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THE NATIONAL IDENTITY IN ARAB COUNTRIES UNDER CONDITIONS OF GLOBALIZATION

Azizjon Rizayev

Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Political Sciences
Researcher at Tashkent State University of oriental Studies

Abstract

This article provides a comprehensive analysis of the mechanisms for preserving national identity in the Arab states of the Persian Gulf (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman) under conditions of globalization. The study examines the role of the state as an architect of national identity, the system of monarchical legitimacy, the function of Islam and the Arabic language as the "hard core" of identity, and the significance of tribal and family-clan structures as a social framework. The author reveals the role of national development strategies, cultural policy, media, and the digital environment in shaping identity within the framework of the "managed modernization" concept. The article elaborates on demographic factors, migration policy, as well as internal contradictions and vulnerabilities of identity mechanisms. A separate analysis is devoted to the unique identity model of Oman based on Ibadism.

Keywords

national identity, globalization, Gulf states, Arabian Peninsula, monarchical legitimacy, Islam, Arabic language, tribal structure, managed modernization, Ibadism, cultural policy, soft power, migration policy, social contract.

The Arab states of the Persian Gulf demonstrate that the preservation of identity under conditions of globalization is achievable, yet it necessitates active and deliberate state policy, investment in culture and education, and the capacity to adapt to change without compromising the core of identity. In the countries of the Arabian Peninsula, identity constitutes an actively constructed, managed, and continuously revised project, the success of which depends on political, economic, social, cultural, demographic, and geopolitical factors. Identity in the Arab-Muslim world represents a complex phenomenon comprising religious, ethnic, tribal, linguistic, and civilizational components.

In Arab perception, globalization constitutes a contradictory process. On the one hand, it opens opportunities for cultural exchange, economic development, and technological progress. On the other hand, globalization poses a threat to Arab-Muslim cultural diversity, erasing cultural boundaries and local specificity while imposing a Western universal model. In the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, globalization is perceived through the prism of the necessity to balance modernization with the preservation of cultural authenticity. Egyptian scholar Abdulfattah al-Fawi[1] characterizes this as "colonialism of consciousness" implemented through modern means of communication. The process of globalization encompasses a tendency toward "cultural expansion," the universalization of developing world cultures, and the imposition of Western values.

Identity in Arab societies is of a multiple character. Samuel Huntington distinguishes cultural, political, social, territorial, and economic types of identity. Under the conditions of the Arabian Peninsula, all these dimensions interact, creating a complex picture of self-identification. The specificity of Arab nationalism lay in its outward orientation, with anti-Western sentiment constituting an integral part thereof. The adoption of Western ideologies occurred

simultaneously with the rejection of European models of social organization. This duality continues to determine the nature of attitudes toward globalization in the countries of the region.

In the states of the Arabian Peninsula, the central authority functions as the key actor in the process of constructing and maintaining national identity. This role of the state differs from the European model, where national identity was formed predominantly through civil society and cultural self-determination. In the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, the state implements a purposeful policy of constructing identity as a managed structure.

An important element of the state architecture of national identity is the monarchical system of governance. In Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Oman, monarchies have become the symbolic center of national identity. The legitimacy of monarchs is not questioned, as they exist within a system of dynastic succession sanctified by tradition and religion[2]. Unlike republican regimes in the Arab world, where rulers often lost legitimacy due to the refusal to rotate elites and develop democratic institutions, Arabian monarchies successfully combine traditionalism with selective modernization. Qatari political scientist Abdullah al-Na'imi notes that "national identity in the Gulf states is not a static category but a dynamic construct actively managed through state policy"[3].

State symbolic policy includes the creation and maintenance of official historical narratives that construct the image of a "national past." National holidays, museums, monuments, and school history textbooks—all these instruments are employed to form collective memory and shared conceptions of the nation's historical path. The state carefully controls the content of these narratives, excluding alternative or competing interpretations of history.

Islam constitutes a fundamental element of national identity; however, states do not permit the autonomy of religious institutions. Religious structures are integrated into the state apparatus, and religious authorities are appointed and controlled by the government. This enables the state to utilize religion for the legitimation of political decisions while preventing religious institutions from becoming an alternative source of power.

