Education for Women: Traditional Islamic Conceptualization of Knowledge, Time and Space and Implication on Education in MENA

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Abstract:

This article considers the functionality of the concepts knowledge, time and space, as hegemonic constituents of Islamic tradition and as a body of conflictual interactions with the modern configuration of MENA. I argue that education in the Arab world hinges on the conciliation of these concepts with the practice of modernity, whereas their entanglement and conflictual nature with the latter is to jeopardize progressive educational reforms. Drawing on the work of Wael B. Hallaq and Fatima Mernissi, on gender studies and on postmodern conceptual literature, I suggest that a cavernous understanding of education in the Arab world is needed and new conceptualization of knowledge, time and space is essential to found substantial transformation in the region.

Keywords: Education – Knowledge – Space – Time - MENA

Introduction

Over the last seven decades, Arab societies have been unceasingly colliding with the more or less distasteful realization that modernity is inevitable and that free-market, as well as the rapid circulation of information and imagery, have replaced rigid local economic transactions and caused the tangibility of local cultures to dissolve (See also Debord 1967). These twists in economy and the abstract circulation of information and imagery inside Arab societies and through them, have triggered resistance (from men more than women) due to the fact that it impacted three key components of Islamic substantial content, which are, among others, knowledge (*ta'lim*), time (*zaman*) and space (*alfada'*). Accordingly, the discussion about the modern change that is taking place in the Arab world amplifies and takes aggressive turns when conflicts arise between the *Umma* and the state. While the state and the *Umma* converge on the patriarchal distribution of wealth, on the necessity of sexual dominance and domestic hierarchy, their points of divergence relate to the state's management of the public space and the state's adhering to the Western notion of progress, which is, often, the state's power resonance over public affairs, cloaked in discursive progressivism and in the glorification of institutional authority.

Education in its most formal settings, which is school, seems to be one of the key sectors where conflict between members of the *Umma* and the state suffers tragic amplification (see also Thobani 2007; Sabic-El-Rayess 2020). I remind here that as far as Arab countries are concerned, one of the requirements of modernization is the atypical and ascendant raise of education rate among the population. Probable consequences of these high rates of education are access to the job market, enhancing birth control, lowering the risk of epidemic spread and unquestionably the establishment of a relative equality between

the sexes, at least legally and financially (see also Harcet 2005; Muhibbu-Din 2019). However, the blurry aspiration of Arab states to progress, using education as a prime vector to civic knowledge, public awareness and professional training, falls short when being installed in societies in which ancestry and tradition are acutely anchored. In the Arab world, the ancestral belief, which is semantically, historically and systematically projecting meaning over common understanding of knowledge, time and space, has not altered and is sometimes fostered by the state itself when it cannot be efficient in matching the prosperity achieved in the West (see also Liebmann and Galal 2020). The consequence of that is the seclusion of education in a mere instrumental affair, instead of rendering it a podium upon which social change is instigated and revered.

In this article, I address the gap separating between (a) women's daily experience of education in the modern Arab world 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 formal education system in the Arab World has not been able to progressively advance women's situation. I examine the conceptualization of knowledge, the conceptualization of Islamic chronological and spatial utilities and their impact on a mostly essential precondition of modernization: *Formal Education*. A specific side of the problem will regard women. In postcolonial Arab countries, more and more young girls are being granted access to education but never to knowledge, let alone access to time and space. The specificity of this pseudo-education for women, when not being delayed or discontinued, is that it is solely of a political responsive nature, either to Western pressure or to the proliferation of neo-liberal transformations in the Arab world, which created more demand for a docile (educated) and 'gender-free' labor force. In this context, education is not generative of revolt, of modern and humanist values and does not meet the civic engagements of the modern state towards the citizen. Similarly, the ideology of the state does not draw on modern ethos nor continental philosophy (Dajani 2012). It is rather a moderate effort to preserve and to exercise essential Islamic knowledge, which is proffered through theological instruments rather than educational institutions. The result of that is the fragmentation of Arab societies into poles, which are highly modernized but remain shaped by an austere understanding of the concepts this article examines.

