

## THE ROLE OF IDENTITY IN THE CONFLICTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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**Abstract:** *Regional security and identity in the Middle East have been tested for hundreds of years, as the region has constantly been caught in a clash of its own populations and values, compounded by external influences. Moreover, internal conflicts and external implications seem to continuously worsen and feed into each other. Thus, disputes over political, sectarian, religious, tribal, territorial, ideological, ethnic survival, and national interest matters combine and overlap. Many of the Middle Eastern states that maintained authority and turned it into dictatorship later lost legitimacy and became battlegrounds for regional and extra-regional powers eager to accumulate resources. Such states in the Middle East today function under imposed authorities that violate the principles of the identities that formed them.*

**Keywords:** *identity, conflict, multiculturalism, religion, Middle East.*

### **Introduction:**

The Middle East is a complex and diversified region, with a vast and rich history characterized by impressive cultural diversity. The cultural demarcations in this area have a profound impact on local politics, economies, and societies. These demarcations are the result of historical, geographical, religious, and ethnic factors that interact in a complex manner. At the same time, the Middle East is both a compression zone and an intermediary or buffer zone between the dominant powers of the Indo-Pacific region and the Euro-Atlantic area, leading to political fragmentation and instability, divided internally and caught up in the competition between major powers and large geostrategic spaces.

The Middle East is the region of an ancient civilization, marked by diversity and discontinuity. Unity is not a characteristic of the Middle East, nor is regional security stability. There is no continuity in the history of the Middle East between the ancient and modern times. In antiquity, the Middle East was governed by multiple administrations that divided the regions and centers of power without many common elements such as a common language, script, or collective identity.

Globalization and modernization have begun to change the traditional cultural demarcations in the Middle East. Thus, technology, communication, and migration generated by globalization have facilitated the blending of different cultures and reduced isolation. Migration to large cities, adoption of modern technologies, and exposure to global cultures

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through communication media have begun to influence traditional customs and create new forms of cultural identity. However, traditional and cultural identities remain strong and continue to play an important role in everyday life, with globalization also promoting common cultural initiatives such as festivals and other activities celebrating regional diversity.

Conflicts in the Middle East have shaped and continue to influence cultural demarcations. The Syrian civil war, the invasion of Iraq, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and other local tensions have forced millions to migrate, leading to significant demographic changes. These migrations have resulted in cultural blending as well as uprooting and the loss of some local traditions.

The synthesis of the Middle East's cultural complexity cannot be fully encapsulated in a single work. The region continues to evolve, responding both to deeply rooted traditions and modern challenges. Understanding the cultural delineations and elements that have contributed to the transformation of spatial and cultural boundaries in the Middle East is essential to fully appreciate the political-social dynamics of the region.

#### **Identity in Middle Eastern Conflicts**

The loss and disappearance of the cultural values of ancient civilizations in the Middle East were the result of multiple transformations of the identities through which populations consecutively passed, such as processes of Hellenization, Romanization, Christianity, and Islamization. Among these, in the 7th century, the process of Islamization of the Middle East had the strongest effects on the cultural identity of the populations, effects that are still felt today. The identity generated by the language spoken by the populations has disappeared, ancient languages like Babylonian, Assyrian, Hittite, and Old Persian have been lost, as has the link between populations and pre-Islamic antiquity. In the last century, after thousands of years of searching for identities, there is a desire for Islamic renaissance among the peoples of the Middle East.

In the Islamic era, Muslim Arabs conquered a large part of the Eastern Christian Roman Empire in the Middle East and North Africa. Thus, in the 7th and 8th centuries, through Islamic conquests, the religion, language, and state organization of the Muslim state were imposed. The emergence of Islam, the third monotheistic religion with its societal rules set—the Quran—led to the creation of an imperial state. This Islamic state marked the emergence of a new society, especially a new political system, within which Islam provided not only a legal framework but also the source of legitimacy and authority. In this new type of state, a new identity appeared in the Middle East—the Arab identity, with the Arabic language being the only one used in governance, justice, administration, trade, and culture. There is a motto in the Middle East that says: "Not all Muslims are

Arabs, but all Arabs are Muslims," meant to synthesize the unifying and identity-building role that the Arabic language has.

By the end of the Middle Ages, the linguistic and religious map of the Middle East and North Africa had stabilized near its current form. In the Middle East, three languages predominated: Arabic, Turkish, and Persian, along with multiple cultural identities. The Arabic language is spoken in multiple dialects, not only on the Arabian Peninsula, where it was formed but also in the Fertile Crescent encompassing the present territories of Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, and all countries in the Maghreb — from Egypt to Morocco, and in certain areas towards the south, in sub-Saharan Africa. This widespread use of the Arabic language is a cultural identity element for the peoples living in these regions who have adopted this language along with the Islamic religion.