An important aspect of state identity policy is the management of ethnic and confessional diversity. In countries with heterogeneous populations—for example, in Bahrain with its Shia majority under a Sunni dynasty, or in the UAE with its multiple emirates—the state constructs specific balancing mechanisms aimed at preventing internal conflicts and maintaining a national identity that prevails over subnational loyalties.

The state actively employs foreign policy instruments to strengthen internal identity. The promotion of a "national brand" in the international arena, the organization of global events (the FIFA World Cup in Qatar, Expo in Dubai), and cultural diplomacy — all of these work to create a positive image of the country, which is then transmitted back into society, reinforcing citizens' pride and sense of belonging to a successful nation[4].

Under conditions of globalization, religion and language become foundational elements of the national identity of the Arab states of the Arabian Peninsula, functioning as the "hard core" that resists the homogenizing influence of global cultural flows. In Saudi Arabia, Islamic identity is particularly strong due to the kingdom's special status as the custodian of the two holy sites (Mecca and Medina) and the historical alliance between the Al Saud dynasty and the religious movement founded by Sheikh Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab. Under these circumstances, the religious legitimation of state power remains a key mechanism. In Saudi Arabia, the king's title—"Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques"—directly links the monarchy to

Islamic identity. The religious establishment legitimizes the political decisions of the Al Saud dynasty, and the dynasty, in turn, provides protection and support for religious institutions.

In Oman, Islamic identity is based on Ibadism, which differs from both Sunnism and Shiism. Ibadism has become the most important marker of Omani national specificity, an element distinguishing Oman from other Arab states of the Persian Gulf[5]. The Omani leadership actively promotes the idea of religious tolerance and "moderate Islam," which also serves as an element of national identity[6].

In Bahrain and Kuwait, the confessional structure is more complex, with a significant presence of both Sunnis and Shias[7]. This creates tension, as confessional identity may compete with national identity. These states are compelled to balance between recognizing confessional pluralism and attempting to create a supra-confessional national identity based on common belonging to Islam.

Institutional mechanisms play an important role in preserving Islamic identity in Arabian monarchies. Religious education remains a mandatory component of the school curriculum in all Gulf countries. Religious norms regulate a significant portion of public life, ranging from dress codes to working hours during the month of Ramadan, from prohibitions on alcohol to family law norms.

Political scientists draw attention to an existing paradox in Arab countries, where globalization simultaneously weakens and strengthens the role of religion in identity. On the one hand, the spread of Western mass culture, secular values, and consumerist lifestyles creates a challenge to traditional Islamic religiosity. On the other hand, recourse to religion becomes a form of resistance to the "spiritual poverty" of globalization and a means of asserting cultural distinctiveness.

The Arabic language serves as the second pillar of the "hard core" of identity. Despite the de facto dominance of English in the spheres of business, science, technology, and higher education, Arabic retains its status as the state language and a crucial symbol of cultural belonging.

In the UAE and Qatar, where nationals constitute a minority of the population, Arabic becomes a marker separating citizens from numerous expatriates[8]. Proficiency in literary Arabic and knowledge of the local dialect become forms of cultural capital accessible primarily to indigenous citizens. In this regard, state cultural policy is directed toward maintaining and developing the Arabic language. Language academies are established, festivals of Arabic poetry are held, literary prizes are awarded, and programs for preserving the classical heritage are implemented. States invest in the Arabization of the digital environment, the development of Arabic-language content on the internet, and the creation of Arabic media platforms.

Cultural policy as a whole is built on the principle of selective acculturation. States actively borrow technologies, economic models, and educational practices from the West, while simultaneously striving to create a "protective barrier" around the sphere of values, morality, and cultural norms based on the formula of "mastering the foreign without losing one's own." A manifestation of this policy has been the creation of large-scale cultural institutions: museums (the Louvre Abu Dhabi, the National Museum of Qatar), cultural districts (Katara in Doha, Saadiyat Island in Abu Dhabi), and centers of Islamic art. These institutions, on the one hand, demonstrate openness to world culture and the modernization of the Arab states of the Persian Gulf; on the other hand, they serve as instruments for reconceptualizing and representing their

own cultural heritage as equal to that of the West.