Following an elaboration on my theoretical framework and methodology, I share an overview on the notion of education in modern Arab countries. I then analyze the conflictive conjunction of education and Islamic essential components, all embodied in the problematic conceptualization of knowledge, time and space. This analysis is combined with insights sought in the work of Wael B. Hallaq, Fatima Mernissi, gender and education studies in MENA (Ibourk and Amaghouss 2013; Kucuk 2013; Ibourk and Amaghouss 2015; Dandan and Marques 2017; Auletto, Kim and Marias 2017; Van Es 2019; Sabic El-Rayess 2020; Assad, Hendy, Lassassi and Yassin 2020; Mavlyautdinov and Glushkova 2021; Ozgen and El Shyshtawy 2021; Emilio 2022) and postcolonial literature (Sunier 2014; Saffari 2015; El Mouden 2018; Carey and Silverstein 2020; Sarukkai 2021). I then discuss the implications of this conflictual but abstract entanglement on the promise of the postmodern Arab world. 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 Knowledge (Bowering 1997; Al-Hayani 2005; Sayyid 2006; Khurshid

2015; Majwan and Haneen 2021; Suyatno, Wantini, Sukiman and Rachmawati 2022), Time (Villis 2021; Mezghani 2021) and Space (Ammann 2002; Rana and Russel 2009), 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 tradition and traditional conceptualization of Islamic essential knowledge (Turner 2008), time and space led postcolonial and modernist requirements of formal education to be conflictual with the genuine social dynamic (Bahfen 2011; Hunter 2009; Bougharriou, Benayed and Gsbi 2019). 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). I also put forward the premise that education for all - that includes women of the region – increases social fragmentation instead of decreasing it. The possibly expending tension instigated calls for a reunion with the past and the re-installation of traditional Islamic appropriation of knowledge, of time and of space in every sector of the public life (Gabriel 2021; Baumann 2013; Shansudin 2016; Javed Mia 2015). I also draw on the work of scholars (Inayatillah and Anzaikhan 2022; Santoso and Khisbiyah 2021; Karasu 2019) who have considered the problematic positioning of humanist notions and secular understanding of civic duties in the heart of Arab states management of public and domestic affairs. Secularism is understood here not as imitation of modernity nor as the removal of all that is sacred (see Hallaq 2019), but rather as the exercise of reason in all that is susceptible to manage affairs addressing common good, common property and common experience of life inside societal context. In addition, I highlight the essential role formal education plays in modernizing the latter at the expense of the power resonance that the Arab states organically shield and projects over individual and collective identities. Identity here is to contemplate in its most essential form. It sends to the process by which the individual's sovereignty is negated; it is a process that is often positioned in critical spaces, in which the social tissue is absorbed and digested by the individual, for the purpose of integrating the *Umma* (community of Muslims) and becoming part of its abstract extant.

Knowledge, time and space 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 concept of knowledge, time and space 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 variation through thoughtfulness and dynamism (Ding 2021). Relatedly, while examining these concepts, while also putting forward the 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 tissue in MENA (Middle East and North Africa) 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 Islamic history. On one hand the ancestral, which is a constant reminder of past tradition and accomplishments, whether they were legal, military or theological, and on the other hand, the postcolonial era, led by Arabs themselves but tightly under the supervision of

the Western world. (Makdisi 2022; Martin Munoz 2013; Perthes 2008; El Badawi, Makdisi 2007; Faqir 1997). Knowledge, time and space are constituents of this duality as they form spheres in which citizens of the Arab world switch roles, either individually or collectively, while interacting, whether with other individuals, groups, communities or institutions (Dolgov 2007; Azlan, Amran and Ishak 2020; Loretoni 2020; Hassouna 2001; Anderson 2001; Muslih and Norton 1991; Khashan 1991; Fradkin 2013).

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, gender and education. 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 knowledge, space and time, 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 evaluation of established findings (World Bank, 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 and IEMed) was a key measurement instruments of behavior, events, individual and group responsiveness to policy and processes of modernization in the Arab world, while designating education for women 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 it helped determine why the Arab world still resents substantial forms of formal education, including the secularization of knowledge and the advocacy of civism as substitute to tribal, territorial and sexualized forms of hierarchy.

I also centered my research on the examination of conceptual meaning and implication, which point at the constituents knowledge (*ta'lim*), space (*alfada'*) and time (*zaman*) to be splitting the Arab social fabric into two poles: one that is modern and one that is traditional. In both poles, formal education for women is instrumental and is not essential. Once I identified formal education in MENA to be a platform that is tremendously conflictual with tradition and ancestry, I attempted to understand then examine the hegemonic but tacit processes by which traditional conceptualization of knowledge, time and space in the Arab world continue to resist modernity and its jolt. Such resistance still roars regardless of the alteration these very same concepts should undergo, due to (a) the incorporation of modernity in the Arab social fabric and, consequently, due to (b) the responsiveness these three constituents of life experience should normally have to the objective materiality.

