Globalized Islam: Arab Identity *Sous Rature*

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PREFACE

In this article Dr. Salam Hawa provides some philosophical reflections on the evolution of Arab political identity. She notes at the outset that little work has been done on the complex relationships that exist among culture, religion, language, and identity in the Arabic world. The Arabic language is closely tied to the Islamic religion, with the Quran itself serving as a model text for the language. The situation is complicated further with the globalization of Islam and of particular forms of Islamic religious beliefs and practices. These globalizing processes further confound the relationships between one's identity as a Muslim, as an Arab, and as a member of a given nation-state.

Dr. Hawa takes a long historical view of these relationships, focusing on the relationship between the identity that arises from being part of the Muslim world (*ummah*) and that of being Arabic. She argues that this relationship is one where Arabic political identity tends, over time, to become subsumed by the global religious identity of the *ummah*. Part of this development, she suggests, involves the long-standing effects of successive waves of colonization of Arab peoples over the past seven centuries. She concludes that it is important for Arab peoples to recognize these effects of colonization on the one side but not to romanticize or orient themselves toward rebuilding the Caliphate of pre-colonial times on the other. Rather, this recognition is important for understanding who they are at present and thus for building a new, more autonomous future.

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Introduction

A combination of the current "global war on terror" and political developments in the Middle East has brought forth deep interest in what scholars have identified as the "Arab Condition," which recognizes the lack of political autonomy of Arab countries, whose citizens are seen to suffer from political disengagement and a lack of coherent political identity that is based on shared language, culture, and history (articles by Edward Said in *Al-Ahram Weekly Online* 22-28 May 2003; 21-27 August 2003). Alternate analyses view this absence of political identity from a religious (as opposed to linguistic/cultural) perspective, believing it to be at the base of the radicalization of Islamic religion, which has been responsible for the upsurge in terrorist activities around the globe (Ajami 1992; 1998; *Wall Street Journal*, 28 March 2004; Lewis 2002; 2003). It has been successfully argued (Bennison 2002; Roy 2004) that the Islamic *ummah* (collective Islamic identity) was at the basis of a global system until the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire in the early twentieth century. However, little or no work has been undertaken to study the complex relation that exists between language/culture and religious affiliation, more particularly for the Arab-speaking nations whose language is directly identified with the doctrines and laws of Islam. As a result, in attempting to understand the current political climate, lines drawn between what is Islamic, what is Arabic, and what is indeed a combination of the two have often been blurred, adding confusion to what has hitherto been a relatively unfamiliar religion and culture in the West.

At the heart of the disparity in the understanding of the "Arab Condition" is the absence of analysis of what constitutes the present form of nation-based Arab political identity, and how it connects to a globally-based Islamic identity. This absence appears to occur due to the lack of consistent and comprehensive analysis of what constitutes a political identity within the Arab Muslim world, both in terms of religion (as part of the Muslim *ummah* and past Islamic empires), and in terms of the collective political identity of the citizens of contemporary Arab nation-states. In order to unravel this confusion between religious and political identity, as well as between historical past and political present, this article undertakes to distinguish the nature of global religious identity (*ummah*) from contemporary political Arab identity on the one hand, and to examine the validity of the widely held underlying assumptions of the connectivity between the two within history on the other.

First, the article examines the validity of the assumption that the *ummah* is a viable basis for the development of a political (as opposed to religious) Arab identity. This examination is undertaken with the wider application of the dialectical tradition in political theory, which allows us to study the development of the elements that combine to help the individual establish a coherent political identity within a given political establishment. Second, in order to examine the elements that appear to give credence to this belief in the connectivity between globally based Islamic identity (*ummah*) and political identity of ethnic Arab populations, a post-structuralist approach is taken to deconstruct the historical development of Arab political identity since the fall of the Abbasid Empire following the Mongol invasion in 1258. *Deconstruction* is a method used by French philosopher Jacques Derrida to reveal the reasons underlying the existence of often contradictory multiple meanings of certain words within language. This multiplicity of meaning, Derrida argues, unveils the existence of cultural practices and beliefs that have been "erased" (~~*sous rature*~~)[1] from the present consciousness of a certain group through moments, or events, that have taken place in the distant past. The need for this examination stems from

the underlying premise that while Western and Eastern Arab/Islamic scholarship successfully identifies the disparate elements that appear to cause the "Arab Condition," such as colonization and foreign influence (Said in *Al-Ahram Weekly Online* 22-28 May 2003 and 21-27 August 2003), or religious influence and lack of democratic government (Ajami 1992; 1998; Lewis 2002; Tibi 1988), it does so in a non-integrative manner. As an alternative, Derrida's approach allows us to deconstruct the historical link between *Arab language-based culture* and *Islamic culture* and identify the content and context within which Arab cultural identity appears to have been subsumed within a purely Muslim global identity (*ummah*).

As our interest in global identity and its effects is embedded in current social, economic, and political developments, analysis of this phenomenon is undertaken within the precepts of the liberal tradition. Authors and critics of liberal political tradition identify conditions, the like of which are gleaned in the near and far history of many countries/groups. The formation of modern individual, political, and social identity are often identified as products of discursive history, and though the details may differ from one culture/group to another, the drive and need for self-definition in political, cultural, and personal terms lends credence to Kant's understanding that the pursuit of political identity as subjectivity is indeed universal. What may hinder the liberal account from being relevant to the Arab world is a prevalent definition of the theology that underpins all understanding of the individual with respect to God, and it is Islam and all that this religion entails that renders the Arabs distinct from their European counterparts.