Despite urbanization, technological modernization, and the formal construction of modern state institutions, the tribal and family-clan structure in the countries of the Arabian Peninsula continues to perform the function of a social framework supporting national identity. In Saudi Arabia, state formation occurred as an alliance between the Al Saud dynasty and major tribal confederations. The tribal structure was not destroyed by the process of state-building but was incorporated into it. Tribal leaders obtained positions in power structures, and tribal loyalty was redirected to serve the nation-state. To this day, belonging to a particular tribe influences social status, access to resources, and career opportunities. In the UAE, the federal structure of the state reflects a balance among the various emirates, each of which is governed by its own ruling family. Within the emirates, division into tribes and family clans is preserved. Ruling families maintain loyalty through a system of patronage, distribution of state positions, and economic privileges[9].

The mechanisms of reproducing tribal and family identity are diverse. Marriage strategies play a key role. Marriages within a tribe or family clan strengthen solidarity and preserve resources within the group. In the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, formal and informal obstacles exist for marriages between citizens and non-citizens, and between representatives of different tribal groups. Endogamy serves as a mechanism for reproducing social boundaries.

Tribal and family narratives are preserved in oral culture, genealogical traditions, and poetry. Knowledge of one's genealogy (nasab), the ability to trace one's lineage several generations back, remains an important element of social identity. Tribal poetry (shi'r nabati) continues to enjoy popularity; poetry competitions are held, broadcast on television, and attract large audiences.

Modernization has not destroyed the tribal structure in Arab society but has transformed its functions. Tribes "adapt and continue to construct a sense of 'we,'" but they do so in new forms. Tribal solidarity may manifest in the creation of business associations, charitable foundations, and informal political blocs. Tribal leaders are transformed into modern political actors, using traditional legitimacy to participate in contemporary politics. The state, recognizing the strength of Arab tribal structures, employs them in a dual manner. On the one hand, it strives to monopolize loyalty, requiring that tribal affiliation be subordinated to national identity. On the other hand, it uses tribal mechanisms to mobilize support, maintain social control, and legitimize power. Ruling dynasties emphasize their tribal genealogy, which serves as an additional source of authority.

The former Sultan of Oman, Qaboos bin Said, actively utilized traditional institutions—majlises (councils) where citizens could directly address the ruler. This practice, rooted in the tribal tradition of consultation, was integrated into the modern state system, creating a sense of accessibility of power and connection between ruler and people.

However, tribal and family structure also creates challenges. In Bahrain, the conflict between the Sunni ruling dynasty and the Shia majority of the population is partly articulated in tribal terms. In Kuwait, parliamentary politics is largely built around tribal and family blocs, which impedes the formation of ideological parties and programmatic politics. However, according to Professor Fahad al-Ahmad, in countries where the budget is largely formed from natural resource revenues, identity and legitimacy become closely tied to the state's ability to finance the social contract and symbolic policy[10].

The role of the state as architect of national identity is particularly evident in the process of "managed modernization." Arab governments actively promote national development strategies that present modernization not as an abandonment of traditions but as their organic continuation under new conditions[11]. The main element of this strategy has become national future projects, which simultaneously construct a new type of national identity. The most well-known examples are the national development strategies extending to 2030. These strategies share several common features. First, they proclaim the necessity of economic diversification and reduction of dependence on oil revenues. Second, they emphasize the development of human capital, education, and innovation. Third, and most importantly for the theme of identity, they present modernization not as a rupture with tradition but as its organic continuation.

The typical rhetoric of these strategies is built around the formula: "we modernize but do not lose our roots." For example, the Saudi Vision 2030 project declares as its goal the creation of "a thriving and ambitious nation, proud of its Islamic and Arab heritage." Qatar National Vision formulates the task of "balance between modernization and preservation of traditions." This rhetoric legitimizes changes, presenting them not as capitulation to globalization but as a strategy for strengthening the nation. According to Professor M.L. Ross of the University of California[12], "thereby the economic foundation of national identity is formed, where citizenship appears not only as a legal status but also as a marker of belonging to a privileged economic group."

An important element of managed modernization is the selectivity of borrowings. The Arab states of the Persian Gulf actively import technologies, attract foreign specialists, send students to study at Western universities, and create partnerships with global corporations. Simultaneously, they strive to create a "protective barrier" around the sphere of national values, family norms, and religious practices. Arab monarchies invest billions of dollars in creating modern universities, often in partnership with leading Western educational institutions. Students receive education corresponding to global standards, studying modern sciences, technologies, and business in English. However, courses in Islamic culture, Arabic language, and national history remain mandatory. University campuses may be ultramodern, yet in some contemporary universities in Arab Gulf countries, rules of gender-segregated education or dress codes reflecting local Arab-Muslim cultural norms are in effect.

