

The cultural dimension of Arab-Western relations: between independence, dependency, and the clash of civilizations

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Abstract:

This study attempts to analyze Arab-Western cultural relations in light of the triad of independence, dependency, and the clash of civilizations. It examines issues of Westernization, cultural dependency, civilizational conflict, and cultural security, while also proposing mechanisms and alternatives that Arab states can rely on to preserve their cultural independence and protect their cultural security amidst the growing policies of Westernization and cultural invasion. The study concludes that protecting Arab cultural and civilizational identity in the face of current geocultural challenges fundamentally requires a comprehensive and integrated strategic framework. This framework should be based on the combined efforts of official governmental bodies and cultural and social institutions, as well as the adoption of a carefully considered policy of openness to the West and the global system. It should also strive to achieve a balance between authenticity and modernity, and to adopt an authentic identity with contemporary standards.

Keywords: Cultural security; Dependency; Cultural identity; Clash of civilizations.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Arab Muslim societies belong to the Islamic civilizational framework, characterized by a cultural and value system distinct from that of Western civilization. However, the cultural identity of Arab societies has become highly vulnerable to infiltration, particularly in light of the challenges posed by globalization. These challenges are primarily manifested in the rise of cultural invasion, Westernization, cultural alienation, the clash of civilizations, and other related phenomena. This is compounded by the destructive effects of new media and communication technologies, and other means employed by forces of globalization and Westernization to undermine Arab cultural and identity security. Consequently, the individual Arab Muslim finds themselves torn between their original culture and the imported Western culture.

Therefore, preserving identity, affirming cultural autonomy, and protecting the unique characteristics and values of Arab societies has become of paramount importance due to the effects of globalization and the emergence of new forms of colonialism and hegemony based on cultural and civilizational foundations. Furthermore, the absolute and uncritical openness to Western cultures has led to the entrenchment of new values that undermine the authentic cultural identity based on religion, language, customs, and traditions specific to Arab societies, replacing them with imported traditions, behavioral patterns, and values. This fosters a kind of dependency on the incoming Western culture, obliterates the cultural identity of Arab societies, and empties the region of its moral and civilizational content.

Therefore, preserving the distinctiveness of Arab societies and affirming their cultural and identity-based independence requires, first and foremost, activating the role of socialization institutions to awaken a new strategic awareness of the dangers of Westernization and cultural invasion in the age of globalization. It also necessitates adopting a measured openness to the West and the global system, striking a balance between authenticity and modernity, and ensuring that Arab societies embrace an authentic identity with contemporary standards.

In light of the foregoing, this study attempts to address the central question: How can Arab-Western cultural relations be understood and interpreted within the framework of a triad of dependency, independence, and the clash of civilizations? To what extent can Arab societies be considered to be oscillating between Arab-Islamic culture and the influx of Western culture, given the challenges of Westernization and the clash of civilizations brought about by globalization?

This study aims to achieve the following objectives:

- To provide a general overview of the reality of Arab societies in light of the influx of Western culture, and to explore the extent of the impact of the Western value system on the cultural identity of Arab societies.
- To highlight the manifestations of Arab societies' dependency on Western culture, as well as to identify the factors leading to the erosion of Arab identity and cultural security.
- To reveal the dangers of new information and communication technologies as mechanisms for cultural invasion and for reinforcing the dependency of Arab societies on Western culture within the globalized system.
- To examine the repercussions of the clash of civilizations on the cultural system of Arab societies.
- Proposing a set of options and alternatives that Arab societies can rely on to build an effective strategy that enables them to preserve their original and authentic culture, as well as coexist with other cultures coming to them without dissolving into them.

In order to address the topic, the study adopted the **descriptive and analytical approach**, in order to describe the nature of Arab-Western cultural relations, as well as to analyze the issues and problems facing these relations, such as cultural dependency, the clash of civilizations, identity security, etc.

To answer the research question and encompass the various aspects of the topic, the study was divided into the following sections:

1. A general overview of the reality of Arab societies in light of the influx of Western culture.
2. The dependency of Arab societies on Western culture: an examination of the causes and manifestations.
3. The clash of civilizations and its impact on the cultural system of Arab societies.
4. Towards an effective strategic framework for preserving the cultural autonomy of Arab societies.

