

Global Epistemologies: Concepts, Methodologies, and Data Systems

The Islamic Cultural Heritage as a "Problem": Is Arab Political Science Culturalist?

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Keywords: Arab political science, cultural heritage, authoritarianism

<https://doi.org/10.1525/gp.2024.94444>

Global Perspectives

Vol. 5, Issue 1, 2024

The study of political culture in the Arab world presents us with a paradox: albeit cultural explanations of Arab politics by Western scholars (e.g., Huntington 1993) have been widely criticized from within the region as latter-day Orientalist views, the cultural approach remains one of the leading analytical approaches employed in Arab social sciences. Central to this tradition is the idea that Arab societies have specific cultural characteristics that contribute to, or are the cause of, the region's general "backwardness," especially politically. Collectively known as critics of *al-turāth* (cultural heritage), this school of thought sparked important scholarly debates in Arab academic circles. This paper reflects on these debates, mainly focusing on how Arab political science, broadly defined, has considered the role of culture as a potential explanatory variable for the endurance of authoritarianism in the Arab world and the failure of democratic transitions. Several influential Arab intellectuals adopt the cultural approach, but they do not necessarily define culture in static, primordial, or fixed terms. If Arab political culture is deemed problematic, it can still be changed. For this academic tradition, the "critical intellectual" is a central agent for any sociocultural and political change.

INTRODUCTION

Cultural explanations are controversial in political science. This is particularly the case with the study of the politics of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). One view maintains that "[r]eligion, and particularly the political implications of Islam, have been more central to the political science of the Middle East and North Africa" (Masoud et al. 2022, 157) than any other region in the world. Indeed, essentialist claims of the supposedly alien nature of Arab political culture to democracy has shaped one school of political cultural explanations of Arab politics: that was labeled "the reductionists" by Hudson (1995). Unsurprisingly, Arab political science¹ is highly critical of the Western cultural thesis. Yet despite Arab intellectuals' rejection of these explanations as latter-day Orientalist prejudices, the cultural approach remains one of the most influential analytical frameworks in Arab social sciences. In fact, Arab scholars have provided some of the most coherent and explicit formulations of the cultural approach to analyzing political phenomena in the MENA region (El-Affendi 2011, 20).

This is not surprising, however. After all, the belief that culture—or, more exactly, *al-turāth* (cultural heritage), understood as the complex interplay of ideas, practices, beliefs, and values, culturally grounded, that influences or even determines individual behavior and collective actions—explains the region's *takhaluf*, or general state of socioeconomic and political backwardness, has been one of the most important themes in Arab intellectual circles since the nineteenth century. Collectively known as the critics of *al-turāth*, this school of thought has sparked important scholarly debates within Arab academia.

This paper engages with these debates, principally focusing on how Arab academia has viewed the role of culture as an explanatory variable for the prevalence of an authoritarian political culture in the Arab world. It will argue that while Arab intellectuals who adopted the cultural approach deemed the Arabo-Islamic cultural heritage a factor that predisposes individuals to subjugation and encourages antidemocratic attitudes, it did not necessarily consider culture as composed of a static, primordial, or fixed set of qualities as the West-

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¹ Arab political science, as a field, is broadly defined here as encompassing the contributions of Arab social scientists and intellectuals who study political topics mainly from within the region and who produce scholarly works written primarily in Arabic.

ern cultural approach to Middle East politics did. In other terms, if *al-turāth* is deemed problematic by this influential intellectual current in Arab academia, Arab political culture is still conceptualized as changeable.

The first section explores how *al-turāth* has been defined and portrayed as a key explanatory factor of Arab “backwardness” by some of the most prominent contemporary Arab intellectuals. This group of influential scholars, often called the “modernists,” theorizes a causal relationship between the Islamic cultural heritage and what they see as a general state of socioeconomic and political underdevelopment experienced by the Arab world. They also claim that this cultural heritage strongly impacts Arab citizens’ individual and collective behaviors, values, and beliefs.

The second section emphasizes a specific example where Arab intellectuals heavily rely on the cultural approach: analyzing political regimes. It presents how the prevalence of authoritarianism in the region has been linked to the Arabo-Islamic cultural heritage by this academic tradition. Moreover, it scrutinizes the criticisms of these claims from Arab scholars who reject the cultural approach to Middle East politics. The most skeptical of the cultural thesis are found among democracy scholars within the region. Albeit they do not deny completely the notion of Arab particularism, they have challenged the assertion that the Islamic and/or the Arab cultural heritage is the main reason for MENA’s democratic deficit. Although some elements of Arabo-Islamic cultural heritage may pose challenges, it is inaccurate to attribute democracy’s absence to the region to Islamic cultural specificities.

