

The Arab world and the collective memory: an overview

Arabs and Arabic culture

Arabic is a Semitic language that was used in the Arabian Peninsula by the nomads of the central and northern Arabia. However, the word Arab had two definitions. The older is to refer to the inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula and to the Arabic-speaking people.

As early as *the seventh century*, in *the year 610 A.D.*, Koran is revealed to prophet Muhammad in the Arabian Peninsula. It marks the appearance of Islam, a new religion in the ancient world. The journey starts in 622 with the prophet Hijra from Mecca to Medina.

Almost, fourteen centuries of Islamic civilization has marked the ancient world .It had its share of power and decline of rulers and dynasties.

Arabs, Persian, Turks, Kurds, Berbers, Mongols, Muslims, Christians, and Jews, all have built and contributed to different parts of this civilization “United by a common religious culture expressed in the Arabic language, and by human links which trade, migration and pilgrimage had forged”. (1)

The Islamic Arab Empire has stretched from northwest India, across central Asia, The Middle East, North Africa, Southern Italy and the Iberian Peninsula to the Pyrenees. Models of political and religious authority, governance and administration, social, economic and judicial structures, education systems, art and architecture, science, medicine and literature were traits of this culture.

This cultural, religious and racial mosaic has influenced and enriched different regions of the time and has mapped the modern world. Hence, the complexity of the modern Arab world and its collective memory cannot be understood in isolation of the above background. (2)

(1) Hourani, Albert. *A history of the Arab peoples*. Cambridge ,Massachusetts. The Belknap Press of Harvard university press. 1991. ISBN 0-674-39565-4. P 83

(2) Arab family names reflect this ethnic mixture, as surnames are the make of geographic, religious and tribal origins. Aldimashqi (for families originated from Damascus); AlAsfahani (from Afghanistan); Almghribi (from Morocco); Almasri (from Egypt) AlShafii (from the Shafii) Nakshabindi (Nakshabindiya sect) etc..

Peter Mansfield projects his thinking about Arabs in the modern age “having a unique opportunity to enhance the unity of mankind by acting as a link between Europe and the West and the peoples of Africa and Asia. In certain important respects they belong to all of them.” (3) Moreover, “they do have the advantage of their higher degree of racial tolerance.” (4)

Major Eras and Arab Islamic Empires

- Appearance of Islam under the prophet Muhammad (622-632)
- The Rashidun or (Rightly Guided). The Caliphate in Arabia (632-661). (5)
- The Umayyad of Mu’awiya. The Caliphate in Damascus (661-750). (6)
- The Abbasids. The caliphate in Baghdad of Abu al’ Abbas (750-1258). (7)
- The Fatimides of Abdullah alMahdi. In Mahdiya-Tunisia (909-969) in Cairo-Egypt (969-1171)
- The Safavids (1502-1722) named after Sheikh Safi Al-Din of the Sufi order. Founded by Shah Ismail I, in Ardabil-Azarbijan
- The Ottomans. The Ottoman Caliphate in Istanbul (1299-1924) and the end of Arab-Islamic empires.

Major Local ruling Dynasties

- The Seljuks (1037-1194) In Turkmenistan of Selcuk Beg
- The Khwarezm-shahs (1098-1231) in Khwarezm (now Uzbekistan) of Qutb ad-din Muhammad. (8)
- The Moravides (1086-1147) in Morocco and Andalusian territories
- The Ayyubids (1171-1342) of Salahdin in Egypt, who fought the Crusades.
- The Mamlukes Dynasty (1250-1517) of AlZahir Baibars in Egypt who fought the Mongols in Ain Jalut (1260). Conquered by the Ottomans in 1517.
- The Ghaznavides (975-1187) of Mahmud of Ghazni (in Afghanistan) in Khorasan – Persia.
- The Ghorids in Afghanistan (1187-1215). Conquered India. (9)

(3)- (4) Mansfield, Peter. *The Arabs*. Penguin books ltd.Middlessex.England.1987. P510

Lapidus, Ira M.A *history of Islamic societies*. Cambridge university press, 1988.ISBN 0-521-29549-1

(5) After the death of prophet Muhammad. Abu Bakr (632-634), Omar bin AlKhattab (634-644), Uthman bin Affan (644-656) and Ali bin Abi Taleb (656-661).

