of Islam. The elite among the nationalists believed that MSA could contribute significantly to the unification of the Arab States under a single nation.

CURRENT SITUATION

Political language is defined as how people communicate with their governments. For Arabic, this includes diglossia, literacy rate, and foreign powers' direct and indirect influence.

Diglossia and political discourse

Modern Standard Arabic, rather than dialects, is generally used in political discourse, putting a certain distance between political leaders and people, in addition to helping establish authority.

Dialects have emerged from casual/intra-personal conversation. They took shape during the spread of Islam to new lands and their inhabitants, now Arab countries. Often, inhabitants in these new regions outnumbered the Arab settlers, leading the latter to be isolated, resulting in dialects emerging alongside written Arabic. Nowadays, two Arabic speakers may not understand each other when they speak in their own dialect. However, this also

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depends on their level of education as they can generally 'meet halfway' thanks to MSA.

Dialects are also seen in the political language. The code-switching strategy used by political leaders, who switch from MSA to dialects and vice-versa, is a well-known practice dating back a long time (since the Egyptian president Nasser). Political leaders sometimes use dialects in their speech to convey a sense of confidence and closeness, but when they want to express the gravity of a situation, they use MSA. The development of MSA through pan-Arabist media and the Internet contributes to better intelligibility, increasing literacy rates, and reduced diglossia within the Arab world.

Literacy Rate

The literacy rate has reached unprecedented levels in the Middle East region. Nearly everyone knows how to read.

We commonly hear that the Internet and social media contributed to the rise of civil society as an actor in the political scene. However, it primarily has to do with the literacy rate. In the Middle East, the Internet and social media developed simultaneously with the literacy level. When someone can read, they can read a flyer or a website. They can also write one. The Internet enabled individuals to easily spread large amounts of information without needing access to a printing system and fact-checking. The Arab Revolution, or the Arab Spring, would not have happened without the increased literacy rate in the Arab world.

The Arab Spring

Despite the increasing literacy level in the Arab population and the increasing use of MSA in media, political leaders often use dialects in their political discourse. They use dialects against new challenges they face with the rise of the civil society to appear like ordinary men and cushion the effects of the Arab Spring in their countries. Coined in Tunisia, the political slogan "Ash sha'b yurid isqat an nizam" (the people want to bring down the regime) was used in different Arab countries. Interestingly, this slogan, chanted in different Arab capitals, is in MSA rather than dialect and thus has a pan-Arabic dimension.

Foreign Influence

Foreign influence has a broad sense. It includes any form of influence (not necessarily negative) in politics and any other areas.

As mentioned above, the transformation of classical Arabic into Modern Standard Arabic was influenced by European languages. Arabic underwent minor linguistic transformations to convey European ideas, particularly in politics, thereby shaping the Elites' way of thinking.

The interference of European powers in the Mashreq region and the protection of minorities led France to develop close relations with Arab Christians in the mid-19th century. A few decades later, they were far more educated than Muslims and were the main contributors to the Nahda ("enlightenment") movement, translation and literature, and promotion of Arab nationalism. The adoption of the term "Middle East" (Al Sharq Al Awsat) by the local elites is an example of this foreign influence, as it led people to define their region, not through their own perspective (Mashreq) but through the European point of view, which could be considered as alienation. The use of the term Middle

Map of Middle East.

East by local media is in itself an indicator of the Western power in the region.

Education

In the UAE, the demand for a higher quality of education led many English schools to open across the country. The 2015 Arab Youth survey on 3,500 people aged 18-24 shows that more than a third of the participants used English more than Arabic in their communication.

Most schools teach English as a first language in the UAE. By law, Arabic is taught in all schools but seems to have reached the status of a foreign language. In the UAE, which has achieved remarkable econom-

ic development, career/employment depends more on a good command of English than Arabic due to the overall power of the English language in the world in general and in the GCC countries in particular. The situation has led many parents to put their children in high-quality English schools rather than Arabic schools. At the same time, these parents are worried that their children speak English at home rather than Arabic. Here, it would be helpful to remind Bossuet's words: "God laughs at men who deplore the effects of which they cherish the causes." As is seen, the situation is awkward and complex. The Arabic language is no more perceived as a source of knowledge and a motor of development by Arabs themselves.