The Persian or Farsi language has been spoken and written in Iran and Central Asia, in regions of Afghanistan and Tajikistan. Although Islam was adopted, the Persian Empire area retained its own language and identity, different from other areas or regions conquered by Islam.

Turkic languages, derived from the language of the Ottoman Empire, are spoken over a vast region from the northern and southern shores of the Black Sea, across Asia, to the Pacific.

Besides the three predominant languages in the Middle East, there are some local ones, like Aramaic and Coptic, which bear witness to ancient civilizations used by non-Muslims, while others like Berber or Kurdish are used by populations without a written form. The Hebrew language is the only one that survived in pure form the process of Islamization, being itself a language of religion and cultural identity.

The first signs of strong identity delineations in the Middle East appear with the impact of the West or European imperialism, through the transformations it created. Some historians take the French expedition to Egypt in 1798 as a reference point, while others point to the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca, imposed by Russia on defeated Turkey. The largely Muslim civilization in the Middle East defined its identity through religion.

The populations of the Middle East were governed by Dar al-Islam, or the House of Islam in all territories where the law was applied according to the principles of the Quran and by Dar al-Harb, the House of War, which governed the territories of infidels, those not subject to Islamic law or those who had not yet accepted the Muslim faith. Over time, those who did not submit, especially Christians, acquired the identity of infidels as a permanent status.

The first half of the 19th century was marked by the withdrawal of European mandates from the Middle East. These left strong imprints on the identity of the populations in the area. Among them, Greeks, Armenians, Turks, and Jews were distinguished from their Muslim neighbors not only

by religion but also by language. For Arabic-speaking communities, this identity differentiation was absent because Christians and Jews shared the Arabic language with their Muslim neighbors.

Religious minorities in the area were concerned with protecting the holy Christian sites located in the region of ancient Palestine. These were disputed for thousands of years by governing authorities in the Middle East, who made great efforts to modernize the countries in the area and centralize administration. The reforms imposed by new Western powers in the Middle East created a series of adverse reactions throughout the region, manifesting in religious forms from the beginning and generating other types of identities. The European advancement generated a reaction from religious leaders in the area against these intrusions, expressed only in religious terms. The Arab Spring and the idea of Pan-Arabism, of creating a common front of Muslim populations against the common threat of Christian empires, emerged in the 19th century, manifested strongly in the 20th century, and sporadically reappeared as an ideology in the 21st century, as a form of defense of a religious identity.

After World War II, the Middle East underwent significant changes; regional peace was very unstable, dominated by internal fights for territorial and identity defense and against those considered external enemies.

Middle Eastern countries desired independence, already having the models of Turkey, Iran, and Afghanistan, which obtained it at the end of World War I, and those who won it in the interwar period like Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Yemen, and Egypt, followed by Syria and Lebanon.

As an attempt to unite values and common interests, the League of Arab States was established in 1945 by Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Transjordan, although the latter was still under British mandate as were the Palestinian Territories. A year later, Transjordan gained independence under the name of Jordan.

For all these states, the main objective was transforming state independence into one of ethnic identity, by eliminating sovereignty treaties and removing foreign presences. This process, particularly important not only for establishing territorial borders but also for marking certain identities, included most Arab countries at the beginning of the 1950s. Libya became independent in 1951, Sudan, Tunisia, and Morocco in 1956, Mauritania in 1960, Kuwait in 1961, Algeria in 1962, South Yemen in 1967, and the Gulf states in 1971. All these states became members of the Arab League.

In the Middle East, the exception was Israel, founded in 1948, after the conclusion and withdrawal of the British mandate for Palestine. The establishment of new independent states in the Arab world did not lead to the end of political and religious conflicts, and the disadvantage of the lack of homogeneity of the ethnic and religious groups from which they were

constituted led to numerous armed conflicts, rebellions, revolutions, and civil wars, generated by religious and territorial disputes, both marks of regional identities.

### **The Role of Identity in Society**

Primordial identities play an important role in their contribution to the foundation of very important cultural types, which precisely through their resilience over time make certain types of conflict possible and also become benchmarks for identity security.