(6) *The Umayyad in Iberia (conquered in 711 by Tariq bin Ziyad). AbdulRahaman I (756-1031) In Cordoba (AlAndalus). The Taifa kings (the factions kings) and Moorish kingdoms (1031-1130) after the fall of Umayyad caliphate. The Moorish (Arab and Berber) Kingdom of Granada of Muhammad Ibn Alahmar (1212-1492).*

(7) *Mongols defeated Abbasids in Baghdad and took over Damascus in 1258 by Hulagu Khan. The Mongols invasion in the 13th century conquered Muslim lands, but soon after converted to Islam.*

(8) *In 1218 Mongol’s Genghis Khan invaded Khwarezm and its capital Urgench, and destroyed Samarkand and Bukhara.*

(9) *Ghorid general Qutub-uddin Aybak founded the independent Delhi Sultanate in (1206-1526).*

-The Ottomans of Osman I, in Anatolia-Turkey (1299-1453). Later Ottomans Empire in Istanbul after the conquest of Constantinople in 1453.

The Modern Arab world

Not all Arabs are Muslims and certainly not all Muslims are Arabs. What is called, Arab is certainly not only the people originating from the Arabian Peninsula.

Arabic is the mother tongue of the modern Arab states, with the exception of Somalia and Djibouti.

The aftermath of the 1st world war

The Ottoman Empire that has lasted longer than any other Islamic Dynasty has come to an end with the 1st world war in 1924. Turkey's weakness in governance was showing all over the provinces. Exploitative taxes, inflation, corruption etc...

The Arab world at that time was already partly under European rule. The French in Tunisia and Morocco, Algeria was a colony and part of France. The British were occupying, since 1882. Oman and the Gulf states had been under the British protection and Aden was a British colony.

Arabs, still have hoped for independence and unity, and were longing to be liberated from the Turks. The races patchwork of the Islamic Arab world that was in the root of power of this civilization was a weapon for division and partition. Arab provinces were presented with division and colonial rule; Sykes-Picot agreement, May 1916; the 1917 Balfour declaration of the Zionist Federation in Palestine (10); and Versailles treaty 18th June 1919 for the French - British mandates in the region.

Under the British mandate, the Hashemite, Sharif Hussein bin Ali of Mecca claimed himself King of the Arabs (1916-1924) when defeated by Abdul Aziz Al Saud.

His sons Abdullah King of Trans-Jordan (1921-1946) (11) then King of Jordan (1949-1951) and Faisal briefly proclaimed King of Greater Syria (Syria, Alexandrette region, Lebanon, and Palestine).

(10) *On November 2, 1917, Arthur Balfour, Britain's Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, addressed a letter to Lord Rothschild, one of the leaders of the British Jews, as follows: I have much pleasure in conveying to you, on behalf of His Majesty's Government, the following declaration of sympathy which has been submitted to and approved by the Cabinet: His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.*

(11) *In 1921, Britain divided the mandate to form the Hashemite Kingdom of Trans-Jordan, now known as Jordan, in the eastern portion of the territory it controlled*

The 25th April 1920 San Remo, conference (12) and its resolution confirmed Sykes Picot's agreement of French mandate of Syria, Lebanon and incorporated the Balfour declaration of the Jewish state of 1917.

King Faisal became King of Iraq (1921-1933) he was succeeded by his son King Ghazi.

Hope and despair

The end of the 2nd world war, in 1945 aroused hopes among Arab peoples and was a catalyst, bringing rapid changes in power and social life. It has also strengthened the idea of closer unity between the Arab countries. The Arab league was founded in 1945. Promoted by the British and based in Cairo by six founding members: Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Trans-Jordan (Jordan from 1949), and Yemen.

The British and French mandates were to end. However, this has left the Arab world with repercussions of the British promise to the Jews.

By the date of the British withdrawal nearly 400,000 Arabs, about a third of the total population of Palestine at that time, had fled their homes and become refugees. One minute after the British mandate ended at 6.00 PM Washington time on 14 May 1948, the state of Israel was established and ten minutes later it was recognized by the United States. The Arabs response was invading the Jewish state with troops from Egypt, Iraq, Syria and Jordan, supported by volunteers from Saudi Arabia and Libya. A nine months war ended with the Arabs defeat and marked the establishment of the state of Israel. The Arab-Israeli conflict has started.

The League of Nations then, tried to sort this conflict. Peace mediator Count Bernadotte, the UN Swedish mediator, has submitted 2 peace proposals. The 2nd (13) was submitted on the 16th September 1948. He was assassinated by LEHI, Zionist group, on the 17th September 1948, in Jerusalem.