From a cultural and religious viewpoint, the difference between the two cultures may seem stark. However, studies (Koyré 1973; 1943; Blumenberg 1980; Daniel 1979) have shown that classical Islamic belief in the soul as the "private property" of the individual influenced Western Medieval schools of religious thought, thereby causing the eventual separation of the individual and the state from religious control. Classical Islam, unlike Augustinian teaching, believes in the ultimate freedom of individual "will," which is inherent in the individual's responsibility to her soul; actions undertaken in the phenomenal world determine the soul's ultimate destination on the day of judgment. Accordingly, classical Islamic teachings and philosophy, exemplified in the works of Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroës, recognize the need to apply human reason to achieve a healthy understanding and practice of faith and the development of the soul. These teachings are therefore the first among ancient cultures to extol the virtues of individualism as a source of moral salvation (*Quran*; Averroës 1974; 2003). Furthermore, when faced with the Arab world's weakness in its opposition to European colonial powers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Arab and Ottoman writers such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (al-Afghani 1942; Adams 1933) and 'Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi (Kedourie 1966; Hourani 1983) repeatedly argue that non-Muslims excelled over Muslims in the "empirical sciences and arts" only following the arrival of Protestantism, which they regarded as being similar to true Islam (al-Kawakibi 1931; Dawn 1973).

Despite the similarities between classical Islam and some branches of Protestantism, however, individuals and states in the Arab-speaking lands have yet to develop a social and political system comparable to their European counterparts. According to Edward Said, the Arab world is characterized by an absolute sense of helplessness, total political disengagement, and a lack of coherent cultural/ political identity. This comes from Said's view that "despite their many divisions and disputes, the Arabs are in fact a people, not a collection of random countries" (*Al-Ahram Weekly Online*, 22-28 May 2003).

If religion, as a doctrine, is not responsible for the absence of individualism in Arab culture, then we are left with the question of what it is exactly that is responsible for this particular state of affairs. When defining the foundations for autonomy, P.B. Clarke states that "if there is to be an essential self it has to occur as a feature built upon the core, or the condition of being" (Clarke 1999, 353). Said would agree, as he perceives a "clear line of imperial continuity that begins with Ottoman rule over the Arabs

in the sixteenth century until our own time" as an underlying factor in this sense of disempowerment. It is also a factor in the political tactics of external interests that combined in history bring about this people's incapacity to overcome internal disagreements and embrace a united strategy that would extend to Arab society and its citizens the means to develop a distinct cultural and political identity (*Al-Ahram Weekly Online*, 22-28 May 2003). However, understanding the basis for what Said refers to as the "Arab Condition" requires a closer study of history, not simply as the product of Western colonization, but as the product of a political history of the region that would account for the content of the modern Arab self (as opposed to *Muslim*), as well as uncover the events responsible for the "~~erasure~~" (Derrida 1982) of this common political/cultural identity.

The remainder of the paper is divided in three sections. The first section outlines the historical elements underlying the genesis of the Islamic global identity (*ummah*) in Arab-speaking lands following the Mongol invasion in 1258. It includes a brief examination of the political, cultural, and legal elements under the Mamluk dynasty and the Ottoman Empire. The second section refers to the theories of political and cultural identity in the work of G.W.F. Hegel and Jacques Derrida to analyze the underlying political and cultural alienation of the Arab individual from the centre of power within the two Islamic dynasties. It contends that the abstract notion of Islamic *ummah* served as the basis for cultural and political identity in order to legitimize foreign rule. It also argues that as a universal concept it subverted the content and structure of the Arab culture and the role religion played within it. The third section draws conclusions and argues that religion alone cannot be held responsible for the "Arab Condition;" that it is the result of a combination of factors, the knowledge of which is necessary to deal with the predicament of the present.

From Regional to Global: History of Arab/Muslim Identity in Flux

One can only surmise the level of chaos and pure fear that permeated the hearts of the citizens of the Abbasid Empire once Baghdad fell into the hands of the Mongols, whose presence — from all accounts — terrorized the populace into total abdication of reason and faith (Glubb 1967). The sack and destruction of the city lasted seven days, during which the entire city was burned and reduced to ruins. Eight hundred thousand people are said to have been killed, after which Hulagu, the Mongol general, left his camp to escape the stench of rotting corpses (Glubb 1967; Saunders 1978). The last Abbasid Caliph, Musta'sim, and his sons were killed in cold blood.

