



EU-GCC Cultural Relations and Representations of the Other in the Gulf Cultural Press: The Case of *al-‘Arabī* Magazine

by Edoardo Barzaghi

The State of EU-GCC Relations

The European Union (EU) and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) are closely inter-dependent economically. As the GCC is the EU's fifth largest export market, it is in Europe's interest to improve its political and economic relationships with the GCC. An EU document from 1995 states, "EU-GCC economic interests are based on energy inter-dependence. This would be reinforced by increased EU-GCC cross-investments, vertical integration and industrial alliances. A free trade agreement would provide a long-term framework for such developments [... and it] remains objectively of interest to the two sides. It would provide duty-free access for the EU to its 5th largest export market and duty-free access for GCC exports to an EU market of perhaps 500 million by early next century."¹

In the last 30 years, the EU and the GCC have sought to strengthen their economic and cultural relationships. However, while a great deal of effort has been devoted to the former, far less has been done to foster the latter. The first step of this relationship was taken in 1983, "as a direct consequence of the creation of the GCC in 1981."² It was followed by a cooperation agreement in 1989, the first attempt to build stable and mutually beneficial relations between the two blocs. Then, in 1991, the EU and the GCC began the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) negotiations, which focused on establishing specific policies that would enable the creation of a Free Trade Area. The negotiations also addressed other forms of cooperation in the fields of energy, industry, trade and services, agriculture, fisheries, investment, science, technology and the environment.³

Since then, the FTA negotiations have progressed very little. To further this cooperation, new agreements were drafted in Riyadh in 2010 under the name Joint Action Programme

1 European Commission, *Improving relations between the European Union and the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)* (COM(95) 541 final), 22 November 1995, p. 1b, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=celex:51995dc0541:en:not>

2 Silvia Colombo and Camilla Committeri, "Need to Rethink the EU-GCC Strategic Relation", in *Sharaka Research Papers*, No. 1 (February 2013), p. 1-2, <http://www.sharaka.eu/?p=1035>

3 European Union, *Cooperation Agreement between the European Economic Community, of the one part, and the countries parties to the Charter of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf...* (21989A0225(01)), 25 February 1989, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=celex:21989a0225%2801%29:en:not>

(JAP).⁴ The programme was discussed and approved later that year, at the 20th Joint EU-GCC Council Meeting in Luxemburg in June. JAP was intended to implement the GCC-EU Cooperation Agreement of 1988. It encompasses a wide range of activities and fields of interest and sets broad guidelines for future policy development. Among the policy areas covered by the JAP were cultural issues such as intellectual property rights, tourism, antiquities and museums, higher education, scientific research, and what is referred to as “culture and mutual understanding.” When compared to the Cooperation Agreement of 1988, which was mainly oriented towards industrial and commercial policies, JAP constituted a definitive step forward in EU-GCC cooperation.

Today, cooperation between the GCC and the EU is at a stalemate.⁵ In the last few years the EU has brought up several issues with the GCC, asking its partner for more compliance in the observance of human rights and the strengthening of political dialogue. In turn, the GCC countries have demanded that the EU do more to guarantee international security and interfere less in their internal affairs.⁶

The aim of this paper is to point out the shortcomings that affect the EU-GCC relationships at the cultural level stemming from the insufficient or flawed understanding of the EU as a geopolitical and historical entity. The paper will first briefly outline the main cultural biases influencing the European perspective of the Arab countries as well as the Arab perspective of the European countries. This discussion underlines how the EU countries generally do not view the GCC countries as constituting a separate region from other parts of the Arab world with its own distinct socio-economic and cultural dynamics. Likewise, the GCC countries more often than not perceive the EU countries as a very indefinite entity, usually referred to vaguely as “the West.”

Then, the paper will examine one of the most important magazines in the Gulf, *al-‘Arabī*, as a case study of the different ways in which cultural issues related to Europe are discussed in the region. Some of the Europe-related articles from *al-‘Arabī* which deal with the perception of the other will be looked at in order to try to give the widest possible outlook of the main biases that still impede a fruitful cultural dialogue.

4 Gulf Cooperation Council, *Joint Action Programme for Implementation of the GCC-EU Cooperation Agreement of 1988: 2010-2013*, June 2010, http://eeas.europa.eu/gulf_cooperation/docs/joint_action_programme_en.pdf

5 The last update about the EU-GCC FTA was on March 25, 2013. The memo reads: “Negotiations for a free trade agreement were suspended by the Gulf Cooperation Council in 2008. Informal contacts between negotiators continue to take place”. European Commission, *The EU’s Free Trade Agreements: Where are We?* (MEMO/13/282), 25 March 2013, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-13-282_en.htm

6 For more information about the GCC countries’ security concerns cfr. Minā Šuštir, “Intilāqah naw‘iyyah li-rifāhiyyah šu‘ūb al-qārah al-šafṛā” (An atomic explosion for the well-being of the populations of the yellow continent), in *al-‘Arabī*, No. 649 (December 2012), p. 16-27; Sulaymān Ibrāhīm al-‘Askarī, “Maġlis al-ta‘āwun al-ḥalīġī, 28 ‘amman fī muwāġahat al-taḥdiyyāt”, in *al-‘Arabī*, No. 608 (July 2009), p. 16-27, also in English: “The Gulf Cooperation Council: 28 Years in the Face of Challenges”, <http://www.alarabimag.com/SubjectArticle.asp?ID=11498>. For an analysis of the possible reasons for the present EU-GCC situation cfr. Silvia Colombo and Camilla Committeri, “Need to Rethink the EU-GCC Strategic Relation”, cit.; Rym Ayadi and Salim Gadi, “Trade and Investment Cooperation between the EU and the Gulf Cooperation Council: Current trends and future prospects”, in *Sharaka Commentaries*, No. 3 (December 2012), <http://www.sharaka.eu/?p=898>



Perceptions of the Other in the EU and GCC Countries: The Importance of Furthering Reciprocal Knowledge

It is generally acknowledged that people living in the countries of the western world, have a scarce knowledge of the Arab world and its customs, and vice versa. This means that both worlds have a limited awareness of the differences that constitute the rich reservoir of experiences that inform the other civilisation, as well as the similarities that might lead the way to reciprocal understanding.

