Conceptualizing Power, Progress and Time: An essay on traditional Islam and Democracy in the Arab World

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Abstract:
This article considers the problematic amalgam of traditional Islam, modernity and democratization in the Arab world, as well as the effects on the configuration of recent progressive endeavours. I argue that the assimilation of democratic ethos - as a requisite for modernity - depends on the assimilation of power, time and progress, by the *Umma* or the community of Muslims. Drawing on the work of Wael B. Hallaq, on political and postmodern conceptual literature, I suggest that because of a conceptualization which draws mainly on traditional Islam, the *Umma* and the state in the Arab world remain in conflict while, at times, they appear to act collaboratively, either to embrace modernity or to obstruct democratization.

Keywords: Democracy – Modernity - Islam – Arab world

Introduction

The permanent transformation of human societies attest to the amount of intelligence poured in the numerous existing disciplines and crafts, which continue to nurture the individual's quest for self-accomplishment and continue to succumb to the collective need for a more or less civilized society. However, humans are political beings as well. Like many phases of social development, *modernity* required a political system whose utility and maintenance were fueled by the abstraction of the social fabric, to render it collectively dynamic, and therefore a matrix of power in which the collective virtues that are authentically expressed within the social platform, are formalized into legal and institutional forms of expression and authority. Relatedly, Modernity was a logical leap towards a much more civic society, a much more humanist world and a much more democratic practice of power. Modern societies reached modernity through a process of demystification, in which the scientific concept replaced the ideological one. In other words, modernity happened to be a logical outcome of a logical enterprise, while the political implication of modernity happened to be a turmoil in which practice of power was among masses. On the other hand, even though the Arab world has become part of a modern world, it still lives on its own substance. The distance separating the region from the rest of world is very wide and its depth equals that of the Arab citizens, who, even though are ethnically diverse, remain traditionally constructed to be collective social, chronological and political beings.

Accordingly, an important element of discussion regarding the matter of modernity in the post-soviet Arab world is that of Western influence. Indeed, it is claimed that geopolitical strategizing in the Middle East and North Africa clouds the promise of regime change towards a much more democratic practice of power. Such influence may be enforced to secure stable political environment and permanent flow of investments in and out of the region (Buchanan and Guillaume 2002; Carapico 2002; Harik 2006; Dolgov 2007; Perthes

2008; Masoud 2015). The impossibility of co-existence between an economically driven modernized Arab world and the modern requirements for democratization has for long shattered the symbiosis, which may join modern endeavors (social reform and economic growth included), to the formation and promotion of democracy in the region.

In this regard, I remind that Modernization of space in most Arab countries (Herrera 2004; Idriz 2008; Arjomand 2010; Donmez 2010; Abouelhassan and Mayer 2016; Kemp 2021) took place when colonizers built cities to live in and roads that led them to areas of the land where natural resources were abundant. As for modernizing time, it occurred when postcolonial Arab states synchronized their economies with that of European and North American stock markets. Lastly, progress in the Arab world was fueled by a more or less pragmatically generated understanding of the region, which is immensely diverse in terms of ethnic and tribal affiliations. In other words, globalizing economic and political affairs required a unified institutional framework. The installation of parliaments, elected political interveners, courts, schools and NGOs were a threshold that was easy to cross by the ruling elite of the Arab world, which invested heavily in pathways that guaranteed an enforcing of modernization. It may have been carried on at the expense of the social integrant – the citizen, whose sentiment of alienation, as it will be demonstrated in this article, was projected over the entire modern enterprise.

In this article, I address the gap separating between (a) the Arab world's daily experience of democracy and (b) the traditional conceptualization of key Islamic components. Accordingly, this paper's contribution is a further understanding of these concepts to identify the cause or causes why democracy in the Arab World has not been filed as a requisite for substantial modernism (Ziad 2011; Samiul 2011; Hafez 2015; Mary 2019). I also attempt to decipher modern social parameters and subsequent entanglements with concepts whose signification may be anchored in traditional Islam. That is to say, the Arab world remains a region whose social fabric is constantly traversed by the past. Oppositely, modernity is a social, a political and an economic arrangement that capitalizes on the future while it utilizes the present as a combustible only. Consequently, the Arab world is now split to two spheres: one, which belongs to the ruling elite (the present and the future), and one which belongs to the *Umma* (the past). The analysis of this fragmentation unfolds on reasons why democracy (Ramadan 1996; Mernissi 2002; Minissi 2005; Spadola 2022; Lavoie 2023) is obstructed while modernity is enforced upon the region. In other words, this article is an attempt to explain why Arab states are largely investing in modern structuring of key sectors (Bougharriou, Benayed, Gabsi 2019) while it remains undemocratic and keen to capitalize on state ideology for the sake of expelling progressive values from the Arab social fabric. The article attempts also to explain that the *Umma,* even though ethnically diverse, remains a congregation of individuals who are bound by belief, Islamic tradition and social hierarchy. Consequently, democracy may be feared and combatted. It subsists separately from modernity, which, I remind, is being promoted by the state. The two (modernity and democracy) continue to exist singly and are never engaged complementarily.