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, education and modernity. 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 formal education 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 resented and substantially inexistent impact of formal education on the modernized Arab world and the promise of equality between the sexes? Part of the answer lies in three key constituents of Islamic theopolitical praxis. The latter was subverted from serving as moralizing and spiritual form of guidance, fueled by contingency, to serving as an oppressive practice of power, fueled by regressive ethos. These components are knowledge, time and space. The semantic, historical and systematic formation of those, and that since the first Islamic dynasties, until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, emphasized on the appurtenance of the *Umma* to what can be referred to as cosmic (Mernissi 2002) time. It emphasized on the territoriality of power, and subsequently of sexuality and sexual freedoms, and at last, it emphasized on the essentiality of knowledge, often conflictive with rational thinking, perceptiveness and scientific theory. The ancestral and traditional molding of these three components made it arduous for education and educated women to serve as modern beings or to be prized as such.

The signification of space (alfada') and the implication on education

In the Arab world, s*pace* is synonym for sexuality and power distribution. The allocation of these depends on the hierarchy that is either social or institutional, but in some cases, it is an admixture of both, meaning that even inside institutional settings, the public space is prolonged. The implication of that is that individuals in Arab societies are identified as powerful or powerless, as sexually dominant or sexually submissive, as endangering the social order or as contributors to its preservation.

Due to the fact that the modern notion of citizenship is practically and essentially non-existent, a separation of the sexes persists, even though Arab societies are being modernized. In schools for instance, the secular dimension of knowledge is hindered and a more technical aspect of knowledge is amplified to serve the labor mark only. Knowledge in the Arab world is politicized. Ideology is constantly put forward and can be considered as a layer that protracts the social order and impedes the territorial limits and their inevitable shifting. When there is a crossing of those limits, it is generally performed under certain conditions, or as a ritualized form of crossing (Mernissi 1975). The emancipation of the educated woman from these rituals can happen at any time, but is it never seen as progressive, even when being guaranteed by the state, through law enforcement or through modernization of the public space. In this particular case, the state is perceived as foreign by the informal proponents of traditional Islam (alien to the local regime), while transgressors are excluded from the *Rahma* and *karama* promised to all members of the *Umma*. The latter often demands retribution from the transgressors of the tacit social order established by a traditional perception of space. The tax demanded from *modern women* can take various forms such as verbal abuse, harassment or physical violence even.

Since the public space is prolonged onto institutional spaces as well, the deferent understanding of power distribution - in addition to hierarchy - is conspicuous in schools as well, where young girls are monitored as soon as they reach the age of puberty. It is a result of them being allocated a gendered identity, where their perception of right and duty is shaped from within their transformation to being sexual entities, whose inclusion in the public space has to be subsequent to certain rules and rituals (see also Mernissi 1975). An alerting fact in this particular case is that women's 'invasion' of the public space, which starts as soon as women are modern and educated, is even more problematic when it takes economic dimensions, which is an inevitable outcome knowing that within the Western proposition of modernity, economy is paradigmatic (see Hallaq 2019). Such economically perceived invasion of the public space by the modern woman renders the process of modernization subaltern to space distribution, which causes production, partnership and apprenticeship between women and men inside the job market or inside educational institutions to be feeble and constantly traversed by tension.

The separation of space, which is a manner of securing certain privileges for one sex on the expense of the other, is neither supported by a logical deduction nor by a probable stagnation of the socio-economic fabric. It is rather a traditional understanding of sexuality and a consolidation of the power it confers or subtracts to a certain individual or gender on the basis of the sexual substance (action). Proponents of traditional Islam – formal and informal - enforce regulation and ritualized interaction on settings inside which men and women converge, either professionally or casually. It is an ancestral idea to believe that women's body is a threat to the social order. Studies revealed that, indeed, men's sexual desires are driven by visual activity while women understand desire and react to it in a much more semantic manner (Gaddam Sai, Ogas Ogi 2011). Yet, the Islamic traditional conceptualization of space resonates through power distribution rather than through the desire of appropriation or the control of the other sex. In Arab societies, men's appropriation of the public space - generally reflective of an ancestral erotic plot – is now guaranteed by the state through state ideology; it has now become intellectual and formal. A consequence of a sectarian social fabric based on the sexual substance (action) of the individual is the subversion of human interaction and civic behavior into a political enterprise or design, which jeopardizes mutual understanding of the social condition, in terms of notions elaborated in modern expression, perceptive understanding and civic ethos.

