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Linguistic Policies and the issue of ethno-linguistic minorities in the Middle East*

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Summary

In the last decades (i.e. since the 1950s and 1960s), many minorities in the Middle East have been advocating or fighting for their linguistic rights. On the other hand, the majority of Arab countries have tried to impose a quasi monolingual policy in favor of Arabic language. If the languages of the former colonial powers are still playing an important role, those of the non-Arab communities have always been marginalized on the basis of nationalistic and religious arguments. Focusing mainly on Egypt and Sudan, this paper attempts to identify the historical roots of the current linguistic policies and to assess their impact and implications for identity formation and national cohesion. The present monolithic linguistic policies are inherited mainly from a narrow conception of nationalism with Arabism being the dominant ideological model. Although it is not always easy to establish a clear distinction between Arabism and Islamism when dealing with the issue of Arab nationalism it appears that Islam, as a religion, did not play a decisive role in the linguistic choices of the modern Arab and Middle Eastern States. In many cases, the linguistic and cultural policies in favor of Arabization have been implemented by secular States (the Nasserist regime in Egypt, the Baathiste regime in Syria and Irak, the FLN in Algeria) but religious references were also explicitly made to acquire more legacy. It is therefore a combination of secular nationalism and modern political islamism that fed most official discourses supporting Arabization. The Arabization policies failed to ensure national consensus and national unity in a number of Arab countries with sizeable non-Arab minorities. This political failure have urge some governments (Morocco, Algeria, Sudan) to recently officially adopt a more tolerant attitude towards the non-Arab component of their society.

Keywords: ethno-linguistic minorities, linguistic policy, ethnic identification, Egypt and Sudan

Introduction

Minorities, like any other type of human grouping (communities, ethnic groups, social classes, etc.) are neither fixed nor stable entities. They cannot be defined in isolation but only within a general framework of social interaction. Human groups are defined by their boundaries (Barth 1969) and by the fact that people are affiliated to a specific group (i.e. the “we-group” versus the “others”). The bases of this grouping can vary according to the main binding factors : kinship, religion, common land, language, culture, etc. But while the concepts of community or

* This paper has been written in early 1998 for the Osaka’s Conference on Islam and the Minorities in the Middle East . Since then a number of changes have occurred particularly in Morocco and Algeria concerning the status of the Berber language and culture. A number of important publications on this topic also came out. I had no time to always update my paper for the present edition but I tried to add some new relevant references.

ethnic group do not convey per se a value-meaning, the concept of minority implies the notion of *inequality* either in terms of demographic weight (larger versus smaller) or in terms of socio-political weight (dominant versus subordinate). In many instances, political weight does not reflect demographic weight : Berbers make up at least 60% of the Moroccan population, but the Berber language is still marginalized even after King Hassan's declaration of 1994 and King Muhammad VI's declaration of 2001 recognizing Berber as an essential component of Moroccan identity. The Middle East is conceived as dominantly (*Sunni*) Muslim and Arab. Therefore minorities are defined (Hourani 1947; Nisan 1991) either on a religious basis (non-Sunni Muslim) or on an ethno-linguistic one (non-Arab).

Ethno-linguistic minorities will be the focus of this paper. Two levels of analysis will be considered. First the effectiveness of national linguistic policies to control language use, and second the role of language in ethnic formation and identity representation. I will try to adopt a comparative and complementary approach by analyzing the language issue in both historical and contemporary settings. However this is not an easy task for many reasons. Each country presents a specific context and it may be hard to avoid broad generalizations. I do not intend to list and review all cases of minority languages for each Middle Eastern country. A broad review of these minority languages can be found in Zaborsky (1997). Instead, I will focus mainly on two countries, Egypt and Sudan, which represent two different cases regarding language.¹ The case of Egypt will show the historical process of Islamization/Arabization and the flexibility of language use during the Mamluk and Ottoman periods. The case of Sudan will illustrate the sensitivity of language and cultural issues in a multilingual state and the failure of a narrow and harsh Arabization policy. These two cases illustrate that there is no direct relationship between religion and language in state linguistic policies. It is the structures of the State more than its religion that determine the role given to languages. In this respect the linguistic situation of the Ottoman Empire does not seem radically different from that of the Roman Empire or the Austro-Hungarian Empire. And corollary the linguistic choices of the modern Middle East states follow the same logic than many other non-Muslim and non-Arab states.