Following an elaboration on my theoretical framework and methodology, I share an overview on the notion of democracy in the Arab state (Garcia-Rivero and Kotze 2006; El Badawi and Makdisi 2007; Teti, Abbott and Cavatorta 2019). I then attempt to perform an analysis on the conjunction that may possibly join democracy and the ancestral Islamic conceptualization of power, progress and time. This analysis is combined with insights sought in the work of Wael B. Hallaq, in postmodern and political literature. I also discuss the implication(s) of this conjunction on the promise of modernity in the Arab world (Zebiri 1999; Eickelman 2000; Amineh 2007; Bidar 2009; Hunter 2009; Abbes 2015; Kuru 2020;). I conclude by suggesting future trajectories of research.

Theoretical Framework

In this section, I delineate existing theories and particularities that support and frame my research, in the process of demonstrating that this paper is relevant and grounded in established ideas. That being so, my analysis draws on the concepts of power (*sulta*) (Kazmi 2004; Boer 2005; Feldman 2008; Acquah 2009; Martensson 2007; Meri 2010; Ahmad 2013; Borrut 2014; Poljarevic 2016; Kersten 2018;), progress (*taqadum*) (Asseri and Ishtiaq 2023; Ariffin 2011) and time (*zaman*) (Bowering 1997; Dajani 2012; Villis 2021; Ding 2021; Mezghani 2021), found in postmodern scholarship, which aimed at the critical study of postcolonial Arab world and the impact of colonial histories on modernity. The latter is addressed in this paper as unique, even though borrowed or imported. That is due to our understanding of *modernity* as a multiplicity of occurrences and not as a rigidly moving formation of concepts and ideologies (see also Hallaq 2019). I examine how the traditional conceptualization of these three concepts still serves Arab states' ideologies (Ghazali 2019) to tirelessly thrust out progressive values and virtues from the Arab social fabric. Tradition here is referred to not as distinct or opposed to reason but rather as one which determines the contents, forms, and structures of rationality (Hallaq 2019). The implementation of these concepts are important, to say the least, in the process of introducing modernity as a platform which is formative of politics (Schemeil 2000; Ralph 2001; Berger 2002; Bouvier 2007; Lizcano-Fernandez 2012; Eberl and Solomon 2013) through a fair collective experience of social, political and economic affairs. I also examine how the understanding of these concepts is conflictual with the postcolonial *modernities* of the Arab world (Amineh 2007; Keyman 2007; Findlow 2008; Parsa 2017; Marin 2022). Modernity in the region may, indeed, be enforced only in the public space, as its conjunction with economic growth is inevitable. For the sake of meeting the probable use of tangible illustrations, I draw on studies (Mernissi 1991; El-Husseini 2016; Rizzo, Abdel-Latif and Mayer 2007; Kemp 2021) that hint about the probability that progressive trends in the Arab world may be the most affected by the conflictual relation joining modernity and democracy. I also draw on the work of scholars who examined the problematic positioning of humanist notions and secular ethos in future social reforms in the region. They pointed at the essential role that ancestral Islam plays in providing contextual use of the sacred texts and the Islamic essential knowledge, either to reinforce Arab states' ideologies or to nurture the *citizens'* general disinterest with modernity, and consequently, disinterest with the necessity for democratization.