The disappearance of the Caliphate marked the end of the Arab system of governance, which was unique in Islamic history. The Caliph was neither Pope nor Emperor, but the successor of Muhammad as governor in a secular sense; the protector of the Islamic community. The Caliph could not represent civil government, since there were no foundations for it in Arab political history, and yet he was the head of the Islamic global community, or *ummah*, a non-territorial entity. He was representative of the Prophet, *not* God, and his responsibility was to oversee the proper application of Islamic Law, but not to interpret or expound upon it, his function being limited to the realm of Executive, rather than Legislative (Grunebaum 1954, 154; Crone, 1986). The Caliphate's ambiguous position caused it to fail in maintaining either a spiritual or a political power base. To its Arab populace, the Caliphate's drift towards kingship was regarded as "unnatural" and displeasing. The only type of ruler the Arabs had known in their own country had been the *sayyid* (the chieftain of a tribe), who held this office as a result of his personal influence and merit, which depended mainly on his qualities as a leader, his generosity, his ability to resolve disputes, and deal fairly with people. His privileges did not impede the basic equality among all members of the tribe (Grunebaum 1954). The Caliphate remained elective to the end, and while the jurists included as qualifications for the office traits such as moral integrity, experience and judgment, physical soundness, and descent from the Kuraish (the tribe of the Prophet Mohammed), but it was never clear who the electors might be, and in practice, Persian influence strengthened the trend towards hereditary succession (Saunders 1978; Hitti 1968; Hourani 1991). Given the

administrative nature of the Caliph's power, the *ulama* (jurists) represented the political elite, proffering advice to the Caliph on all matters of public policy and jurisprudence. Within Arab-run Muslim civil society, it was the *ulama* who were primarily responsible for running the affairs of the community, and for the interpretation of the *Sharia* in all matters pertaining to civil society.

By the time the Mongols invaded, however, the Arab/Muslim[2] political system was already losing focus, and its population had come to place religion above political association. Nevertheless, the Mongol invasion effectively destroyed all that tied Arab culture to political power under Islam, and since 1258, the Arab population's single focus of politico-religious loyalty that is based on its affiliation to Islam, not language or culture (Gibb 1974; Saunders 1978). With the loss of their political autonomy, one is left to wonder what happened to the Arab identity as a politically and culturally founded entity. How is it that the Arabs accepted foreign rule, and to what degree were they able to maintain a coherent understanding of their cultural identity under such rule?

The answer, suggests Clarke, is twofold: in "times of fracture or times of rupture … social collapse may occur or, alternatively, some unusual moment of individuality" may take shape. This "social collapse occurs most evidently in those societies that clash with other societies and whose ways of life, hegemonic drive and myths … override all obstacles" (1999, 359-360). However, for those to whom a new form of individuality is not available, such as was the case with the Arabs/Muslims, and who were unable to "make some transition from one era to another without a complete and generalized collapse of all their ideas and ideals," "poetic myths" appear (Ibid., 359). In the Arab/Muslim case, religion was just that myth. To those left behind in Baghdad, who had to contend with rebuilding a city that embodied the depth of their faith and culture, there was no other identity to cling to than their faith, hence the rise of the *ummah* in medieval Arab/Muslim consciousness. Perhaps due to the popularization of the idea of nationhood in modern Arab culture, this "poetic myth" or "ideal" has come to be embodied in the memory of the glories of the Umayyad and early Abbasids to the Arabs of today, leading to the unrealistic proposals in our own age "to revive the Caliphate as a symbol of unity linking together the many new Islamic nations which have emerged from the debris of the European colonial empires in Asia and Africa" (Saunders 1978, 184).

Mamluk and Ottoman Masters: Rise and Popularization of the "Ummah"

In 1250, the Mamluks, having rid the region from the Mongols and the Crusaders, were looked upon as the saviours of the Arab/Muslim civilization. They were slaves who were freed, Islamized, and trained as elite soldiers of the Egyptian Ayyubid dynasty. Upon taking power in Egypt following their successful resistance to the Mongols, they sought legitimacy, not only as protectors of the faithful, but equally as directly associated with the recently destroyed Arab Caliphate in Baghdad. This was made abundantly clear as the first Mamluk ruler, Baybars, sought to obtain legitimacy by inaugurating a new series of Abbasid Caliphs who carried the name only officially, having none of the authority of their predecessors. Although diminished by the Mongol invasion, the Arab/Muslim world remained very much attached to the Caliphate system, and it would take 250 years of Mamluk rule to allow the first level of social *acculturation* to take place.

Although remaining Arab/Muslim in culture, the Arab world had, by the beginning of the thirteenth century, lost its intellectual eminence, and maintained only a modest lead in astronomy, mathematics, and medicine (Hitti 1968). In literature and fine letters, the Arab/Muslim world never recovered from the destruction of its centres of learning in Baghdad and Syria. Gibb describes in great detail the fall in the quality, though not quantity, of publications of any importance during the age of the Mamluks. Commenting on the failure in quality of knowledge of Arabic language and literature in Iraq in 1327, the legendary Ibn Battuta, while visiting Basra tells us: "I attended once the Friday prayers at the Mosque, and when the preacher rose to deliver his sermon, he committed many serious grammatical errors. I was astonished at this and spoke of it to the qadi, who answered 'In this town there is not one

left who knows anything about grammar' " (Gibb 1974, 142). For this to be said of a city that was the seat of learning of the entire Muslim world illustrates to what extent the level of knowledge had deteriorated, and for it to be true of the "clergy", whose position is key to teaching and understanding the word of God in His chosen language, is certainly worthy of Ibn Battuta's astonishment.