Yet Arab academia should devote more attention to empirical studies exploring the validity of all the theoretical claims implied by the cultural talk—especially those on the potential causal relationship between Arabo-Islamic culture and a set of political behaviors. In fact, the paper highlights how the current state of research on cultural explanations is largely dominated by normative and macro-theoretical claims, lacking sufficient individual-level empirical evidence.

The conclusion will argue that the tremendous theoretical debate between the Arab cultural intellectuals and their critics should be acknowledged and taken seriously by Western or non-Arab political scientists. This is necessary to overcome the ongoing international academic division of labor perpetuating a division between so-called “theoreticians” from the West and “informants” from the MENA region (Abaza 2011).

This paper uses a sample of works that is representative of Arab intellectuals’ different positionings on the cultural debate, rather than a comprehensive literature review. While those works consist mainly of the contributions made by Arab intellectuals from within the region in Arabic, it does not exclude Arab scholars who have spent all or most of their academic careers in Western universities—es-

pecially those who have been active in the MENA region’s scholarly debates and intellectual circles.

THE CULTURAL HERITAGE AS THE PRIMARY CAUSE OF ARABS’ “BACKWARDNESS”

Thirty years ago, when Huntington (1993) presented his thesis on the so-called “clash of civilizations,” Arab intellectuals were among its most vocal critics. Arab academics responded to his theory with cynicism and skepticism (Al-Millad 2022, 210). Most Arab scholars saw the culturalist propositions, which were regaining momentum in Western academia after the Cold War, as problematic and even provocative—considering that the 1990s was a period during which many Arab intellectuals, promoters of democracy, and human rights activists expected that the so-called third wave of democracy, theorized by Huntington himself, would ultimately yield positive outcomes for their region. After all, during that period, several Arab regimes engaged in varying forms of political liberalization: they introduced multiparty elections, decreased state repression, allowed the growth of a vibrant civil society, and even, in some cases, created public institutions dedicated to the promotion and defense of human rights.²

The argument that the MENA region is culturally incompatible with democracy was viewed by many in the region as a manifestation of blatant ignorance regarding the region’s multidimensional socioeconomic realities, cultural diversity, unique political histories, and the impacts of the colonization that Arab countries experienced. For most Arab social scientists, Huntington’s culturalist claims were nothing more than simplistic generalizations and biased allegations, raising doubts about his understanding of the Arab world. They reject his dubious assertions on the inner conflictual nature of Islamic culture—with its overly cited quote on the “bloody borders” of the so-called “Islamic cultural zone” and on the antidemocratic tendencies of Islamic values (Huntington 1993). Many in the region will go as far as considering the Western cultural reductionists’ arguments as nothing more than a recasting of old-fashioned Orientalist portrayals based on bold essentialization and reductionism of Arabs’ culture.

The Moroccan philosopher Taha Abdurrahman (2001), considered by many as one of the most creative contemporary Arab intellectuals (Hallaq 2019), dedicated most of his intellectual journey and academic career to theorizing an indigenous model of modernity compatible with Islamic ethical values beyond merely material considerations (Weld Abah 2013). While he accepts the existence of specific civilizational groupings worldwide, as claimed by Huntington, he refutes the idea that Islamic culture is inherently problematic or conflictual. According to Abdurrahman (2001), the roots of the problem are to be found in

2 For instance, the National Human Rights Council in 1990.

the West’s deep belief in the comprehensiveness of its culture and civilization, which has made [the West] to radically favor its values, institutions, and practices, [and therefore to assume] ... that there is no more enlightened, rational, no more modern pattern of thought than its culture ... This radicalism results from a false equation between the culture ... and the ethical meanings entailed in the culture that may not be different at least partly between nations (21-22).

In another example, the Lebanese sociologist Abdelghani Emad, in his book *Susyulūjiya al-thaqāfa (Sociology of Culture)* (2016), portrays Western cultural arguments about democracy in the MENA region as nothing more than a collection of ideologically motivated and politicized statements, and considers the reductionist cultural theories characterized by evident Western centrism (223). Despite his criticism, Emad nevertheless sees culture—which he defines as a set of “values, behavioral patterns, customs, concepts, and morals ... that are related to the ways of thinking, feeling and acting ... that distinguish and differentiate societies” (Emad 2016, 250)—as a central explanatory factor of diverse social phenomena in the Arab countries. To put it another way, while he does not accept the Western essentialist reductionist cultural approach to Middle Eastern politics, he does accept culture as an independent variable that shapes people’s attitudes, beliefs, and, most importantly, behavior, including the political ones.