Power, time and progress in the Arab world

In 2022, the total population in the Arab World increased by 8.2 million inhabitants (+1.8 percent) since 2021. With 464.68 million inhabitants, the total population thereby reached its highest value in the observed period. Around 94 % of these inhabitants are Muslim (O'Neill 2024), acting under the aegis of local regimes that are constitutionally, systematically and morally bound by Islam. Accordingly, while examining the notions of power (*sulta*), time (*zaman*) and progress (*taqadum*) in the Arab world I put forward Islam to be a dominant social establishment in the region, rather than a spiritual quest or a fragment within regional, ethnic or religious diaspora. Such critical understanding of Islam should involve –idyllically- a constant removal of rigid practices and a permanent need for adjustments, through theological/critical thoughtfulness and political openness. Relatedly, while examining these concepts while also putting forward the MENA region (Middle East and North Africa) as ethnically and religiously diverse, I suggest that the region is intellectually and theologically incapable of translating such diversity in concept formation and understanding. Therefore, the social fabric in MENA suffers a visceral duplicity instead of a prized multiplicity. To put it simply, though diverse, the Arab world's perceptive understanding of its own nature, condition and disparate seems to be nurtured by two facets of Islam

(Lawrence 1987; McCutcheon 2000; Tyler 2005; Amineh 2007; Irwin 2013; Al-Rasheed 2016; Thaver 2018; Munt 2020). On the one hand (a) traditional Islam, which is a constant reminder of the past and past accomplishments, whether they were legal, military or theological, and on the other hand, the (b) postcolonial Islamic era, led by Arabs themselves but tightly under the supervision of their geopolitical partners. These dual introspective realities served on both sides of the Arab social fabric, meaning that Arab modern states still invest in macro-economic activity as a driver of modernization, while on the side of the citizens, democracy (Saaidia 2007; Amin-Khan 2009) may have never been sought seriously for reasons that will be unveiled in this article.

Methodology

The research methodology employed in this paper draws on a conceptual approach, which was fueled by postmodern conceptual literature, to refine key concepts historically and systematically. By 'conceptual work' I mean the distillation of dense yet essential concepts, which are gateways to trigger axed angles on targeted fragments of materiality. I approach concepts as practical schemata, which perform as compelling platform for thinking and understanding, for elucidative inspection and exact judgment. Through a process of cognitive elucidation, I attempt to enhance understanding on how the evolution and the distillation of the concepts examined in this article can serve as a cross-disciplinary refinement of addressing Islam and democracy in the Arab world. Relatedly, I understand that concepts should not be approached as pre-established meaning, but as an arrangement that is characterized by dynamism, while being constantly in need of reformation by the intellect that utilizes it as reactive attitude to context or materiality. The methodology implemented in this paper aims, at last, to supply an understanding of the concepts and their practicalities while transforming their tacit attributes into objects of interest and inquiry. Accordingly, the historical and systematic qualities are here vital, both critically and constructively. Dense concepts, in particular, namely power, time and progress, have a given rout and are deeply rooted within the conditions of their creation. The regional genealogy of the concepts should provide substance for qualitative inquiry. In this paper, I also implemented a qualitative primary data collection, in which observation and evaluation of established findings (World Bank Open Data, World Bank Gender Data Portal, UNICEF, Policy Center, SESRIC, European Commission, Population Reference Bureau, Union for the Mediterranean, National Institutes of Health, United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, International Labor Organization, UNGEI, IEMed, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Reporters sans frontieres, Brookings, International IDEA, OECD) were key measurement instruments of behavior, events, individual and group responsiveness to policy and processes of modernization in the Arab world, while designating democratization as a focal point. While evaluating the data, an attempt was carried on to assimilate the observable social dynamic and trends among the populous in terms of conceptual meaning, which characterizes the Arab world and its social as well as political modernisms. It was beneficial in a sense that the realities encountered helped determine why the Arab world still resents democracy. I also centered my research on the examination of conceptual meaning and implication, which point at the constituents power (*sulta*), time (*zaman*) and progress (*taqadum*) to be splitting the Arab social fabric into two poles: one that is modern and one that is traditional.

What also drives this analysis is a juxtaposing of the concepts discussed in this article – including the arguments put forward in the findings section - with recent academic studies axed on traditional Islam, modernity and democratization. The literature regards the infrastructure of the concepts discussed in the article, their formation and understanding within and for traditional Islam, their entanglement with the

present realities and the implication they have had so far on perceptive understanding of democracy in MENA. This particular analysis was fueled by a comprehensive review of the literature and capitalized on the multi-disciplinary dimension of the problematic discussed in this article, which involved a cross-disciplinary methodological procedure, varying from the appropriation of conceptual significance (Peococke 1999; Slaby, Mühlhoff and Wu 2019), to the collection of primary data, based on observation and evaluation.