Radical transformation of culture is more acceptable, and even welcomed, when it is perceived as *orthogenetic* (Grunebaum 1964), meaning achievement or advance experienced as the natural outcome of historical evolution due to an event, such as a war or radical political change. Following the Mongol invasion, which threatened to eradicate Muslim self-rule, the shift from an Arab-based Caliphate to the military rule of the Mamluk dynasty must have been viewed by the Arabs of the thirteenth century as a blessing, and certainly an advancement. In his analysis of radical cultural change, Grunebaum points out that the result of successive cultural changes, which he believes the Arab world to have undergone, "may consist in a shift of the relative position of several coexisting but … not contemporary layers of a given cultural order." Many of these layers may be eliminated with the exception of what he calls "survivals," "elements that continue to be adhered to but no longer can be accounted for in terms of the prevailing 'system'" (Grunebaum 1964, 21).

Baybars' institution of the Caliphate, however formal, appears to have all the makings of a "survivalist" practice that allowed Arab civilization to operate according to known rules and precepts. The radical transformation of political administration was stabilized through a combination of official Arab-type political organization and colonizing practices, made all the more possible due to the adaptive nature of Islamic law. This was helped by the fact that Islamic faith with its principle of *ijma'* (consensus) was adhered to, and the new rulers maintained a drive toward learning. This said, however, the story of the Mamluks "became one of the darkest in Syro-Egyptian annals" (Hitti 1968, 191). Due to outrageous excesses, lack of culture, and sexual deviation, the gulf between the rulers' behaviour and what was acceptable to the *ummah* grew ever larger (Hitti 1968; Hourani 1991). The Mamluks were unable to depend on the support of their citizens since their "democratic laws" had nevertheless excluded the local population in its entirety from governing (McCarthy 1997), and by 1517, Selim the Ottoman sultan entered Aleppo in triumph, and was welcomed as deliverer from Mamluk excesses, heralding what may have appeared as another moment of *orthogenetic* cultural transformation.

Like the Mamluks, the Ottomans were nomadic Turks, but nevertheless "abhorred the civilization of High Islam since it was identified in their minds with the dual evils of taxation and religious orthodoxy" (Itzkowitz 1972, 6; also McCarthy 1997). They preferred to live on the frontiers, inhabiting the Islamic territories bordering the Byzantine Empire, the lands of which were the object of their constant *ghazia* (raids). Wealth captured during such raids was considered lawful booty and the inhabitants, being non-Muslim, were enslaved or killed.

Spun from these *ghazi* origins, the descendants of Othman, founder of the dynasty (1299-1326) ruled according to Steppe tradition, stipulating that a single family chosen by God had the prerogative to rule. By 1566, the Ottoman Empire covered much of Eastern Europe and the whole of the Arab/Muslim lands, including North Africa. Unlike Arab Muslim polity, which was characterized by its social equalitarianism (Lewis 1988; Crone and Hinds 1986), the Ottoman polity was primarily hierarchic, divided into two classes: rulers and ruled. In Turkish, they were identified in military terms as *askeri* and *reaya*, the "military," and "subjects", or "flocks". The *reaya* designated all religious groups, and were set apart from the military class by laws that regulated their dress and prevented them from riding horses and carrying swords (Itzkowitz 1972). The distinction between the two was meant to be absolute; a civilian could only enter the military class by royal decree.

The military represented the foundation for the ruling classes, as no one could belong to the latter without having been educated in the art of war. Entry into this class was made through the *ghulam* system. *Ghulams* were highly trained slaves who served in the palace and state structure. The system is

associated with the development of the janissary corps, which involved the well-known levy of Christian youths from the Balkans. Taken away from their families at a very young age, converted to Islam, and enlisted in various levels of military and government, these youths eventually held offices which included military leadership, provincial governorship, or the office of Grand Vizier. Education was centred in Istanbul at Topkapi Palace, where teaching the military arts, the letters, and religious canons, including law and the interpretation of the *Sharia*, took place.

In accordance with high Islamic tradition of the early Caliphs, the Ottomans believed fervently that justice was the backbone of a sovereign state. To this end, a "tower of justice" was erected at Topkapi Palace, where justice was dispensed through the hearing of petitions from the *reaya* even when the case was against the highest of officials in the Empire. Chief Judges, appointed by the Sultan, headed the *ulama* (jurists and official experts in religious texts). They were overshadowed by *Sheik al-Islam*, a dignitary who was appointed by the Sultan and who stood outside of the *ulama* circle as supreme judge, passing decisions as to the legitimacy of laws ordained by the ruler.

