

LAU - MEPI TOMORROW'S LEADERS PROGRAM



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ABOUT LAU MEPI-TL

The Tomorrow’s Leaders Program is a collaboration between the U.S. Department of State’s Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) and the Lebanese American University (LAU). The program, which is coordinated by LAU’s University Enterprise Office, was launched in 2008. It provides higher education opportunities to youth from around the Arab world who demonstrate outstanding leadership potential but who may otherwise not have the chance to study in an American educational system.

The program’s mission is to prepare future Arab leaders for the complexities of the 21st century. Through high-quality academic support, leadership development activities, and civic engagement opportunities, the program fosters professionalism, ethical conduct, and tolerance in order to enable students to become globally competitive leaders and agents of change in their respective societies.

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A Word from the Editor

Nathir Haimoun | Cohort 7



“Humanity Is My Identity”

For the first time in my life I ask myself who am I in terms of existence and identity. In a world full of anger, blood, war, and bitterness, I look within myself but fail to find a clear and decisive answer to the way that I should identify myself. It wasn't that long ago that I started reflecting on my identity and redefining myself in this world, motivated and inspired by being in Lebanon for last 12 months and forming friendships with individuals from different nationalities.

As a person who lived in Syria for the last ten years, I never considered myself as Syrian only, probably because of the nature of its political system, which drew inspiration from the Baath party. Fundamental to the principles and beliefs of the Baath party was Arab unity post-colonization.

I studied this in books at school and got an A most of the time for memorizing this fact. But what I failed to do was question what I read, or at least discuss it with people from other Arab or neighboring countries. Today, after joining the LAU-MEPI TL program and meeting new people from all over the Arab world, I can claim that I have a clearer, more realistic idea about Arab nationalism. Spending time with individuals from a range of cultural and social backgrounds, learning of their fears, needs, aspirations, and dreams, have all helped me turn an abstract idea into something real. One common theme that kept resurfacing is fear; it turns out that most of my new friends are afraid of Arab nationalism because of its ambiguous future that seems to be darker than the shades of night.

I could think of many justifications that may explain this fear such as feelings of exaggerated entitlement, speculative superiority, and a self-serving attitude, all of which, unfortunately, conflict with the fundamental basis of Arab nationalism. For example, friends from the GCC countries voiced the opinion that they are against their wealthy nation financially supporting another Arab nation in the name of Arab nationalism. Also, my Tunisian and Lebanese colleagues consider themselves more civilized than the words Arab nationalism can imply and clearly conveyed a sense of superiority.

I put this new information, the varied perspectives, differing opinions yet same underlying sense of fear, in perspective with regard to all that I had learned and studied for the last 12 years.

I was in pursuit of my answer - who am I?

Meanwhile, many people still consider themselves as Arabs and believe in Arab nationalism; with an Arabic mother tongue, nothing else was needed to define their presence in this world. Their trust in unity is supported by a unified Arab history, expanding centuries during the era that followed the emergence of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula. What's more, they claim that our individual countries are no more than lines drawn by France, England, and other colonial powers. They may even go so far as to compare themselves to the European Union, another successful example of unity despite linguistic and historical differences.

The idea of Arab nationalism is debatable, controversial, and an ongoing process. For some, it is a primary belief forming the foundation of who they are, while for others it is void of any meaning. It is between these two perspectives that we are stuck in our quest, looking for the truth that may never be decisive facts at any time or any place. In the meantime, as we battle our way out of uncertainty, we must all bear in mind that before being an Arab or any citizen of any country, we are humans, thriving on this planet and building it for the future generations.

LAU-MEPI TL News

By Kaies Ben Mariem | Cohort 8

“You get a strange feeling when you’re about to leave a place. Like you’ll not only miss the people you love but you’ll miss the person you are now at this time and this place because you’ll never be this way ever again.” Azar Nafisi

Workshops, trainings and meetings can be quite boring, but not with TLers around! From the onset of the academic year, we have been participating in an interesting variety of workshops from retreats to stress management seminars to debate trainings and movie screenings.

The retreat was the very first interaction the new cohort had with the other students and the program officials. It involved a variety of activities including workshops,

sightseeing, and outdoor activities. Responsibility for preparing and holding the workshops was divided among students and faculty members; some workshops were technical, others were functional, and some were emotional. Students enjoyed the different activities and had a great time wall-climbing, rappelling, zip lining and doing archery. The retreat was a great kickoff for the students, an ideal situation to bond, and a perfect way to start the year.

As the year progressed and the students were immersed in their busy lives trying to manage taking care of their studies, their social life, and their extracurricular activities, the level of stress rose. So, rather appropriately, a stress management workshop was conducted by Ms. Loulwa Kaloyeros to deal with this matter head on. The session included a self-assessment exercise and Ms. Kaloyeros imparted some beneficial tips on how to manage our daily routine in order

to reduce and manage stress.

Debate training was an activity welcomed by the majority of the students as it is a necessary, useful and valuable skill that any leader should have. The workshop took place on the 4th of February, 2016 and it was facilitated by our own students who’ve had a successful experience with debate. The training included a session on the rules of procedures and the flow of debate and a simulation of the British parliamentary where students put into practice their debate skills.

When it comes to TLers, we do not just focus on one thing, we tend to mix, diversify and explore different elements. As some of our friends are into art and film, they communicated their passion by organizing a monthly movie screening to help us discover different cultures, different approaches, and perspectives through the medium of movies.

Who Are You?

In 2009, in Beirut, Sarah starts her presentation by distributing paper to her small audience. There is one question on each: “Who are you?”

Everyone she had ever asked answered in much the same way; answers that center around exterior factors such as name, nationality, religion, age, or answers that are verified by a piece of paper, of a given or forced concept, including passports, birth certificates, and educational degrees. It seems that these days a person’s level of knowledge is measured with papers.

There was one person in the audience that caught Sarah’s attention. A teenager. Through her experience, Sarah had come to realize that it is teenagers who respond the most to her presentations because ‘who they are’ relates to both their physiological and psychological development and the older a person gets, the more they depend on papers to define their identity.

This particular teenager has a complex background and has lived in different environments.

on a small scale, it becomes obvious that the survival of the many depends on the survival of the few. It has always been a matter of quantity, and not a matter of quality.”

Sarah is befuddled. In her discussion with this teenager, she came to realize that official documents, those pieces of paper that are supposed to define us, and the illusion of identity they hint at might be the only reason for the continuity of the human species.

She rethinks his logic in relation to the concept of identity and in relation to the question “Who are you?”

The YOU is a dynamic variable in this question, depending on the environment you live in and one too many uncontrollable factors. Nothing exists if people don’t want it to exist. Everything contributes to the survival of the species, and everything done is done for

it, except for human consciousness which has thus far proven to be a failure; only if we can consider it as just another process, just another step, just another means for survival, it will be nothing more than that.

The boy leaves. He leaves with an identity that he believes in, even though it does not make much sense to him. He leaves with an identity he doesn’t know he has. He leaves with an identity that is truer and more genuine than any answer she had ever gotten.

Beneath the surface level of identity – the papers, nationality, borders, name, birthplace - lies a deep and irrefutable truth: this is where I belong. It is the place that needs me and wants me. It is the purpose of my existence. Every individual matters and maybe that is why states are pushing for more territory and boundaries, so every individual can sense that they belong. Countries are in a constant struggle for more land, more boundaries, more borders, and more

walls. They feel the need to identify and single out the “better” individuals in the “better states” in order to feel the contagiousness of success and sense of superiority that comes with uniqueness. Even the losers survive, hanging on to life with the hope that tomorrow they will be the winners because it’s all about the survival of the many over the loss of the few.