Many contemporary influential Arab intellectuals subscribe to such dualism: disavowing what is viewed as a Western cultural essentialism of Arab societies and politics, while strongly adhering to the cultural approach in analyzing contemporary Arab societies (e.g., Mohammed Abed Al-Jabri³ and Abdelilah Belqiziz⁴). Critics of *al-turāth* are part of a wider intellectual current typically labeled in the region as *al-tayār al-hadāthi*⁵ (the modernist current), in contrast to *al-tayār al-turāthi* (the cultural heritage current). *Turāth* critics have developed a domestic Arab cultural approach that has become one of the most influential traditions in Arab academia. This approach postulates that the Arab world is suffering a grave sociopolitical crisis, which has its genesis in some “problematic elements” of its own culture that are transmitted from generation to generation. If the debate on *al-turāth* versus modernity has been central to Arab intellectuals’ debates since the mid-nineteenth century,⁶ the emergence of a domestic cultural approach in Arab social sciences started to take form only after the 1967 Arab armies’ defeat.

The 1967 *naksa* (setback) was felt by large portions of the Arab intelligentsia as a cataclysm. According to Fouad Ajami (1992), “[n]o sooner had the Six Day war ended than a war of different sort erupted in the Arab World: Who was responsible for it? What did the defeat say about the basis of Arab society?” (30). To comprehend the cause of the military and political disaster, which was viewed as a complete breakdown of Nasser’s Arab nationalism, certain scholars, particularly those influenced by Marxism, argued that the “criticism of the Arabo-Islamic cultural heritage” is the only “scientific” analytical framework capable of explaining the causes of what happened in June 1967. From this point of view, it is the “reactionary value system” characterizing Arab societies that is to blame for not only the 1967 military defeat (Al-Rabbi 2011, 366) but also all the aspects of “backwardness” that the Arab world has experienced for centuries.

Sadiq Jalal al-Azm is a perfect illustration of this Marxist Arab cultural approach. In his book *Naqd al-fīkr al-dīnī (Critique of Religious Thought)*, published in 1969, he attacks Arab intellectuals who “in their critical analysis of the Arab world realities limited themselves to the social structures without evoking their deep cultural and ideological roots grounded in [the Islamic] religion” (Weld Abah 2013, 71). Sadiq Jalal al-Azam, like many other “secular-nationalist-socialist writer[s], [such as] Hadi al-Ulawi (Iraq), Mahmood Amin al-Alim (Egypt) ... espouse[s] ideas like social change, progress, autonomy, sovereignty, development, growth, and modernity to redeem a society that he considered in the grip of traditional frameworks” (Agbaria 2022, 61). In the post-1967 context, Arab Marxist intellectuals were the first to place the Islamic cultural heritage on “the cultural agenda of the Arab world” (71).

This criticism of Arab culture was not restricted to Marxist scholars, however. According to Samir Hassan (2007), there is a consensus among Arab intellectuals that religion is essential in forming individuals’ and groups’ personalities in the Arab world (396) even if the modernist and *al-turāthi* currents do not agree when it comes to how they assess the cultural heritage and evaluate its impact. In fact, in the 1970s, “[t]he advent of the problem of [*al-turāth*] gave rise to [a] new breed of Arab intellectuals ... whose scholarly assumptions were at odds with many of the widespread [Marxist/leftist] intellectual orthodoxies” (Agbaria 2022, 57). Mohamed Abed Al-Jabri (1935–2010) is probably the best example of the non-Marxist Arab cultural approach.

3 For instance, Mohamed Abed Al-Jabri, a central figure of the Arab cultural approach, was one of the most involved Arab intellectuals in criticizing Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” thesis. His book *Qaḍāya fī al-fīkr al-mu’asir (Issues in Contemporary Thought)* (1997) includes a chapter (the fifth) titled *Šīrā’ al-ḥaqārat (Clash of Civilizations)*. For an excellent summary of Al-Jabri’s position, see Masood (2015).

4 See Belqiziz (2014, 2017).

5 Sometimes also labeled as *a-tayār al-ilmānī* [the secular current] or *a-tayār al-taqadumī* [the progressist current].