Findings

What does explain the subsidence of democracy –and substantial modernity with it- in the Arab world? A partial answer may be in the traditional conceptualization of certain components of Islamic theology and theopolitical praxis. I suggest that the spiritual integrant of the latter - often fueled by contingency - was subverted into an oppressive practice of power, fueled by regressive ethos, which sank the *Caliphate* and later on the modernized state in despotism and isolated *individuals* from civic duties and legal rights while detaching them from their spiritual analogous as well. These components are power (*sulta*), time (*zaman*) and progress (*taqadum*). The conceptualization of those happens to be of a subsequent nature. In other words, the evolving of Islam as a historical and a material amalgam of realities caused major mutations on the level of the historical and systematic understanding of these concepts and consequently, on the practice of those as well, both as a vision of the world and as a management of affairs. Furthermore, the meaning of these concepts was reconfigured during a critical period, which is the colonial era. It was a period of time when the Arab world was propelled into modernity while liberation movements scattered around the region had to capitalize on tradition and ancestry to guarantee cohesion and union among its ranks. Similarly and for the first time, the Arab world had to conceptualize these notions while (a) preparing to integrate a global geopolitical framework and while (b) attempting to emancipate from it, all done simultaneously. Also, for the first time in Islamic history, the political elite was powerless and was confined to the requirements of a world order whose power, progress and time drew from earthly, secular and humanist ethos. As a result, in the Arab world, modernity took place while the political elite was separated from the masses, especially when the former was unable to procure independence and later on, social justice and economic growth for the people. In the same vein, the *Umma*'s understanding of power, time and progress is blurry and is often fueled by state ideology, usually remitted via partners of the state, embodied in the theological elite. The *Umma*'s general attitude is, therefore, to reject modernity and to seek the theological elite for assistance, while limiting the *Umma's* modern experience of life to a heavily sought involvement in the micro-economic activity. The *Umma*'s inertia is greater than ever and its reminiscence to the past equals its disinterest with the future; meanwhile, the state remains modern and acts accordingly.

The signification of power (sulta) and the implication on democracy in the Arab world

Power in the Arab world draws on three distinct but systematically interacting spheres: (a) The sacred text (b) The Caliph and (c) The social hierarchy, often subsequent to the sexualization of social relations. The sacred text – *Koran* and *Hadith* – have been a source of legislation and essentialist nuances of ethical behavior since the dawn of Islam. To this date, the sacred text is still used to regulate a certain portion of social relations, though its use remains highly informal. The definitive dissociation from the sacred text happened while promoting the installation of parliaments as an exclusive source of legislation in Arab countries, shortly after being granted territorial independence. However, during the struggle for independence, nationalist and liberation movements cloaked their doings in a sacred form of tussle, led

against the 'infidels' rather than against advanced societies whose scientific, naval and military advances permitted these invasions. The sacred text was used and interpreted to serve violent action and to seek retribution, while progressive discourse within these liberation groups was inoperable.

Later on, the political turmoil inside the region was profoundly affected by the cold war and soon after, despotic rulers took charge in the postcolonial Arab world, backed up by their geopolitical partners inside a global design, which was dominated mainly by Western Europe and the United States of America. Meanwhile, the Arab world was traversed by immense generational changes and cultural mutations, which apparently did not have an impact on the political management of affairs. The latter continued to be despotic and regressive. It unfolded on populations of the Arab world where poverty and illiteracy grew exponentially. The economic requirements of modernity, as in other parts of the civilized globe, transformed the Arab world in a congregation of laborers, completely isolated from their civic duties and legal rights while profound alterations in social relations took place as a consequence (See also Beaudrillard 1975).

In parallel to that, the state capitalized on ideology to educate the masses, while humanist, liberal and secular teachings were excluded from formal education and the institutions that proffered it. The social fabric in the Arab world was therefore split: on a one hand the state, on another hand the *Umma*. Power in its codified form, which is the sacred text, was replaced by legislation. The state enforced the use of legislation to manage public and domestic affairs while the *Umma* resisted and still perceives legislative outcomes as incomparably futile when compared to those of the sacred text. The *Umma*'s resistance is amplified when legislative outcomes displace social hierarchies and limits, whose origins are still traditionally perceived and are still foreseen within an ancestral framework.

In the same vein, despotic ruling in the Arab world has given up room to a political elite whose legislative endeavors are rarely subtracted from the will of the masses and are often the result of undemocratic electoral and institutional processes. The *Umma*'s will is therefore expelled from Arab parliaments and legislative assemblies; it finds shelter –thanks to state ideology as well- in providence and divine retribution. The *Umma*'s management of affairs, especially in rural areas, remains highly framed by tradition, often derived from an ancestral understanding of the sacred text and an alienation towards legislation.