2. A General Overview of the Reality of Arab Societies in Light of the Influx of Western Culture

2.1 Challenges Facing Arab Societies Amidst Growing Currents of Westernization

Anyone studying the reality of Arab societies in light of the influx of Western culture will observe that the identity and cultural security of these societies is facing extremely serious geocultural challenges, especially given the rise of currents and forces of cultural invasion, Westernization, and the resurgence of civilizational and religious conflicts.

The most important cultural challenges facing Arab societies can be summarized in the following points:

- **The first challenge:** It lies in the establishment by the capitalist West, led by the United States, of a new system that includes the formulation of a single global identity, which would lead to the disappearance of the identities of other peoples, particularly Arabs, and the dissolution of their distinctive cultural and intellectual characteristics.

- **The second challenge:** It lies in the Westernization of other cultures and the replacement of them with Western civilization, under the pretext that they are traditional, backward, and living on the margins of the industrial, technological, and postmodern age.

- **The third challenge:** It manifests itself in working to unify the world's cultures under Western culture, thereby dismantling the boundaries of national cultures, abolishing their sovereignty, and eliminating their historical and civilizational foundations, thus entrenching Western cultural hegemony.

-The fourth challenge: It lies in employing modern science and technology, and the information and technological revolution brought about by globalization, as tools for cultural invasion and penetration, and for dominating the cultures of Arab countries. The aim is to obliterate and assimilate these cultures into Western culture, under the pretext that these cultures are inferior and lagging behind modern civilization.¹

2.2 The Influx of Western Culture and the Dangers of Penetrating the Value System of Arab Societies

Arab societies have become victims of the forces of globalization and Westernization. The latter, to a large extent, works to undermine identity and obliterate the civilizational and cultural distinctiveness of other peoples. This is achieved not only through the various mechanisms produced by globalization, such as technology, the internet, and the information revolution, but also through the use of slogans like "globalism, secularism, objectivity, democracy, and human rights," and through the skillful application of modern technology.

In this context, Western civilization works to shape the cultures, discourses, values, thinking, and behavioral patterns of Arab peoples in accordance with the absolute hegemony of this authoritarian civilization. This is accomplished by forcing these nations and peoples to abandon their cultures, which are deemed inferior and backward to modern civilization.²

In fact, the use of all forms of destruction against the distinctive characteristics of Arab societies, including moral and spiritual annihilation focused on cultural identity and religious values, is a primary and institutional condition for consolidating cultural invasion. Creating disintegration in national cultures, beliefs, distinctive characteristics, and value systems of peoples and nations eliminates their sense of identity, thus rendering their defense of their distinctiveness, identity, role, and status absent, making them vulnerable to Western cultural hegemony.³

Therefore, the influx of Western culture in the age of globalization has led to serious repercussions for the identity and cultural security of Arab societies. The currents of cultural invasion and forces of

Westernization are laying the groundwork for the educational subjugation of individuals in Arab societies through external interventions in altering educational curricula and the use of propaganda and media. Furthermore, these penetrations of identity by cultural globalization foreshadow even greater dangers to the nation-state, national independence, and national culture, especially since globalization, to a large extent, works to entrench the logic of the periphery's dependence on the powers of the center.⁴

Furthermore, the intellectual invasion and the massive influx of Western culture have significantly contributed to deepening the crisis of self-discovery and the search for distinctiveness in Arab societies. This is a result of the cultural polarization and attraction that the dominant Western civilization, in its capitalist (imperialist) manifestation, has consistently exerted. This civilization has promoted the slogan of the centrality of civilization (Western centrism), which has produced what is now known as globalization. It has declared that it possesses a universal (global) civilizational project from which no nation can escape unless it condemns itself to remain on the margins of civilization and progress.

