The “Arab world” is largely not Arab at all. Berbers, Kurds, Copts, Assyrians, Nubians, Yazidis, Mandaeans – the region is home to some of the oldest cultures and religions in human history. However, Arab states have systematically suppressed, Arabized and in some cases eradicated this diversity for decades. Israel, on the other hand, which is portrayed as the enemy of Arab civilization, is the only state in the region that protects minorities, institutionally promotes linguistic diversity and cultivates religious diversity as a mark of identity.

From Mohamed Diwan

Those who speak of the “Arab world” use a term that is itself an instrument of homogenization. The region, which stretches from Mauritania to Iraq, is presented as a unified Arab-Islamic space – a narrative that systematically obscures the actual ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity of these areas. In his standard work “The Berber Identity Movement and the Challenge to North African States”, political scientist Bruce Maddy-Weitzman shows how post-colonial regimes in North Africa created official national narratives aimed at subordinating the Amazigh to an Arab-nationalist and Islamic-centered order.

Before the Arab conquest in the 7th century, North Africa was home to the Amazigh (Berbers) – a people whose presence in the region dates back thousands of years before the arrival of Islam and the Arabic language. According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, the Amazigh make up over three-fifths of the population in Morocco and around a quarter in Algeria. Their language, Tamazight, was only constitutionally recognized as an official language in Morocco in 2011 and in Algeria in 2016 – after decades of oppression. The Kabyle linguist Salem Chaker described how Arab nationalism pursued the negation of Amazigh identity as a factor of political legitimacy and thus made Amazigh history disappear from curricula, public discourse and official memory.

Egypt was a Christian country before the Arab-Islamic conquest in 640. The Copts – whose name is derived from the Greek Aigyptos and who see themselves as direct descendants of the pharaohs – formed the majority for centuries. Today, according to most estimates, they make up around ten percent of the population. The decline was the result of a centuries-long dynamic of discrimination, Islamic poll taxes (jizya), periodic forced conversions and an education system that marginalizes Coptic history. Even Amnesty International speaks of “persistent discrimination against Coptic Christians in Egypt, both in law and in practice”.

The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy documents that Copts are largely excluded from key positions in the Egyptian administration, judiciary, military and police and remain massively underrepresented in parliament. Since December 2016 alone, over 100 Christians have been killed in a series of attacks on Coptic churches and pilgrim buses – including the bomb attack on the Coptic cathedral in Cairo (December 2016, 25 dead), the double attacks on Palm Sunday 2017 (47 dead) and the attack on a pilgrim bus near Minja (May 2017, 28 dead).

Iraq, that “cradle of civilization” where Sumerians, Akkadians, Assyrians and Babylonians left their mark, offers perhaps the most dramatic example of cultural extinction. Under Saddam Hussein, Assyrian-Aramaic Christians were only tolerated if they denied their ethnicity and called themselves Arabs. According to the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), fewer than 200,000 of the 1.5 million Iraqi Christians (estimated before 2003) remain today. Cardinal Louis Raphaël Sako, Patriarch of the Chaldean Catholic Church, appealed to the international community in September 2024 in view of this catastrophic decline. The genocide committed by the Islamic State against the Yazidis in Sinjar in August 2014 was recognized as genocide by the United Nations.

In Sudan, the Arab identity was imposed on the indigenous populations for centuries. The Nubians, whose kingdoms of Kush and Meroë are among the oldest advanced civilizations in Africa, were linguistically and culturally Arabized. The Nubian kingdoms were once bastions of Coptic Christianity; under the Mahdist state in the 19th century, almost all remaining Christians were forcibly converted to Islam. Political scientist Alex de Waal documents how Khartoum’s Arabization policy led to the systematic marginalization of non-Arab populations – a policy that found its bloody expression in the wars in Darfur, South Kordofan and the Blue Nile. Today, Sudan describes itself as Arab and Islamic, although its ethnic and cultural reality is fundamentally different.