By Kawthar Kadhém | Cohort 8

Arabism was the dominant ideology for many years. In a way, it helped Arab countries gain their independence after many years of rule and dominance from their colonizers. Wars that unified Arabs against a common enemy also helped to build this utopian idea of what Arabism is supposed to be and what being an Arab truly means. But ironically, those wars also caused the faith in Arabism to diminish as Arabs continued to lose the wars with their enemy. The fact that each Arab country was absorbed in and pre-occupied with their own national problems did little to halt the weakening faith in a unified identity.

And so the idea of Arabism started to dwindle. Today, Arab nationalism is not nearly as strong as it was 50 years ago. While only decades ago Arabs boycotted Israel and stopped exporting oil to the West to make a statement of solidarity, now we see our leaders weaker and more self-oriented, making agreements with the West that benefit only the country itself, ignoring the fact that whatever choices an individual Arab country makes also impacts the region as a whole. Consequently, people lost faith in Arabism and what it stood for, but nonetheless tried to keep this conviction alive by finding other common

grounds. This is when religion stepped up and took the podium. People began identifying more with sects, giving rise to sectarianism and dividing each country into blocks according to religious beliefs. Naturally then, instead of Arabs relating to their Arab colleagues per se, they related to Arabs who shared their beliefs. In Iraq, Sudan, Syria and many other states, countries are now divided according to religion, ethnicity, beliefs, and origin. In Bahrain, after the uprising in 2011 and after the government claimed that the movement was sectarian-inspired rather than politically motivated, the country

divided into two religious groups: the Shiites (who are mostly opposed to the government) and the Sunnis (who are mostly loyal to the government). Consequently, our idea of the unified Arab nation was replaced by our belonging to the people with shared beliefs as people chose to unite over religion. Arabism was overpowered, even in the Arab countries that have had revolutions. As in Tunisia and Egypt, Islamist rulers rose to power rather than nationalists, since the majority of Arabs are Muslims. Furthermore, support for a political party or leader is often based solely on religion rather than policy.

Talking from personal experience, many people I know support the Syrian president only because of his religious beliefs, while others oppose him for the same reason, disregarding the sad reality that a country and its people lie in the middle of this sectarianism. In Lebanon, some people blindly follow certain parties just because they share the same religious beliefs, while the party’s agenda, what should be the principal causal factor for support, is of little importance. Even in Bahrain, we see that the influence and power of political parties that adopt Arabism as an ideology have weakened in comparison to Islamist-

Freedom & Arab Identity

If we contemplate the connection between freedom and identity, we'll find that the latter effects and shapes people's freedom, be it political, sexual or even religious. Philosophers have long regarded liberty, how it may contradict or coincide with societal norms and taboos, and what may ensue in the event of a clash.

Alexander Hamilton, a founding father of the United States, chief staff aide to George Washington, and one of the most influential interpreters and promoters of the U.S. Constitution asserted that the reason government is instituted despite the fact that we as humans are naturally free is because: “The passions of men will not conform to the dictates of reason and justice without constraints.”

This is a valid point considering that liberty free of limits does not lead to private or public good. However, such logic may not hold true when it comes to people's acts and how these acts affect their committers. For most Arabs, the first thing that comes to

mind when they hear “liberty” is foulness and moral deterioration. The difference between Arab identity and any other identity is specifying the individual's freedom. We can say that Arabs have a misconstrued concept of personal freedom – primarily that it is an independent concept and thus does not affect other people. In fact, people's behavior and norms not only direct the degree of public freedom, but also impose others' social beliefs on your private life. There is an unspoken and inescapable convention that we are all to some degree aware of and that is our egotistical inclination to use our personal freedom to pursue improprieties and excesses, for which we would blush in private.

As a 20 year-old Egyptian man, I was raised with to believe “Egypt Is My Mother”, a vehemently held truth rooted in the very existence of all those in my generation. In spite of the admirable patriotism implied in this statement, it reveals an important cause of our current problem with ‘liberty’ that touches all the Arab nations: your identity traces your religious, ethical codes and does not permit any moral transgressions although these morals were set by others or retrieved from different religions or cultures.

History provides us with more than enough examples of instances where society obligates a person or a group of people to behave in a way that blends into the

rest of society's behavior out of fear of rebellion and encouraging similar behavior.

I believe that one is free, and this belief - which we are all entitled to as independent individuals with our own thoughts and pursuable dreams - doesn't by any means suggest that I consider myself above society, superior to all that ensures its prosperity at a functional level; however, in our unfortunate case, the government has fallaciously assumed the role as the guardian of our manners and behavior, whether we are causing harm to another or simply trying to fortify our existence and find our place in this world, under the false pretense of protecting the virtues and the morals of our society.

Although such behavior that effectively defines and constrains our basic human right of freedom might be based on good intentions, that is not to say that good intentions can not have ruthless consequences. The problem is essentially that our current sense of Arab identity is the end point of our sense of freedom, failing to grasp the truth that we are inherently free individuals.

By Abdelrahman Ghalab | Cohort 8

Freedom Is Not Free

By Ahmed Ali | Cohort 7

Darkness
was the color these walls chose to be painted in
and silence strung from the ceiling
like a vicious robe,
ready to kiss your neck.

Picture this:
A suffocating space
where instead of air
there's darkness,
and it becomes smaller,
every time your lungs expand.

That's where I was, and I was OK with that.

In there,
the absence of life, was life to me.
From all of the warm darkness
there was some dying light.
I could barely make out what was in front of me
my blindfolded eyes saw shadows
twirling and dancing
barefoot and free.

In the back of my head
the smell of burning wood
cut through the air like a blunt knife
ready to cut me open
and drain every bit of oxygen out of my body
Leaving me to dry.
Just worthless flesh.
Laying there.

That's where I was, and I seemed OK with that.

My head
not turning
fixated on the dancing shadows,
watching every swirl they made
every motion and every step.

Why did I do that?
“It was the proper thing to do”
I was told that this is freedom.
My arms stitched neatly to my sides
in a way I always saw as convenient
and I had this insufferable itch
to move them
and write, and create, and change.

Day after day,
I kept seeing the same dance routine
the same moves

the same whispers underneath their broken breathes
over
and over again...
Heavy with flaws, they kept on dancing
but I stopped enjoying the show
I stopped being distracted by the “freedom” I was given.

For the first time
I turned my head to my left
I could hear my bones shattering,
and I saw my arms
shackled
and warm blood was streaming
making its way
from my wrists all the way to my elbows.

I kept on breaking off these chains
the more I moved
the more blood I shed
the more wounds I carried
but I kept on
until they broke open
and I left them behind me,
drenched in my rusted blood

My skin peeled, raw
And
I WAS
OK with that.
The place I was in
was too small
to contain the universe of creation
that was ready to burst out of me.

So I started leaving heavy footsteps behind me
and I started going somewhere else
anywhere else.
And I was gone
into the light
to make something out of my flesh
I was going and
I saw
I learned
I exposed

I was gone into the light
And it set me on fire.

But I'll tell you what
I preferred being ignited with fire
than comforted
with darkness.



The Day I Lost My Syrian Nationality

By Jad Misri | Cohort 7

The events of this story are completely fictional (unfortunately)

I woke up the other day in my dorm - as usual - and rather unwillingly against the will of every bone in my body - as usual. I left the comfort of my bed with a clear task ahead: I had to go to the embassy to stamp a paper as part of the process of postponing my military service till after I graduated so that I could wholeheartedly give back to my society. As a Syrian, conscription was not unexpected. I had no choice in the matter, no say; such a law is served with disregard for my current plans, not to mention my desire (or lack thereof) to join the armed forces.

