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Arabs, Kurds, and Amazigh: The Quest for Nationalist Fulfillment, Old and New

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Brief Analysis

For almost a century, Kurdish national aspirations were thwarted by geo-strategic considerations in which regional and international actors were complicit. Kurdish identity was mostly denied, marginalized, and disparaged, with dominant irredentist formulae – Arab, Iranian, and Turkish – stipulated as more suitable alternatives.

In the newly independent North Africa of the second half of the twentieth century, Amazigh – also known as Berber – pursuits may not have sought political sovereignty. However, the alienation of Amazigh culture, by subsuming it to a coalescing Arab nationalism, mirrored the fate of its Kurdish counterpart. With the rise of Kurdish and Amazigh nationalisms, history today seems engaged in a course correction. However, some cautionary considerations are necessary.

Arab nationalism – in its self-image of a grand narrative of anti-colonial indigenous pride – sought in the mid-twentieth century to assert the potential and distinctiveness of Arabic-speaking societies. However, it failed to define and delineate the proclaimed commonalities of its presumed constituency. After a few iteration of ideological and political experimentation, Arab nationalism was scaled down to a discourse of authority brandished by states that lacked other bases for legitimacy, with the question of Palestine serving as focal point to justify the failure of the announced goals of liberty, unity, and social justice.

With Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the receding Arab nationalism lost any remaining credibility as a political project. No meaningful political force has ever since espoused it as its driving doctrine. It is in the 1990s that the trajectories of these three nationalist expressions, Arab, Kurdish, and Amazigh, intersect; the Arab on the decline, while the Kurdish and Amazigh in ascent. Rather than offering a new paradigm, however, each of the two emerging nationalisms has appropriated negative aspects from the retreating one, laying the ground for tension and conflict.

Arab nationalism posited a large territory as its homeland, transcending extant national borders. At its apex, the imagined Arab homeland extended from the Persian Gulf, including its Iranian shores, to the Atlantic Ocean, sweeping much of the Sahara outside of Arab states. Kurdish nationalism is also irredentist. The map that adorns classrooms in Iraqi Kurdistan depicts a homeland stretching from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean Sea, with considerable swaths of Turkey, Syria, and Iran merged with the areas under the Kurdistan Regional Government authority. Amazigh nationalism, in its extreme forms, also draws maps of an abode that encompasses all of the Maghreb, extending well into Egypt, the Sahel, and the Spanish Canary Islands. All three nationalist geographic mythologies are based on an assumption of collective entitlement that does not account for coexisting realities and competing claims, and create the ground for radical challenge to national state.

In all three narratives, geographic irredentism is coupled with a reductionist assumption of cultural unity and with the imposition of a common identity label. In the Arab case, the unstated rule was that “Arab-ness” was assumed for any population living in an Arab state and which is either Arabic-speaking or Muslim; Arabic-speaking Coptic Egyptians, as well as non-Arabic speaking Kurdish Muslims, and even Kurdish Yazidis, re-conceived as “Umayyad Muslims” were covered by the Arab identity umbrella. Today, the distinct cultural and religious identity of Yazidis is subsumed under the Kurdish label, together with the Shabak, Zaza, and Ahl-e Haqq, irrespective of the individual or collective definitions within these communities. In the case of Amazigh nationalism, disparate communities with vastly different experiences, but with histories pre-dating the Arab Muslim conquest, have been declared Amazigh. The individual reception has varied, with both inter-communal and urban-rural aspects shaping the response. Tuareg non-compliance with Amazigh identity is often understood as a lack of nationalist consciousness that would eventually be remedied.

The Amazigh quest for nationalism is not limited to the linguistic element. Its reading of the cultural reality of the region posits three components: Amazigh, Arabized Amazigh, and Arabs. The second group, and consequently the Amazigh as a collective, is assumed to be the majority. Amazigh identity is thus presented as a question of essential “being”, as opposed to the Arab overlay of “having.” The Maghreb is accordingly Amazigh, with a substantive, but still incidental addition of an Arab element, among others (Black African, Andalusian, Jewish). This nationalist vision is now enshrined in the preamble to the Moroccan constitution. It may be reflective of the Amazigh nationalist thought; it is also a calque of Arab nationalism, in the simplification, reductionism, and linearity applied to Maghreb history.