Cultural awareness is already part of the EU agenda in international policies, as the EU recognises culture as an asset for development in the different states that make up its geopolitical body. Programmes have already been set up to promote and celebrate cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue, highlight the richness and diversity of European cultures, and foster understanding among the citizens of the EU about other cultures. Such awareness has been recognised as a flywheel for economic growth, as it promotes tourism and contributes to the emergence of sustainable new economic activities.

This cultural agenda was actualized in 2007, when the EU Commission established its “European Agenda for Culture” initiative.⁷ It was followed in May 2011 by the European Parliament’s adoption of a resolution focusing on the cultural dimensions of the EU’s external actions and calling for the development of common EU cultural policies.⁸ But though an EU report from July 2010 cites third party countries as partners in cultural projects,⁹ there is a noticeable absence of GCC countries in EU cultural policies in spite of the importance of EU-GCC economic relations. On 6 December 2012, the EU approved two new programmes for the Southern Mediterranean region aimed at reinforcing the sectors of media and culture as vectors of development and smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, thus displaying an interest in bridging the cultural gap between the Northern and Southern Mediterranean.¹⁰ However, no similar project with the GCC seems to be on the EU’s agenda. Culture and exchange of ideas are at the basis of progress and evolution. History itself “dictates the way we live more than we would care to think, and the only

7 See the European Commission website: *European Agenda for Culture*, http://ec.europa.eu/culture/our-policy-development/european-agenda_en.htm

8 European Parliament, *Resolution on the cultural dimensions of the EU’s external actions* (P7_TA(2011)0239), 12 May 2011, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=TA&reference=P7-TA-2011-0239&language=EN>

9 European Commission, *Report on the implementation of the European Agenda for Culture* (COM(2010) 390 final), 19 July 2010, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=celex:52010dc0390:en:not>. See the accompanying Commission working document at p. 4: “The Programme also caters for activities with third countries, the focus being on a different country or group of countries each year: India and China in 2007, Brazil in 2008, Armenia, Belarus, Egypt, Georgia, Jordan, Moldova, the Occupied Palestinian Territories and Tunisia in 2009, the same countries joined by Azerbaijan and Ukraine in 2010, followed by Mexico in 2011 and South Africa in 2012”. European Commission, *The European Agenda for Culture: progress towards shared goals* (SEC(2010) 904), 19 July 2010, p. 4, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=celex:52010sc0904:en:not>

10 “Without effective media and dynamic cultural actors, democracy can not take root, and governments can not be held accountable by local civil society organisations. The EU regional Programme on Media and Culture for development in the Southern Mediterranean region is intended to enhance the institutional framework for media and culture and support civil society actions. This will reinforce them as vectors of freedom of expression and contributors to sustainable economic development. The programme will enhance the independence of the media in the region, complementing existing trainings for journalists and supporting the Mediterranean partners in their reflexion on the optimal regulation of the media and the media legislation”. European Commission, *New regional programmes to support media, culture and private sector development in the Southern Mediterranean* (IP/12/1331), 6 December 2012, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-12-1331_en.htm



way to control its impact on our lives, is to control it better.”¹¹ In order to have a better understanding of the other, one has to avoid generalisations and get a closer look at the object of his inquiry. As Fatma al-Araimi stated in a recent workshop held by Sharaka in Muscat,¹² Europe is too often regarded by the people of the GCC countries as part of the “West,” while at the same time the GCC countries are not separated from the other Arab countries when it comes to social issues.¹³ Among the different actors that take part in the spreading of information and that build an image of the EU and GCC countries is the mass media: news broadcasting channels, newspapers, journals, reviews, and also social media. These outlets can represent vehicles of knowledge as well as of poor or utterly bad information.¹⁴

al-‘Arabī Magazine: A Case Study

Since it would have been a work of many years to cover all the representations of Europe in all the cultural reviews and journals published in the Gulf, and for the whole existence of each review, it was necessary to scale down the survey to a limited time span and to only one review.¹⁵ After an evaluation of the content and structure of some of the main cultural reviews published in the area, it was decided to focus on the review *al-‘Arabī* (The Arab). Published by Wilāyat al-I‘lām bi-Dawlat al-Kuwayt (Kuwaiti Press Department), the magazine played a pioneering role in the development of cultural press in Kuwait and in the Arab world as a whole in the 1950s and 1960s, combining accessible language with intellectual rigor and scientific accuracy. Today, *al-‘Arabī* is distributed throughout the Arab world as well as abroad and continues to be a highly respected cultural review.

The review was founded in 1958 and envisioned in the words of its first editors as “a comprehensive cultural, social, literary, scientific magazine which includes in its pages, among other things, the gist of the ideas of thinkers, the essence of the experiments of top scientists, the masterpieces from the talents of creative poets, and above all these, it should be especially concerned with illustrated scholarly studies of each of the Arab countries,

11 Rim Turkmani, “Introduction”, in *Ġudūr ‘Arabiyyah* (Arabick Roots), 1001 Inventions, 2012, p. 10.

12 Sharaka workshop on “Dialogue on Opportunities for Enhancing Understanding and Cooperation in EU-GCC relations in the fields of Media and Communications and Higher Education and Scientific Research”, Muscat, 26 March 2013, <http://www.sharaka.eu/?p=1147>

13 Fatma al-Araimi, “The Image of the GCC in the EU Media and Vice Versa”, in *Sharaka Research Papers*, forthcoming.

14 On the role of mass media as well as academia in the development of a culture of conflict between Arab and Western countries, cfr. Sulaymān Ibrāhīm al-‘Askarī, “Šūratnā fī ‘l-ġarb. Mas’ūliyyah man?”, in *al-‘Arabī*, No. 554 (January 2005), p. 8-13, also in English: “Our Image in the West: Whose Responsibility?”, <http://www.alarabimag.com/SubjectArticle.asp?ID=11466>