Overall, the Ottoman system functioned according to two separate classes within which a certain degree of subdivision occurred, and according to which the composition of the ruling classes emerged. To begin with, the *askeri* class, chosen almost exclusively from the Balkans and from youth of Christian stock, put at a great disadvantage the children of the vast majority of Arab Muslims, whose only hope of entering this class depended on them acquiring the necessary education, which was only available at high cost or through the guardianship of a member of the *askeri* class. The possibility of this taking place was further diminished as the members of the *askeri* class were allowed to wed and therewith promote members of their families, leaving the realm of government to lie exclusively in the hands of non-Arab, and non-Muslim population (as a rule, the non-Muslim and Islamized could not take over the Sultanate). In addition, Muslim-Arabs were further hindered from entering the *askeri* class as centres of education were situated in Istanbul, whereas schools in Arab cities taught the *Quran* by rote, and writing and publishing were mainly discouraged, if not forbidden. Literature and published writings became the exclusive domain of the non-Muslim minorities whose schools were not monitored by the Ottomans; this facilitated the rise of Christian-based Arabic literature in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Schools run by the Ottoman power excluded most Arab pupils as they demanded the participants be true Ottomans: "they had to … serve the state; serve the religion; and 'know the Ottoman Way'" (Itzkowitz 1972, 60). This meant that they should be in the employment of the government, be Muslim, and be at home in the Turkish language. Unlike the political system under the Arab Caliphs which gave financial support and equal opportunities to Arabs and non-Arabs alike to access education (in 1258 Baghdad had thirty-two universities that subsidized the students) (Lewis 1988; Glubb 1967), the Ottoman system denied in practice entry to Muslims in general, and Muslim Arabs in particular (Douwes 2000; Hourani 1991).

Whether ruled by Mamluks or Ottomans, the Arabs lost in every conceivable fashion all means of political autonomy. Although they were never placed in control of the administration of their local and provincial affairs while under Mamluk rulers, there was nevertheless a certain measure of continuity, especially under Baybars, in political administration and cultural development. This became non-existent under the Ottomans, whose governing strategy instituted a distinct separation between rulers and ruled. Policy maintained that governors were to be wholly foreign to the lands they ruled, and were to be regularly moved to avoid the development of kinship between governors and subjects (Lewis 1988; Hourani 1991). As to the application of the *Sharia*, ordinances were established in Istanbul by jurists attached to the palace, and favoured the colonizers insofar as they manipulated formal Islamic laws to the point of wholly contradicting them, particularly regarding land ownership and tenure (Imber 1999). As they had no access to exegetic studies to facilitate the understanding and interpretation of the *Sharia* and were not allowed access to the legislative process, the Arabs were denied the ability to conceptualize and practice political autonomy, and therewith failed to establish a ruling elite that would have been capable of taking power following the dissolution of the Empire.

Critics would rightly argue that the Ottoman Empire, while limiting the participation of all "subjects" in the running of its administration, nevertheless gave full reign to self-government under the *millet* (recognized religious/ethnic groups) system (Hourani 1991), which permitted communities a degree of autonomy and self-rule. This was indeed the case for Jewish and Christian communities, but not so for Muslim communities of all ethnic backgrounds whose laws, at least under the principle of the global Muslim *ummah*, were not recognized as separate or distinct in any fashion from the Empires. They were, due to their common faith, its direct subjects and accordingly had no means to exercise any form of self-government, but were forced to gradually forsake their culture and ethnic identity in order to be permitted, if at all, to enter the military colleges. This form of political, economic, and cultural domination resulted in successfully eliminating all distinctions between the Arabs/Muslims and their Ottoman rulers, creating a sense of total belonging under the banner of a united Muslim identity that admitted no distinction between Arab and non-Arab Muslims except in their adherence to the faith. This accounts for the predominantly Christian Arab scholars' interest in establishing Arab national movements (*al-fatat* in Lebanon, *al-Ba'th* in Syria) that struggled for independence from the Empire, whereas the Arab-Muslim multitude prayed for it to remain (Dawn 1973). Since members of the Jewish and Christian communities living in Arab lands had access to education and practiced independent self-rule, they maintained a separate Arab identity that was not at all connected to the Ottomans. Even when faced with the Empire's eventual extinction, the Arab-Muslim population remained passive, hoping for another Muslim conqueror to march in, take power, thereby ensuring their salvation (Ibid.). In 1920, the Arab-Muslim population felt abandoned and overwhelmed; at once unable to unite itself in either a coherent cultural (Arab) or religious (Muslim) *ummah*, nor capable of defending their lands against the invaders. If the events of 1920 were a test for the strength and coherence of the *ummah*, then it proved a failure, and yet its influence lingers as an ephemeral symbol of unity. To understand the role the *ummah* played in disempowering the Arab population, it is necessary to examine its structure, its foundations, and its global uniting power, and contrast it to the founding element of Arab identity: the language.

Ethnicity vs. "Ummah": Arab Identity within Global Islam

As Islamist writers would remind us, the Muslim world is founded on a distinct, universalistic understanding of its being an *ummah*, a term that has come to denote a transnational community encompassing all Muslims and which is based on shared religious belief (Gellner 1994). Traditionally, the concept of *ummah* — the root of which could be Arabic *umm* (mother), Hebrew *umma*, or Aramaic *umm tha* — is unclear. The term appears sixty-four times in the *Quran* with a variety of meanings denoting "the followers of the prophet, a divine plan of salvation, a religious group, a small group within a larger community of believers, misguided people and, an order of being" (Grunebaum 1964, 78). Originally, the Prophet spoke of the *ummah* that transcended the tribal and ethnic diversity of the various peoples of the Arabian Peninsula. It was synonymous with Islam, the "establishment of peace" among the warring Arabian tribes. Following the death of the Prophet and the ongoing expansion of Islam as a faith, *ummah* denoted a community of believers, and "entailed a consciousness of belonging to a community whose membership was open equally and without any qualification or restriction, except that of the faith, to all believers" (Hassan 2002, 88). More recently, the word has come to mean a "universal" community that is bound by similar beliefs and laws irrespective of local, cultural, and linguistic practices.