Grand nationalisms posit one homeland, one nation – and then one language. Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) pre-dates Arab nationalism and is a bona fide linguistic success story. As the high language in many societies with mutually unintelligible dialects in the nineteenth century, MSA has seeped into culture and society across its domain, creating an “Arabosphere” that encompasses many cultural domains, and even initiating a convergence of the dialects to more intelligibility. It was a historical achievement based on the gravitas of Classical Arabic and the ritual use of the language in Islam. However, it also fostered the illusion of an original common language for the Arabic-speaking societies, hampering in the process free expression in native languages.

Neither Kurdish nor Amazigh nationalism can rely on an equivalent of Classical Arabic as a lexical resource or as a corpus of literature to establish a language system with a standardized core. Yet, each is engaged in an experiment of linguistic engineering that may display innovation, but is also characterized by linguistic imperialism.

Standardization efforts are detrimental to the wealth of dialects and languages deemed in deviation from a sought-after standard. A further linguistic adventure is currently in process in Morocco, where Tifinagh, a Runes-like epigraphic script used by the Tuareg) was adapted to create a new alphabet for three recognized forms of the standardized Amazigh language. Learning in one’s own native tongue is supposed to enhance the educational experience of pupils. Moroccan students, however, are directed to devote considerable resources in the name of

national pride, with questions still pending as to sustainability and consistency of the effort. In Algeria, Libya, and even in Tunisia, interest in replicating the Moroccan model is driven by considerations of a nationalist, rather than educational nature.

Over more than two decades, Iraqi Kurdistan has engaged in a policy of de-Arabization, relying exclusively on Kurdish-medium education. There are undoubtedly positive local results to be highlighted, in particular the emergence of a new and vibrant literature. However, it is in the local Sorani dialect, which would be in competition for the one unitary Kurdish language. Meanwhile, a categorical disconnect has been established with Arabic-speaking Iraqis. The new generation of Iraqis has to resort to English to communicate across the Kurdish-Arabic divide. Similarly, the thrust of the language movement in Morocco is to posit an unrealistic parity, leading to a detachment from Arabic rather than an engagement into the newly refined Amazigh languages. In both the Kurdish and Amazigh examples, the net beneficiary would be a third language, respectively English and French. The Arabization of curricula in the Maghreb of the Arab national age had amplified issues in knowledge acquisition and production. Rather than remedying a problematic situation, Amazigh nationalism seems to be doubling down.

Grand nationalisms devote equal attention to the “other” as to the “self”. The “other” in the Arab case may initially have been the “Turk” or the “Westerner,” but was soon translated into the “Jew” (euphemistically rendered as the “Zionist”). The fixation with the other has outlived Arab nationalism itself and continues to be corrosive, with the “Jew” shedding the “Zionist” garb, and integrating instead elements from European antisemitism. The “other” in the Amazigh nationalist narrative is evidently the “Arab.” The streamlining of historical tribal feuding into a history of Arab-Berber adversity draws considerably on nineteenth century European notions of ethnicity and nationhood. Similarly, in the Kurdish context, attempts at explaining the incompatibility between Kurd and Arab often resort to Aryan versus Semitic assessments, derived from obsolete scholarship.

Saddam’s Iraq subjected its Kurdish population to crimes against humanity revising the textbook definition of genocide under an Arab nationalist veneer. Iraqi Kurdistan was effectively colonized by Baghdad, with Arab settlers and tribes relocated to alter the demographic balance, and with a deliberate policy of service denial and exclusion from higher education. The obliteration of thousands of villages and the relocation of the Kurdish Iraqi population to “modern cities” – concrete concentration camps – were further steps along a path of atrocities culminating in the “Anfal Heroic Operations,” in which some 200,000 Kurds were exterminated in a matter of months in 1988, including thousands by poison gas. Yet, Iraqi Kurdish culture has largely avoided the demonization of the “Arab.” Whether this success can be spread beyond Iraqi Kurdistan is however an open question, with Syrian Kurdish militants invoking the plight of Iraqi Kurds to justify or explain the victimization of the Syrian Arab population.

Amazigh and Kurdish expressions of nationalism may be a pendulum swing in reaction to the excesses of Arab nationalism. They may also be a roundabout act of resistance against Islamism, with “Arabism” as a less controversial stand-in for their conservative constituencies. Regardless, they instill a sense of pride in their communities. For this second wave of nationalism in the Middle East and North Africa to yield a positive result, it may be advised to consider the excesses and shortcomings of the first wave.



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