15 The cultural reviews of the Gulf are many. The following list includes the ones that were collected at the time of writing: *Bayān al-kutub* (The Book Index), published by Mu’assasat al-Bayān li ‘l-ṣaḥāfah wa ‘l-ṭibā‘ah wa ‘l-našr (al-Bayān Foundation for Journalism, Press and Publishing) of Dubai; *al-Rāfid* (The Support), published in the UAE by Dā‘irat al-ṭaqāfah wa ‘l-i‘lām (Agency of Culture and Information); *Šu‘ūn adābiyyah* (Literary Things), published in the UAE by Ittihād kuttāb wa udabā‘ al-Imārāt (Literates’ and Writers’ Union of the Emirates); *al-Dūḥah* (Doha), published by Wizārat al-ṭaqāfah wa ‘l-funūn wa ‘l-turāt (Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage); *al-Nizwā* (Nizwa), published by Mu’assasat ‘Umān li ‘l-ṣaḥāfah wa ‘l-našr wa ‘l-i‘lām (Omani Institution for the Press, Publishing and Information); *al-Baḥrayn al-ṭaqāfiyyah* (Cultural Bahrein), published by Maġlis al-waṭānī li ‘l-ṭaqāfah wa ‘l-funūn wa ‘l-adab (National Council for Culture, Arts and Literature); *Ši‘r*, published by Mu’assasat al-ṭaqāfah wa ‘l-funūn (Foundation for Culture and Arts) in Ābū Ḍabī; *al-‘Ulūm al-insāniyyah* (Humanities), published by Kulliyat al-adab wa ‘l-tarbiyyah, ġāmi‘at al-Baḥrayn (Faculty of Literature and Education, University of Bahrein); *Maġallat dirasāt al-Ḥaliġ wa ‘l-Ġazīrah al-‘Arabiyyah* (Journal of Studies of the Arab Gulf and Peninsula), published by Maġlis al-našr al-‘ilmī, ġāmi‘at al-Kuwayt (Council for Scientific Publishing, University of Kuwait).

dealing with their inhabitants, crops and wealth, whether this be animal, vegetable, mineral or water wealth.”¹⁶ This educational approach was never abandoned in the pages of *al-‘Arabī*, which still contain today a diverse range of articles from the fields of science, literature, history, sociology and anthropology. Additionally, each monthly issue is devoted to a particular country or a city in the world.

What differentiates this publication from similar ones in the region is that it has a less literary approach and a stronger focus than the others on social and political issues. In fact, an average issue of *al-‘Arabī* published in the time span between 2005 and 2011 is usually structured in different sections that cover many disciplines ranging from literary criticism to history and sociology.¹⁷ Given this content matter, the magazine was chosen to serve as an example of a cultural publication from the Gulf region in order to examine how Europe is both represented and perceived in the region. To get an idea of *al-‘Arabī*’s treatment of the topic, a methodical scrutiny of the review’s content over a five-year time span, from 2005 to 2011, has been carried out. The time span was chosen to include the most recent events in the Arab world.

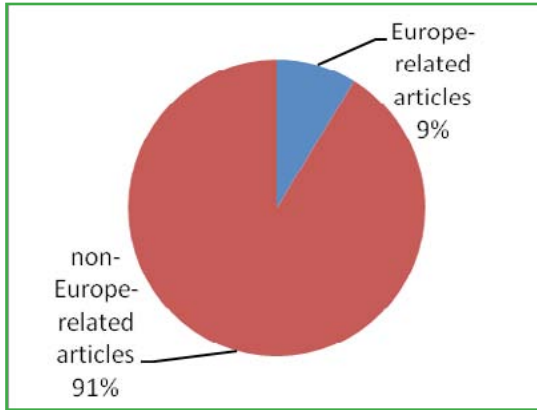
The initial criterion for the survey was to select articles that discussed EU and GCC relations, but this method yielded little results. For this reason, the selection was widened to take into account all the articles that dealt in some way or another with Europe, be it within a cultural, sociological, political or economic context. Subsequently, the percentage of pages devoted to Europe-related articles was calculated.

As can be observed in the first graph below, only about 10% of the magazine addressed European countries, people or events.¹⁸

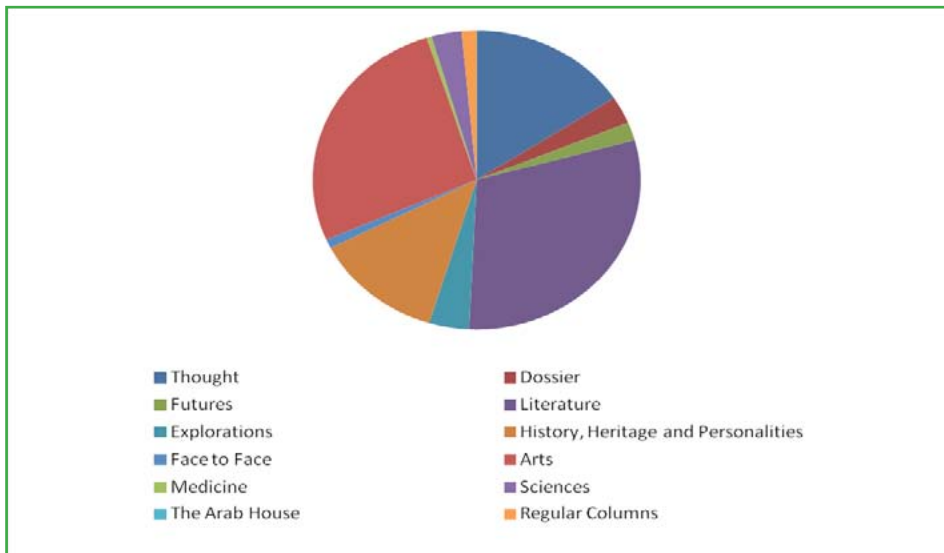
16 Cfr. The archived page “About Al Arabi - Al Arabi Magazine: the Idea and the Reality”, <http://archive.is/tUHDQ>