6 This debate is central to what is called in Arab academia the Modern Arab Thought—an umbrella term that designates a wide range of social sciences and philosophical contributions to which “*al-mas’ala al-siyāsiya*” (the political question) in the Arab world is central (Belqiziz 2006).

Al-Jabri, a professor of philosophy specializing in epistemology, employed interdisciplinary approaches to excavate the history of Islam, mobilizing concepts from sociology, psychology, and political science, among other disciplines. His trilogy *Naqd al-'aql al-'arabi* (Critique of Arab reason)—which in 2019 was in its fourteenth edition—has established him as an eminent Arab academic. According to Al-Jabri (1990),

Arabs have a lively cultural heritage in their souls, feelings, minds, perceptions, memories, aspirations, hearts, and books ... [their] cultural heritage has such presence and weight on [their] consciousness and unconsciousness in a [unique] way that does not exist elsewhere in the modern world. (33) ... to free [themselves] from the dependency on the other [read: West] can only be achieved through liberating [themselves] from [their] dependence on the past ... [that is,] to be free from the “hegemony” of *al-turāth*. [Yet] the liberation from *al-turāth* does not mean escaping from it or throwing it into the trash ... It means dealing with it critically (33).

Al-Jabri (2002) argues that what he calls *al-'aql al-'arabi* (the Arab reason)—or the manner of thinking of the Arabs—is determined by the Arab culture (38). For him, *al-'aql al-'arabi* is deeply rooted within specific analytical and cultural patterns established more than twelve centuries ago during the *'asr al-tadwīn* (the era of codification), a period distinguished by the introduction of the early Islamic “theological” manuscripts. Any effort to comprehend, explain, or even surpass the Arab world’s complex challenges without considering the impact of this cultural heritage will be a futile exercise. Al-Jabri “was not alone in recognizing [the centrality of the Islamic cultural heritage in] shaping power, but he was undoubtedly the most eloquent protagonist of the cultural shift that took hold of the Arab imagination in the defeat of the postcolonial project” (Agbaria 2022, 121).

Hassan Hanafi⁷ (2002), another renowned contemporary Arab intellectual, theorized *al-turāth* as a “psychological reservoir within the masses ... [which] with its thoughts, perceptions, and ideals determines the people’s everyday conduct” (15–16). This conceptualization of *al-turāth* is quite indicative of how culture is not only viewed as a fundamental factor that must be thought about by social researchers in their investigations of economic, social, and political issues in the region, but also how it is given a solid explanatory power, particularly when it comes to political outcomes. In fact, despite their conflicting epistemological perspectives, scholarly backgrounds, and ideological motivations or partialities, most Arab social scientists who adopted the cultural approach agree on several points.

First, the concept of *al-turāth* has been essential to their analyses of Arab societies. They also agree that *al-turāth* sustains a state of *takhaluf* (backwardness) and hinders the path to modernity. Arab societies and their political orders are seen as engulfed in a set of old social, economic, and political institutions, practices, norms, values, and beliefs embedded in Islamic principles. Those principles should not be venerated or regarded as synonymous with Islam as a religion, however.

Second, there is a widespread perception of Arab culture as being in a state of crisis or in “trouble” (Munif 2018, 5). Yet Arab intellectuals have not necessarily agreed on why this is the case. For instance, some scholars blame Arab culture for the socioeconomic and political underdevelopment of the region, while at the same time, they denounce the risk of acculturation by globalized Western values (Munif 2018). This sense of crisis is not to be separated from a broader question that has been central to the works of Arab intellectuals for more than one century: the concerns about identity, or, more precisely, the fear of losing Arab and Muslim cultural specificities, described by Afaya (2012) as an “obsessional question” (95).

Third, most Arab culturalist scholars will avoid deterministic positions or assertions. While heritage is perceived or identified as a “problem” or in “positivist” language as a key independent explanatory variable for the MENA region’s multifaceted backwardness, it is nevertheless not static. This is a crucial element that must be kept in mind when examining the works of what we may call the *Arab cultural school*, especially when it comes to the authors that belong to the non-Marxist tradition within this school. In fact, at first glance, it may appear that the Arab cultural current has several points in common with the Western culturalist. Yet the dominant current in the Arab cultural school—as exemplified by Mohammed Abed Al-Jabri—will insist on elements that make it diverge profoundly from the reductionist Western cultural approach, such as that adopted by Elie Kedourie (1993). Those Arab intellectuals’ endeavor is by no means anti-Islamic.