I made my way to my destination. Before arrival at the embassy, I was stopped by a soldier at a checkpoint and asked to step out of the cab. He gestured to the cab driver to leave, and he rummaged through my phone, checking my call history, images, WhatsApp chats, voice notes, and so on. I knew that I was innocent. While the soldier was scrolling down my screen, invading my personal space for no apparent reason, I too skimmed through the many memories I had, those cherished and locked in my heart, those that consumed my every thought, those that the soldier could not see.

After checking my papers, which were all in order, he gave me permission to walk to the embassy. And so my morning resumed. When the embassy was finally in my line of vision, my already withering mood soon got worse; droves of people were queued outside and there were still two hours before the embassy opened. It seemed that they had woken up earlier than me, way earlier, to form what was definitely longer than a one-kilometer queue! My only choice was to join them, and so I did, blending into the crowd of hopeful and desperate spirits. It was raining, and why wouldn't it be? Two hours before the still growing queue would start to move, I allowed myself to listen to the stories that were being told behind me in hope that time would pass faster and standing under the rain would be more bearable. One kid was telling his story; his entire family had made it to Turkey, and only he was trapped in Lebanon. He was there to renew his passport so he could join them before they all headed off to Greece. Then there was a man. He was there to register his two-year-old daughter. He never had enough money before now to do so.

Arabism

The two hours eventually passed and it took another two to actually enter the embassy. It was finally my turn to approach the window. My shoulders were hurting from all the pushing and shoving (on both the receiving and giving end) that comes naturally when tensions rise and patience falls – and four hours of waiting in less than ideal conditions is conducive to such apprehensive feelings!

As my tired feet took those few steps toward the window, I felt like a groom walking down the aisle, about to embark on a life-changing journey, about to dive head first into unknown waters. At that moment, nothing could appease my nerves.

I stood, looking at the long face of a 30 something-year-old grumpy man, with a glass panel separating us and only a tiny segment open through which his voice traveled, and a low voice at that. For some inexplicable reason, he didn't see the need to raise his voice to the level that it would be humanly possible to decipher his words. Rather, as it turns out, it is my duty to hear whatever it is that he was saying.

Grumpy man

What do you want?

Me

Excuse me? I didn't

hear you

Grumpy man

What do you want?

I still couldn't hear him, so I just slipped my papers and passport through that multi-purpose gap in the glass segment and he took them with a look on his face, a familiarity perhaps, that reminded me of my own father.

He turned to his computer screen. His eyes were moving hastily up and down. I felt that same pang I experienced only a few hours earlier at the checkpoint - a pang that was pushing me to question my life decisions and my sweet and bitter life memories vividly ran through my mind. And here I was again, with that same feeling, resisting the urge to reflect on and assess my life choices. His eyes grew wider. I started to question my entire existence. A smile swept across his face. Then, with a loud, clear voice he said: "Excuse me Sir" and I responded "Sir?" with no idea as to what his next words might be, still trying to evaluate the sudden change in his demeanor. He continued: "Yes Sir, please forgive me but...

At this point, I started to feel the air thickening around me, as my body prepared to stand its ground as two huge security guys grabbed my already aching shoulders.

Now smiling man

It looks like you're no longer Syrian

Me

What?

Now smiling man

You're no longer

Syrian sir

Me

Please double check.

There must be a mistake

Now smiling man

No sir. I'm sure you're

not Syrian anymore.

Have a nice day

A nice day?

Now these were not the words that I expected to hear as I rolled out of bed and greeted this seemingly typical morning. I was prepared to hear many a thing, but not this.

I took a step back from the window, and my body found the nearest chair.

I wanted to grasp this moment, prolong it, understand it, prepare to revisit it. I needed to take a deep breath, fill my lungs with the air I am so accustomed to and say goodbye to this place. It was like walking out of my grandmother's house for the last time before it was sold. But, at the same time, it was more like receiving a ticket off the Titanic.

I was a mess of raw emotions. Paralyzed by the utterance of one grumpy man's words, which hurdled me into a state of mental and emotional chaos. What just happened?

I remained calm. I maintained my composure. I took my

phone from the front desk and stepped out of the embassy. The world seemed different. People seemed different. I walked pass that very same checkpoint that insulted me and belittled me, only now, on my way out, the soldiers smiled at me. Did they know I was no longer Syrian? Why were they smiling? I was even more confused.

I took the bus back to my dorm. I leaned my head on the window and remembered all the streets I played in as a child, streets that I grew up in, streets that are my home. I also recalled all those awkward reactions I got whenever I told someone I was Syrian. The palpable change in their facial expressions is something I had gotten used to.

I felt empty. What should I do with my life now? I no longer have military service to postpone; I'll no longer have to renew my passport every two years; I'll finally have a bank account like my friends; I'll be able to get a job and, most importantly, I can go anywhere now.

Ironically, by losing my nationality - which was supposed to define me - I found myself. I've never wanted to belong to a country just like I've never wanted to practice a religion. For no apparent reason, I suddenly felt connected to the other six billion human beings occupying this planet. It was a surreal feeling, liberating perhaps. I was no longer restricted by treaties or borders; I now belonged to the nation of the people.

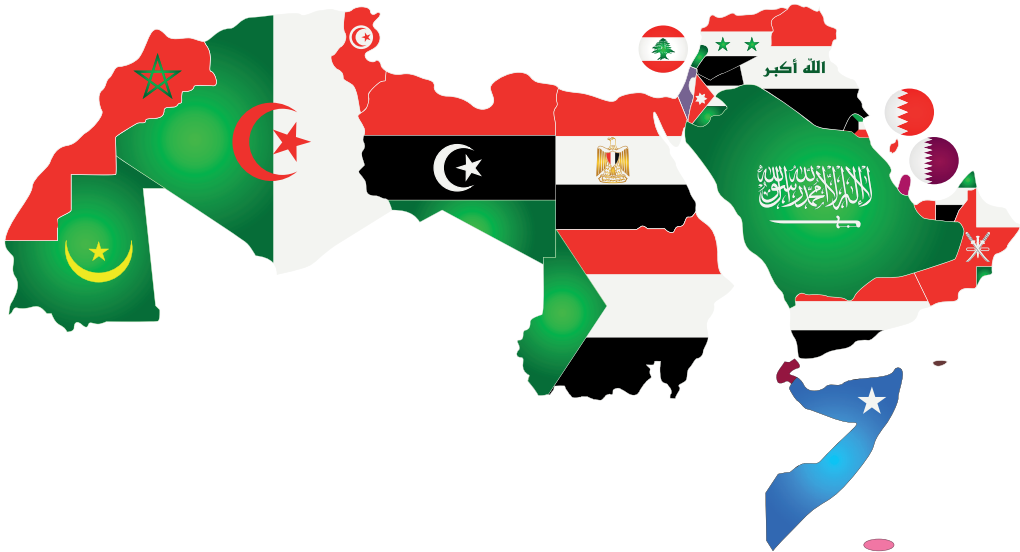
I reached my destination in Byblos, but on that day, I didn't hail a cab up to university. Instead, I went to the beach. I took a walk by the sea and roamed the old city like a crusader roaming Jerusalem. Street signs suddenly seemed irrelevant and lost all meaning. I didn't need to know where I was; I was too consumed by the smell of the old rocks, filling my lungs with a new sense of hope. I never felt so attached to this soil as I did that day – the day when I was freed from all my fears.

At one stage, as I was strolling with an unfamiliar but much welcomed sense of inner peace that made me walk a little but taller, I wondered what I might answer when the very common questions of "who are you?" and "where are you from?" are asked. And then I knew. I may have lost my "official" identity but I found myself and I finally felt like a complete person.