Historical studies indicate that for centuries Muslim states were able to accommodate different linguistic communities and that multilingualism was widespread. This is partly due to the fact that following the fall of the Abbassid Caliphate, many members of the Muslim ruling elites throughout the Muslim Empire were from non-Arab ethnic backgrounds. Moreover Empires tend to be multilingual while contemporary Nation-States tend to become monolingual (Baggioni 1997) following the model of the 19th century European nationalism.

However one has to be very cautious when trying to compare between past and present because we rely on different kinds of data for the historical and contemporary periods. Data on language uses and attitudes are scarce for the historical period and language uses have not yet raised the interest of many historians. We have information on written uses but we find no account of oral uses and language attitudes. On the opposite, we are first-hand witnesses of the contemporary period and we have access to both the official and non-official uses and discourses. This disparity may bias our perception of a tolerant past versus an intolerant present. Furthermore the stakes and impact of linguistic policies have grown tremendously in the contemporary states due to the spread of mass education. For centuries, writing was in the hands of an educated minority. The written language was often a complex literary type not used in daily speech. The elites were plurilingual and the rulers did not bother to control the spoken variations of the commoners. Spoken languages were emerging, evolving and sometimes dying mainly under the influence of socio-economic factors and rarely under that of a specific linguistic policy. But with the emergence of the modern states and the raising of nationalism, language came to play a crucial role in the formation of national identity. This is not specific to

¹ I selected the two countries where I have been doing research. The data on Egypt is mainly taken from a collective research that myself and Dr Madiha Doss coordinated in 1997 (Doss and Miller, eds., 1997). The data on Sudan is mainly taken from previous personal research.

the Arab world or to the middle East but can be found in most countries of the world (Baggioni 1997, Habsbawn 1990, Thiesse 1999)

Between Monolingualism and Plurilingualism: the emergence of linguistic nationalism in the Middle East

Language, Ethnicity, Minorities and the State

The relation between language and ethnic identity and the role of language in shaping identity (especially among minorities) have been the focus of hundreds of sociolinguistic studies, following among others the outstanding work of Wholf, Sapir, Fishman, Gumperz, Giles and Bourhis. Generally speaking, the predominant theoretical trend tends to emphasize the major role of language in shaping identity and in maintaining distinctive collective entities (Fishman 1977; Giles 1977). In this conceptual framework, language is not only a means of communication, but more importantly it is the essence of the culture of the people, the symbol of their cultural survival and continuity. Through language people can be controlled and political power exercised. This conception has influenced the linguistic policy of many States towards their minorities. It was thought that national unity would come about more easily through linguistic unity. Therefore multilingualism was perceived as a threat to national unity. On the other hand, minorities would fight as much as they could to protect their linguistic integrity.

However, linguistic assimilation does not always lead to socio-cultural assimilation and to the disappearance of ethnic boundaries, especially in cases of social or political discrimination. Members of a group can still claim a specific belonging while the cultural and social set-up of the group has undergone drastic change. In a number of recent publications (Dow 1991; Fishman 1994; Edwards 1994), sociolinguists themselves begin to relativize the very role of language in structuring identity and to underline that “identity continuity and ethnocultural continuity are two quite different things” (Fishman 1994) and that “language may be more central for some groups than for others” (D. Gorker 1994).

Today the primacy given to language as a symbol of (either communal, religious or national) identification appears to be a quasi universal and inescapable phenomenon. However this primacy must be relativized according to times and civilizations. While the intimate link between language and identity seems to be extremely prevalent today in the definition of who is considered Arab it appears that in ancient times the only true Arab was the Bedouin Arab, and kinship and lineage as much as language were primordial means of identification. Many pre-modern Empires have been characterized by their multilingualism as we will see in the case of the Ottoman Empire. In fact in many pre-modern states there was no equation between the language of the elite and the language of the commoners. The members of the elite or aristocracy were not always of local origin (cf. the links between the various Royal families) and used to speak and write one/many of the main international prestigious languages (Latin, French, Italian, Arabic, Persia, Osmanli, etc.) while the commoners were speaking the various local dialects. Language did not seem to be considered as a primary matter of confrontation and identification. During the Ottoman period, religious affiliation was the primary means of identification. But following the rise of nationalism in the mid-19th century, ethno-linguistic affiliation tended to become an important means of identification. In the last decades, many minorities in Middle Eastern countries have been advocating or have been fighting for their linguistic rights; among others, Berbers, Kurds, Armenians, Southern Sudanese, etc. (Nisan 1991; Suleiman 1996). On the other hand, the majority of Arab countries have opted for a linguistic Arabization policy. If the languages of the former colonial powers are still playing an

important role, those of non-Arab minorities have always been marginalized if not fought on the basis of nationalistic and religious arguments. However, these policies have not always proved to be very successful and have fuelled many protests.