On the other hand, cultural globalization has produced a hybrid discourse in which rebellion against national and ethnic culture is considered a sign of progress, and deviating from the rules of the Arabic language is a source of pride. This has weakened the foundations of national identity and entrenched a kind of dependency on the West, in accordance with Ibn Khaldun's saying: "The vanquished are always eager to imitate the victor." Based on this, the spread of the values of the center (Western countries) on the periphery, the spread of the phenomenon of alienation, the increasing bias towards cultures and societies on the periphery towards the West, and the inclination, admiration, imitation, and consideration of it as a model of global culture and a pattern of modernity, has not only undermined Arab identity security, but has also created additional burdens and future dilemmas for national cultural institutions in Arab countries.⁵

3.The Dependence of Arab Societies on Western Culture: An Examination of Causes and Manifestations

3.1 The Dependence Approach as an Interpretation of Cultural Dependence on the Western World

Critical Latin American sociologists and historians, such as Prado, Fernandez, and Prebich, were among the first to establish classical dependency theory. They were later joined by other theorists from different regions, such as Samir Amin.

Dos Santos argues that countries suffering from dependency in its various forms are characterized by fragility, where development is contingent upon and dependent on the development of another economy.⁶

It is well-established that dependent states are characterized by developmental failure at all levels and by a rentier economy based on exporting raw materials and importing all other manufactured products from developed countries. This means that the economies and cultures of dependent states, which dependency theorists call peripheral states, are unproductive and lack independence and self-sufficiency. Instead, they are based on a consumer culture.⁷

Based on the above, it can be said that dependency is a complex cultural and economic condition in which rent-seeking, capital accumulation, and the management of this accumulation are contingent upon and conditioned by the prevailing economic and cultural conditions and patterns in core states.

Dependency theorists have investigated the responsible parties and the reasons for the formation and emergence of this condition. According to Cardozo and Valetto, in a study they presented in 1973, dependency results from the entanglement of narrow, shared interests between certain elites in peripheral states and certain elites in core states.

Furthermore, the integration and convergence of certain elites in both peripheral and core states is the fundamental driving force behind dependency. As a result, a class called the global bourgeoisie has emerged. Later, Samir Amin presented his studies and emphasized the existence of

another, more advanced, and dominant phenomenon one of the most prominent manifestations of dependency called "dependent development." This means that development, including cultural development, in underdeveloped countries (peripheral countries) has become contingent upon the dictates of core countries, serving their interests and those of their elites. This manifestation is the most dangerous in the current century.⁸

All of this leads to what proponents of dependency theory call "dependent development," which essentially means an alliance between global capitalist forces and local capitalist forces, with the state merely an active partner in this process.

Following this state of dependency, the phenomenon of globalization emerged in international relations, becoming deeply intertwined with it. Globalization has several manifestations: economic, cultural, and political. What concerns us in this study is focusing on dependency and globalization in its cultural aspects, while acknowledging that culture has several types and forms: economic, social, political, and religious.⁹

3.2 Causes and Manifestations of Arab Societies' Dependence on Western Culture

3.2.1 Causes of Dependence on Western Culture

The causes and manifestations of Arab societies' dependence on Western culture are numerous and can be summarized in the following points:

- Based on historical factors and the Arab states' previous subjugation to waves of colonialism that attempted to infiltrate their identities and eliminate Arab Muslim nations, even after independence, Arab societies continued to suffer from the legacy of colonial culture. This manifested itself in several Arab countries adopting the languages of their former colonizers as dominant foreign languages within their cultural and educational systems.
- Some segments of Arab societies were influenced by the progress of those countries that were once occupied. Furthermore, the West, through its influential media outlets, promoted the idea that Western culture leads to civilizational development. This negatively impacted

the Arab individual's mindset and perception, fostering a sense of inferiority towards the West.

- Various perceptions and theories have described the phenomenon of underdevelopment and the civilizational gap separating Arab societies from the other, namely the advanced West. The West has positioned its culture and civilization as a "sacred icon" to which one must turn as the only path to salvation and overcoming the reality of underdevelopment and material and moral decline experienced by Arabs.¹⁰
- The factor of colonialism and imperialism. In this context, Edward Said, in his important work on "Culture and Imperialism," argues that "the state of dependency of the majority of Arab societies on Western culture is a product of a world we live in, a world created by imperialism, which, according to him, has produced nothing".¹¹
The reasons that led to the exposure and breach of Arab identity security can be attributed to the following elements:
 - Dependence on foreign powers, which Malek Bennabi termed "susceptibility to colonization," and which Ibn Khaldun expressed by saying, "The vanquished are inclined to imitate the victor in their food, drink, and clothing." It is noteworthy that this dependence is likely to increase, especially given the lack of intellectual immunity in Arab societies.
 - The abdication by Arab cultural institutions of their social responsibility in socialization and the dissemination of cultural awareness, considering the reality of educational and university outputs, which are no longer scientifically competent and are incapable of producing educated and aware national figures who are cognizant of the challenges of the age.
 - The weakness of cultural immunity and the lack of awareness and strategic vigilance regarding the magnitude of the challenges and dangers posed by the currents and forces of globalization to Arab identity security. The tension between tradition and modernity