The *Caliphate* is the second component to examine in the process of understanding the concept of power in the Arab world. The conversion of the Caliph into *Malik*, president of the republic or mere political leader, striped the Islamic political scene from two of its most vital constituents, which are space and time. The Caliph was certainly the protector of Islam in time, while he was the prime protector of public order and the protector of space limits that were enforced inside the *Caliphate* territory. Caliphs were often sought to solve issues regarded as crucial to the future of the *Umma*. When the *Caliph* could not succeed in doing so, he was either assassinated or heavily challenged by the opposition. Even though the vulnerability of the Caliph was later on less apparent, especially during the *Omayyad* and *Abbasid* dynasties, the Caliph remained cherished and perceived as a leading force in establishing a utopic Islamic supremacy. The social hierarchy was maintained while the Islamic cosmic (Mernissi 2002) time was synchronized with that of a metaphysical parent, which is God. However, for the first time in Islamic history, postcolonial Arab states were ruled by powerless leaders, whose clocks were synchronized with Western time and who permitted a trespassing of the limits (see also Mernissi 2002). The power of the ruler did no longer draw on heavenly origins and was dictated by geo-political partners of the state. The *Umma*'s interests were no longer entangled with that of its political elite since unsubstantial modernity in

the Arab world served to build social relations on economic exploitation and to turn the political turmoil into a 'graveyard' for all modern opponents. The *Umma*'s frustration with the rulers inflated when the social hierarchy – often connected to the sexualization of social relations – was disrupted. To illustrate, if women now have access to opportunity, to education and to the job market, their inclusion in the public space was brutal and did not take place within an authentic modern expression. This creates tensions between the state and the *Umma* but it also casts unproductivity, unauthenticity and feeble dynamism over social relations in general.

Similarly, the state's failure to provide its citizens with rapid economic growth and improvements in life quality are compensated by the implementation of state ideology to reinforce the citizens' traditional interpretation of time, necessary to expel them from the present. The Muslim believer is indeed not a spatial being but a chronological one. To put it simply, his or her existence is an extension of Islam itself in time, that is exponential rather than finite. Through state ideology, the *Umma* is waiting and demonstrating its discontent while subsisting in a form of reality that is chronologically oriented. The power conferred to the political elite by its geopolitical partners is, therefore, seen by the *Umma* as temporary. Restoring power in its traditional form – that is embodied in (a) the conservation of the social hierarchy and (b) in the vulnerability of the ruler or the Caliph - is perceived as a preferable substitute for modernity and the subsequent process of democratization.

The third and last component, which connects to the concept of power in the Arab world, sends to the notion of the *Umma*. The latter means the congregation of Muslim women and men on earth, with an emphasis on the role to be played by men in a form of the future that is highly entangled with the will of God. In fact, the *Umma* is a chronological mass, moving through time and is in a constant state of war. Its understanding of history is assimilated in terms of power relations rather than meaning (see also Rabinow and Faubion 2002). To understand what follows, it is here important to point out that utopic Islam is described to be cosmic and englobing, which involves two aspects of theology: one that is exponential and the other that is scholarly. The former means that Islam is a religion that is not bound by territorial limits, while the latter means that its essentialist substance is fluid and is in a constant mutation; that involves a permanent questioning of meaning and a permanent search for answers that respond to present economic, political and social realities.

Unfortunately, the *Umma*'s inner workings is no longer managed by principles stated above. It was highly damaged due to historical and political factors, which altered the implementation of the sacred text and the management of political affairs since the first Caliphates. The subsequent power given to men of the *Umma* has often been embodied in the ability to earn (*kasb*) and the possibility to confine women to the domestic space. To preserve these privileges, two elements had to be secured: (a) economic growth and (b) the sexualization of social relations. For a long time, the *Umma* and the political elite tightly collaborated to maintain this balance, where power was distributed in a manner that served political stability and a more or less 'patriarchal' configuration of social relations. Yet, in the postcolonial Arab world, failure within the economic composition caused the social hierarchy to crumble and the limits to be displaced due to men's inability to earn (*kasb*). The *Umma's* only form of power, which happened to be social, was no longer secured by the state. As a result, the *Umma* had to succumb to severe social changes, whose implications, especially on Arab men, were devastating.