In this paper, I would argue that linguistic conflicts in the Middle East have little to do with Islam as such and more to do with the emergence of nationalism (being Arab, Turkish, etc.). The prevailing linguistic conflicts are the result of a specific conception of the nation inherited from the nationalist European ideology of the 19th century (Tibi 1981; Suleiman 1994). Political scientist usually distinguish between the French nationalist conception (the social contract between the citizens) and the German nationalist conception (the common origin). The Arab terms *watan* and *qawm* are supposed to translate this distinction (Baduel 1994). But in both French and German conceptions there is an agreement on the fact that members of a nation are bound by a shared cultural heritage, the language being one of the main important component of this cultural heritage. Nationalists are therefore looking to create a common identity and a common culture within the territorial borders of the nation. In order to foster this common identity they call for an homogenization of both written and oral uses and for an equation between the language of the state and the language of the commoners. The fathers of the Arab linguistic nationalist movements -Sati Al-Husri, Zaki Al Atzouzi, Michel Aflak - adapted the German theories of Herder and Fichete and developed the idea that "Speaking Arabic was to be an Arab" and that language was the basic element of a nation more than religion, state, economic life or common territory (Tibi 1981:122 quoted in Suleiman 1994:11)

Arabism has been advocated by both Secular and Religious Arab nationalists. In the Maghreb for example (Mouhssine 1995), as in Sudan, nationalists and Islamists advocate an extensive Arabization policy to eradicate the former colonial cultural influence. This does not mean that Islam does not play a role in the current linguistic options of many Arab States, but I would avoid to talk in general terms of a Muslim policy towards minorities. Some scholars argue that the concept of Arabization fed the Islamist claim. According to Mouhssine (1995: 50) :

The issue of Arabization has fed Islamist militancy in the Maghreb. The question of language and political protest are the two pillars of the Islamist discourse... The Islamist trend aims for total Arabization, seeing it as a response to Western influence which is felt through the use of the French language. Its slogan is thus Arabization for Islamization. Some scholars such as Rouadjia (1990: 111) and Burgat (1988: 154) hold that Arabization, as it was conceived and implemented would have served a seminal role in Islamist resurgence and it is around the language polemic that Islamist protest emerged.

This indicates that nationalist and Islamist discourses use the same symbolic devices. There is however a difference of hierarchy between the nationalists and the Islamists. For the latter, Arabization is perceived as a means to reach Islamization. For the former (among whom the Christians were influential) Arabization is an end in itself. And as pointed out by Burgat (1988:39) the Islamists often accused the Arab nationalist (cf. Nasser) of having privileged Arabism over Islam. We should not forget that in the Muslim world, some of the harshest linguistic policies towards minorities have been endorsed by secular states (Turkey for example). The influence of Muslim ideology seems to be more effective in the internal debate concerning the nature of Arabic language and the status to be given to colloquial Arabic. Arabic is the language of the Quran and as such cannot be compared to any other human languages. It cannot be modernized or simplified. Education must be done according to the religious traditions. Arabic dialects are conceived as corrupted forms that should be eliminated by proper education. As mentioned by many scholars (Zaborsky 1997), the status of Arabic dialects is similar to that of minority languages at many levels (i.e. no official recognition despite the fact that their informal use is widespread). But again the contempt towards Arabic dialects was (and

is still) shared by a number of both prominent secular (Christian or Muslim) and Islamist intellectuals.

The Historical Process of Arabization and Islamization: the case of Egypt

Historically the spread of the Arabic language is intimately linked with the spread of Islam and the establishment of the Muslim Empires. However it is well known that Islamization did not systematically lead to Arabization, and sometimes Arabization occurred without Islamization. The spread of Arabic was mainly limited to Middle Eastern countries (here including the Maghreb) where Arabization seems to have come about as a result of population movements rather than political decrees. Arabization of the conquered lands occurred mainly during the Umayyad period. But as early as the Late Abbasid period, and also during the Mamluk and Ottoman eras, political power shifted from Arab to non-Arab groups, mainly Persian, Turkish, Kurdish, and Circassian. These non-Arabic-speaking groups did not try to substitute their language for Arabic but many foreign terms entered Arabic and bilingualism prevailed among many ruling elites.