17 To give a better understanding of the content of the review, a short description of its sections is presented here: *Fikr* (Thought), a series of articles on a range of subjects, from literature to politics to economic and sociological issues, with many articles appearing under the subcolumn *Qadāyā ‘āmmah* (General Issues); *Mustaqbālīyyāt* (Futures), usually consisting of a single article written by an anthropologist on some topic related to the future of Arab society, or even to the future of the planet, like environmental questions or science-related matters; *Malaff al-‘adad* (Dossier of This Issue), which treats some specific theme varying in every issue; *Adab* (Literature), which comprises all the articles that are dedicated to literary criticism, translations of literary texts and publications of original texts. Since 2007 this section has also included the *qisāṣ ‘alā ‘l-hawā’* (Short Stories on Air), a collaboration between *al-Arabi* and BBC in which the review prints the short stories by Arab authors that were broadcasted in the BBC programme with the same name; *Tārīḥ wa turāt wa aṣḥās* (History, Heritage and Personalities), which includes articles dedicated to historical personalities or to the history and traditional cultural expressions of different civilisations; *Funūn* (Arts), which is dedicated to visual arts such as painting, cinema, theatre and music; *‘Ulūm* (Sciences), composed of articles that talk about natural and mathematical sciences; *al-Bayt al-‘Arabī* (The Arab Home), usually dedicated to articles about raising children and other issues related to family and private life; *Istiṭla ‘āt* (Explorations), usually a dossier of many pages with photographs related to a particular place in the world (these are the same places that appear on the front cover of the review); *Waḡḡan li-waḡḡ* (Face to Face), an interview between a famous Arab thinker or columnist from *al-‘Arabī* and an intellectual or professor on a specific matter; *Ṭibb* (Medicine), a recently introduced column about medicine and illnesses; *Abwāb tābitah* (Regular Columns), the closing section of every issue which includes readers’ letters, small columns from the Internet and recent publications and exhibitions in the Arab world.

18 Out of a total of 11888 scrutinized pages, 10% or 1141 pages were dedicated to articles about Europe. For a complete analysis of the survey see the Appendix.



The following graph shows the percentage of Europe-related articles subdivided according to their subject matter and the section of the magazine in which they were placed.¹⁹



As the second graph shows, certain sections of the magazine seem to treat Europe-related issues more often. The Adab (Literature) section, with 30% of the total, appears to publish the greatest number of Europe-related articles. In this section readers can find short stories by some of the most relevant writers of the world, from Yukio Mishima to Gabriel García Márquez to Vladimir Nabokov to Nadine Gordimer. Quite often this column contains writings from European authors like Marguerite Yourcenar, Ranko Marinković or Władysław Reymont.

The section with the second highest percentage of Europe-related articles is *Funūn* (Arts), with 27%. In this section one can find the *al-Ma'raḍ al-'Arabī* (The Exhibition of *al-'Arabī*) column, which looks at the work of famous European artists of the past. The section

¹⁹ Unfortunately, at the time of writing not all the issues for every year were available. For further enquiry see the Appendix at the end of this paper. Concerning the percentage of pages which were dedicated to Europe-related articles, the calculation only included the issues that were actually surveyed.

that comes third in terms of relevance to Europe-related issues is called *Fikr* (Thought), with 16%. This section of the magazine is usually dedicated to articles related to culture in the widest sense or to contemporary issues, ranging from scientific to socio-political matters. As can be observed, over the span of five years the section was quite often devoted to writings that were somehow related to Europe, particularly in its subsection *Qādayā ‘āmmah* (General Issues). Finally, the fourth richest column by percentage of articles is *Tārīh wa turāt wa šaḥṣiyyāt* (History, Heritage and Personalities), with 13%.

Quite predictably and consistently with its cultural aim way, it is possible to say that the magazine is mainly focused on discussing European cultural expression like the arts (literature, painting, cinema), general issues and analysis of social, political and economic matters, and historical events and famous personalities of the past.

However, even a quick glance at the content of the articles demonstrates a clear trend: one finds out that Europe is never referred to by its name as an independent entity, but always as part of a larger “West” that also includes the United States. (However, the articles that looked exclusively at the North American countries have been excluded from the survey.) This first generalisation that can be yielded from the titles certainly does not help in identifying the many political entities that constitute what is portrayed as a general western bloc, and one has to read very carefully to understand what actually constitutes the “West” that is being referred to in the different articles.

In the following sections some examples of the articles that address the relationship between Europe and the Arab world will be given. It is important to notice, once again, that in the selected issues there were no articles that discussed the EU-GCC relationship specifically. This is valuable information that needs to be considered. The absence reveals how, even in such an important publication and over the course of a five-year time period, the magazine did not contribute to the discourse on the cooperation between the EU and the GCC. Nevertheless, this survey is useful to give an idea, however limited it may be, of how the relationship between Arab and European culture is portrayed.

A Complicated Relationship

To reach a better understanding of the discourse related to European and Arab relations, the *Qādayā ‘āmmah* (General Issues) and *Tārīh wa turāt wa šaḥṣiyyāt* (History, Heritage and Personalities) sections were especially taken into account, since they are more directly related to the aim and the topic of this paper. These two sections often discuss controversial issues related to the relations between European and Arab countries. This relationship is particularly complex and multi-faceted. Whoever would search the review *al-Arabī* for stark criticism of the policies of the EU or of the “western countries” will certainly find it, together with a sharp self-criticism of the Arab culture and its alleged missed contact with modernity, which is often directly associated with the encounter with Europe and the West.



The first example is an article by al-Ḥabīb al-Ġinḥānī that starts with a very compelling question: if we are to help different civilisations speak to each other, why are we supposed to do that?, why are we supposed to do that? How? And with whom?²⁰ In this article, the author observes that one of the main issues that comes up when dialogue between Arab and European civilisations is called for is the issue of what is normally referred to as European cultural hegemony. In the subtitle al-Ġinḥānī asks, “How is it possible for an individual to adhere to the principle of dialogue among civilisations and defend it under the shadow of a polarised cultural hegemony with clear characteristics, when this hegemony itself has become one central element of speculation about the new imperialism?”²¹

This question has a lot of meaning both for the European and for the Arab reader, since it posits the existence of what is considered to be a cultural hegemony that is perceived as an obstacle to establishing any collaboration between Arab and European countries. This is, we believe, the first and most important concept for the western reader to understand. Many of the articles in *al-Arabī* that talk about reciprocal knowledge between the western and Arab worlds as well as their political relations start from this premise.