Independence of states was the trait of the second half of the 20th century. Arab countries joined in the Arab league as soon as they gained independence. Currently the Arab league is made up of 22 Arab states; Libya (1953), Sudan (1956), Morocco, Tunisia (1958), Kuwait (1961), Algeria (1962), UAE, Oman, Bahrain, Qatar (1971), Mauritania (1973), Somalia (1974), Palestine liberation organization (1976), Djibouti (1977) and Comoros (1993). And three countries joined as observers Eritrea (2003), Venezuela (2006) and India (2007).

(13) *Text of The British Mandate For Palestine San Remo Conference, April 24, 1920. Confirmed by the Council of the League of Nations on July 24, 1922 Came into operation in September 1923. Whereas the Principal Allied powers have also agreed that the Mandatory should be responsible for putting into effect the declaration originally made on November 2nd, 1917, by the Government of His Britannic Majesty, and adopted by the said Powers, in favor of the*

establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, it being clearly understood that nothing should be done which might prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country

Arabism

The idea of Arab unity reached a climax of Arabism between 1950s and 1960s, based on the grounds of “shared culture and historical experience as well as shared interests, to make it possible for them come into close union with each other, and such a union would not only give them greater collective power but would bring about that moral unity between people and government which would make government legitimate and stable” (14)

In July 1956, Egypt nationalized the Suez Canal. With British and French support, Israel - whose shipping had always been blocked from going through the canal - invaded Egypt on the 29th October 1956, crossing the Sinai Peninsula and closing the canal. Israel also seized Gaza and Sharm el-Sheikh, which controls the Gulf of Aqaba. A great exponent of Arab unity, Egyptian president Gamal Abdel-Nasser (1952-1970), with Syrian and Jordanian alliance, attacked Israel on the 5th June 1967. His statement of resignation on the 9th June 1967(broadcasted on radio), on the eve of the Arab defeat of 1967 war, left Arabs with loss and despair, more lands were lost to Israel. Over six days, it seized control of the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Jordan, the Golan Heights from Syria and the Gaza Strip and the Sinai from Egypt.

In 1973, Syria and Egypt attacked Israel on the 6th of October (the Yom Kippur war). Advancement of the Egyptian army was made in Sinai Peninsula that was lost in 1967 war. For the Arabs, it was little gain, but this victory has paved the way for Egypt to negotiate peace with Israel.

Egyptian President Anwar Sadat (1970-1981) relation with the Americans has led to talks about peace with Israel. In 1977 Sadat, was the 1st Arab leader to visit Israel. His visit initiated Camp David accords (1978). In March 1979, Egypt signed the 1st peace agreement with Israel and gained back Sinai Peninsula (in full by 1982). As a result, Egypt was expelled from the Arab league. President Sadat was assassinated on the 6th October 1981. In 1982, Egypt has withdrawn from the conflict and has exchanged diplomacy with Israel.

The Arab-Israeli conflict has brought defeat and fraction to this unity. Ideas that Arab people were one nation, united in interests and intentions were destroyed.

The Camp David agreements, to which no Palestinian was a party, remained the foundation of the Americans peace initiative in the Middle East.

As 1980s progressed, more divisions (rich and poor) between societies and Arab states were surfacing and made them prone to manipulation by outsiders.

(14) Albert Hourani. *A history of the Arab peoples*. Cambridge, Massachusetts. The Belknap Press of Harvard university press. 1991. ISBN 0-674-39565-4. P401.

. Corruption has made the economic and political reforms more difficult and dangerous as it has made people poorer, envious and bitter.

Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982 and the PLO (Palestinian Liberation Organization) was forced to agree to withdraw from Lebanon.

Arafat's PLO president was received by Tunisia. Frustration in west bank was rising, giving way to uprising against Israeli military occupation and the 1st Palestinian Intifada or the war of stones (1987-1993). (15)

The struggle for Peace

In the 1990s a political climate in the Arab world was swinging in favor of peace with Israel. Bilateral and multilateral peace talks progressed (1991-2000). The International Madrid conference for the peace process (30th October 1991) initiated talks between the Israeli State, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and the Palestinians. Followed by meetings in Moscow in 1992, Syria and Lebanon agreed on a common strategy and refused to take part of multilateral meetings, as long as there was no concrete progress. Negotiations have resulted with The PLO (Palestinian Liberation Organization) Oslo accords (20th August 1993) and Jordan's Peace treaty with Israel signed in Jordan (Wadi Araba Treaty 1994). As a result, Israeli Prime Minister, a right-wing Israeli radical assassinated Yitzhak Rabin on The 4th July 1995. Oman, Qatar, Tunisia, Morocco and Mauritania declined of the Arab Boycott and economic relations with Israel.