The relationship between Islam and Arabic is very complex. The only universal feature of Islamization is the use of Quranic Arabic for matters pertaining to religion and especially prayer. Even *tafsir*, religious explanations and *khutba*, religious preach can be done in the vernacular language, as it is still the case in the Berber-speaking areas of rural Morocco (Boukous 1997) and in many West African or Asian countries. Wherever Arabs were in minority or when Islamization was achieved by non-Arabs, Arabic never became the dominant language and did not expand into the secular aspects of life. In many countries, Arabic influence was limited to lexical borrowings and to the use of Arabic script to write local languages (cf Hausa and Fulfulde in West Africa, Persian and Osmanli languages, Urdu etc.). In the most extreme cases, contact between Arabic and local languages gave birth to new mixed languages (eg Swahili, with approximately 50% of Arabic lexical items and a Bantu grammar). In this respect, some scholars (Wexler 2000) have favored the concept of Islamic languages, i.e. languages spoken by the non-Arab Muslim population that tend to develop specific bounds with Arabic and to integrate many Arabic lexical and functional items as well as the Arabic script.

The reasons why the Arab conquest led or did not lead to full Arabization in each specific country are still unclear and we do not yet know exactly how Arabization took place (Versteegh 1997). What we know so far is that in most cases Arabization was a much slower process than is generally admitted and that multilingualism was quite common.

In Egypt for example, the policy of Arabization was implemented during the reign of the Umayyad Caliph Abdel Malik b. Marwân (685-705). In theory, all administrative documents were to be written in Arabic and Greek. But many papyry found in the provincial administrative centres were written in Greek or Coptic during the 9th and 10th century (Björnesjö 1997). The papyry show that even when official documents were written in Arabic, people could still speak Coptic and that bilingualism was widespread. During the first century of Arab rule, it seems that the use of Arabic was mainly limited to the immigrants and the military ruling elite. It was only with large scale migration of Arabs and the conversion of large parts of the population to Islam in the later 8th and the 9th century that Arabic became the main spoken language. The Coptic Church seems to have resisted any use of Arabic for almost three hundred years and the first major Coptic writer in Arabic is Sâwirus ibn al Muqaffa' in the later part of the tenth century. But suddenly the Copts gave in to Arabic extensively, and by the end of the eleventh century, the Coptic Church had almost totally shifted to Arabic. It seems that this shift to Arabic came about under the pressure of the Crusades and in a move to show the national roots of the Coptic Church (Rubenson 1997).

Therefore a Coptic-Arabic bilingualism prevailed in Egypt between the 7th and the 10-11th centuries. Between the 11th-13th century, Arabic was the sole written official language and became the dominant mother tongue. But as early as the 13th century a non-Arabic-

speaking Mamluk elite came to dominate the country and as stated above many foreign words entered the administrative language (Abu Ghazi 1997). Between the 15th-19th century, under Ottoman rule, Turkish-Arabic bilingualism prevailed and Osmanli and Persian were introduced in the high levels of the administration. The ruling elite was multilingual and, as described by Michel (1997), language was not an ethnic criterion. Members of this elite were first characterized by their professional category which in turn determined language use. Diversity of language use was also shared by members of different ethnic minorities (Jewish, Armenian, etc.). Legal documents of the 19th century Egyptian Armenian community show a mixture of Turkish and Armenian while documents testify to the growing use of Arabic orally (Kazazian 1997). Specific scripts played the role of religious community marker : the Hebrew script for Judeo-Arabic documents, and the Armenian script for Armenian documents. But the written Arabic of these non-Muslim communities was not grammatically very different from the ordinary civil Muslim writings and the use of Middle Arabic, with its mix of colloquial and classical features appears to have been widespread among all communities².

The Ottoman Empire was multilingual as more than a hundred languages were in use (Strauss 1996). At the written level, Osmanli, Arabic, Greek, Armenian, Judeo-Spanish, Serbian, Bulgarian and Slavic were used by different communities, each one with its own script. After the reforms of the 19th century all these languages were used in different administrative sectors, in the official gazettes, in the statistical records (*sâlnâme*) and in various newspapers and books. They were also taught in the minorities' schools.

It was only at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century that a general trend of linguistic reform started to affect *all communities*. This movement was in part due to the diglossic situation faced by all these languages and by an aspiration to purify each language of its foreign elements. Greeks and Armenians started to eradicate all Turkish elements from their literary writings and to resort to neologisms. In Greek, Armenian, and Arabic the linguistic reform tended to return to a "golden age" and to elevate the "corrupted" colloquial level to a more literary one. Later on the Turks initiated a radical movement of reform of the Turkish language, and eventually in 1928 Mustafa Kamal changed its script.