among Arab youth, especially during adolescence, has led to a lack of understanding of their society's realities, exacerbated by the absence of moderate guidance from the media and socialization institutions.

- The legacy of colonialism and its impact on Arab identity, particularly language, is evident. In Algeria, for example, the influence of French is noticeable within the administrative apparatus, extending even to civil society and schools.¹²

3.2.2 Manifestations of Dependence on Western Culture

The dependence of Arab societies on the West manifests in various forms. In the economic sphere, this is evident in the adoption of capitalism and Western cultural thought as the sole, sacred, and successful model in the world. Western lifestyles and clothing have become the "ideal model," and Western consumer culture has spread to such an extent that this dependence extends to imitating the West even in the simplest aspects of culture, such as consumerism, lifestyle, and food and drink.

Thus, cultural colonialism has changed its form and developed its methods to become more insidious and powerful. Just as colonialism always strives to achieve a dependent economy and dependent politics, it also seeks to achieve dependent thought and culture. The manifestations of cultural invasion and the erosion of Arab identity security are evident in the extent to which Western, and particularly American, popular culture has spread and dominated people's tastes and ways of thinking. American music, television programs, and films have become widespread in the region, and American styles of dress, fast food, beverages, and other consumer behaviors have become widespread. It seems that it relies not only on its technological superiority but also on its economic and political dominance to spread its cultural model.¹³

4.The Clash of Civilizations and Its Impact on the Cultural System of Arab Societies

4.1 The content of the Clash of Civilizations Thesis

Samuel Huntington introduced a controversial concept: the "Clash of Civilizations." He argued that conflict in the modern world gave rise to this profound term. He believed that future conflicts would not be ideological or

economic, but rather primarily cultural and civilizational. As he stated, "Civilizations are the great human tribes, and the clash of civilizations is a conflict of tribes on a global scale. Cultural differences are the foundation and center of the classification and differentiation between societies and people...".¹⁴

For Huntington, cultural identity is defined by opposition to others. He believed that in wars, identity is solidified, and social cohesion is achieved instead of division, the resolution of which requires a common enemy. The "Clash of Civilizations" thesis includes the question of universal civilization, the relationship between power and culture, and the shifting balance of power between civilizations...".¹⁵

In his book, "The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order," Samuel Huntington argues that the years following the Cold War witnessed the beginnings of dramatic changes in the identities of peoples and the symbols of those identities. Global politics began to be reshaped along cultural lines. Huntington states: "...in the post-Cold War world, flags came into play, were taken into account, as did other symbols of identity such as the cross and the crescent, even head coverings, because culture has importance and because cultural identity is of paramount importance to most people... People began to fight for identity...".¹⁶

4.2 The Impact of the Clash of Civilizations Thesis on Arab Societies

The "Clash of Civilizations" thesis has had serious repercussions within Arab societies. The reality of this has become Societies, both internally and externally, reflect issues related to the clash of civilizations. Civil wars and political crises in the Arab region are, for the most part, crises of cultural identity, linked to the idea of a clash of civilizations. We are now witnessing a clash of civilizations within individual states, between different currents and segments of society. Furthermore, those in Arab societies influenced by Samuel Huntington's thesis are dazzled by Western civilization and assimilate into it, to the point of abandoning their Islamic civilization, which Huntington considered bloody and violent.