Accordingly, the tension between the state and the *Umma* has not stopped increasing. But thanks to ideology, which draws on traditional Islam, the state often collaborates with the *Umma* to confine the progressive integrant of the social fabric (modern women included) in a status of a mere economic

contributor and aborts by the same action the process of democratization in the Arab world. In other words, Arab states use ideology to prevent progressive genre from accessing power, an access which can only be achieved through democratization. As for the *Umma*'s frustration with the modern economic requirements, it is seen by the state as manageable and is often compensated by a promotion of a more or less traditional practice of power inside the domestic space.

The sovereignty of cosmic time (zaman) and the implication on democracy in the Arab world

Democracy may be an abstraction of authentically remitted collective or social endeavors, as well as the implementation of politics as an institutionalized form of power distribution, whose prime source of legitimacy is suffrage. The latter often unfolds on elected political elites, whose concern may center on nurturing the political scene with critical, secular and humanist pathways towards a legislation that guarantees the freedoms, dignities and equalities for all citizens. The substance for this political arrangement may draw on the modernization of the human being and the thought that co-existence in modern spaces requires a balance of power, which may be expressed and preserved by, and through, the secular mass.

As far as the Arab world is concerned, democracy may still be perceived as a component of a global design, one that is imposed by modernity for modernity, and one that is put forward to become a substitute for ancestral forms of power distribution. The association between time and democracy happens when there is a general feeling among the Arab world that a deterioration in all sectors and spheres of life is taking place. The role democracy plays in rendering politics more accessible and in guaranteeing the involvement of the masses in the monitoring of power and the design of legislation and development plans remains a dominant trait of the modern world. Whereas in the Middle East and North Africa, the experience of democracy is often traversed by a troubled encounter with power distribution. Consequently, the implementation of the Muslim time as cosmic and as one that is heavily entangled with the will of God propels the *Umma* right into a crossroad. In order for the *Umma* to install a democratic practice of power, the *Umma* has to become substantially modern. During this formative process, the past will inevitably be confronted. In other words, the regard to ancestry as subliminal might be replaced with the displacement of glory from the past right into the future. Furthermore, in order for the *Umma* to install a democratic practice of power, the promotion of modernity in the Arab world should be formative of politics. Inversely, it may still be, to this date, exclusively associated with regional economic plans, which often have been a concentration of national economies on the needs of the big corporations, with local governments as a stimulating, supporting, and sometimes even controlling force (see also Marcuse 1964; Hallaq 2019).

What is even more problematic is that democracy capitalizes on the individual, the individual responsibility and the individual sovereignty. Accordingly, democracy draws on the present as a time sphere in which free action is neither monitored nor prevented. It is rather a transformation into a political action, whose critic of the established laws and institutions is perceived as a natural and relatively acceptable motion of society itself. On the other hand, freedom, which is another notion that connects to democratization, is not welcome nor cherished in the Arab world. It reminds of past failures, even though their magnitude is little when being compared to the present ones. The social chaos (*fitna*) and discordance among the *Umma* (*tafriqah*) are two drastic consequences that are often expected to happen when freedom is granted to the individual, to the fraction or to the group. The *Umma*'s power has often drew on cohesion and unanimity.

Similarly, Arab states may see in the process of democratization a threat to their rule. They may use state ideology to capitalize on the concordance of the *Umma* and to direct its frustration towards progressive

trends or outside threats, often portrayed as isolated individuals or embodiments of foreign attempts to subvert essential Islamic teachings and local tradition. Consequently, the *Umma*'s timeframe is hostile towards present demands for freedom, justice and equality. The Arab state's proposition is to modernize space but not time. It is a proposition that the *Umma* accepts, to preserve a relative amount of power. It is a power that is conceptualized traditionally. Subsequently, the 'glorious' past is still profoundly contemplated by the *Umma* in every sector of public life, while in the domestic space, it takes a more ideological form, embodied in a sexualization of social relations, an alienation towards legal rights and a disinterest in civic duties as well as active political participation.