al-Ġinḥānī then writes, “Is dialogue a necessity demanded by the political, social and cultural situations in this or that country? Does it represent the essential core of the project of a democratic renewal, in which all the living forces in a society participate to define its characteristics after a fruitful and deep debate? Or should it be the answer to the other’s accusation of ambiguity and extremism?”²² Somewhat sarcastically, he wonders whether the Arabs should adopt dialogue in the same way as one puts a dress, only in order to be recognised by “the other” (by which he probably means the West) as supportive of democracy and peaceful confrontation, or whether dialogue should instead be the result of educated civil society parties trying to cope with political and social issues.

al-Ġinḥānī continues in this regard by recalling what he calls the “trend” of Christian-Islamic dialogue, which according to him was widespread in the Arab world over the last 30 years. He argues that this dialogue never ended up accomplishing anything mainly because it arose out of “circumstantial political worries, instead of a project of civilisation and acculturation.”²³ al-Ġinḥānī seems to stress that when cultural dialogue is called for between the western and Arab cultures, it is usually due to political emergencies that need to be solved, and it is not the product of a consistent project of education aimed at bridging the gap between our two cultures.

Another article that appeared in November 2007 with the title *Ru’yatnā lil-ġarb: naṭrah naqdiyyah* (Our vision of the West, a critical glance) takes into account the different descriptions that the first “pioneers” of the *nahḍah*²⁴ – intellectuals and scholars who had a

20 al-Ḥabīb al-Ġinḥānī, “Ḥiwār al-ḥiḍārāt, limādā? Wa kayfa? Wa ma’a man?” (Dialogue between civilizations, Why? How? And with whom?), in *al-Arabī*, No. 557 (April 2005), p. 16-21.

21 *Ibidem*, p. 16

22 *Ibidem*.

23 *Ibidem*.

24 *Nahḍah* (renaissance) is the term for the period of intellectual and social reform that starts, according to the conventional account, with Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt in 1798.

deep interest in European culture and who traveled to Europe in order to observe and record the customs of its population – made of the European countries that they visited.²⁵ The author Karam al-Ḥalw recalls how Rifā‘ah Rāfi‘ al-Ṭaḥṭāwī, who is usually regarded as the first of these pioneers, referred to Paris with the epithet *diyār al-kufr* (place of unbelief), giving the city itself a moral connotation despite his admiration for European scientific achievement. Another eminent pioneer of the *nahḍah* period, Aḥmad Fāris al-Šidyāq, saw the West as the opposite of Islamic civilisation and a threat to it, while Buṭrus al-Bustānī, a major figure of the Arab renaissance, wrote that European civilisation was incomplete in many aspects.²⁶ And in his 1865 novel *Ġābat al-ḥaqq* (The Forest of Truth), the intellectual Fransīs al-Marrāš, who had a deep admiration for Europe, described the West as a green land and a sea of brilliant light, while he imagined the East as an arid wasteland dominated by darkness and inhabited by the silence of death. After a few years of direct contact with European civilisation, however, he declared that it was “a savage one that engenders wars and obscure desires and bloodshed.”²⁷

At a later point in the article al-Ḥalw writes that “we [the Arabs] are losing our ability to succeed in modernity, and to share in a fruitful way its cognitive, scientific, political and social revolution, whereas our political systems can be traced back, for the major part, to the Middle Ages, and our philosophical thought does not manage to open a breach in the extremism of its intellectual positions [...] and our scientific thought is meager even if compared to other developing countries.”²⁸

The main point of this article is apparently the oft-recalled issue of Arabs and modernity. According to al-Ḥalw, it would be possible to make a critique of modernity only after entering it, but the Arabs decided instead “to remain on the margin of the history to come.”²⁹ He wonders how it is possible that the Arab approach to western civilisation hasn’t changed since the time of al-Ṭaḥṭāwī.

Another article by Ḥāmid ‘Umār entitled *Muwāḡihah sāḥinah ma‘a ṭaqāfat al-ḡarb* (Hot confrontation with the culture of the West) tackles the issue of religious and intellectual differences between the Arab world and the West.³⁰ He writes that one of the main issues with western countries could be that western culture has never been able to understand Islamic religiousness, and for this reason he deems it responsible for the breaking of dialogue. The author recalls the British intervention in Egypt during the fifties because it represented, in his view, a clear demonstration of how a European nation could interfere with the politics of an Arab state. Umār goes on, then, to state that the globalisation phenomenon is nothing else but another form of colonialism and compares it to a virus that spreads generation after generation. He reproaches the Arabs for too easily adopting the western customs and too

25 Karam al-Ḥalw, “Ru‘yatnā li ‘l-ḡarb...naṭrah naqdiyyah” (Our vision of the West, a critical glance), in *al-‘Arabī*, No. 588 (November 2007), p. 18-21.

26 *Ibidem*, p. 19.

27 *Ibidem*, p. 21.

28 *Ibidem*.

29 *Ibidem*.

30 Ḥāmid ‘Umār, “Muwāḡihah sāḥinah ma‘a ṭaqāfat al-ḡarb” (Hot confrontation with the culture of the West), in *al-‘Arabī*, No. 579 (February 2007), p. 20-23.

willingly consuming their commodities. He concludes by arguing that the time of peaceful declarations should be over, and that the only possible answer that remains is resisting globalisation, which he considers to be a commercial and cultural invasion.

Is There Hope for Change?

In other articles in *al-Arabī*, the meeting with the other becomes the starting point in the quest for a more constructive, even fruitful, way of seeing the other.

Mas‘ūd Dāhir, for instance, writing about the troubles of those who migrate to Europe, starts with the worrisome statement that migrant workers usually have very low salaries while at the same time they need to overcome a series of problems that start from the large cultural differences between them and the populations of the hosting states.³¹ This article, which at first suggests an analysis of the difficulties Arab emigrants to Europe encounter, soon becomes a very critical analysis of the problems that Arab countries have which create the causes for mass emigration in the first place and the responsibility they bear.