Unique and remarkable as it may be in establishing a notion of a universal community, *ummah* is nevertheless problematic as it remains in its very nature *abstract* in the sense that as an identity it is "pure essence" (Hegel 1929, 35-27) — that is, an identity, that remains an "ideal" and has no grounding in everyday existence. If the *ummah* (as this pure ideal) *were* to be *the* founding principle of an individual's political identity, it would imply that this individual could only politically self-identify as

belonging to this universal by sublimating the elements that are founded in his/her distinct political/ national/cultural identity, which are necessarily at variance with this ideal. Were this pure identity to be formed, it would only yield an identity that is "self-identical … by virtue of which otherness [political/ cultural/linguistic] and the relation to *Other* [distinct polity/culture/language] has simply vanished" (Hegel 1929, 37). This occurs because the *ummah* does not encompass particulars, such as culture, ethnicity, language, history, but maintains a broad understanding of common faith lines identified in the practice of religion. The drawback for such immediate self-identity is the absence of self-knowledge as complex individuality, a combination of "ideal" and "real" which may only take place in and through the consciousness of *otherness* as the basis of a determinate being (as a specific political/cultural identity). Therefore, for the *ummah* to be a valid form of individual identity, its adherents must recognize the diversity of cultures and ethnicities that the concept encompasses, whereas in its *ideal* form, its founding principles do not admit to such forms of *otherness*.

This faith or self-identity can only become a lived reality (actualized) "when its Reflection determines itself to be related to Essence" as it is "Other to Form" (Hegel 1929, 78), in other words when it succeeds in establishing a dialectical relationship between its *ideal* and *lived* reality. Therefore for the Arab/Muslim citizen to maintain an identity that transcends pure Essence (faith) and is determined in Matter (political sphere) as both Arab and Muslim, they would have to live in a society that nurtures both the culture (Arabism) and the religion (Islam).

Some would argue that the *ummah* is not abstract, but finds its fundamental grounding in the laws (*Sharia*) which, being product of the faith, remain constant and immutable. However, these laws are to a great degree adaptable and expandable as they remain contingent on the principle of *ijma'* (consensus) (Grunebaum 1964; Lambton 1981), which merely demands that the learned of the community come to an agreement regarding what is acceptable, and therewith make it binding as law. For Grunebaum, "a [Muslim] community's law is, in the last analysis, precisely as elastic and as adaptive as the community would have it, and its criteria of admission are as catholic or exclusive as its identification implies." He observes that for the general consciousness, "the intention to be and to remain a Muslim counts for more than the failings that are observable in its implementation," and the "concern for the grandeur of Islam … overrides the concern for uniformity in detail of practice and doctrine" (1964, 16-17). However, acceptance of mystical religiosity does not mean elimination of conflict between the religious ideas and mores and the norms upheld by the learned, or between the interpretation of the *Sharia* by one culture and that of another.

Consequent to the adaptability and expandability of the practices of Islam, bound as they are by the principle of *ijma'*, the concept of *ummah* as pure Essence is therewith grounded as self-identity only through a certain amount of non-essentiality (*abstraction*) in the political realm. This means that in the *Idea* of consensus the content of this global Islamic self-identity remains *particular* and therewith unique in content and form to each separate ethnic group. More importantly, the grounding of "identity" in the *real* (political present) must go through a process of active transcendence of opposition between the *ideal* and the *real* in order to maintain their unity and "difference" as a single entity. This means that for the Muslim identity to be *consistent* and *coherent,* it has to find a social and political community and relevant institutions in which it can *actualize* itself and through which it is recognized and applied as law. The *universal* concept of *ummah* fails to provide these conditions, as the age of Muslim empires has long passed.

The *ummah* as "universal" concept therefore fails on two levels: social and political. It fails to provide substantial and grounded basis for a coherent cultural and ethnic identity to emerge, and as a result is highly misleading since it gives the illusion of unity, whereas diversity and particularity abound. As abstract universality (global identity) of the Muslim community, *ummah* does not take into account the particularities (cultures) that would invariably enter into conflict with it, as the universality of the law is overrun by the particularity inherent in the diversity of cultural practices (Lambton 1981;

Globe and Mail, 12 October 2004). In political terms the concept of *ummah* is equally problematic, since it helps conflate the right of law with the practice of law, as it does not provide distinct constitutional rules and rights to citizens who are members of the community of the faithful. By remaining a "universal" notion, the *ummah* as a political reality is bound directly by the regional, political, cultural, and ethnic nature of its adherents, and in its universality it becomes 'everything to everyone' (Hegel 1995). The *Quran* envisages the Muslim community to be equalitarian, open, based on goodwill and cooperation, and without elitism. However, there are no guarantees that this would be the case even if the *ummah* were to guarantee to "prohibit evil and command the good" on the basis of the belief in a singular and undivided God.