Inversely, the contemplation of rational, humanist and secular ethos is not new to the Arab world. It anchors deep in Islamic history. To explain, the war waged against progressivism in the region has often coincided with the exponential ascendance of despotic political elites, and that since the first Caliphates. Traditional opposition against despotism often took two forms of expression, one that is violent and another that is rational. The modern Arab world suffers the same political dynamic, while its opposition is still detached from the *Umma*'s political ambition. That is to say, the process of democratization lacks the necessary interveners and the required knowledge, while modernity stumbles, as a large number of the *Umma* is reluctant towards modernization. Reminiscence to the past is therefore a manner by which the *Umma* escapes an undignifying present and 'sinks' its impotence and will for change in (a) providence and predestination instead of (b) progress and democracy. The former may be necessary for the *Umma* to subsist under despotic ruling while continuing to gain a relative amount of power in a physical reality that is extremely weakened by the requirements of modernization.

Progress (taqadum), Prosperity (izdihar) and implication on democratization

The modern notion of progress may still be foreign to the Arab world, where the future is not to fear, at least not as much as the subversion of Islamic teachings, which is believed to have happened because of modernity and the subsequent demand for democratization. Progress in the Arab world may not be measured by scientific advancement nor by the promotion of civic behavior. The word itself is foreign to the Arab world and does not have theological nor ethnic roots. Indeed, if explained in other terms, the modern notion of progress disconnects the human experience from the metaphysical and ancestral realms. It perceives prosperity as a progressive human effort, which may take the form of craft or knowledge that can render society friendlier, more just and more equitable. Inversely, *progress* in the Arab world is spiritual rather than empirical. In other words, *progress* is perceived to serve emancipate from certain realities, which belong to modernity and subsequently, to the local political elite and its geopolitical partners. The progress achieved by the latter is judged as foreign and finds neither echo nor continuation in the Arab social fabric. On the other hand, progress is not expected to take place until it is ritualized through territorial and sexualized arrangements, but also, not until both the present and the future are re-synchronized with the Muslim cosmic clock, where the chronological configuration of the social, economic and political affairs are merged once again with the will of God.

Consequently, in the Arab world, the *Umma* is in a constant state of war since its positioning shifted, partially due to the factors unveiled in this article, to become an adversary of the modern world. This state of war often takes another form of struggle, which is waged against the *Umma*'s own integrant, that is either the political elite or the progressive trends among the social tissue. I remind here that in the postcolonial Arab world, modernity did not shape via formative processes, but was probably required to match modernization of the globe and to meet standards set by the geopolitical partners of the region. Consequently, progress for the *Umma* was split from that of the state, as it neither matched prosperity in

modern terms nor the ancestral understanding and traditional conceptualization of prosperity (*Izdihar*), which was understood by the *Umma* as a consequence of empowering Islam and Muslims through time, while preserving social hierarchies from shifting or mutating. Because of (a) state failure to install substantial progress and (b) through state ideology, often procured by the local or regional theological elite, the *Umma* may be finding shelter in a framework that is more or less responsive to past notions and ethos. The *Umma*'s conceptualization of progress is therefore highly traditional. It amplifies through a process of absolution, whose objects of alienation are the modern economic design and the modern political elite.

For the *Umma*, the confrontation with modernity is inevitable, but remains of a remotely contemplative nature. The consequence is that the social fabric is broken into two poles. The first pole is managed by the state. It is where progress is constantly monitored, while being highly responsive to global modern requirements. The second pole is the *Umma*, which is excluded form progress and one that fails economically. The *Umma*'s response to that is to disobey (implicitly and explicitly) calls for civic behavior and for legal retributions. The *Umma* takes shelter in tradition and ancestry – that is the past – where members of the *Umma* perceive the respect of essential Islamic teachings (*ta'alim)* and the preservation of ancestral social hierarchies as a salient form of progress, whose aim is to prolong the *Umma*'s ability to wait.

Oppositely, in democracies, progress was often unrelated to politics and was a logical consequence of liberal and humanist endeavors. Progress in equality, opportunity for all, dignity and freedom that is symmetric with individual responsibility could have been attempts to gain ground against nature, whose principle became, at a certain point in time, anti-social, regressive and anarchic. In democracies, nature reminds of the past. It reminds that humans were brutal, unfair and above all, undemocratic. Capitalizing on the future while using the present as a combustible brought upfront notions of humanism and secular ethos, which rendered nature exploitable and God as an unwilling entity, while theology was often powerless and was usually excluded from the modern manufacture of knowledge. In other words, in democracies, scientific research may have been an endeavor to increase the sovereignty of the human being over chaos while re-shaping the social, political and economic space using modern measures and progressive notions. Democracy is therefore the offspring of the Godless human, the logical, the humanist and the secular. It is a vision of society, which places the future in parliaments and schools, while it uses the present as a mere combustible, in which concoctions for a bright future are permanently attempted.