When it comes to the reasons that produce such a massive migration to European countries, Dāhir writes that “[The reason for the augmentation of this migratory movement] is to be identified in the failure of the Arab systems in planning short term solutions for the difficulties that affect Arab society and economy.”³² Another issue according to him is the general inability of Arab states to keep pace with more advanced economies, as the formation of the GATT³³ agreements is among the main reasons of the high rate of emigration from the Arab countries. He argues that these agreements obliged the Arab countries to compete on international markets while retaining traditional methods of production, leaving those markets weak in comparison to others.³⁴

Another reason for emigration is related, especially for intellectuals and specialised workers, to the search for a freedom that they do not find in their home countries, especially all those workers in the fields of academic teaching, scientific research, press, publishing, literature, theatre and music. In a word, it is the “non-democratic” nature of certain regimes that Dāhir believes constitutes an element pushing a great number of intellectuals and workers to emigrate from the majority of Arab countries.³⁵

The need to understand the Arab culture is tackled in the article *al-‘Arab yastaq̄tibūn ihtimām al-ġarb iliktrūniyyan* (The Arabs awake the interest of the West electronically). The article reports a “growing interest towards the Arabs” on the web which has arisen “in an attempt to close the distance between Arabs and the West on one side and in an attempt

31 Mas‘ūd Dāhir, “Hiġrah ‘arabiyyah mutazayyidah. Muškilāt al-istiqrār fi Urūbā” (The increasing Arab migration. Problems about settling in Europe), in *al-Arabī*, No. 618 (May 2010), p. 58-63.

32 *Ibidem*, p. 58.

33 The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade was signed in Geneva on October 30, 1947 with the aim of providing international laws for facilitating trade and commercial exchange between countries.

34 Mas‘ūd Dāhir, “Hiġrah ‘arabiyyah mutazayyidah. Muškilāt al-istiqrār fi Urūbā”, cit., p. 58.

35 *Ibidem*, p. 61.

to discover the reasons that led the Islamic extremists to the western tragedy.”³⁶ Issues such as the use of the niqāb or the immigration of Muslims to European countries are also discussed in this article.

According to the author, Germany has done the most out of all the European countries to encourage intercultural dialogue on the Internet. In the last few years, this has developed into an interest in understanding Arab culture and in fostering cultural dialogue on a number of media related to culture. Most notably, at the Frankfurt Book Fair of 2004, the Arab world was hosted as the guest of honor.

This flourishing of interest in the Arab world has also been accompanied by the creation of many websites, like Qantara,³⁷ Midad³⁸ or Li-Lak.³⁹ The first of these websites, Qantara, does not only provide information and news on Arab and islamic countries, but it also deals with social and cultural issues, and attempts to promote dialogue by intellectuals of various extractions into contact to discuss sensitive subjects. Midad, instead, is a literary forum related to the Goethe-Institut and created with the aim to exchange knowledge on literature-related issues between Germany and its partnering Arab countries, while Li-Lak is a platform for younger people open to debate and discussion over the differences between German and Arab young people.

Another good example of public debate and dialogue between the two cultures is the one brought forth by the BBC, since it has a website in Arabic language which opens the “discussion for the visitors of the site to practice some sort of dialogue on the argumentative topics in the Arab world, like the *hiḡāb*, the *niqāb*, racism, terrorism, extremism, freedom of expression, the interaction between civil and religious laws.”⁴⁰

The article finally declares that “there is a great need for these sites” because they are ultimately based “on the idea of the recognition of difference and on the declaration of the diversity of humanity as a distinctive characteristic of our planet.” It continues by stating that these sites affirm “the necessity of enlarging the cultural horizons that challenge the intellectual closure which awakens all the evils of sectarianism and reciprocal opposition on the basis of religion, dogmas and cultural differences.”⁴¹

Such cultural differences are at times so stark that they seem to constitute an insurmountable obstacle, like in the case of the Danish cartoons that depicted the prophet of Islam in a disrespectful way under the claim of free expression. In one of his *ḡadīḡ al-ṡahr* (Discourse of the Month) columns,⁴² *al-Arabī* editor-in-chief Ibrāhīm Sulaymān al-‘Askarī writes

36 al-‘Arab yastaqībūn ihtimām al-ḡarb iliktrūniyyan” (The Arabs awake the interest of the West electronically), in *al-‘Arabī*, No. 612 (November 2009), p. 141.

37 Qantara, <http://en.qantara.de>

38 Midad - deutsch-arabisches Literaturforum, <http://www.goethe.de/ins/eg/prj/mal>

39 Li-Lak, <http://jugendinfo-gegen-rechts.de/artikel.php/347/25461/li-lak-deutsch-arabische-jugendwebsite.html>

40 “al-‘Arab yastaqībūn ihtimām al-ḡarb iliktrūniyyan”, cit., p. 142. See also the BBC website in Arabic: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/arabic>

41 “al-‘Arab yastaqībūn ihtimām al-ḡarb iliktrūniyyan”, cit., p. 143.

42 Sulaymān Ibrāhīm al-‘Askarī, *ḡudūr taqāfat al-fitnah* (The roots of the culture of revolt), in *al-‘Arabī*, No. 595 (June 2008), p. 8-13.

about the movie *Fitna*,⁴³ which was produced by the Dutch Member of Parliament Geert Wilders in 2008.⁴⁴ In the film, images of terrorist attacks and violence are followed by Quranic verses inciting Muslims to jihad. The film also depicts scenes of violence against women and others showing children primed to hate other religions.

al-‘Askarī expresses satisfaction with the refusal of many western countries to screen the movie, among them the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. He states that the movie and others like it are the inevitable products of the Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilisations” theory, as well as the spread of the idea that Islam is the new enemy of western countries in the post-Cold War world. al-‘Askarī does acknowledge that some expressions of religious or racial extremism do come from European countries, but he argues that in this particular case European governments responded appropriately by denying the circulation of a movie that is harmful in content and only aims to propagate racial intolerance.

The articles that are reported in this section show the fact that self-criticism and dialogue are the best way of coming to terms with cultural differences. The article by Mas‘ūd Dāhir, which starts apparently with a focus on the difficulties of settling in Europe, becomes an analysis of how certain policies adopted in the Arab countries are the real reason why a great number of people feel the need to leave and go abroad, pointing out that the problem is the need to emigrate, and not only the bad welcome that the Arab migrant might find in Europe. This is an example of the fact that the review does not give expression only to “anti-western” voices, as seen in the previous paragraph, but it gives room also to constructive criticism.