Modernization has yet instilled major changes in the Arab world, but most importantly, it instilled major changes on the female body as well. In the case of a woman's eye or gaze, traditionally feared and labeled as erotic, it is now a vector of knowledge, which enables women and young girls, whether in urban or rural areas, to read through letters, words, sentences and images. It enabled them also to hermeneutically read through the sacred texts, which were the property of the theological elite, and that for centuries. The semantic nature of women's sexuality is now being added to women's semantic understanding of men as well, not as sexual instruments and advocators of domination but as dominated beings, foreign to economic and political configurations, regulated and monitored either by the state or by foreign Western hemispheres of power.

Inversely, modernity has also 'mistreated' the woman's body. One of the major impediments faced by women when being able to access formal education and to clinch a position in the job market is the fierce amount of labor she shares with men. As a matter of fact, Arab states have invested in the privatization of sectors of production and service since the late twentieth century. Arab states did that without being able to create a counterbalance, substantiated in the education for civic action and legal protection, from and against labor exploitation. The result is that a considerable share of women may perceive the labor market

as matrix which strips them from *dignity* and that the return to the domestic space is the only possibility to restore a sense of preeminence. But faced with the incapability of men to provide descent income and to secure financial stability (*kasb*) (Hallaq 2013), women who believe that their dignity can be restored via confinement to the domestic space, are chased off of their own hope and are asked to return to classrooms, factories and company offices for the sake of meeting discrete financial needs.

Relatedly, the inclusion of women in the public space is only as revealing as the latest Arab states' financial pages and GDP rankings. The rates of educated women and their access to opportunity and entrepreneurship is relatively high and continues to rise. Tertiary education enrolment rates for women for instance have increased significantly from 24% in 2005 to 43% in 2019, exceeding both the regional male enrolment rates (40%) and the world average for female enrolment (36%) (World Bank 2020). However, the threat still roams over the homogeneity of the social fabric, as such changes have damaged the latter. The modernized Arab social fabric remains highly traditional and profoundly anchored in ancestry. The brutal alteration of power dynamics, sexual freedoms and above all of territorial hierarchy continues to generate tension between the state and the informal proponents of traditional Islam. It also generates tension among the residents of these same spaces, often compelled to switch roles and to embrace the advantages of modernity, while modern notions related to democracy (Bouvier 2007; Schemeil 2000; Berger 2002; Eberl 2013; Lizcano-Fernandez 2012; Ralph 2001; Mouffe 1990), to citizenship and to individual responsibility are hindered or resented. This perfidious setting is often fueled by state ideology, through formal proponents of traditional Islam (partners of the local regime), which sees in space, whether domestic or public, a region of the social matrix in which seeds of humanist, secular and scientific ethos must never grow or prosper.

Education, Islam and the sovereignty of cosmic time (zaman)

In the Arab world, Islamic tradition preaches a merging of *time* with the will of God. It constantly connects its evolution with the Islamic existential substance, often expressed through conquest, worshiping rituals and discursiveness that is configured by the belief in a *judgment day*. The very start of Muslim time is the day the first words of God were revealed to the prophet Muhammad, via the messenger Gabriel, sometime around 610 AD. The expansion of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula and the establishment of the first caliphate (11 AH) mark the events that will later on model the time capsule, which will be resistant to the natural flow of time and the earthly and social changes it still carries with it to this day. The amalgam that joins the will of God to the Islamic expansion rendered the naturalization of time difficult as Islamic 'cosmic history' reached its apogee with the *Omayyad* and *Abbasid* supremacy and Muslim's invasion of southern medieval Spain (also see Otenkaya 2021). It is only with the colonization of Arab countries that the Muslim clock pointed back at point zero and that Muslims came face to face with the earthly chronological arrangement of events, in which Muslims abruptly belonged to Western flow of time, and a lot less to predestination or to providence.