Arab Cultural Identity

There’s a popular saying you’re undoubtedly familiar with
“We only know the true value of something when we lose it.”

By Ghufuran Haidar | Cohort 8



Through the years, the Arab world has witnessed the dangerous spread of grudges and the shameful evolution of discrimination based upon race and religion, but no one ever thought this would pave the path to civil war. Wars in which people’s intentions were transformed, childhoods were destroyed, lives were lost, and dreams were burned. It is sadly true that only through war, through complete and utter destruction of all things material and non-material, do people realize the value of their country. It is most certainly a lesson learned the hard way, hard in the sense that pain is experienced in unlimited and unconceivable ways.

In war, people, and especially the youth, reset their priorities in life and gain a deeper

understanding of nationalism. In the past, not so long ago, when you randomly asked any teenager why s/he would choose to leave his/her country and the Arab world to study abroad, s/he would, without hesitation, immediately answer to the effect that Arabs do not have the required technological development or updated learning techniques; that Arabs are simply not advanced enough. Nowadays though, after this difficult period of time which forced us all to redefine our identity and reestablish our patriotism, you might find an acceptable number of adolescents who are proud of being from that specific region and even for being Arab, and the thought of leaving their homeland in pursuit of a better future is now second-guessed and

contemplated further in light of a renewed loyalty that transpired from hardship. Not surprisingly, some young people are completely oblivious to the meaning of Arab nationalism, a major problem resulting from lack of education and/or poverty. Others believe that a unified identity is not possible as Arabs are afraid of the future and of the great nations’ reaction to our unification. However, there is a minority who still believe that it might one day be possible if it is considered as political and economic integration. They believe that the only solution that can be established is the implementation of a regional educational system with the common objective of educating upcoming generations

about the importance of Arab unification. Shining a light on the benefits of such unity, on a moral level and also on a more material level where Arab countries pool their resources, whether it is oil, agricultural food, or industrial materials, is a promising step in the right direction.

Being away from home, I have realized that when combined, your vision and your determination can have tremendous power. I am not a politician or an activist; I am an ordinary and simple human being who does not care about which side is right or wrong in war. Not because I believe there is no right and wrong, or that it is never so black and white, but because I care about the innocent children who die because of people’s greed and pursuit of power. We are not talking

about theories, about textbook depictions of life, but about the real bitter truth we are in the midst of, one that is destroying the next generation’s future. For me, war is just a game where humans are sold and bought and the only victims are the citizens - the youth, the children, the elderly. It’s never the president, the leader, the dictator....

My reflections here are not a vain attempt to predict the future. I am merely drawing a dull black and white painting that symbolizes the Arab vision for the future. I believe that the most important lesson we should all remind ourselves of is a very simple one: cooperation is the key to unity.



“LAU ALUMNI WELCOME CEREMONY FOR THE TL GRADUATING STUDENTS”

May 2015



A Jumble of Multinational Strings

By Majdoulin Al Mwaka | Cohort 8

Interviewer

“What can you tell me about yourself? Who is Majdoleen?”

For many citizens of the world, their identity is a rather unambiguous, uncomplicated idea. However, for citizens of the Arab world, it is not so straightforward. Many of us currently suffer from an identity crisis, especially when we are wrapped up in the general idea of being an Arab, yet confined to a specific country with an inability to experience a sense of belonging anywhere else.

After having lived in Kuwait till the age of eight, I moved to Syria. Everything was different. My whole world changed. I felt like I had left a part of me in Kuwait and was forced to love Syria just because, legally, it’s my country of origin. Although not more than a two-hour flight from Kuwait, Syria seemed like a new world. The only Arabic I knew was Kuwaiti, so, needless to say, I stood out like a sore thumb among my relatives who proudly flaunt a thick Aleppo accent. To my family and relatives putting my “Kuwaiti ways” aside

was necessary in order to embrace my true identity as a “Halabiyeh”. They bombarded me with instructions and guidelines on how I should act as a Syrian and why I should embrace my country’s and city’s heritage, culture, and traditions. Albeit well intentioned, my loved ones’ underlying logic for my need to fall in love with Syria was simply because it’s my homeland. But, despite the then lack of years to my creditability, I knew different.

The idea that whatever country you have plastered on your passport is the one you should support and love unconditionally strikes me as a rather meaningless, blind patriotism. I do love Syria, but it is a love that happened on its own accord – as love so often does. It is not something that I could control, time, or force. As my surroundings blended into my day-to-day life, and the comfort of familiarity showed its face, mental mementos

Me

“Oh that’s easy, you see I’m” Wait a second... who am I? This is a fairly simple question. I should be able to answer as effortlessly as stating my name, yet I have no clue how to respond. Who am I?

engraved on every corner and every stone of my homeland formed, and grew, and are now etched in my heart. I also began reading and gaining knowledge about this country of mine to help me shape and mold a true identity for myself. I was falling in love.

However, as time passed and I reached adolescence, I was faced with another change, one that would eventually lead me to discover yet another layer of my compounding and oftentimes overbearing notion of identity. I left what was my home for the past many years – a home I learned to live in harmony with, a home I was head over heels for – to join the prestigious LAU-MEPI TL program in Lebanon. I was to spend the next few years in a new country with a group of individuals from diverse Arabic countries.

Thus far, I can say that my experience as a TLER has been more than enjoyable and educational. We have forged friendships that

go beyond a national identity; we have blurred geographical borders and come to appreciate identity on a much more abstract and meaningful level.

It first began by sharing our cultures and experiences, learning more and more about each other as well as ourselves along the way. It became patently clear how we differed in some ways and were the same in others. Soon enough, we felt the pang of nostalgia for homes and places we had never been and a yearning for comparable liberating experiences. Our paths intersected and because of that, the whole Arab world feels like home to me. I no longer belong to one place. My new friendships have enabled me to form profound connections with other countries and now I am also Kuwaiti, Tunisian, Bahraini, Yemeni, Libyan, and Palestinian. I am all of these; I am an Arab. All the memories I have made as a proud TLER, the good times and the tough times, the highs

and the lows, have seeped into what now shapes my identity.

Home is no longer just a designated city in a specific country on a map. It’s not just one place, but many places that are forever connected with endearing and fortified strings. Our connections to those strings are what eventually form our self-perceptions. Although I have established roots in Syria and it will always be my motherland, I am also an Arab whose branches are continuously diverging and extending to reach across all the Arab countries. For this reason, I can say that I’m not afraid of being homesick and denying this truth would be nothing short of waging a war against myself. As John le Carré so aptly said: “Home’s where you go when you run out of homes.”

My fellow TLers have confirmed one truth: I’ll never run out of homes.

Is Arab Nationalism Just an Illusion?

By Ghofran Ashor | Cohort 8

This is the question I found myself pondering over in a stream of consciousness. As a 19 year-old Libyan female, this may be an unusual thought to reflect on. From a young age in Libya, society and school alike taught us that religion is the main unifying factor in the Arab world. But now, as I reconsider all that was spoon-fed to us, such an idea seems illogical because if this is the case, all Christians, Jews, other believers and minorities are excluded from this equation just because their population size is relatively smaller in comparison to the Islamic population. At school, we were also taught that the Arabic language serves to unify us, but again, this only leads to further exclusion of minority groups. The older I got, the more unanswered questions I had, and the greater the urge I felt to seek answers that would fill the gaps that were only growing.

The Berbers (Amazigh as known in the Arabic language) for instance, are the natives of Libya and lived in this land long before the Arabs came along and claimed it an Arab nation, resulting in the alienation and loss of national identity for this indigenous minority. They suddenly became foreigners in their own homelands. Amazigh are but one example of cultural minorities who suffered this ill fate. There are also the Tabu and Tawarik in the Maghreb region, the Kurds, Armenians, Circassians, Nubian, and Turkmen.