Old Narratives for Present Times?

The amount and variety of issues that are raised when the question of Arab-western relations is tackled requires the strengthening of the intercultural discourse on both sides. From what can be observed from the examples cited it is quite uncommon to find an article focused solely upon Europe, as it is more often associated with larger cultural entities like the West or economic entities like the industrialised countries. For both European and Arab countries, this blurring of such a rich ensemble of states into one geopolitical entity like “the West” or the “Arab world” or the “developing world” has no other result other than keeping local diversity and particularity completely out of focus and privileging discourses that lean towards generalisation and, even if undertaken with the best of intentions, towards stereotype.

The magazine al-Arabī does not seem to endorse any particular vision of the West or of the Arab relationship with the West, instead maintaining a pluralistic approach that allows for the possibility of different points of view, from those who proclaim the necessity of

⁴³ The word *fitnah* is mainly used with the meaning of “revolt,” “disturbances,” “civil war”.

⁴⁴ For further reference, cfr. Sabina Mihelj, Liesbet van Zoonen and Farida Vis, “Cosmopolitan communication online: YouTube responses to the anti-Islam film ‘Fitna’”, in *The British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 62, No. 4 (December 2011), p. 613-632.

resisting European cultural penetration to those who see the adoption of European customs and traditions in a positive light.

With regard to the relationship between Islamic and European societies, the discourse presented in *al-Arabī* seems to be articulated in two main branches: on the one hand, the possibility of a dialogue between Islam and the West by focusing on the similarities between Islam and Christianity is spelled out, while on the other, a more reluctant approach envisages Islam as a system of values that contrasts too strongly with the western ones, and it is in this kind of discourse that western society is viewed as a profoundly secularised one, driven mainly by materialistic ends, of which colonialism, neocolonialism and globalisation are the most evident embodiments. In addressing this second approach, the review – far from presenting consistent doctrinal or theological analyses – takes more or less pronounced forms of what could be simply seen as ethnocentrism, based essentially on the passive acceptance of a conventional contraposition between Islam and the West in both historical and cultural terms, this discounting any possibility of dialogue between the two.

This discourse shows a close resemblance to other forms of ethnocentrism like those displayed by certain right-wing, regionalist, or, in the worst cases, xenophobic political groups that can be found in Europe that build their refusal of opening to other cultures mainly upon the rhetorical device of naturalising conflict on the basis on “historical” assumptions.

The tendency of articles in *al-Arabī* to appeal to dramatic historical events such as the Crusades and the Spanish Reconquista and to lament how Europeans do not recognise the influence of Arab civilisation on Europe’s development illustrates, as Richard Bulliet points out, “the power of historical narratives” and runs the risk of contributing to conflict naturalisation on a historical basis.⁴⁵ Bulliet states how the interpretation of Christian-Muslim relations as built on hostility rather than productive relations is a tendentious cultural practice, particularly as it would be possible to consider the European and Arab cultures and histories as part of the same civilisation: that of the Mediterranean.⁴⁶

At the same time, there are many examples in the magazine of intellectuals who exert a pointed self-criticism towards their own societies. Often these intellectuals view an overly strong allegiance to traditional values as the main reason for the Arab countries’ poor adaptation to modernity and the inability to update the Arab mentality in order to obtain more radical reforms, especially with regards to participation in the civil society, democracy and human rights.

It can be observed that there is a trend in the articles that were collected to bring the debate to a very theoretical level, but this approach is very often a problematic one as the “West” (being a geographical entity) is set against “Islam” (being a religion) and abstract terms like

45 Richard W. Bulliet, *The Case for Islamo-Christian Civilization*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2004, p. 31, http://www.e-reading.co.uk/bookreader.php/141461/The_Case_for_Islamo-Christian_Civilization.html

46 *Ibidem*, p. 32.

“the western Church” are employed (given the fact that “western” Church would be, at the least, inaccurate). Moreover, along with the issue of globalisation, which many intellectuals liken to a new form of colonialism, other complex topics are often evoked in order to present a stereotypical picture of permanent conflict between the Arab world and Europe. The conflict in the Palestinian Territories is commonly mentioned along with historical events like the Crusades, and sometimes many of these sorts of examples are employed within the same article. Needless to say, this behaviour is also adopted by intellectuals in Europe, but this does not mean that because it is adopted on both sides of this confrontation it should be taken as a matter of fact or a common practice and that as such should be accepted.

Even though the articles quoted above constitute only a few examples, it appears quite evident that there are many issues that provoke debate and confrontation between the Arab countries and Europe. It appears as if a common language of discontent has developed on both sides, and, even worse, it is also employed by those who belong to the intellectual spheres of society.

Edward Said once wrote that an intellectual’s mission in life is to advance human freedom and knowledge. This mission often means standing outside of society and its institutions and actively disturbing the status quo.⁴⁷ Both in Europe and in the Arab world certain historical narratives are still predisposing the public opinion to a very partial reading of history and to a marginal comprehension of the other civilisation. If intellectuals want to be consistent with their function as described by Said, they should have the courage to propose new readings of history, including those that do not only glorify their own civilisation’s development, but that put this development in relation to the history of other civilisations as well.

The Way Forward

As was pointed out in the previous paragraphs, there is a stalemate in the relationship between the GCC and the EU which needs to be addressed, be it through the establishment of a Free Trade Area or, at a deeper level, through the strengthening of cultural and educational resources that could help to bridge the distance that still seems to separate these two regions of the world. Even when it comes to cultural dialogue, this is too often carried out in the furrow of the general Islam/West discourse.

To overcome such a static situation we believe that a higher degree of education about the other civilisation must be reached. More generally, the relationships between Europe and the Arab countries are so ancient that we need to overcome the apparent barriers that still separate us, and start to operate inside civil society through the concerted work of schools, libraries and think tanks to conceive a future made of reciprocal understanding.