The reunion of the Arab world with the cosmic flow of time, which is perceived to originate from a metaphysical parent, was completed once local liberation movements rose against colonial presence. The call for liberation forced these movements to cloak their efforts and plots in a traditional form of warfare, waged against 'infidels' rather than advanced societies whose scientific, naval and military advances permitted these invasions. Even if within those liberation movements progressive thinking was latent, the need for granular unity served as an excuse to subvert these progressive trends and to prioritize a much more ancestral form of struggle, led by the *Umma* and its theological leaders. Unfortunately, after the independence, postcolonial Arab countries were left face to face with their own fate, while glories of past

accomplishments, often useful in times of struggle against the colonizer, crumbled when facing the changes that have been happening in the world and especially in the West (Mernissi 1991).

Knowing that the *Caliphate* does no longer exist, at least physically, while it has still been romantically contemplated since the early age of Islamism (Reda 2019), and knowing that in ancient Andalusia new rulers arose, holding parliament assemblies, having no regrets from the past while putting together concoctions for the future, Muslims were suddenly propelled into a cross-road: that is (a) either to embrace modern values of civility, individuality and the natural dimension of the human being, or (b) to persist in a stubborn subsistence inside a time sphere, built with bricks of reminiscence to the past accomplishments of the prophet Muhammad and the Caliphates after him. In terms that 'incriminate' modernity as well, if Muslims were to organize their lives in social, economic, and political terms, then they either had to succumb to the modern state and the world that produced it, or the modern state and the world that produced it had to recognize the legitimacy of Islamic governance, that is, the Muslim conception of polity, law, and, most importantly, morality and its subordinated political and economic demands (Hallaq 2013). Inversely, as much as there is a general amazement in all sectors of life and in all disciplines when contemplating Western progress, there is also a general disgust when coming face to face with the realization that this progress is being installed in Arab countries as a sub-product only; it is a residue of all the advancements accomplished, especially when such progress has no direct impact on the lives of Muslims. The *Fuqaha*, who are the ideological partners of the local regimes (formal proponents of traditional Islam), play a dominant role in softening the anger of the masses by reminding of past accomplishments and nurturing the notion of 'the awaiting', which helps picture the Islamic world as in a state of hibernation and that patience is the Muslims' ultimate gift received from God. Islamic time is therefore split from the Western one, first via the time of the prayer, and second by the promise of an upcoming and foreseen judgment day. Western time is transferred into the public space, to schools, to offices and to TV sets, while deep within the believer and deep within domestic spaces, time is at point zero, until the will of God 'strikes' again.

What makes the traditional conceptualization of time even more problematic is the accord that it instills in perceiving the future. Unlike the Western 'obsession' with subsequence, which originates from the displacement of time from the heavens into organically and essentially controllable conditions and conditioning, in the Arab world, the future is death, destruction and blood bath. It is a total war, led by men against other men, for the purpose of restoring Islamic supremacy on the land. It is the conjunction of various conditions, which are perceived to either put Muslims back into prosperity or cause the end of time, an end that should be triggered by degenerate rulers, whose task was to carry on the mission of the prophet Mohammed and to guarantee the prosperity (*izdihar*) of the *Umma*. Arab 'citizens' have now created micro-atmospheres, isolated from the world's requirements of progress and citizenship. In these micro-atmospheres Muslims wait, isolated from their civic rights, isolated from their civic duties and isolated from their humanism. They are more traditional than ever, now that the world has become modern. Consequently, the notion of time in the Arab world is now duel and is highly regressive, even though it is still collectively needed in practical and intellectual walks of life (Sami, Ehsan, Hameed, Khan and Rahim 2011). Arab states have their own will, often embodied in despotic ruling (Hallaq 2013) and investment in local natural resources as well as foreign markets. This is only lucrative when local clocks as well as local economies are pointing to Western time. On the other hand, the Arab social fabric remains traditional and has not yet broken ties with the cosmic time. Such ties are often consolidated by the state through state

ideology, when the state is unable to secure rights, advantages and prosperity that modernity has provided the Western citizens with.

One of the consequences of such duality is the impact on formal education. The break from cosmic time involves knowledge that is highly scientific, secular and futuristic. As far as Islamic tradition is concerned, knowledge must merge with providence. Consequently, formal education remains kept in the margin of the Arab social fabric, at least essentially. The probability that formal education is key to economic, political and spiritual accomplishments is expected to be very low, while the ancestral belief sends to the supremacy of Islam and Islamic essential knowledge as a prime vector of prosperity for all (that includes women's prosperity as well), which involves reproduction of the past rather than planning for the future.