The Kurds – a nation of an estimated 30 million people – are the largest people in the world without their own state. In Syria, their language has been banned, their culture suppressed, hundreds of their villages and towns renamed, and an “Arab belt” 350 kilometers long created along the border by expropriating Kurdish land and giving it to Arab military farmers. Human Rights Watch has documented this policy as targeted ethnic cleansing.

The mechanics of homogenization

The Arabization of the region follows a recurring pattern that unfolds in three dimensions: linguistic, religious and identity-political.

The linguistic dimension is the most important instrument of identity-political unification. Arabic was declared the sole official language in the post-colonial states – at the expense of all other languages in the region. In his study “Arabization et politique linguistique au Maghreb”, linguist Gilbert Grandguillaume showed how this language policy was used as a political instrument to secure power.

The Aramaic language, which Jesus spoke as his mother tongue and which survived as a liturgical language in Iraq and Syria, is disappearing. Coptic, the language of the pharaohs, has already died out as a spoken language and only exists in the liturgy of the Coptic Church. Nubian is being displaced. Kurdish was banned in Syria until the civil war and suppressed in Iraq under Saddam Hussein. Even the Tamazight of the Amazigh was only recognized as a second language in Algeria and Morocco after decades of resistance. The Arab nationalist Sati al-Husri formulated the principle behind this policy bluntly: “An Arab is whoever speaks Arabic.” In practice, this meant that anyone who did not speak Arabic did not exist.

The religious dimension reinforces the linguistic one. In almost all Arab states, Islam is the state religion and the source of legislation. Religious freedom exists formally, but is massively restricted by blasphemy laws and the ban on apostasy. A 2012 analysis by the Pew Research Center found that more than half of the countries in the Middle East and North Africa make apostasy punishable by law, in some cases with the death penalty. Christian communities are shrinking not only due to forced emigration, but also due to an environment in which church construction is hindered by the authorities, access to higher offices is denied and interfaith marriages are de facto only possible in one direction – conversion to Islam.

The multicultural counter-model Israel

Israel is the only state in the Middle East that embodies the exact opposite of this homogenization policy.

The founding of the state was already an act of linguistic resurrection: the revival of Hebrew as an everyday spoken language by Eliezer Ben-Jehuda is a unique

experiment in human history. While the Arab world was wiping out old languages, Israel brought a dead language back to life. Hebrew, which for centuries existed only as a liturgical and scholarly language, became the state language of a modern, high-tech country.

In addition, Arabic has the status of a language with “special status” in Israel – a formulation that was enshrined in the 2018 Nation-State Law and explicitly protects the existing rights of the Arabic-speaking population. Arabic is the language of instruction in Arab and Druze schools, is used on street signs and in official documents, and Arabic-speaking members of parliament can speak in Arabic in the Knesset. According to Ethnologue, a total of 38 languages are spoken in Israel.

Israel’s religious diversity is just as remarkable. In addition to Judaism in all its forms – from secular to reform and conservative to ultra-orthodox – Israel is home to Muslims (Sunni, Shiite, Ahmadiyya), Christians of various denominations (Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Armenian, Maronite, Coptic, Protestant), Druze, Baha’i (whose world center is located in Haifa), Bedouins with their own cultural traditions and Circassians who have preserved their Caucasian identity.

The Druze, although Arabic-speaking, are recognized as an independent religious community and have autonomy within the education system. They serve in the Israeli army and occupy high positions in the state and society.

This contrast can be condensed into one point: While in large parts of the Arab world minorities are systematically treated as a threat, disenfranchised or even physically exterminated, in Israel they are a constitutive and legally protected part of society. The fact that the very state that institutionally embraces diversity has become the target of global demonization reveals a bitter hypocrisy: the vociferous “anti-Israel movement” remains stubbornly silent about the genocides, expulsions and cultural extermination of millions in neighbouring Arab states. The cynical principle seems to apply: ‘No Jews, no news’ – suffering is apparently only worth a headline for these activists if it can be blamed on the Jewish state, while the actual disappearance of entire civilizations in the shadow of Arab nationalism is ignored.

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