It is examples such as these that led me to ask questions including: What brings us all together? What made these 22 countries an “Arab Nation?” Was it geography? Why were some included and others not? Why specifically these countries? I took on the role of investigator and started researching the inception of Arab nationalism in hope of finding some answers. It turns out that Arab nationalism originated

in the “Islamic Empire” in the sixth century. All inhabitants from the borders of India, through Persia and the Middle East, along the north coast of Africa, and into Al-Andalus (Arabic Spain) were considered Arab, defined by ethnicity and language and not by geography. Then, with the repressive rule of the Ottoman Empire in the fourteenth century, things changed.

In the 17 century, the Ottoman Empire reached the peak of its greatness, only to begin its decline the following century with the gradual loss of significant territories in Europe to the European empires that were steadfastly gaining strength and power. Each time the Ottoman Empire lost against the European empires, the latter pressed on the former to give more rights to minorities within the structure of the Ottoman Empire, strengthening these minorities in much the same way as with the Serbians and then the Greeks in the early 1800’s. The development of sectarianism in society

triggered a sectarian war within the Ottoman Empire just as it did in the Emirate of Mount Lebanon between the Druze and the Maronites in 1860. The Ottoman Empire fostered conflict between religious and ethnic groups in order to sustain and reinforce its own power through the false illusion that it was maintaining balance between these groups. It endeavored to erase the Arab identity through Turkification; the process of transforming the Arabs to Turks by force by imposing the Turkish language as the only official language. The targeted classes were minorities, mainly Christians who repelled the process by clinging to the Arab language and trying to disseminate it through immigration and literature. Elia Abu Madi and Gibran Khalil Gibran, nineteenth and twentieth century Lebanese Christian Arabic writers, were two notable examples of the latter who reinforced the idea that the Arab nation is based on language, and language is the

ultimate unifying factor. In this regard, it was the Lebanese Christians who actually revived Arab nationalism in the second half of the 1800’s during the Mutesarifate period in what became known as the Arab Renaissance. The rivalry between European powers in WWI led to the defeat of the Turkish Empire, catapulting the British and French Mandates in the Arab world. After WWII and the end of the mandates, most Arab countries sought independence. In Egypt, Gamal Abdel Nasser came to power in the early 1950s, promoting and championing Arab nationalism, which, again, stressed on the principle of language as a unifying factor. He heralded that every Arabic speaker within a certain geographic area is an Arab, thus igniting political, cultural, and historical unity among all Arabs. Being a charismatic leader abetted his intentions and served his purpose well.

Ever since, we commonly hear expressions such

as “Arab World”, “Arab Nation” and “Arab Identity,” but we haven’t witnessed any Arab unity. They are terms that are used loosely, taken to mean many things and interpreted as we please, or, as best suits our interests. Unfortunately, they have come to be used carelessly and in vain of our ancestors’ efforts to adhere to them.

If anything, we are witnessing more Arab division than any notion of unity. We cannot even cross the artificial borders that the French and British imperialists drew after WWI, dividing the region among them into foreign-dominated mandates. How can we be an Arab nation when we are not politically or economically united? How can we be an Arab nation when there is a conventional “non-speaking Arabic country” among us that was established by taking over the Palestinian land? And how are we an Arab nation when some of these “Arab” countries have signed peace treaties with the “State of Israel”?

“What is it that brings us all together?” is a question that has been haunting me since it first occurred to me to ask. What name do we all fall under, both as majorities and minorities? What is our common denominator despite the countless differences? It came as a surprise to know that it is neither religion nor language, not even geography or the bits and pieces of culture we share. It is humanity. Humanity is a form of internationalism negating the very essence of nationalism, national identity and divisions, endorsing that all human beings are spread across different borders simply by geographic coincidence and that the true value lies in people not in land. With the answer I was seeking arming me with the power of knowledge I yearned, I can claim that the 196 counties including the 22 “Arab” nations are nothing but bare lands and without their people, any kind of declared nationalism is indeed an illusion.

When It Takes Your Breath Away

By Remonda Younan
TL Alumna - Class of 2015

Sometimes I feel like giving up and I’m sure that if you are honest, you occasionally feel this way too. Whether it is a job, academic success, relationships or any sort of life challenge, wanting to give up feels like running a marathon that takes your breath away. In fact, what I have realized during this year after graduation, is that life itself is a marathon and it doesn’t matter how fast you run, or who is running on either side of you, but rather, how hard you compete against that inner voice that tells you to quit.

In all honesty, when Nuran asked me to write a piece for this newsletter, I was at a loss as to what to write, not too certain, given that I still haven’t achieved all the goals I had set for myself one year ago. She advised me to write about my feelings and seeing as how I have felt like giving up, but didn’t, and sometimes still feel like giving up, but won’t, I thought it a suitable topic. Although we typically prefer to read about accomplishments rather than the process of achieving them, I decided that my reflections and personal experiences thus far would deem it more honest and transparent (and hopefully inspiring) to write about the journey and not the destination, the struggle and not the reward.

This is not to sound preachy or by any means an authority in the field of human behavior, but I believe that we are unfortunately too focused on the end goal, impatient to proudly hold our trophy high above our heads, high enough for the world to see our achievement, our success, our immortality as we define it. Albeit my journey is short and the path ahead of me is indeed longer than that which is behind me, I can gingerly and humbly claim that I have learned this invaluable life lesson, that my soul and mind have been awakened and are henceforth cautious of this very human misconception. I have learned that the satisfaction of success and the reward of my efforts are dimmed without the fight, overshadowed

by self-glory. We are impatient to reap the grandeur of crossing the finish line, failing to remember, or realize, or acknowledge that there is no glory without pain, without tears, without picking ourselves up, without running out of breath, without silencing that inner voice.

Another reality I will surely need to fall back on more often than I would like is the inescapable necessity to change. Things don’t always turn out as planned and so we need to be flexible, endorse change, and realize that change is not synonymous with giving up, but rather it is the essential ingredient to ensure personal and professional progress. Acquiring the wisdom to distinguish between accepting the things you cannot change and finding the determination to change the things you can is by no means an easy task, but most certainly a valuable one.

As certainly as there will be days when we feel invincible, ready to take on the world and run like the wind, there will be days when we need to slow down, re-assess our strategies, and take a moment to catch our breath.

Each is as beautiful as the other.

Rethinking Revolutions: What Season Is the Arab World Today?

By Ikram Hamizi | Cohort 8

During the last fortnight of December 2010, uprising started in Tunisia in the face of political corruption. One year later, Egyptians went to the streets united for the same cause, which was reforming the political system, and they succeeded in abolishing the corrupted regimen. After that, several similar movements arose in other Arab countries in call for their rights in what sociologists refer to as a water ripple effect. However, at some point, these movements lost their path when protests that started out as a call for democracy, turned into bloodshed with rivalry between ethnicities and religions, ingraining sectarianism and forcing people to question their identity and existence.