In the same vein, being a requirement of civility, education in Western countries is put forward as the sole provider of civic values, of social justice and equality between the sexes. But the lack of democratic and civic states on top of Arab countries' theopolitical scene, pushes towards an installation of formal education onto modernized chronology as an institutionalized form of capitulation before economic requirements of modernization, often elevated to be a central domain (Hallaq 2013) rather than an outcome of dynamism, freedom and intellectual activity. Therefore, (a) formal education may largely be understood as a vector to the job market instead of being a vector to modernity or to the future. Another consequence is (b) the problematic positioning of the *educated woman* inside the Arab social fabric. Indeed, the former is understood as foreign to a chronological arrangement which is highly traditional and whose configuration is nuanced by men's economic, political and social impotence.

Similarly, one of the major issues women have to face in the modern Arab world is the duality - which is conflictual –between belonging to the *Umma*, on one hand, and on the other hand, cherishing modernity through formal education, income and increasingly equal legal rights with men. The latter are in a visceral state of war and the place the former has in it is futile compared to the duties that are demanded from them as well as the duties expected from them in the future. When being face to face with women who are advocating more rights, informal proponents of traditional Islam transfer their aggressively towards women who seem to be more willing to transform the Arab social fabric into one of free will. The latter requires, ironically, a committed involvement from the side of men as well. The latter are in a large majority fearful of such demand as the latter strips Islamic fate and supremacy from three major components: a) Subsistence of the Arab world in Islamic cosmic time, where Muslim men are protagonists and are in a state of war (against the local regime and the West) while women are relegated to a secondary role. B) Synergy, which is a matrix in which the individual is ridiculed while the sum of interactions within and for the *Umma* is cherished and performed heavily. C) Order, which is often expressed in terms that help consolidate territorial limits, which appear to have more paramountcy before the existence of the modern woman and the possibility of her having equal freedoms in the public space.

That is to say, it is only when the Muslim – that includes women – thinks for himself that he or she disrupts the Islamic cosmic time by intentionally escaping the will of God. One of the ancestral fears of proponents of traditional Islam is that of the individual action, one which is cherished by modernity in its most neoliberal configuration. I remind here that Islamic time is merged with the will of God, which is a constituent of the *Umma's* fate and the subsequent events to happen in the near or far future. Whether it is will, choice, action or responsibility, in the Arab world individuality is not taken seriously, as long as the individual does not fit in (a) a more or less Islamic perception of time, embodied in an entanglement with the will of God, with a (b) theopolitical conception of the world order and lastly, with (c) the Islamic

essential knowledge, that finds its source in the sacred texts (*Hadith* included) rather than in modernity and less even in formal education.

Conceptualizing knowledge (ta'lim) in the Arab world and implication on formal education

It may be hasty to believe that education in the Arab world is of an entire ideological infrastructure. While being introduced to the individual who is about to be part of the collective integrant of the *Umma*, knowledge in the Arab world shapes in three systematically associated forms. A form of that knowledge is (a) modern and is the sum of input and techniques retrieved from Western advances in multiple disciplines, formalized into educational material under the aegis of the neoliberal mounting inside Arab countries, in the form of policy and social repair. In other words, it is a form of knowledge, which meets minimum requirements for economic modernization. Another form of knowledge is (b) ideological. It is the property of the state, which instills its substance and understanding via the contribution of a theological elite, trained and monitored to serve in this sense. The third form of knowledge is (c) the Islamic essential knowledge, which is a platform because of which the Arab states and the informal proponents of traditional Islam are in extreme animosity. The Islamic essential knowledge merges the *Umma*, its space and time, with the will of God. In fact, this type of knowledge might be considered superficial or largely insufficient to procure a substantial understanding of Islam and its parameters. Yet, due to a high rate of illiteracy and lack of trust between the *Umma* and local regimes, essential Islamic knowledge has taken more and more space in Arab countries. This has been putting modernization on hold and has been fracturing more and more the social fabric into two poles, one that is economically responsive to demands of modernity and one that is pointing to the past and hoping to restore a utopic Islamic supremacy. The consequence is that formal education does not meet its anthological objectives, while knowledge in the Arab world is responsive to politicized forms of power distribution instead of being universal, atypical and undefined by social class.