Fourth, whatever their divergent disciplinary particularities or focuses, most scholars who belong to the Arab cultural school defend the idea that many components of the Islamic cultural heritage that appear as sacred religious texts, beliefs, and practices are, in fact, a by-product of the political context of the early centuries of Islam. They were purposely incorporated in the Islamic religious teaching codified during the eighth century to achieve political goals considering that era’s heated struggles for power, including between the ruling Abassi caliphs and their political opponents the *Tablibiyun*⁸ (the descendants of Ali) (Al-Jabri 2002). Therefore, the need for a historical context-

7 For an excellent biography of contemporary Arab intellectuals and a summary of their contributions, see Abdelilah Belqiz, ed., *A-thaqāfa al-'arabiya fi al-qarn al-'ishrīn: ḥaṣīla awaliya* (Arab Culture in the 20th Century: The Preliminary Outcome) (Beirut: Center for Arab Unity Studies, 2012).

8 In reference to Ali Ibn Abi-Talib, the fourth caliph of the Rashidun Caliphate.

tualization of Islamic religious *fiqh* and *‘aqīda* texts (the Islamic “theologian” texts) has been a central argument in Al-Jabri’s work on *al-turāth*. This has a crucial implication for how culture is to be conceptualized or perceived. While culture is accepted as an independent variable that explains several phenomena in modern Arab society, it is also a dependent variable that can be changed.

Although the cultural approach has been one of the most influential intellectual traditions in Arab social sciences, it has also been criticized from within the region. The rejection of the critical approach to Arab culture has not been limited to the *turāthī* current within Arab academia, as exemplified by the Moroccan Taha Abderrahman, who represents an Islamic Sufi perspective. For instance, George Tarabishi published an extremely virulent book in 1993 in which he denounces what he calls the “*Slaughtering of Heritage in Contemporary Arab Culture*.” According to Tarabishi (1993), the cultural approach in Arab academia is ideologically motivated, biased, and prone to historical selectivity, quoting from Islamic history only elements that serve their argument while ignoring the diversity of Islamic heritage, which is far from monolithic.

In short, against all expectations, the cultural approach in Arab academia has served for decades as a central analytical framework in Arab social sciences deployed in studying Arab societies and grasping what was believed to be a general condition of backwardness they have been experiencing. This indigenous Arab cultural approach is not new to Arab intellectual circles. It found its roots in the mid-nineteenth century in the works of what is known in the region as *a-nahda* era (the awakening), almost a century before the establishment of social sciences in Arab universities. Yet, while sharing a few commonalities with the Western-based cultural analysis of Middle Eastern politics, particularly with respect to the importance of Islam to Arab political culture, it is somehow divorced from any cultural determinism. The Arab cultural school considers Arab culture to be “reformable,” and Arab intellectuals are argued to be central agents of this needed cultural change to overcome the state of backwardness.

The following section explores the Arab cultural current’s perspective on the democracy deficit in the region and how democracy scholars have criticized it from within the region. The choice of this topic is not fortuitous. Democracy—or, more precisely, its absence in the Arab world—has been one of the most studied subjects in which the cultural approach has been used in Western political science. What is the position of the Arab Cultural School on this issue? And how is it met by democracy scholars in the region?

THE ARAB CULTURAL CURRENT’S EXPLANATION OF AUTHORITARIANISM AND ITS CRITICS

Arguing that Arab political culture has some specificities that favor authoritarianism and therefore inhibit the establishment of democratic regimes in the MENA region is a position adopted by many Arab intellectuals. Even though no

consensus exists over what exactly these cultural elements responsible for the antidemocratic nature of Arab political culture are, two major trends may be identified.

Given that many non-Arab Muslim countries—especially in Asia—are democracies or at least electoral democracies, authoritarianism should be considered an “Arab problem” rather than an Islamic one. Therefore, if we do accept culture as an explanatory factor of regime types in the MENA region, the prevalence of authoritarianism in the region is therefore to be found in the Arab elements of Arab societies rather than in the Islamic components. In other terms, what makes Arab political culture prone to antidemocratic values is its Arabness or its Arab cultural traditions.