These days, “Freedom” and “Right of Self-Determination” are some of the many expressions that are politically misused to attract different communities and minorities for the sake of instilling and endorsing segregation. Sometimes, when I hear people talking about partition in the Arab countries in a praising tone and as the favorable solution for the Arab countries, I involuntarily cringe, my toes curl, and I feel shivers down my spine at the mere absurdity of the idea. I do belong to a certain ethnicity of the many in my country; and I may have been born in a culture that is unique from other parts of Algeria; I also may have talked in “H’chawith” before learning Arabic in school and have grandmothers who cannot communicate in Arabic. I am Chaouyia, and Amazighiya, but I am strictly Algerian before anything else. Moreover, I am an Arab, an African, and, above all, I am human. So if some ethnic fanatics want to divide for whatever motive, I would rather die before seeing my country crumbled to pieces. The sovereignty that my grandmother was electrically tortured for during the French colonialism, the millions of martyrs who sacrificed their souls to paint the red crescent and star of our flag with their chaste blood, the land and history that has unified different cultures today are not easily forgotten, nor can they be obliterated or shaken from our memories. At this scary rate of disarray, if all the Arab countries divide on a religious basis as Sudan or into ethnic regions as is the case with Iraq, not only will the Arab identity decay, but the Arab world would vanish and be substituted with small ethnic or religious entities that live in a Forest Policy, creating, without doubt, geopolitical conflicts; not to mention the negative impact dissociation has on the economy of countries.

Revolutions have become self-limiting and restricted to personal interests. Furthermore, the main goal of “Free

Palestine” is withering away, satisfying the enemy’s aspirations, an enemy that would expectedly seek to serve its interests from any flaw and benefit from any weakness. Now, the direction that these revolutions are taking is of more interest to the enemy than to the countries in question. As Arabs are preoccupied with other challenges, nations are more prone to the submission of their rights, and more importantly, the Palestinians’ Right of Return. At the beginning of these then promising and inspirational movements, people were hopeful. We all were. We were optimistic that the Arab Spring was going to bring to power governments that would make the official Arab stance firmer, stronger than ever, and less prone to surrender. After a long time of repression, our Palestinian brothers and sisters saw a beam of hope again, but sadly, that dream was put aside. Why should we care about that specific piece of land? People must move on, belonging is old-fashioned – or so they believe. What is more important now is which country is going to help us and supply us with weapons to be used against each other. Nevertheless, Mahmoud Darwich reminds us that “Being a Palestinian means to be ailed with an incurable hope.”

If these revolutions’ aim is democracy and freedom, then I do not think they achieved a minute fraction of their goal. I fully believe that change does not happen at the press of a magical button, but we have to step back a little and ask ourselves: Was it the right way from the beginning? Are massacres what we took from the lessons of Gandhi and Mandela? Is slaughtering our brother the example we are setting for our children? Do we want them to believe that war is the only solution? Is this the society we want to belong to? Societies where everyone thinks he or she is superior to everybody else, and where the word “diversity” is

a curse rather than richness? A revolution is the evolution of the mind and soul, it is foremost an educational journey. Revolutions are more than overthrowing a president; a revolution is a moral venture that uplifts values and ethics, holding the purest universal message of nonviolence and humanity.

From a Reality to a Utopian Dream

By Marwa Ben Khalifa | Cohort 8

“Before embarking on a discussion about Arab identity, we first ought to ask ourselves some basic questions: Who are Arabs? What makes an Arab an Arab? What are the essential characteristics of the Arab identity?”

Before the youth of this generation can accurately perceive and genuinely embrace the concept of a unified identity, they need to understand who they are and where they come from.

Just because Arabs gained their independence from their colonizers does not mean that they are not culturally colonized. How can we even ask our youth about their Arab identity if they are French/English educated, have lunch at McDonald’s, and wear American Eagle and Adidas?

How can we ask such a question if history is dotted with conflicts

between Arabs, conflicts we are still witnessing today? How can we ask such a question if our fellow Arabs are brutally killed every single day in Palestine, Syria and Yemen? Arabism was once one of the major factors that encouraged many countries to work toward gaining their independence and establishing their own legitimate states. For instance, leaders such as Gammal Abdel Nasser or Habib Bourguiba unified their people under hegemonic ideas such as freedom, dignity, and independence.

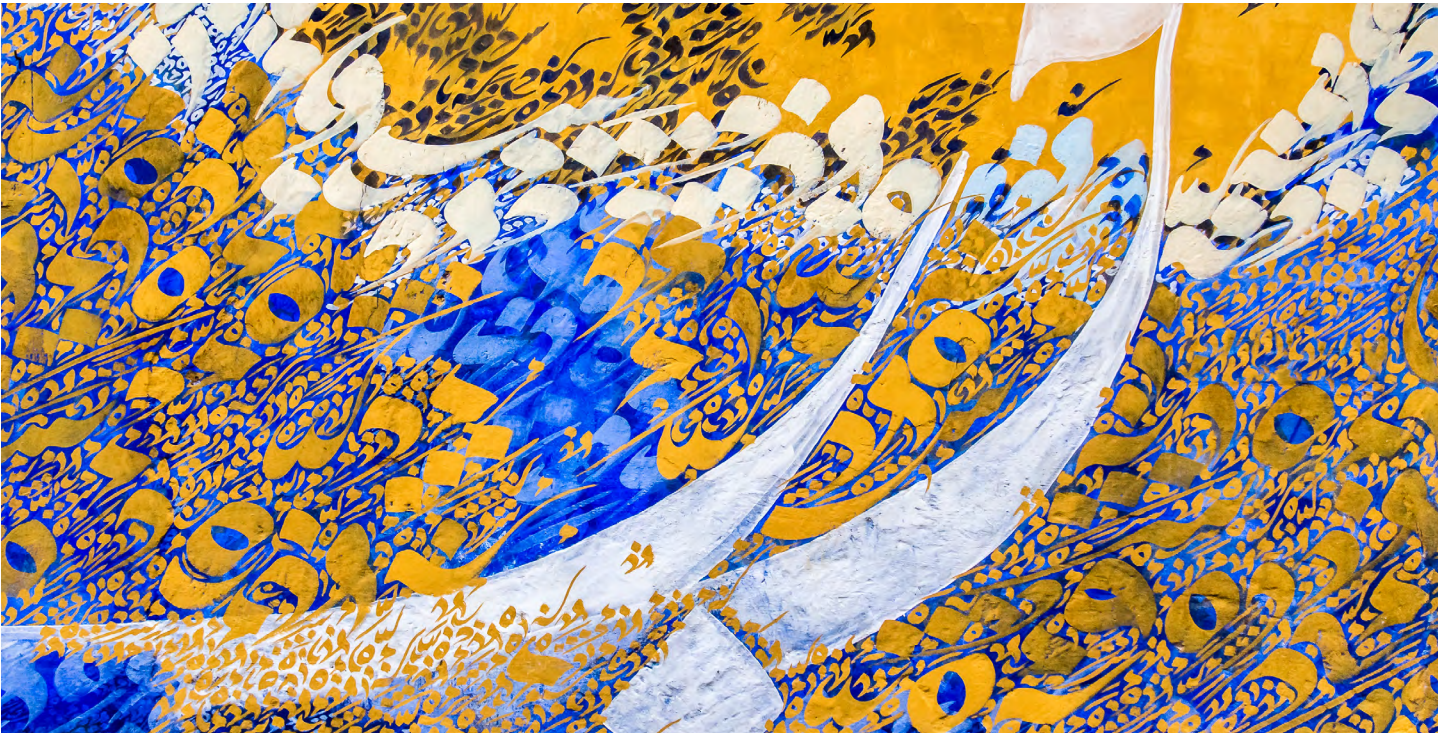
Arabs were drawn to the concept of Arabism and, as a result, they fought for it because of their

escalating feeling of not fully belonging to the French or English people. Fully aware that they were different in terms of their cultures, beliefs, traditions, and principles, Arabs believed that they could make the change and be the masters of their own destiny, the ones to preserve and maintain their identity and unity.