Similarly, because of the combination of Islamic essential knowledge and the empowering of the traditional man over the modern one, informal education becomes one of a paramount importance as it has an impact on power distribution and the processes of sexualizing social relations. In fact, Arab women are encouraged, since early age, to use malice rather than critical thinking for example. Their existence in a society that privileges men and men's sexuality on the basis of their gender, includes a certain substance in the process of young girls' socialization process and the formation of their gendered identities. An explanation of this substance can be formulated as such: knowledge given to women is that of survival rather than enlightenment; it is a form of knowledge that widens the gap between the two genders rather than narrowing it. Knowledge here can be regarded as a form of compensation against men's emotional, cognitive and economic handicaps. Women are taught by other women, still in informal settings and in other cases in parallel to schooling, to earn their rights by capitalizing on men's weaknesses rather than their sense of citizenship, collaboration and apprenticeship. Men are here perceived as unpronounced jailers. What's more is that education inside the family, especially for young girls, is to provide them with essential knowledge on how to be domestic beings. Civic education and knowledge that is *modern* or close to enlightenment will become trivial as soon as young girls reach the age of puberty.

What rendered the installation of formal education and universal knowledge in the Arab world so difficult is the association -which happens quite often, either intentionally or unintentionally- between civic and scientific knowledge on the one hand, and the Western invasive substance on the other hand. The consideration that modernity is a prime vector to that variety of knowledge, which is often encountered in formal education, drives informal proponents of traditional Islam to reject it as it conflicts with the

traditional conceptualization of knowledge. This did not happen in countries which were not colonized and embarrassed modernity as an integral part of human development, while emphasizing on tradition and ancestry as an identity procurer or as a receptacle of spiritual exercise. The case of Arab countries is so different due to the fact that knowledge and education in the Arab world are of a systematic nature and withhold an organic function sending to Islam as a social establishment. Consequently, knowledge and education are considered as a condition to emancipate from Western grip and a gateway to renew with past glories, but also with an entire apparatus of knowledge that is both a system and a way of living in the material world (Hallaq 2019). What's more, calls for social change, either political or civic, have been combatted by Arab states using the same process. The result is that progressive trends, either they are intellectual, ideological or theological, have been labeled as foreign and have been automatically extradited from the *Umma* and linked to Western agendas of unpronounced occupation and subversion of Islamic teachings. Arab countries never had posed and moderated debates on the conflictual relation joining Islam to modernity. The tension was often consolidated by the formal proponents of traditional Islam and sometimes by advocators of progressive ethos themselves, when being forced into disillusion, into lack of responsiveness, into abuse or persecution.

Knowledge is above all a quest to understand the world and to act accordingly. The fuel of this quest is for sure curiosity, while the aim varies according to one's belief. Women's ability to write, artistically perform or to think critically, cannot be always shaped like a cannon, erected against Islam. The beauty of education and the knowledge it provides lies in the ability to understand, then act accordingly, sometimes to force change and other times to project one's views, fears and aspiration in a work of art, of literature or inside a laboratory. Knowledge in the Arab world has been a generator of fear when not originating from tradition and ancestry. Educational institutions became politicized. They axed their educational content on the technical and regional aspects of knowledge rather than focusing on the anthological and universal substance of information, methodology and cognition. Furthermore, education which encourages free self-expression and engages young girls and boys in free artistic, physical and cognitive performances are practically non-existent. In an era when information is up for grabs thanks to the Internet, there is more room for education which capitalizes on cognitive skills and personal development. Yet, in authoritarian Arab states (Hallaq 2013), education serves the labor market and omits the universality of knowledge, meaning the understanding of human nature, human difference and human condition.

When education is being looked at as necessity in the search of a decent work in the labor market, knowledge is reduced to fragments of information, which happen to be even thinner when education is narrowed down to specialization and expertise. In Arab countries, in which consumption is often unreasonable and is a subsequence of a total lack of consumerist culture, education often seizes as one reaches financial stability. The implication of that is that Arab societies stagnate in a state where knowledge to be delivered is not multi-dimensional and falls within two categories that are either (a) essential (Islamic) or (b) professional. What is excluded from these two categories are the inherited stereotypes, beliefs and misconceptions that have ethnic, geographic or tribal roots. The rigid structuring and purposeful instrumentalization of formal education does not help moderate nor replace those.