According to this view, patriarchy and tribalism are central to Arab political culture (Sharabi 2021a). The region’s cultural heritage should not be reduced to Islam because “not every element in *al-turāth* belong[s] to [the Islamic] religion, and not everything in [the Islamic] religion is part of *al-turāth* ... [In fact], calls for subjugations, submissions ... and fear appeared in *al-turāth* and not in [Islamic] religion” (Hanafi 2002, 23). Whereas, according to Al-Mouldi Al-Ahmar (2016, 6), the concept of tribe has been central to both the academic and the political traditions of the Arab world.

Hicham Sharabi (2021a) argues that authoritarianism in the Arab world cannot be explained without considering the patriarchal structure of Arab societies, which has found its way to that contemporary political institution called the “modern” nation-state and its political regimes. Deeply rooted in the Arab political culture, patriarchy (reproduced from generation to generation) has been espoused by the Arab states since their formation, resulting in neopatriarchal political regimes prone to an undemocratic, personalistic form of government (Sharabi 2021b). Arab societies are characterized by the “tenacious resistance of tribal clan mode [of social relations] facing any forms of structural change” (46).

This has a critical political implication. The neopatriarchy that distinguishes Arab societies “produces dependent individuals ... that are loyal to the family, to the clan, to the sect” (64), which ultimately favors submission (65). Barakat (2006) goes in the same direction by arguing that due to the “close relationship between [the Arab] patriarchal social system and the authoritarian political system, the ruler acts like a father and perceives the citizens as minor individuals” (93) who must accept his authority and follow his will as he is better equipped to determine what the general interest of the community is and to defend it.

Alternatively, a second group of scholars focus on the religious Islamic heritage in Arab political culture. Here the so-called antiliberal nature of the Islamic religious discourse—which is not to be equated with Islam as a religion—developed and institutionalized by the religious institutions will be under scrutiny (Abu Zayed 1994). The prevalence of autocratic regimes in the Arab world cannot be explained without considering the Islamic component of Arab political culture, especially those traditionalist Islamic religious teachings that produced an unfriendly context to liberalism. For instance, they argue that Islamic po-

litical theory as developed and codified centuries ago by influential Muslim religious scholars in a set of politico-religious manuscripts—e.g., *Kutub Al-Adhāb al-Sultaniya* (*The Sultanic Ethics Books*)—served to justify despotic rules and outlaw all forms of protests, rebellions, or revolutions against despotism and autocratic regimes, and was utilized to validate repression during most of Arab history (see Abu Zayed 1994). Contemporary Arab authoritarian regimes are simply an extension of this historical trend. Initially politically motivated, this religious heritage is seen as having favored submission and facilitated regime dominance and shaping the Arab world’s political culture. These claims parallel those made by the reductionist cultural school of Western political culture analysis of Arab politics.

As a central aspect of any functioning democratic society, tolerance has also attracted the attention of Arab scholars favoring cultural explanations. Here the Arab world is perceived as remarkably intolerant and prone to sectarianism, violence, and armed conflict, unwelcoming to freedom and individual liberties; its prevalent culture is singled out as responsible for this state of affairs. For instance, Muflih (2017) argues that tolerance is exceptional temporally and spatially in the history of the Middle East. According to him, populations in the region experienced tolerance only in particular historical periods during which philosophical rationality gained strength in opposition to religious and theological dominance (247). Thus, whenever religious thinking prevails, intolerance prevails.

This dark portrait of Arab political culture from within the region does not mean that all attempts to implement democracy in the Arab world are inevitably a lost cause as no matter how powerful or influential, the culture is not static. For example, speaking in reference to the 2010–2011 Arab uprisings, Abdellatif (2012) argued that “to achieve a democratic political project based on a set of principles and values linked to modern political philosophy ... requires a cultural revolution that should aim ... to spread the values of enlightenment and the gains of modern thought” (42). Laden with modernization theory undertones, this argument did not resonate with many Arab scholars from the region. For instance, El-Affendi (2011) and Ghalioun (2003) refute the incompatibility thesis, which posits that authoritarian characteristics pertaining to the Arab political culture make the Arab world an unwelcoming place for democracy. The aforementioned approach comes as a reaction to theories proposing the introduction of cultural change with the purpose of establishing democratic regimes across the region. Probably the eminent Palestinian political thinker Azmi Bishara’s work is exemplary in this regard.