Arabization

The word "Arabization" can be translated into two different words in Arabic. So far, what has been mentioned refers to the word "ta'reeb": a movement to catch up with modernity.

The second word used is "ta'arrub." It is an effort to Arabicize the language of a region/people. It has a pronominal form and can be translated vaguely as "to become Arab." It is generally used for minorities living in the Arab countries who are still using their own languages, such as Kurds in Iraq and some minorities living in Yemen (in the 1960s and 1970s) and North Africa (Berber). While "ta'reeb" is a projection towards modernity used mostly in Mashreq, "ta'arrub" refers to an anchor with the past.

In Algeria, the Arabization attempts had two objectives: re-Arabization of the country following the French colonization, in a desire to restore the Arabic language after a deep and long colonization process that alienated the Arab identity, and the Arabization of the remaining Berber minority. It was also about providing education in Arabic rather than French. Thousands of teachers from mainly Egypt, Iraq, and Syria came to Algeria in the 1960s and 1970s to teach Arabic and re-Arabize the region. Their obsolete teaching methods learned from the Egyptians led the Algerian government to send back many teachers. Also, Algerians were more aware of modern teaching methods learned from the French. Algeria both hates and feels attraction towards France, which alienates them. The successive Algerian governments have struggled to impose Arabic in the administration, unlike other countries. Algeria has not yet recovered from colonization as its elites continue in the 21st century to be more comfortable with French than Arabic.

Islamization of the language

The Nahda movement and Arabization made their way into Arab nationalism that had weakened in the mid-1970s, following several military defeats against Israel, the unsuccessful unification of Syria and Egypt (1958-1961), and suffering economic development. A few years later, the Islamic Revolution in Iran brought Islam back on the table as an alternative to nationalism. The resurgence of political Islam in the last decades was perceived as a threat from most, if not all, Arab governments, who responded severely. After the 2000s, Arab states (mostly republics but also some monarchies) changed strategies. In a surprise move, the authorities held elections to include Islamic movements in the political game to respond to people's demand for "more Islam." At the same time, Islamic movements toned down their rhetoric. Some supporters of Islamic movements participated in the elections process, putting their transnational aspirations aside for more commitment to their respective countries. For instance, the Hamas movement in Palestine has created a new concept of Islamic nationalist movement. The rise of political Islam seems to be magnified by the Islamization of the political discourse. Islamic terminology has been used more often by politicians in their discourse.

Mutanebbi Avenue in Iraq.

CONCLUSION

One question that would summarize the above development is whether there is a link between modernity and Westernization. The different forces that influence the political discourse are divergent in whether they come from civil society or political leaders.

For some, modernization and Westernization are synonyms, while for others, they are two different terms. As a result, the Arabic language and its political expression are caught between these two views.

Throughout history, language and politics in the Middle East have had a strategic interaction. Nowadays, the political language in the Middle East is influenced primarily by the two main ideologies that have shaken Arab society: the rise of political Islam and secularism. The use of dialects by secularist movements can be seen as an attempt to strengthen each country's concept of "nation-state" (state-centered, opposite to Arab nationalism). The development of written sources of information in dialects, such as Wikipedia pages written in Egyptian dialect (and more recently, the addition of Moroccan dialect on the same platform in 2020), contribute to giving the dialect the status of language, which is considered by some as a threat to the Arabic language.

With globalization and new forms of organizations such as the European Union with its unique supranational aspect, the concept of nation-state in the West has weakened. Currently, secularist movements in the Arab countries take Western states and society as a model. At the same time, the slow shift of power from the West to East led many to re-question the link between modernity and Westernization, which has shaped the political discourse and ultimately had a certain influence on the Arabic language through new concepts and ideas.

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