The Gulf crisis and the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990; the pressures for peace in the region; the collapse of the Soviet Union; Iran's interest in the region, have triggered the birth of a more pragmatic Arab world. "A functional relationship between states in which countries promoted economic co-operation, put ideology on one side and accepted a degree of inter-independence." (16) The Gulf co-operation council and the Arab Maghreb union were examples of this new type of thinking and it was certainly extended to international cooperation in the economic and cultural sides.

This pragmatism was certainly adopted in most Arab states. It has been efficient and successful, as we have seen economic growth and development in major Arab countries Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, The Gulf states since the year 2000.

(15) *IDF (Israeli defense forces) violence against Palestinians has never ceased. A series of confrontations since the year 2000 brought figures of casualties and losses killing 1028 Israelis and 4944 Arabs.*

(16) *Field, Michael. Inside the Arab world. London. John Murray publishers ltd.1994. ISBN0-7195-5096-3. p. 393*

However, economic growth cannot be secured without security. Iraq war in 2003; AlQaeda and the international terrorism triggered by 9 /11th 2001 attack in New York; the second intifada (AlAqsa intifada) in September 2000, Hamas and the Palestinian state; the political unrest in Lebanon in 2005 and the July 2006 war.

With many setbacks and exceptions, there is a discernible trend towards greater liberty for the Arab individual.

Undoubtedly, the political heritage in the Arab world hinders the cultural heritage and present Arab states and the Arab institutions with challenges and high tasks.

However, two major challenges can be identified in respect of cultural heritage and the Arab collective memory.

On the one hand; to keep, to hold and to preserve, the historical heritage of the Arabs, on the other hand; to use this heritage as a tool to share, to produce and to reproduce a memory for the future generations.

The above challenges have never been more crucial than today. The 21st century and the international information summits presented these countries with dead lines and major changes that should take place to protect and preserve this memory. We have witnessed revamping of libraries and archives (Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Syria, Qatar).

Projects, conferences and workshops on the national and regional levels have aimed at bridging the gap in the know how and establishing library and information practices and infrastructure. National and international institutions have joined forces to bring awareness and action plans into force.

The struggle to preserve the nations memory has never been more obvious. Palestine, Lebanon and Iraq were and are still witnessing slaughter of their land, heritage and memory. These countries lie at the heart of the Arab collective memory. The importance of their heritage to the world and humankind should never been undermined. Efforts to rescue this heritage, was a huge concern to the international and the Arab communities. Little could be done in the lack of security and the present political unrest.

”The memory of the Arab world”

Lately a promising project (17) has seen the light.

- The memory of the Arab world project was launched in July 2007 after 2 years of preparation.
- The project was endorsed by Unesco and was approved by all the Arab countries in the Sharjah declaration in the 1st executive meeting in October 2007.
- The project is very ambitious for the 4 years period that was suggested in its final draft.
- The budget for the 1st year of the project preparation, is set for 300.000US\$ and it is funded by ICT Egyptian ministry, ITU, TREEM institute (Syria), Sharjah Emirate, Unesco and ISESCO. Three years are set for execution with 6.300.000US\$ budget and fund raising is in the process.

Objectives of the project:

- To ensure cooperation and partnership amongst the Arab countries for Arab heritage documentation and dissemination
- To build and support reliable electronic sources and databases according to international standards, thus adding to the Arabic e-content on the inter-net
- To create a network of expertise in heritage related fields from within the Arab world
- To identify best practice in information technology for the Arab heritage preservation and safeguard within the Arab world
- To gather, document, digitize and disseminate the Arab heritage on a portal in Arabic and English

The project identifies the collective memory of the Arab world in the following fields:

Manuscripts; Pictures; Archaeological sites; Natural heritage; Museums; Oral heritage; Music; and the Folklore. Each category has a specialized committee of experts in the field. Also, the project aims at identifying the different eras in the Arab world Umayyad, Abbasids, Fatimids, Mamluks, Saljuqs, and Ottomans etc...