⁴⁷ Edward W. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual. The 1993 Reith Lectures*, New York, Vintage Books, 1996.

Even though the GCC countries have particular characteristics that distinguish them from other Arab countries, because of their history, economics, societies and political structures they are still part of the Arab-Islamic world and face some of the same prejudices. If we are to overcome this impasse that affects our relationship with the GCC countries, we first have to overcome the commonplaces and prejudices that inform the European vision of the Arab-Islamic world as a whole.

The first step in recognising the effort being made by the Arab counterparts would be to recognise and spread the opinions and culture that are being added to every day by Arab intellectuals. The existence of a review such as *al-Arabī* testifies to the effort that is made to do this in one of the GCC countries, Kuwait.

Concerning the improvement of EU-GCC cooperation, one of the key methods should be to increase people-to-people contact and cultural exchanges. Both regions are in need of an adequate education on the culture and particularities of the other. The experience of living in another culture facilitates the perception of culture itself as a construct, frees the individual from ethnocentric preconceptions and drives him to an understanding of diversity. On the subject of culture as a construction Homi Bhabha wrote:

“It becomes crucial to distinguish between the semblance and similitudes of the symbols across diverse cultural experiences –literature, art, music rituals, life, death– and the social specificity of each of these productions of meaning as they circulate as signs within specific contextual locations and social systems of value. The transnational dimension of cultural transformation –migration, diaspora, displacement, relocation– makes the process of cultural translation a complex form of signification. The naturalised, unifying discourse of “nation,” “peoples” or “authentic” folk traditions, those embedded myths of culture’s particularity, cannot be readily referenced. The great, though unsettling advantage of this position, is that it makes you increasingly aware of the construction of culture and the invention of tradition.”⁴⁸

Only after we understand culture as a construction we can more freely confront other cultures and avoid perceiving their differences as a threat to our integrity or to the validity of the customs that shape our personal identities. We become more aware of those “inventions” or narratives that influence our opinion of the others’ civilisation. The problem of overcoming cultural differences in the relation and in the communication between nations that belong to cultures that are perceived so distant, as those belonging to the EU and the GCC, is a complex one that entails the need to undertake new approaches in the fields of humanities. This problem is not a new one and scholars like Regna Darnell or Jörn Rüsen have already pointed out that sciences like anthropology or historiography need to be updated to the needs of our contemporary, globalised world.⁴⁹

48 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London and New York, Routledge, 1994, p. 172.

49 See for example the work by Regna Darnell, “Anthropological Approaches to Human Nature, Cultural Relativism and Ethnocentrism”, in *Anthropologica*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (2009), p. 187-194. See also Jörn Rüsen, “How to Overcome Ethnocentrism. Approaches to a Culture of Recognition by History in the Twenty-First Century”, in *History and Theory*, Vol. 43, No. 4 (December 2004), p. 118-129.



The historian Jörn Rüsen is the author of the following proposal to undertake such a transformation: “[I]t is necessary to start from anthropological universals valid in all cultures and [to] proceed by constructing ideal types on a rather abstract level, into which these universals can be concretized. Cultural peculiarity should be interpreted with the help of these ideal types. They can make it plausible that cultural difference is not rooted in specific essentials unique only for one culture, but that cultural particularity is an issue of a composition of different elements each or at least most of which can be found in other cultures as well. Thus the specifics of cultures are brought about by different constellations of the same elements.”⁵⁰ This is certainly not an easy task, but we believe that if the EU and the GCC managed to undertake such a revolutionary effort, they might become the pioneers of a new approach in the field of cultural relations, to the great benefit of their cultural and economical exchanges, and, ultimately, to the benefit of their citizens.

⁵⁰ Jörn Rüsen, “How to Overcome Ethnocentrism...”, cit., p. 128.

Appendix

SURVEYED ARTICLES IN *AL-ARABĪ* DIVIDED BY COLUMN

Section	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	Total per section
Fikr (Thought)	6	4	6	3	4	3	6	32
Malaff al-‘adad (Dossier of This Issue)	0	0	0	2	1	0	3	6
Mustaqbaliyyāt (Futures)	2	0	1	1	0	0	0	4
Adab (Literature)	11	3	9	11	9	10	8	61
Istitla‘āt (Explorations)	3	0	0	1	1	1	2	8
Tāriḥ wa turāt wa ašḥās (History, Patrimony and Personalities)	5	1	5	6	3	3	3	26
Waḡh ^{an} li-waḡh (Face to Face)	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	2
Funūn (Arts)	12	7	6	6	9	6	8	54
Ṭibb (Medicine)	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
‘Ulūm (Sciences)	1	2	1	1	0	0	1	6
al-Bayt al-‘Arabī (The Arab Home)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Abwāb ṭābitah (Regular Columns)	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	3

TOTAL NUMBER OF SURVEYED PAGES

2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	Overall Total
2536	1260	1938	1906	1486	1486	1276	11888

TOTAL NUMBER OF PAGES CONTAINING EUROPE-RELATED ARTICLES

2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	Overall Total
9.86%	6.19%	7.48%	10.97%	10.36%	9.42%	12.93%	9.6%



TOTAL PERCENTAGE OF ARTICLES RELATED TO EUROPE

Section	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Fikr (Thought)	36	20	32	15	20	14	36
Malaff al-‘adad (Dossier of this Issue)	0	0	0	33	6	0	15
Mustaqbaliyyāt (Futures)	11	0	5	5	0	0	0
Adab (Literature)	45	15	57	82	55	52	28
Istitla‘āt (Explorations)	70	0	0	24	23	26	31
Tāriḥ wa turāṭ wa ašḥās (History, Heritage and Personalities)	24	6	30	32	15	16	10
Waḡh ^{an} li-waḡh (Face to Face)	7	0	0	0	0	7	0
Funūn (Arts)	51	26	15	12	28	19	33
Ṭibb (Medicine)	0	0	0	0	4	0	0
‘Ulūm (Sciences)	6	11	6	6	0	0	6
al-Bayt al- ‘Arabī (The Arab House)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Abwāb ṭābitah (Regular Columns)	0	0	0	0	3	6	6
Total Pages per Year	250	78	145	209	154	140	165

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