According to Professor Jasim al-Manna'i of Qatar University[13], identity is reformatted as a "country brand," where culture becomes part of a competitiveness strategy. Qatar invests in world-class cultural institutions (museums, libraries, research centers) to present itself as a center of knowledge and culture. The UAE positions itself as a "global hub"—a meeting place of East and West, a fusion of traditions and innovations. Saudi Arabia launches ambitious cultural and tourism projects, striving to modernize its image. These projects perform a dual function. Externally, they are directed at attracting investments, tourists, and talent, and at positioning the country in global competition. Internally, they work to form a new national narrative in which citizens can take pride in their country's achievements and feel themselves part of a successful, dynamically developing society.

According to political scientist Khalid al-Dakhiri[14], within the framework of managed modernization, Arab state leaderships carefully control the pace of change. For example, reforms, especially in the socio-cultural sphere, are introduced gradually, with attention to the reaction of traditionally-minded segments of society[15]. In Saudi Arabia, the reforms of Crown Prince Sheikh Muhammad bin Salman Al Saud are presented as a "return to moderate Islam" rather than as Westernization. Reforms are justified by references to early Islamic history or to the necessity

of adapting to modern conditions to preserve the nation's strength.

The education system remains the principal institutional instrument of the state in shaping identity. Educational programs in all Arab countries include mandatory courses in national history, Islamic culture, Arabic language, and civics. These courses construct a conception of national history as continuous progress from a tribal past to a modern state, emphasize the role of ruling dynasties as nation-builders, and form images of national heroes. The history of regional and global relations is presented from the perspective of the nation-state. For example, in history textbooks published in Saudi Arabia, emphasis is placed on the unification of the Arabian Peninsula under the rule of the Al Saud dynasty as a national achievement, while conflicts with other tribal groups are minimized.

However, the state's monopoly on educational narrative is challenged by several factors. First, the spread of private and international schools creates an alternative educational space. In the UAE and Qatar, a significant portion of citizens study at international schools operating according to British or American educational programs. These educational institutions transmit different values, approaches, and worldviews. Second, study abroad has become a mass phenomenon. Thousands of students from Arab countries receive higher education at universities in North America, Europe, and Australia. They return not only with diplomas but also with new value orientations, conceptions of democracy, human rights, and gender relations. This creates a gap between generations and social groups.

The media space and digital environment have become a key arena for the construction of national identity in Arab countries. Globalization has radically altered the state's ability to control information flows and shape collective representations. Globalization through social networks reduces the state's monopoly on the production of identity narratives. As Egyptian researcher Abdulfattah al-Fawi notes[16], under conditions of globalization, "it is precisely the image that is called upon to play the same role that the word and written culture played in human history." The Arab states of the Persian Gulf have created powerful national media holdings. Qatar's Al Jazeera has become a global media brand transmitting an Arab perspective on world events[17]. Saudi Arabia controls several major pan-Arab media platforms. The UAE is developing the media industry in Dubai. These media play an important role in shaping both the external image of the country and citizens' internal conceptions of their nation. Mass media transmit a "normative" image of society—successful modernization, the wisdom of leadership, cultural heritage, social harmony. They avoid critical topics, conflicts, and social problems. Social networks have become a space where alternative identities and narratives are articulated. Youth use these platforms to discuss issues that are taboo in official discourse.

State leadership is compelled to balance between striving for cultural openness (important for image) and the demands of conservative segments of society for the protection of moral foundations. Cultural industries such as cinema, music, literature, and art play a special role. Arabian monarchies actively invest in their development, seeing them as instruments of "soft power" and the formation of a positive national image.

The digital environment has also become a space of global competition for national identity. Religious extremist groups actively use the internet to propagate their ideologies and recruit supporters. The Arab states of the Persian Gulf are compelled to compete with these narratives, promoting their own version of "moderate Islam" through networks of official religious authorities, educational programs, and media campaigns.

The demographic structure of the Arab states of the Persian Gulf represents a unique phenomenon. In most of them, citizens constitute a minority or only a slim majority of the

population. Demographic reality transforms the question of identity into a matter not only cultural but also political-legal. Identity becomes a "managed boundary," a mechanism for separating citizens from non-citizens, "us" from "them." Migration policy and citizenship regulation serve as key instruments for preserving identity. The cultural assimilation of migrants is not only not encouraged but in a certain sense is prevented. Mass migration strengthens rather than weakens the national identity of citizens.