Today though, the wind blows in another direction and the birds sing a different tune. Over the years, somehow and somewhere, Arabism turned from a motivating, inspiring ideology to a labeling notion that is absent and hollow of any sentiment, of any truth. Today, the concept of a

unified Arab identity is more akin to a utopian dream, one that requires nothing short of a miracle to become a reality. Yes, it cannot be refuted that various initiatives have been taken by Arab leaders in order to empower Arabs, such as the Arab League, but they are not enough. The problem is that for the younger generation, Arabism is nothing more than a set of abstract assumptions, accepted without question but not existing in their consciousness. Rather than forming the basis of their identity, guiding their beliefs, shaping their principles, Arabism has become a part of history, a story that is told - not a lifelong concept.

What is most ironic in this current state of turbulence we find ourselves entrenched in, is that although the notion of Arabism is somehow fading every single day, further and further out of our each, our communal sense of belonging to the Arab world somehow remains.



On the Immorality of Conscription

By Mohamed El Gohary | TL Alumnus – Class of 2015

Ours is a story of three men, all of whom are fresh graduates. The first has been actively seeking the job of his dreams, the career he wishes to pursue for the rest of his life. The second has managed to enroll in a postgraduate program to continue his studies and undertake research in one of the highest ranking universities in the world. The third tried looking for a job for a short time, only to give up upon receiving his first rejection letter; he then spent his days roaming the streets purposelessly, complaining about his lack of money and how he was entitled to much more than the little pocket money he received from his parents. The support of his claim resting upon his need, not his ability, not his effort, but his need.

These three men, all of whom are very different, were facing the same fate. A few months after their graduation, they were all conscripted, called upon to serve in their nation's great army. The first had to leave his job. His employer then started losing business because he could not hire another competent candidate on time. The second fellow was told that he would have to give up on his studies for the time being. That he would not be permitted to leave the country until he served his great nation. That any personal gain or interest is secondary to the homeland's call for duty. That his country needed him in arms much more than in a research laboratory. However, when the third man heard the news, he was ecstatic, completely and utterly overjoyed that finally he would be of some use and have a purpose. The extra little cash he would receive from the military would certainly be a welcomed boost to his Shisha allowance. Ironically, he who was nothing yesterday, would

tomorrow hold a rifle and determine the fate of others.

The first man was a civil engineer. His employer hired another engineer who had just managed to graduate. That engineer was reaping the benefits of being an only child as this meant that legally he could not be conscripted. Soon after he started working, he made an ill-informed decision, a bad judgment call concerning the design of his first building that unfortunately led to its collapse, leaving 10 dead. The second fellow decided to illegally flee the country. He got in touch with some smugglers who promised to get him to Europe where he could start his studies on time. The moment he stepped foot on the campus grounds, he instinctively knew that his life would never again be the same; he was deemed a traitor, an outlaw, a fugitive. He had to face his new brutal reality: he could not return to his country without the fear of prosecution until the age of thirty. The third

man went on to become one of the best soldiers the country's military ever had. He obediently carried out his orders, permanently silencing enemies of the nation. Whether they were peaceful protesters or ISIS fighters did not really bother him. He was the perfect soldier, following orders to a T, not once questioning their legality, morality, or necessity. A soldier's purpose, he was told, is to follow orders, not question them, not second-guess them, not doubt them - all in the best interests of the motherland.

Our three men are but an illustration of three ideas. When success is deemed unnatural, failure becomes the norm. When ability is sanctioned, it is unavoidable that men of ability become the outlaws. When mediocrity is rewarded, violence becomes the reward. By what right does a country forcefully demand the time and effort of its citizens to join the military? What is the difference between a conscription officer and an abductor

who holds a gun to his victim's head and kidnaps him/her? Yet, more importantly, what happens if the victim refuses to cooperate? Is it logical to assume that the country is safer if it is defended by a group of unwilling, poorly trained men who do not wish to take up arms but are forced to, than by soldiers who take pride in their military ability, who would not hesitate to put themselves in harm's way, in the face of danger, for the betterment of their nation?

We are raised to believe that a man should go out of his way to defend his homeland and should nurture the sense of self-sacrifice in the name of patriotism. That it is the highest honor to join your country's military. That one's effort, time, and future are cheap tributes to be paid for the security of the nation and in defense against its enemies. Yet, those who issue such claims fail to define who these enemies may be. The vague rhetoric threatening us, that the country is always under

threat, that our enemies are waiting for the right time to attack us, that we are vulnerable and in need of protection by our great military never seem to materialize. If my country is under threat of eminent war, a real one, I would be the first to take up arms to defend myself and my loved ones. But to pretend that somebody else's enemy is mine, to sell me the idea that somehow my country needs me more in arms – at times of peace – than at work to build its economy is preposterous. I have always been opposed to dogmatic ideas that negate the individual in favor of the collective, nationalism included. Conscription is the worst form in which the ludicrousness of such ideas prevails. Conscription is an evil act that entrenches on the liberties of men, destroys their moral, and only produces halfhearted soldiers who are neither equipped nor willing to go to battle. It is as immoral as abduction.

A Work-In-Progress

“My identity has no definition and can not be reduced to a chain of words simply because I am still a work-in-progress.”

By Malak Buhardan | Cohort 8

Growing up in Bahrain, I spoke the standard literary Arabic rather than the Bahraini dialect and I never quite felt that sought-after comfort that comes with integration. When I was young, I was obsessed with cartoons and because they were all in standard Arabic, I picked up the language at a young age. Many people I met found it odd that I spoke in standard Arabic and endlessly suggested that I should learn the local dialect. But my mother's family was Persian or what we call Ayem, and so when I communicated with them in daily conversation, I couldn't use the Bahraini dialect because they too were not familiar with it.

Before I reached my teens, we moved to Kuwait where I heard the same comments regarding the language I spoke. In Kuwait, I met my best friend Rawan, who taught me how to speak in the Kuwaiti dialect. She was one of the first people who actually tried to help me assimilate into the community, teaching me the traditions and what was considered a norm and what was not. I have not forgotten her efforts because for the first time I had what I needed to assume the identity of a Khaligi girl.

I spent the next few years finding my place in Kuwait, only to return to Bahrain. I moved so many times, in and out of schools, from city to city, constantly back and forth between Bahrain and Kuwait that at some point I lost myself. Although I mentally understood and fully processed what was the normal and expected

behavior from girls at that time, I couldn't quite integrate in the culture and couldn't change the essentials of what defined me. I loved my lifestyle in Kuwait, and I loved my friends and so on several occasions, I almost accepted it as being me. But then, on the verge of yielding, I felt something missing.

I felt like I was in a bubble that clearly engulfed my identity, my race, my background, and my nationality, but, on some subconscious level, I refused to accept it.

All that I could accept was that I was a girl who knew so much and so little about the world.

I had one too many unresolved issues. For example, I couldn't digest the constant labeling of people; I loved meeting people from different countries, learning about their cultures, dreams, and accomplishments, but me conversing with a non-Khaligi was shun upon, deemed unacceptable because they were labeled depending on where they came from. I hated these labels because they built barriers between classmates, friends, and families. How could this culture consider that being from a different race, ethnicity, or nationality is sufficient to regard another human being as inferior or less important than themselves? I couldn't understand some of the mentalities and mindsets no matter how hard I tried. I didn't know who they were or who I was. All that was confirmed to me is the normalcy of structure in a society and for people to follow it. My identity isn't something that I could have defined during my high school years; it's not even something that I can define now. In fact, my identity has no definition and can not be reduced to a chain of words simply because I am still a work-in-progress.





Who Are We & What Is Our Identity?