Identities in society profoundly influence how people perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others. These can be individual, collective, or part of social groups, and can include aspects such as ethnicity, nationality, religion, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, occupation, and many others. Here are some of the key roles identities play in society:

a) **Source of Personal Identity:** Identities contribute to forming individual consciousness and building a self-image. They provide answers to questions such as "Who am I?" and "What do I belong to?"

b) **Groups and Communities:** Identities can connect people in groups and communities with shared values, experiences, and interests. These groups can provide a sense of belonging and social support.

c) **Social Cohesion and Solidarity:** Identities contribute to social cohesion by strengthening the feeling of belonging to a larger community, such as a nation, ethnicity, or religion.

d) **Diversity and Inclusion:** Identities contribute to social and cultural diversity, bringing the perspective and experiences of different groups into society. Promoting inclusion and respect for diversity is important for a healthy society.

e) **Combating Discrimination and Inequality:** Identities can be a source of discrimination and inequality, but also tools through which people combat them. They can serve as starting points for social movements and advocacy activities.

f) **Politics and Governance:** Identities can play a role in political processes, from forming public opinion to electing representatives and defining policies.

g) **Cultural and Religious Experiences:** Identities influence how people experience the world, conduct rituals, celebrate, and connect with cultural and religious values and traditions.

h) **Security and Conflicts:** Identities can play a role in national and international security, especially in cases of ethnic, religious, or national conflicts. It is important to emphasize that identities are complex and can have multiple intersecting aspects. They can also be fluid and evolve over time.

Understanding and respecting the diversity of identities is essential for promoting an inclusive and equitable society. Identities play a significant role in the context of regional security. They can influence perceptions and interactions between states and actors in a specific region.

Here's how identities can affect regional security:

a) **Identity Conflict and Security:** Collective identities, such as ethnicity, religion, or nationality, can be sources of tension and conflict in a region. Identity differences can lead to historical rivalries or perceptions of threats between groups.

b) **Formation of Identity Blocks or Alliances:** States or groups of states with similar identities can form regional alliances or blocks to protect their common interests. For example, similar cultural or religious identities can contribute to forming alliances.

c) **Consolidation of Collective Security:** Identities can be used to consolidate collective security within a region. Common identity can serve as a cohesion factor for states in that region, facilitating cooperation on security issues.

d) **Emergence and Evolution of Identity Conflicts:** Disputes related to identity can drive conflicts in regions. These can range from ethnic and religious conflicts to struggles for autonomy or independence.

e) **Democratization Processes and Regional Identity:** Collective identity can influence democratization processes in the region. For example, struggles for cultural or linguistic rights can play an important role in the political evolution of a region.

f) **Redefining Borders and Regional Security:** Identity-related aspects, such as nationality or ethnicity, can play a role in discussions and conflicts regarding borders and territories in a region.

g) **Influence on Regional Policies:** Identities can influence how states or regional organizations approach security issues, determining the priorities and strategies adopted.

h) **Spread of Extremism and Terrorism:** Radical or extremist identities can play a role in the spread of terrorism and extremism in a region.

The Middle East remains a region of great religious and spiritual diversity. From the vast Sunni and Shia Islamic traditions to smaller and syncretic sects, the region offers a complex mosaic of beliefs and religious practices. Understanding these diverse sects is crucial not only for the study of religion but also for understanding the tensions and cooperation that define this part of the world.

### **Conclusions**

Regional and identity security in the Middle East is far from being established, marked by the conflict between two concepts regarding world

order, it is part of the Israeli-Palestinian problem. The state of Israel is a product of the Peace of Westphalia, founded in 1947, with the United States as its main ally and primary supporter. The main actors and factions in the Middle East do not agree with the principles of absolute democracy, and their governance policies are based on Islamic conscience principles. Between the Jewish state and its neighbors, there are major geopolitical, identity, and historical rifts: differences in religious worship, identity principles, security problems, access to water, resources, refugee management, etc.

The issue of regional and identity security in the Middle East boils down to the possibility of coexistence between two concepts of world order, through the two states, Israel and Palestine, in a space located between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. Every kilometer of territory holds significant identity importance for each of the two states, and amid the ongoing conflict, the optimal peace solution seems to be the signing of a provisional coexistence agreement for the two states, after which the West Bank would receive certain sovereignty attributes to be later included in a final treaty.

The United States is the main influence and security actor in the Middle East, alongside the United Nations, having relationships with states throughout the Middle East: alliance with Israel, association with Egypt, partnership with Saudi Arabia, etc.

Regional security can only be established if the main parties adhere to similar and common policies for the same type of issues. The Middle East has not reached a state of security and regional peace, nor a level of peaceful coexistence; regional actors have consistently exhibited divergences regarding the three major issues: the internal situation, the political future of the Palestinian Arabs, and the future of Iran's nuclear military program. An example of a common policy is the shared vision of Israel and Saudi Arabia to prevent the development of Iran's nuclear capabilities, but its assertion is hindered precisely by distinct identity principles that do not confer legitimacy.



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