Migration creates serious challenges for the identity of Arab countries. In the UAE and Qatar, the problem of cultural dominance emerges[18]. Western mass culture dominates the public space. This generates anxiety among citizens regarding the "loss of identity" in their own country. States respond to this by intensifying identity policy. Migration policy and control over citizenship become mechanisms for preserving identity under conditions of globalization.

The mechanisms for preserving national identity under conditions of globalization contain internal contradictions and vulnerabilities that may undermine their sustainability in the long term. States strive to preserve cultural specificity, limit the influence of "foreign" values, and control sociocultural changes. These goals are in contradiction. It is impossible to be fully open economically and closed culturally. Economic globalization inevitably entails cultural changes[19].

The young generation of citizens in Arab countries receives modern education, often abroad, is fluent in English, actively uses global digital platforms, and consumes global mass culture. This youth has internalized many global values such as individualism, gender equality, human rights, and political participation. The state and the older generation strive to preserve traditional values: collectivism, hierarchy, gender segregation, respect for authority, and religious orthodoxy. This contradiction manifests in Saudi Arabia, where the reforms of Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman partially respond to the expectations of youth, yet political control is simultaneously intensified and dissidents are suppressed. In Bahrain, the confrontation between the Sunni ruling dynasty and the Shia majority of the population creates competing identities that undermine national identity. Attempts by the state to impose a pan-Bahraini identity encounter resistance from the Shia community, which feels discriminated against and perceives its identity in confessional rather than national terms[20]. Similar, though less acute, tensions exist in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Oman. Confessional identity may compete with national identity, especially when it is linked to external patrons or transnational movements.

In light of the foregoing, it should be noted that the analysis of mechanisms for preserving identity under conditions of globalization demonstrates that Saudi Arabia represents a case where identity is closely linked to religion. Since the founding of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Islam has constituted the foundation of state legitimacy and a key element of national identity. Under the leadership of Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman Al Saud, Saudi identity is being reformatted from a religious-conservative to a national-modernizing orientation, while preserving Islamic symbols. The UAE, combining traditions and ultra-modernity, East and West, has successfully constructed identity as a "brand." The federal structure creates certain complexities; both a pan-Emirati identity and local identities of individual emirates exist. Qatar employs a strategy of cultural capital and "soft power" to assert its identity. Qatar's policy of preserving national identity serves to form citizens' perceptions of themselves as part of a successful, influential, and culturally significant nation. Qatar positions itself as a mediator, an intellectual leader, an innovative country preserving Islamic and Arab values. Kuwait's identity is linked to the idea of national sovereignty. However, Kuwaiti society is fragmented along tribal and confessional lines. Identity is formed in balancing between these sub-identities and an overarching Kuwaiti national identity. In Bahrain, national identity is undermined by

confessional division. A Sunni ruling dynasty governs a country with a Shia majority. Attempts to construct a pan-Bahraini identity encounter resistance from Shia opposition, which perceives the regime as sectarian and discriminatory. Bahraini identity remains divided and contested. Oman demonstrates a unique model where identity is built around the figure of the ruler (sultan) and the specific religious tradition of Ibadism. Ibadism distinguishes Oman from other Arab countries and serves as an element of national identity. Oman positions itself as a tolerant, neutral, peaceful country avoiding regional conflicts. Omani society is diverse, and the state performs an integrating role.

Globalization, by causing Anglicization and cultural unification, strengthens the symbolic significance of the Islamic religion and Arabic language in society. They become the "last frontier" of the cultural distinctiveness of the Arabs of the Arabian Peninsula. Urbanization and education gradually weaken the direct influence of tribal structure on everyday life, especially among youth. Tribal identity continues to function as a "reserve" identity, activated in situations of conflict, resource distribution, and marital choice. It forms an "invisible framework" of social relations that coexists with modern institutions and even penetrates them. The process of managed modernization in Arab countries creates internal tensions. Expectations generated by ambitious national projects outpace the real possibilities for their implementation. Arab youth who have received modern education and internalized the global cultural codes of the West demand more political freedoms and social changes than the state is prepared to provide. The balance between control and liberalization remains fragile and is constantly being revised.

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