By Nuran Ben-Musa | Cohort 7

If you grew up in Sanaa, or you are originally from Cairo, or you live in Tripoli, the idea of being an Arab has, in varying degrees, influenced you to the extent that it may well be embedded in your personality. This is a natural phenomenon; after all, your nationality, your homeland and your culture all at some point converge to create your identity – your personal sense of belonging. But who exactly is an Arab? Well, a person who comes from any one of the 22 Arab countries is considered an Arab. It's not a difficult question with rather straightforward and clean-cut answer.

Or is it?

As of late, the Arab identity has undergone some instability and many Arabs are trying to distance themselves from this identity which has come to be more of a label than anything else; a way to categorize a group of people and attach a certain stigma to any person carrying this label. No longer is “Arab” just a word that geographically defines which part of the world you come from, or refer simply to people with shared cultures and similar beliefs. Being an Arab today implies a lot more than it used to and is a lot more dangerous than it once was, somehow becoming synonymous with less than desirable attributes.

Linked with standings such as terrorism and extremism, the word ‘Arab’ has been trending lately on social media websites like twitter and Facebook, international news networks channels and renowned

newspapers, all of which are painting their own portrait of what an Arab is and feeding it to the world. Showering it with negative connotations and re-defining an entire culture with their contentious choice of words and oversimplified perceptions, the western world has not only rendered Arabs as the big, bad wolf, but made us doubt who we are and question our own identity.

Let’s take a step back and consider the Arab identity. Arab identity is an umbrella under which stands a mixture of religions, ethnicities, sub-cultures, and dialects that delineates people in this geographical area as belonging to the significant Arab world rather than to the modern nation-states. Therefore, Arabism is neither associated with race nor religion. If you ask a Syrian and a Moroccan, they both might identify themselves as Arabs, but

by no means are they from the same ethnicity. Also, being a non-Muslim does not contradict being an Arab. Consequently, the Arab identity is a cultural linguistic identity that developed and maintained its shape through a common history. Despite the physical boundaries of such a vast geographical area, it is our distinctive and shared culture that connects us. The first and perhaps the most significant feature is the Arabic language, a crux of the Arab Identity. Since the Arabic language was spread from the Arabian Peninsula, Arabic has been a dominant language in the area. With time, various dialects sprouted out of standard Arabic, the base, but it still retains its essence.

With the language, a culture was formed, the influence of which spanned to poetry, music, folk stories

and superstitions that passed from generation to generation. In fact, folk stories that you hear in the old souk of Damascus are very similar to those told in downtown Cairo, differing only in the spirit of their sources. One of the manifestations of a traditional superstition is eye-shaped amulet or the five-fingered hand charm believed to protect against the evil eye; it might be found hung on the wall of a Lebanese home, an Egyptian home, or an Iraqi home, to name but a few.

Generosity and hospitality are also essential traits of Arabism, a part of our identity we take great pride in. Do not expect an Arab to stop offering you food or coffee; they will persist in asking, so if you refused the first time, be ready for at least two more invitations. The family network is another central aspect of Arab identity. Family gatherings, respect for

our elders, reverence for unity and collectivism, and the comfort that comes with belonging to a larger group are all part of who we are.

What we share in common are the very same factors that identify us; primarily, the shared language, culture and history along with the qualities of respect, tolerance, and generosity. This is who we are and it's a far cry from the image projected around the world. What is most unfortunate is not that the world is forming misconceived notions of who Arabs are as a result of the media propaganda, bias – or whatever name you want to give it - but that Arabs themselves are fulfilling this prophecy and beginning to question their identity.

Instead of really looking at the bright side of being an Arab, currently people detach themselves from their Arabian origins, disregarding the authentic and positive qualities of the Arab culture.

A Humble Acknowledgment

“The Youth of a nation are the trustees of posterity.” Benjamin Disraeli

I am a LAU-MEPI TL alumnus, and a graduate of political science from LAU with a strong passion for my major. Accordingly, I opted to pursue my master's degree in the same field at the University of Tunis in Law and Political Science. I have been enrolled in the program since late 2012. Despite minor setbacks, which any typical student may face, my commitment has never wavered. I owe my strong sense of dedication and adherence to my studies - in the face of what may have been reason enough to quit - to the time I spent at LAU surrounded by the wonderful LAU-MEPI TL family. I am currently in the process of writing my thesis, entitled “The European Union (EU) and the democratic path in Tunisia”. In my thesis, I discuss the relationship between the EU and Tunisia to support the latter's democratic transition. More precisely, I am analyzing the involvement of the EU in monitoring both legislative and presidential elections in Tunisia following the popular uprising. Due to the nature of my thesis, I have been immersing myself in and familiarizing myself with the different elements of the Tunisian civic society such as local NGOs which took part in the observation and monitoring of the elections, as well as conducting interviews with different representatives from a variety of political parties that were engaged in the electoral process. Much to my surprise, and a pleasant one at that, along the way I have learned something about myself: I am not that shy person anymore! I found myself more relaxed, eager even, to engage with the different members of the Tunisian civic society. I guess I owe this welcomed change and development in my personality to all the seminars, workshops, and round-tables that I had with my fellow TLers. While I'm extending gratitude and acknowledging the events and people that have contributed to my personal growth, I can't but mention my respectful professors, both at LAU and currently in Tunisia.

It would be nothing short of false pride, pretentiousness even, if I claimed that the person I am today developed as a result of my personal endeavors alone. The LAU-MEPI TL program had a monumental impact on my personality, my maturity, my sense of self, my identity. The responsibility I carry with me today, the responsibility from which branches my interminable commitment to become an engaged citizen in my country, was born from the LAU-MEPI program. Now I realize what Dr. Touma meant when he used to tell us LOUDLY in every

meeting we had: “This is NOT a scholarship program! This is a LEADERSHIP program!” Well, Dr. Touma, I am not a leader YET but I am taking 'baby steps' towards becoming one.

Considering the current developments in the political atmosphere in Tunisia as part of the democratic transition, I believe that the Tunisian youth finally stand a genuine chance to make a difference in their society. Given that most of the restrictions that were imposed on former students of my major by the Ben Ali regime have now been revoked, we can act more freely in order to realize our full potential, to be engaged citizens working to make Tunisia a better country and an ideal for the rest of the MENA region to follow. Now is the perfect time to take those baby steps and have a positive impact in my country. As Mahendra Gaur, an Indian lawyer and political activist, so accurately said: “Democracy is not a destination, but a process of constant evolution.”

As an LAU-MEPI TL alumnus, I have every intention to take part in this process to the best of my ability, and for that, I sincerely thank you.

Sabri Bezzazi | TL Alumnus - Class of 2012



Alumni News

“I finished my master's degree in Sweden last June, and now I am in a program called Ruwwad by the Arab Bank (pioneers of Arab Bank-Jordan).” **Joud Zaumot, Jordan** “After my graduation from LAU in the summer of 2014, I have been working as an interior designer on both residential and commercial projects. I am currently employed by HEC Holding.” **Haneen Monzer, Lebanon** “I completed my Master's in International Relations from the London School of Economics with Merit. Currently, I am working as a Human Security Research Fellow at the West Asia-North Africa Institute; a policy think-tank headquartered at the Royal Palaces in Jordan.” **Leen Aghabi, Jordan** “I am now back in Egypt and after working at the American University in Cairo I am currently working as a Business Analyst for LOGIC Management Consulting. I am also in the process of applying for my master's degree at a variety of universities around the world.” **Mohamed El Gohary, Egypt** “I am working at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation of the Kingdom of Morocco after completing a four-month internship within the United Nations department. I'm also continuing my studies through the Ministry's Academy of Diplomacy to become a future diplomat.” **Soukaina Bahnini, Morocco**



A visit to Jeita Grotto - September 2015



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