Bishara has dedicated substantial intellectual energy to the study of prospects for democratic transitions in the MENA region since the 2010–11 uprisings. The creation of the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies (ACRPS) in Doha, Qatar, in the aftermath of these uprisings aimed, among other things, to serve this academic enterprise. The

ACRPS has rapidly become one of the most vibrant sites for political science in the Arab world and has produced tremendous research on authoritarianism and democracy in the MENA countries. The ACRPS has published hundreds of books and peer-reviewed articles; organized an impressive number of conferences, roundtables, and winter schools on democracy and democratization in the Arab world;⁹ and produced several rounds of the biggest survey data on political issues based on the Arab world, the Arab Opinion Index, gathering information on Arab citizens’ attitudes toward democracy.

A vocal opponent of the political culture thesis, Bishara (2018) argues that we must refute all claims of the existence of a specific Arab personality profile or of the particularism of Arab or Islamic culture, mainly when they are theorized or presented as incompatible with democracy (144). He believes that “while criticizing culture or the dominant cultures is undoubtedly important ... yet a radical cultural change is not a precondition that Arab societies must wait for” to establish democratic regimes in the region (Bishara 2020, 411). At the theoretical level, Bishara’s work adheres more to the “elite theories” approach in political science than to deterministic structural explanations, especially cultural ones. He believes in the agency of power holders and their central role in the implementation and sustenance of a democratic regime:

... many modernization theorists view democracy as the offspring of a specific culture. In so doing, modernization theorists perpetuate the false dichotomy of ‘Islam versus democracy’. Some of them reduce this cultural prerequisite to the availability of a supportive political culture. However, it remains a nebulous concept if not limited to a society’s influential elites, their experience, and political skills. (Bishara 2021, 261)

For students of democracy in the Arab world, while political culture should not be ignored as a “guiding concept to explain the authoritarian condition of Arab countries ... it is not itself sufficient either to analyze the reality of authoritarianism and its persistence, or to understand its role in the triggering of ‘revolutions’ in several Arab countries” (Malki 2012, 262). Burhan Ghalioun (2003) shares similar views, suggesting that “no serious research” will accept the idea that “the material and objective reality, i.e., historical, stems directly from the visions, values, ideational beliefs” (Ghalioun 2003, 11). Political phenomena in the MENA region have little to do with primordial religious identities that favor cross-religious hatred but are the product of elite instrumentalization of these identities.

It is striking that many elements of the debate on the relationship between the so-called Arab cultural heritage and authoritarianism in Arab academia have been dominated for a decade by normative and/or macro-theoretical assertions. The problem with this is that when it comes to the causal claims made about the relation between the so-

9 For more details, see <https://www.dohainstitute.org/en/Pages/index.aspx>.

called Arabo-Islamic cultural heritage and a range of political phenomena in the MENA region—from sectarianism and armed conflict to the democracy deficit and so on—often the conclusions appear as a set of propositions and conclusions that are not necessarily sustained by solid empirical evidence. To the best of my knowledge, Arab scholars who have adopted the cultural approach have not yet demonstrated the impact of *al-turāth* on authoritarian attitudes using individual-level data.

This enterprise cannot be achieved without using survey data and individual-level empirical evidence. Probably, one element that favored this situation is that deploying those methods in the MENA region has historically faced real challenges. For a long time, in Western academia, the excuse for not testing the validity of culturally based behavioral claims about Arab politics was the dearth of valid survey data. However, during the last two decades, the situation has improved—first, thanks to the inclusion of some countries from the MENA region in the fourth wave of the World Value Survey, and later, in the mid-2000s, with the development of the Arab Barometer by a group of MENA politics specialists. Marc Tessler and Amaney Jamal (2008) have conducted studies demonstrating that Arab citizens do not exhibit lower levels of acceptance of democracy compared to other populations. Their research also indicates that being a Muslim Arab citizen with a high level of piety does not necessarily translate to holding antidemocratic attitudes.

Historically, Arab social sciences have been very skeptical of data collection techniques such as surveys, questioning their ability to be “detached from its Western and/or ‘imperialistic’” origin (Farah 1983). As a result, quantitative methods were marginalized in Arab political science (Amengay and Aloskan 2023). Nevertheless, in 2011 the Arab Opinion Index (AOI) was launched by the ACRPS, and it can hardly be depicted as serving any imperialist agenda. All these welcomed datasets offer many more opportunities to test the conceptual utility of political culture in the region, to identify its potential characteristics, and, more importantly, to test whether Arab cultural values and orientations have any impact on political behaviors, especially attitudes toward democracy.