Each country will be presented on the project’s portal, and will be responsible for coordination with relevant institutions and will be advised and supported by the project committees, according to the project specifications.

(17) (Documents were supplied by the project of the Memory of the Arab world.)

The countries who will be contributing so far to the project are Egypt, Lebanon, Qatar, UAE, Sudan, Yemen, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Tunis, Jordan, Oman, Iraq, Libya, Kuwait, Bahrain and Palestine: together with the support of Unesco; ISESCO; Alecso; Jumaa elMajid center-UAE, AlTurath-Qatar; CULTNAT- Egypt and Bibliotheca Alexandrina. (18)

With no doubt realizing this project will bring to forth awareness about the Arab world and the Arab heritage. It will also, gather and attract expertise in the fields of interest.

It would also help in upgrading skills and professional networks in the region. Such a project would promote the Arab identity and the Arab heritage on the national, regional and international levels.

Admittedly, the Arab world has always approached projects of the sort with utopia. The Arab League has had numerous projects that had an open end and never achieved their high objectives.

Therefore, sizing tasks and priorities and sharing skills and resources in a more pragmatic fashion could prove success.

There is a kind of common grounds between this project and the Unesco MOW programme, which could be a basis for cooperation and future projects.

The Memory of the World -Unesco

The Arab countries have not had their share in the Memory of the world international register.

The Unesco Memory of the world programme that was initiated in 1997 has had for aim to reveal the treasures of the world. It has regarded the Arab world as a region with “cultures of great richness and antiquity, but many nation states are relatively young in their present form. A general history of colonization creates issues in repatriation of documentary heritage Archives, libraries and museums often lack adequate funds, infrastructure and skills”.

MOW has succeeded so far in bringing to light several manuscripts from the Islamic and the Arab world.

Several attempts have been made via MOW projects on the national and regional levels and at some point on the international level to safeguard the written heritage and to preserve Arab and international treasures. The Unesco MOW programme has worked on some interesting projects in this respect.

(18) <http://www.almajidcenter.org>; www.alecso.org.mt; www.bibalex.org ; www.isesco.org.ma ; www.culmat.org ; www.eternalegypt.org ; www.alturath.org

- /Czech Republic - Catalogue of Arabic Manuscripts of the National Library of the Czech Republic
- Tunisia - Tunisian Postcards
- Turkey - Manuscripts of Kandilli Observatory
- Uzbekistan - Oriental Miniatures (14th-17th centuries)
- Yemen - The Sana'a Manuscripts
- Slovakia - Basagic's Collection of Islamic Manuscripts in the University Library of Bratislava
- Egypt - Dar Al-Kutub Manuscripts
- Egypt - Egyptian Postcards

The programme has tried to encourage Arab states to contribute to the programme via the Unesco national commissions but has had little chance to contribute to establish national committees and or regional committees.

Out of 158 worldwide nominations on the international register, only 6 nominations made it through from the Arab world.

Egypt

- The Memory of the Suez Canal (1997)

-Deeds of Sultans and Princes (2005

-Persian Illustrated and Illuminated Manuscripts (2007)

-

Lebanon

- Commemorative Stella of Nahr el-Kalb, Mount Lebanon (2005)

- The Phoenician Alphabet (2005)

Saudi Arabia

- Earliest Islamic (Kufi) inscription (2003)

Moreover, 2 Arab countries Lebanon 2003 and Egypt 2005 have managed to establish national MOW committees. For the rest of Arab states, nominations to MOW make their way through the Unesco national commissions.

With regard to the MOW programme, there seem to be some limitations that should be sorted, to encourage contributions of the Arab states:

- MOW is not well marketed in the Arab countries
- Institutions interested in submitting their nominations find application requirements for submission in need of explanatory notes.

For countries lacking MOW national committees, submitting nominations via Unesco national commissions, could hinder meeting dead lines for submission. Let alone, lack the experts' advice needed in selecting and evaluating nominations.

A regional MOW committee for the Arab states could be of high interest to support projects such as the Memory of the Arab world. It could bring out a balanced presentation of the Arab collective memory.

Such a regional committee could prove effective, as cultural cooperation in the international arena is a trait of the 21st century.

With only 2 MOW national committees, in a region of 22 countries, the task seems difficult with little awareness about the MOW programme and its goals.

A special attention should be made for the programme marketing campaigns in this region. Unesco national commissions could be very helpful in this respect but using other channels of communications could stand the test such as workshops, seminars and case studies related to the programme.