Samuel Huntington views civilization as an entity and a cultural identity based on hierarchical cultural differentiation, starting from the smallest cultural units: the local, passing through the regional, and finally reaching the national level. He states in this context: "Civilization is a cultural entity. Powers, regions, ethnic groups, nationalities, and religious groups all have distinct cultures, albeit at varying levels of cultural heterogeneity." The culture of a village in southern Italy may differ from that of a village in northern Italy, yet they share a common Italian culture that distinguishes them from German powers. Similarly, European societies share cultural characteristics that differentiate them from Arab societies.¹⁷

Applying these arguments to Arab societies, we find that they experience a clash of civilizations and cultures both locally and regionally: Iraq (Sunni, Shia, Kurds), Lebanon (sectarianism), and others. In reality, the West, by promoting the idea of a "clash of civilizations," negatively impacts Arab societies. It reinforces the notion of the inevitability of violent conflicts between different cultural identities, which poses a serious threat to the national security of Arab states.

5. Towards an Effective Strategic Framework for Preserving the Cultural Autonomy of Arab Societies

5.1 Visions and Approaches on Securing the Arab Cultural System

Achieving identity security and preserving the cultural independence of Arab societies necessitates openness to Western culture and a well-considered strategy for engaging with globalization. This involves adopting universal human values from the West, benefiting from neutral aspects such as technology and natural sciences, while rejecting anything that contradicts our civilizational identity and value system.

Furthermore, it is crucial to learn from the experiences of Asian countries and their approach to globalization. These countries have embraced and benefited from globalization while simultaneously preserving their cultural identities and civilizational distinctiveness.

A strategy for preserving the cultural identity of Arab societies also requires a broad intellectual discussion on the constants and variables of values. In general, three main visions have emerged in the search for ways to preserve the independence of Arab cultural identity:

- **The first approach:** This view holds that preserving identity necessitates preserving original features, as changes in current values have occurred as a result of influence from other cultures or adaptation to manifestations of material change. Therefore, there is a focus on and emphasis on distinctiveness, and the necessity of shaping the self within a cultural framework shaped by the specificities of the social and national group in particular. Collective identity, or national identity more broadly is what builds the sovereignty of societies through distinctiveness, which contradicts cultural submission and subservience, or through self-improvement by valuing the cultural specificities of the society. The progress of societies and the dominance of a nation depend first and foremost on deepening its distinctiveness, that is, on relying on its cultural particularities and employing them effectively. These particularities are closest to the hearts and minds of individuals, and they constantly shape and prepare their personalities.

They also present themselves to these individuals as raw material and a foundation for social and cultural development. Therefore, in order to preserve identity, members of society must remain committed to their local values, which are constant and do not change with time and circumstances. This is done to preserve their identity and to introduce it to others, rather than imitating and becoming subservient to them.

- **The second approach** calls for building a new cultural identity based on the principles of modernity, keeping pace with others, openness, and accepting new cultures. This approach views isolation as a negative and ineffective stance. His actions directed against cultural infiltration that is combating it do not actually prevent the infiltration itself. Rather, his actions are entirely directed at the self, aiming to fortify it. Fortification is only beneficial when the combatants possess a reasonable degree of parity and balance of power and capabilities.

He also believes that if Arab societies do not join the march of civilization and embrace globalization, they will be marginalized and

excluded. Therefore, it is impossible to operate outside of globalization or to think outside its logic.¹⁸

- **The third vision:** calls for an authentic identity with a contemporary culture. The debate surrounding methods of preserving identity security in the age of globalization has become extremely important, and Arab societies have found themselves facing two choices: either preserving internal values or conforming to Western culture. If one chooses the first option, one risks reducing a global phenomenon that permeates every home, imposed by its proponents through planning and strategy. Alternatively, isolation in this case can lead to a slow death, punctuated by moments of heroism, but ultimately doomed to failure.