Moments of Global Identity: "Différance" or Arabism

More than any other ethnicity, the Arabs have been directly associated with Islam by virtue of language. The direct association often made between Arabs and Turks (Lewis 2002; 2003) or Arabs and all Muslims in general are not only rooted in Islam, but in *abstraction* from the essential Arabism of the *Quran*. It is true that Islam denotes directly the Arabic language since God chose to reveal His message through an Arabic *Quran* (*Quran* S. 20:112, S. 42:5). However, given the early Islamic struggle against associations with the poetic pre-Islamic culture, there is a common underlying preconception within the Arab/Muslim world that Arab culture predating Islam, better known as *al-jahilyya* (Age of Ignorance), is of somewhat lesser value, which further exacerbates the attempt to draw a distinction between religion and culture. Nevertheless, Arab/Muslim history provides ample proof of an appreciation of the language and the culture it represented. Medieval Arab scholars praised the language for the vastness of its vocabulary, and the beauty of its phonetics, which added to its staggering richness in synonyms. In extolling the beauty of the language, these scholars recognized in equal measure the nobility of Arab culture. In comparing it to older Persian, Indian, and Byzantine civilizations, it was judged to have been superior by virtue of its cultural and literary accomplishments (Grunebaum 1954). It can therefore be argued that although Islam was "Essential" to the development of the concept of the *ummah* as a global identity, it was not essential to the language or the culture that predated it (Khouri 1983).

Elements distinguishing the two, Islam and Arabic culture, emerge through the application of Jacques Derrida's deconstructionist approach to language and culture in history. Derrida does so in a bid to discover *traces* of identity and difference, ~~erasure~~ and recovery of underlying cultural practices that were separated/differentiated over time. Deconstruction seeks *traces* in language to uncover practices that have become incoherent, as they were separated from the culture in *time* and in *space*. In his essay *Différance* (Derrida 1982), Derrida puts forth a critique of modernity that focuses on the excessive economy in the interpretation of language according to a theologically-constricted context. To illustrate this economy, Derrida offers to deconstruct language with the intention of showing that words have a multiplicity of meanings, often contradictory. Hidden or forgotten meanings unveil multiple layers underlying ordinary speech, which provide the *trace* of the ~~erasure~~ of earlier forms of thought and cultural practices. Derrida shows that the verb *différer* has two distinct meanings, to *defer* and to *differ*, thereby denoting suspension of accomplishment or fulfillment of "desire" or "will" in two distinct mediums, *time* and *space*. Derrida argues that there is a need to distinguish between the two to examine what is hidden, and proposes to use *différance* (with an *a*) to denote what is undecided between the active and the passive, "recalling something like the middle voice" in our language. To join *différance* as temporization and *différance* as spacing in writing, it is necessary to acknowledge the relationship between the *sign* (word) and the *signified* (what is). The *sign* represents the present (*signified*) in its absence. It takes the place of the present "when the present cannot be presented" (Derrida 1982, 7-9). In this sense, *différance* represents *the absence of presence* both in *time* and in *space*. It is absent in terms of its *temporality* — that is, as not now, and in its *spatiality* as not here.

Conceptions of the "Arab Condition" which bracket the Arab/Muslim identity, establishing it as a natural growth of Islamic Ottoman culture (Ajami 1992; Lewis 2003; Tibi 1988) appear to have followed what Derrida would identify as a modernist approach to defining Arab/Muslim culture, insofar as they fail to recognize that the *sign* — that is, Islam has come to represent the *absence* of a *presence* of Arab culture both in *time* (*as not now*, but the Golden Age of the Caliphate), and in *space* (*not here*, but globally). For the medieval philosophers and philologists of the Abbasid Empire, the *sign* is the language that expressed the *signified* (Islam), or the will of God. Whereas contemporary Eastern and Western analyses of the Arab/Muslim world have inverted this notion and made of the *signified* the *sign*, where Islam has become the *sign* — subject, and the Arab culture and language have become the *signified* — the product. In so becoming, Islam as *sign* refers to the universal Muslim *ummah*, a concept that has no direct reference to *Arab culture*, but that has been appropriated by the colonial powers that shaped it since the dissolution of the Caliphate. Consequently, Arab culture, now *signified* (superseded), appears emptied of its *particularity* as cultural *ideal*, and is subsumed within the universality of the concept of *ummah*. As such, Arab culture has become separated from its original status as *sign* in *time* (eight centuries) and *space* (Baghdad) and reduced to mere language, the function of which is to express the Islamic doctrine. Arabic language as *function* cannot call upon its culture in reference to Islamic doctrine, but needs Islamic doctrine to identify itself as culture.

This inversion has had direct consequences in terms of the nature and content of both religion and culture. On the one hand, in becoming universal (*sign*), the religion is emptied of its original Arab culture and is refashioned in the image of its foreign imperial rulers, thereby inheriting colonizing characteristics. On the other hand, in becoming *signified*, the Arab culture has been superseded as well as subverted, and made to reflect a religion (*sign*) that has become "abstract," an "ideal," rather than a "real" or "actualized" entity. One should not, however, think that this inversion occurred by chance, since even for Derrida, modernist thought has its notions embedded in history, and it is to history that we now turn.