Over the course of the last ten years, the latter research question reemerged as especially significant. The Arab uprising initially led to the installation of democratically elected regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, in addition to some level of liberation for regimes in other nations such as Morocco and Jordan. Secondly, the resilience thesis on authoritarianism in the MENA region has been revived due to the backsliding of democracy in the region.¹⁰ What is the conclusion we can draw from the analysis of the AOI with re-

gard to Arab citizens’ attitudes toward democracy? Furthermore, what is the connection between Islamic beliefs and attitudes toward democracy?

In 2014 a paper titled “Public Opinion and Democracy” was published in *Siyasat Arabiya*—which is considered one of the top peer-reviewed journals in Arab political science—by the Public Opinion Unit of ACRPS. This paper and others published by ACRPS emphasize how the MENA region’s inability to achieve democracy in many countries during the Arab Spring has revived the cultural approach as an instrument to scrutinize authoritarianism in almost all Arab countries. Thus, questions such as “does the specificity of the Arab society and its culture hinder democratic changes? Are democracy and Arab culture compatible? ... Is the dominant [Arab] political culture undemocratic, and therefore are [Arab] citizens undemocratic?” (136) have been brought again to the Arab intellectual circles’ debates.

Yet despite the unhappy end of the Arab uprisings, the ACRPS’s data has consistently shown that by no means could Arabs be described as holding antidemocratic attitudes. For instance, the analysis of the second wave (2012–13) of the AOI covering fourteen Arab countries shows¹¹ (1) that 79 percent of the respondents understand democracy in an accurate way (e.g., democracy implies political and civil liberties); (2) that 68 percent of the participants do not see any opposition between Islam and democracy; and (3) that 68 percent see democracy as still better than any other political regime “despite its problems,” with scores over 80 percent for this question in Lebanon, Jordan, Yemen, Morocco, Iraq, Sudan, and Tunisia (ACRPS Public Opinion Unit 2014, 146). In other terms, more than two-thirds of Arab citizens are favorable to democracy, and their Islamic cultural heritage does not make the Arab population favor authoritarianism.

This strong attachment to democracy is not specific to the early phases of the Arab Spring. The ACRPS Public Opinion Unit (2021) performed an analysis of attitudes toward democracy nearly ten years after the overthrow of President Ben-Ali’s dictatorship and, more significantly, after almost a decade of exceptionally volatile democracy that resulted in significant dissatisfaction with the parliamentary system. Nevertheless, according to the AOI’s 2019–20 report, the best political regime is still viewed as democracy by 80 percent of Tunisian respondents (Public Opinion Unit 2021). In another article published in the same journal, Dana El-Kurd (2018) utilized the AOI’s 2016 data to present the association between individual religiosity and a set of political behaviors, with particular attention given to its effect on attitudes toward democracy. She “find[s] that there is no link between increased religiosity and negative views of democracy; in fact, the opposite is the case. There

10 For a good review of the literature on this issue, see Lynch, Marc, Jillian Schwedler, and Sean Yom, eds., *Political Science of the Middle East: Theory and Research since the Arab Uprisings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

11 The included countries are Lebanon, Mauritania, Palestine, Jordan, Iraq, Algeria, Libya, KSA, Sudan, Kuwait, Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, and Morocco.

is also no link between religiosity and political participation. Finally, there is a positive correlation between religiosity and political tolerance” (105).

In summary, the available quantitative analyses of individual-level data conducted by Arab scholars within the region do not corroborate the assertions of the Arab cultural current, particularly regarding the association between personal Islamic beliefs and attitudes toward democracy. This is consistent with the findings of studies conducted by Western researchers based on data from the Western world. Nearly two decades ago, in her critique of the political culture approach in general, and in Middle East political science in particular, Lisa Anderson (1995) highlighted how the Western literature on the MENA region’s political culture seemed little concerned with testing and verifying these causal claims. The cultural approach in Arab social sciences is not an exception to this trend.

CONCLUSION

Arab social scientists and intellectuals, while being highly critical of the cultural works generated in Western political science, have established an indigenous cultural approach, which is now widely regarded as one of the most influential schools of thought in Arab academia. The investigation of political phenomena has traditionally held a central position in this tradition, although many of its most influential intellectual figures would not consider themselves political scientists. Notwithstanding, it is essential for any scholar in

Middle East political science worldwide to take it seriously or at least to be aware of its existence. The importance of this academic tradition stems not just from its influence in Arab academia, but also from its impact on public debates and political discourse through its arguments, claims, and analyses.

COMPETING INTERESTS

No competing interests exist.

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Submitted: November 23, 2023 PDT, Accepted: December 06, 2023 PDT



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