Therefore, we find ourselves in need of cultural exchange within its civilizational, economic, and social frameworks between societies. It is expected that alienation will increase for the individual during the transition from the pre-globalization era, as societies move from their established traditions and customs to a new reality. Consequently, they experience what is termed "cultural alienation," fearing cultural assimilation and invasion, and sometimes feeling lost. Societies may find themselves either in a state of alienation or captivated by the methods of cultural invasion, thus conforming to and ultimately accepting them. If society internalizes this culture, it lives in a state of alienation; if it resists and rejects it, it experiences the problems of cultural conflict. And if it chooses to assimilate into globalized Western culture, it falls into a crisis of alienation and detachment from its origins and principles, resulting in the loss of its identity.¹⁹

Therefore, it has become imperative for society to work towards a balance between authenticity and modernity in order to produce an authentic identity with contemporary standards, according to the logic of modernizing our traditions and grounding our modernity. This is achieved by establishing a system of standards and values through which the individual can interact with people, situations, and things. For if values are absent or conflicting, the individual becomes alienated from themselves and their society, leading society into a value conflict, which in turn leads the social order to disintegration, collapse, dissolution, and weakness.

Therefore, achieving a cultural identity that balances the constant and the changing necessitates striking a balance between fixed values namely Islamic values, and the aspiration for global integration, while taking into account the existence of local groups divided amongst themselves based on customs and.²⁰

Furthermore, in order to preserve their identity security, Arab societies must not adopt a consumerist stance in their dealings with the West and the global system. Rather, they must engage with it from a critical and understanding perspective, recognizing the naiveté of the horizontal transfer of technology and the resulting hybrid values and behavioral patterns. They must prioritize importing productive ideas before importing consumer goods and commodities.²¹

5.2 Proposals of the Arab Plan for Preserving Cultural Security

The Arab plan for achieving identity and cultural security included important elements, among them:

- The necessity of formulating a unified Arab cultural and identity policy with clear objectives, features, and means.
- Working to eliminate all effects of cultural alienation and intellectual invasion, both overt and covert.
- The imperative of supporting and using the Arabic language in all media and cultural outlets. Strengthening the role of social and cultural institutions in a way that contributes to preserving identity in the face of the challenges of cultural invasion.
- Belief in the prevailing civilizational role of Arab culture.
- Achieving integration and coordination between cultural, educational, and media institutions.²²

In light of the above, it becomes clear that if Arab societies have thus far faltered in confronting the geocultural challenges posed by the forces of globalization and Westernization, it is because they have not dealt correctly with either their own heritage or with others. Therefore, it is incumbent upon it to engage with its heritage by understanding it from within, and

with "global" thought, to develop for itself an objective, scientific methodology for both aspects, enabling it to connect them.

Furthermore, it is necessary to begin with the self, to ground theoretical practice, and to affirm intellectual independence, cultural identity, and the integrative unity within this identity, encompassing its various components: spiritual, historical, and material.²³

6. CONCLUSION

This study has attempted to examine and analyze the cultural dimension of Arab-Western relations in light of the triad of independence, dependency, and the clash of civilizations. The study concluded with a number of findings, including:

Arab societies are facing extremely serious geocultural challenges, especially in light of the growing currents of cultural invasion, Westernization, and the dangers of new media and communication technologies. This has led to serious repercussions for the cultural identity and value system of Arab societies.

Through an analysis of the causes and manifestations of Arab societies' dependency on Western culture, it became clear that several factors have contributed to entrenching this cultural dependency. Among the most prominent are: the historical factor, the personal psychological factor produced by waves of colonialism and imperialism, in addition to Westernization and a feeling of inferiority in the face of Western superiority.

The clash of civilizations thesis, biased towards Western strategic thought and Western culture, has demonstrated that the crises and sectarian, ethnic, and racial wars plaguing Arab societies today are a direct reflection of a local clash of civilizations. As a result of Arab societies' dependence on Western culture, they have been influenced by the ideas of this theory, which has negatively impacted Arab cultural security and the security of identity groups.

The study also concluded that preserving the cultural autonomy of Arab societies and protecting their identity security requires significant, sustained, and organized efforts from governments, institutions, and individuals across the Arab world. Without such efforts, the distinctive characteristics and identities of Arab societies will be vulnerable to

infiltration and assimilation by the forces of Westernization and globalization.

Furthermore, social and cultural institutions are called upon, more than ever, to play an active role in preserving identity by fostering strategic vigilance and raising awareness about the dangers posed by globalization and Westernization to the identity and cultural security of Arab societies. This includes emphasizing the importance of adopting a measured openness to the West and the global system. It is also necessary to strive for a balance between authenticity and modernity, and to determine the extent to which Arab societies can embrace an authentic identity within a contemporary framework.

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