"Arab Condition": History / Trace / Present

It is frequently argued that the "Arab Condition" is a counter-culture, a revolt by the Arabs against the West's technological superiority, as well as the result of a "fatalist" attitude, inherent in the Muslim ethos that disenfranchises the Arab/Muslim population, rendering it helpless and ineffectual (Ajami 1992; Tibi 1988; Lewis 2002; 2003). Others (Said in *Al-Ahram Weekly Online* 22-28 May 2003; 21-27 August 2003; Bamyeh 1999) see it differently, namely as a result of a colonized past and present. In view of our current analysis, it would appear that both viewpoints are — to a limited degree — accurate, insofar as they each give a systematic reading of the present. However, due to an inattentive reading of the past, neither acknowledges that in spite of their "Islamic" faith, the Mamluks and Ottomans were indeed occupiers of Arab lands, and their colonial rule extended primarily through religion, to the detriment of indigenous culture. Contemporary "Arab Condition" is a product of this lengthy form of colonization that embedded in the lands it occupied the pre-eminence of religion as opposed to indigenous culture.

The "Arab Condition," as identified by Said, would be considered by Max Weber (1994) as a direct consequence of a depoliticized population whose nations lack politically mature elites. This lack of political maturity is itself a product of a long historical process that has discouraged the Arab population from participating actively in the political legislation and governance of their lands for several centuries. This was, as Said claimed, a by-product of active colonization not only by the Ottomans, but also, and more importantly by the Mamluks. However, the legitimacy of these rulers was established in and through their adherence to Islam, and it is there that Ajami's and Lewis' comments are justified, particularly as they perceived in the practices of the Islamic religion a "fatalism" that is disempowering and regressive, rather than constructive and liberating. This is due to the colonization, not only of the lands, but what this colonization established in its capacity to manipulate the content and

purpose of the *Sharia* and Arab tradition, which jointly became an instrument of repression, disempowerment and regression embedded in the culture through centuries of practice. In its "universal" and symbolic form, the perceived global form of Islamic *ummah* continues to oppress and alienate long after the colonial power as political establishment had ceased to exist.

This ongoing process of depoliticization and alienation continues to depend largely on the content of the Islamic identity (*ummah*). Notwithstanding the obvious manipulations of Islamic laws (*Sharia*) for colonizing purposes that undoubtedly altered much in terms of customs and practices, there is also a matter of understanding the significance of seizing the lands of the faithful by force, maintaining legitimacy by violence, threats, and military campaigns, all in the name of Islam and of God. As Islam appropriates Arab culture or cultural practices in general, it also appropriates all practices that would have been defined in and through cultural practices. The ~~erasure~~ of pre-colonial Arab culture by the colonially based Islamic *ummah* allows for the development of a direct association between the lived culture and colonial practices, thereby blurring the line between what is authentically Arab/Muslim and what are predominantly colonial practices. Cultural and local practices are thereby steeped in an *arrested* culture, espousing the colonizer's ethos, practices, and norms. This process of *acculturation* is significant, for as it becomes embedded in the psyche of the *signified* (colonized), it also ~~erases~~ all vestiges of the latter's original culture, and therewith comes to be lived and understood as the "ideal" instead of being recognized for what it truly is, an instrument of coercion. This process of *sign—signified* inversion is most effective as there appears to be no conflict between the colonizer and the colonized, since the latter in assimilating this "abstract" identity is unaware of her condition, and therewith believes she is free. In this process the colonizer succeeds in a twofold manner: having seized control by the sword and being in control of the legitimizing principle of government (Islam), the manipulation of all laws and practices need simply to be imposed rather than achieved through *ijma'*, consensus. Secondly, having succeeded in embedding in Islam the violent and repressive practices that helped them maintain domination for centuries, the colonizers equally altered the spirit of the religion and therewith helped maintain within these societies the identification with practices, the design of which is to maintain servile and dominated masses, rather than allow for the emergence of independence and self-rule.

It is of vital importance to recognize that the identification of vastly repressive and violent practices with Islamic laws has, particularly in the present global political climate, significant ramifications for East and West. Notwithstanding the immediate threat of terror embedded in the practices of current political movements professing the need to return to the purity of Islamic law, there is a more insidious threat associated with the current level of conflation between religion and its culturally-based practices. This conflation allows the rise of radical movements that succeed in legitimizing the use of violence and terror to express the frustration and powerlessness of the multitude, whereas no justifying factor legitimately exists.

In its utter silence, political *disengagement* and apathy, the Arab world tacitly accepts this violence as if to express the frustration prevalent in its inability to bring in harmony the glory of its past and the humiliation of its present. There appears no middle ground, no *différance*, to bridge the *sign* (Arab culture) and the *signified* (Islam) in *time* and *space*. History is itself a barrier that is not able to break through, and this inability is further exacerbated by the colonizing ethos and practices it has adopted, and continues to uphold as its legitimate tradition. Arab society does not need the glorious past of the Caliphate to save it from the present, but it is the *knowledge* and understanding of the coming-into-being of this *present* that may save it from its colonized *past*. The pre-colonial Arab culture will never return as it is already past; the knowledge of its *trace*, however, holds the key to the *present*, and therein lies the future.

NOTES

1. Use of the "strike through" refers to Derrida's deconstruction of language, in order to make visual the effect of "traces" of language (i.e., a language that was at once "erased" and remains present).
2. The solidus (/) that separates Arab/Muslim refers to the middle ground between separate identities, both ethnic and religious. It aims to remind the reader that the two concepts, though related, are by no means identical.

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Globalized Islam:
Arab Identity *~~Sous Rature~~*

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