One of the persisting traditional and ancestral trends in the Arab world is the territorial distribution of power and the sexualization of social relations. Modern women are labeled as foreign – because of the knowledge they carry - and are urged to regain their status and 'dignity', often envisaged as a returning to the domestic space. Ironically, by providing society with women and men who can collaborate and interact

using gender-free expression, formal education has 'forced' Arab societies to postpone the separation of the sexes. More than that, through formal education alone, this amalgam of the two sexes has been prolonged into all sectors of public life. Even now, an educated girl is a threat to the traditional family because sooner or later, if that young woman is a successful student, she would 'invade' the public space and become unsafe or 'alarmingly' self-reliant. While these 'invaders' of the public space are being protected by law and legal advisory, traditional men (who are in most cases carrying on modern tasks) pour their aggressiveness into a refusal to respond to the state's demands for civil obedience, civic contribution, taxation… etc. The latter requires labor force while the former requires dignity and power, often associated with financial privileges and territorial assignment, allowing the seclusion of women in the domestic space and the restoring of male sexual supremacy over the female. As for the reformist elite in general and the progressive woman in particular, they exist in a temporary sphere, far away from the Umma. They are often seen as disruptors and are often prohibited from contemplating the Islamic essential knowledge as non-theological, which happens to be also political, historical and spiritual (Mernissi 1991). The amount of tension created in a society where men lack a form of knowledge that carries progressive ethos is unimaginably huge and causes more and more women to resign from academic endeavors, professional duties and artistic or physical performances, unless it is a matter of financial need or a matter of mere survival (see also Hanafi 2019). These women may sometimes be traversed by the disturbing thought that the world is of a masculine substance, where women exist through men and for men only (see also De Beauvoir 1976).

Conclusion

The literature addressing problematics related to gender and education in the Middle East and North Africa has often sieged its analysis in fruitful efforts to understand patriarchy and to determine its roots. The latter were often connecting to the development of the Islamic essential substance both as a social establishment and as a theopolitical emergence, which capitalized on the appropriation of the sacred text by male elite, to consolidate power structures, which have been empowering males socially but not politically nor economically. However, scholars may have paid less attention to the conceptualization of spiritual, economic, political and social ethos inside the Arab world, but also to acting constituents inside the layers of traditional Islam, where meaning forms and resonates.

Focusing on the three concepts this article examines to understand the lacking advances in formal education and therefore in modernity, I argued that rigid traditional understanding of knowledge, time and space, as well as the deliberate involvement of the state in consolidating such conceptualization, cause education to be relegated to a minor rank and to be regarded as a Western unpronounced invasive maneuver. I claimed that Islamic essential knowledge is often prioritized over secular and humanist forms of knowledge. Arab countries are also experiencing absolution regarding anxieties related to the future and hope for the past to repeat itself. The Muslim clock points at point zero and does not reflect time as a flow of episodic lapses but rather as a cyclic divine will, which is chronologically dependent on the Islamic resolution of its own existential problems. As for space, the dominant perception is that formal education, as well as the modernized forms of knowledge it procures, postpones the separation of the sexes and prolongs it into all sectors of public life. The knowledge formal education provides in the Arab world is instrumental and does not help modernize the interactions nor the practice of power.

I suggested that the modernization of Arab countries requires profound change, which goes through atypical formal education and should impact the reformation of conceptual understanding of knowledge,

time and space semantically, historically and systematically, using progressive thinking, secular ethos and Islamic rational and humanist tradition. 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, often traversed by tribal tendencies, communal cultures and inner specificities; however, this study opens a venue for further research on the concepts discussed in this article and their dialectic dynamism with their modern equivalents. Education for all, as wanted by Arab activists, thinkers and advocators of women's rights cannot be *essentially* achieved until the public space, as well as the institutions implanted in it, become secular, humanist and democratic. Young girls and women in general are still expected to have a minor role in Arab societies while the educated ones are seen as a threat. Modernization may not be achieved if not all members of society act as individuals, driven by civism and a secularized organization of the legal affairs. It may not be achieved until the social relations are channels of collaboration rather than repression. This does not only involve women but all the excluded members of the *Umma* and all the extradited from its essential knowledge, its chronology and its spatial extant.

Lastly, it is true that even a steady break from tradition and ancestry may not always unfold on relatively positive results, but no one can deny to the Arab world the genuine attempt to be modern on its own terms and using its own refined conceptualization of key constituents of life experience and social arrangement. The challenge is theopolitical and highly intellectual; its uniqueness equals the uniqueness of Islam as a religion, while the essentiality of education for all subsists as a most indispensable tentacle among the many tentacles of progress.

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