Inversely, the process of democratization in the Arab world is still feared, by both the state and the *Umma*. Progress is therefore not conceived as a form of emancipation from the natural nor the metaphysical. As far as the *Umma* is concerned, God's will is the generator of world realities while Islam is a compass to maneuver through its chronology, though it is of a modern configuration. The state continues to nurture this vision via state ideology, while it joins the *Umma* in its efforts to propel progressive voices and oppositions out of the public sphere. The latter are considered foreign and a threat to the *Umma*'s unity, though they are necessary for democratization. Furthermore, the *Umma* is unwilling to embrace democracy as a requisite for progress, since the former threatens to break the *Umma* into equally responsible/accountable individuals. Modernity –and subsequent progress- in the Arab world is therefore put on hold, unless it is enforced by the state. The latter's investment in the future is responsive to global requirements, while attempting to meet modern development plans when reforming key sectors of public life such as health, education and justice. Meanwhile, the *Umma* continues to resist the subsequent legal, social and economic changes.

Last but not least, while modernity in the Arab world may be serving economic agendas mainly, undemocratic practice of power may continue to stain the Arab political scene. Meanwhile, the *Umma* continues to wait. It is highly disinterested in modernity and, therefore, in the need for democratization and progress. As far as the *Umma* is concerned, the world remains a chronological arrangement, which is expected to be resynchronized with the cosmic clock, one that started in year one of the *Hijra*. The *Umma*'s strong belief in predestation and providence strips the present from political praxis and transforms the future – and progress with it - into a time frame that is largely governed by the notion of endism (see also Sim 1999). If the state and the *Umma* remain highly conflictual over various issues, they also appear to be partially collaborative on the matter of democratization. In other words, democracy is traded by the state for its own supremacy over the political and macro-economic activity, while on the other hand, democracy is traded by the *Umma* for the latter's sovereignty over its own chronology, its own social hierarchy and its inner collective cohesion, all at the expense of formative progress and politics.

Conclusion

The literature on the Middle East and North Africa has often sieged its analysis within fruitful efforts to study present economic, political and social performances in the region. They served examining the parameters of surfacing issues in the Arab world. However, these issues are often symptomatic of a deeper problem, which seems to position the Arab world in a space that is exterior to modernity, even though the region is continually experiencing a renewal of infrastructure, educational programs, political interveners...etc. I suggest that modernity is yet to be introduced to the Arab world and that modernity's values and virtues are yet to be re-conceptualized by Muslims, using their own terms and realities, as well as their critical understanding of the depths of Islamic tradition and ancestry. Until then, though ethnically diverse, the Arab world remains fractured and split into two major poles. On the one hand, the state stands as an enforcer of macro-economy. It also expeditiously monitors the social relations via a process of legislation and formalization of the physical reality, while implementing ideology, proffered by the theological elite, to isolate the population from active political participation and to 'corner' progressive trend and opposition. The *Umma* on the other hand - as a congregation of men and women whose resources are scarce and ones in whom modernity does not echo – is contemplating the past and is disinterested in the future. The political elite is seen as decadent and corrupt, while the public space is constantly traversed by tension. This may occur between the *Umma* and the state, and in other times, between the *Umma* and its inner integrant, embodied in most cases in groups and fractions that refuse to align with the traditional and ancestral configurative conceptualization of the modern Arab society. I suggest also that the state and the *Umma* collaborate to withhold the process of democratization from reaching public and domestic spaces. While the state may be despotic, the *Umma* may be reluctant to absorb notions of individual liberty and responsibility. At last, for a democratic practice of social and political affairs in the Arab world, the conceptualization of power (*sulta*), time (*zaman*) and progress (*taqadum*) is to change, while the idealization of the past has to be replaced by a *naturalization* of the future. This is said while being aware that the conflation of Arab and Muslim identities in this paper seems to occasional oversimplify the rich ethnic and religious diversity of the MENA region. Accordingly, I do not claim that my analysis applies to all Arab countries, which are often traversed by tribal tendencies, ethnic affiliations, global trends and economic specificities. However, this study may open a venue to investigate even further the concepts discussed in this article and to examine their dialectic dynamism with their modern equivalents. The challenge is certainly theopolitical but remains highly intellectual; its uniqueness equals the uniqueness of

Islam as a religion and the complexity of democracy as a progressive political outcome of formative and substantial modernity.

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