Nationalism and language reforms

The emergence of nationalistic movements in the 19th and 20th century led the way to a new linguistic consciousness for both Arab and non-Arab groups. Arabic (Literary Arabic) became the expression of a specific Arab identity that wanted to distinguish itself from the peoples of the Ottoman Empire. It became also the symbol of a political movement calling for access to power and the establishment of the Arab *Umma*. According to Suleiman (1994:6) :

The early impulses of Arab Nationalism were influenced by the success of the Balkan nations in achieving their independence from Ottoman rule in the 19th century. The important and unifying role of language as a symbol of national identity in the struggle of these nations for independence was not lost on the Arabic-speaking elite in their efforts to promote the interest of their people whether within or outside the Ottoman Empire. However the major impetus in the development of the Arab Nationalist i.e. at the beginning of the 20th century came from the aggressive policy of Turkification adopted by the Young Turks after their arrival to power in 1908.

² Until recently and following the works of J. Blau (1965) many scholars thought that Middle Arabic with its mixture of literary and colloquial features was more specifically used by non-Muslim minorities (i.e. Christian and Jewish) More recent works on non-formal Muslim writings have shown that in fact Middle Arabic was not a religious variety (except for the script) but was representative of the non-formal writing (Hopkins 1984, Versteegh 1997) .

The Young Turks launched a "Turkification policy". In Syria for example Turkish became the language of Instruction in the government-sponsored schools. Pupils were not allowed to speak Arabic between themselves. The Arabic names of some mosques were removed and replaced by the names of the presume ancestors of the Turks (Suleiman 1994:7). The Arabs' linguistic reponse called for the revitalisation of the Arabic language and for its use as the language of education and administration in the Arabic-speaking parts of the Ottoman Empire. This was the impetus for the famous movement of revival and promotion of standard Arabic led by many cultural societies including the well-known Al-Nahda. This cultural movement was then formulated into political revendication by Sati Al-Husri (1880-1963), the most influential theorist of the ideology of Arab nationalism. The Arabic language became the symbol of Arab nationhood for all Arab nationalists, whatever their political and religious aspirations may be. The promotion of standard Arabic served as a means to challenge colonial languages (Turkish, French, English) but also to eradicate local Arabic dialects and other local non-Arabic vernaculars considered as divisive factors among the Umma members.

After Independence, all Arab states eventually adopted an Arabization policy that was implemented to a degree varying according to countries. This Arabization policy did not raise too many problems in countries with a mainly homogeneous Arabic-speaking population (Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Lybia, Tunisia, Yemen and Oman). In those countries the main linguistic problem is the structural gap between the mother tongue (colloquial Arabic) and the formal language of education (MSA) but an intermediate variety (Educated Spoken Arabic) is spreading and tends to reduce this gap. But in countries with large non-Arabic-speaking minorities (Algeria, Morocco, Irak, Sudan) the State refused to accommodate non-Arabic vernaculars and to consider them as part of the national heritage. In fact the modern State dramatically deny large parts of its local history, identity and culture and in the case of Maghreb tends to impose an exported Middle-Eastern cultural model (Benrabah 1999). Ironically modern Arab States seem more concerned to eradicate local languages than foreign ones, as the latter always manage to maintain themselves through the justification of pragmatism, modernization, and nowadays, globalization.

As history repeats itself, this monolithic policy fuelled minorities' claims. And again language became a crucial means of identification, but this time by minorities threatened by an aggressive Arabization policy. In this conflict between Arabism and non-Arab minorities, Islam or Muslim references are sometimes used to justify the hegemony of the Arabic language. The sanctity, the holiness and the superiority of Arabic are evoked to justify the marginalization of non-prestigious languages.

Language and Minorities in the Contemporary Middle East

From this brief historical overview, one may conclude that after centuries of cohabitation, contact and mixing, the 20th century brought an era of linguistic Puritanism and intolerance in many states.³ Under the dogma of modernity, mass education, national building, and the eradication of colonial elements, many states have tended to impose a cultural and linguistic hegemony and to assimilate through compliance or force the unwelcome minorities. However, broad generalizations must be avoided. The glorious past may not have been so tolerant and we still need to know exactly how language changes took place, a crucial task for historians. On the other hand, many different cultural options were considered throughout the emergence of Arab nationalistic movements in the first half of the 20th century. In Egypt, at least four trends were defending different cultural options (Hassan 1994, Doss 1995, Delanoue

³ The same observation is made by Nisan 1991 concerning the change of perception towards diversity; cf. P. 32 "Diversity in the Ottoman Empire has been a mixed blessing. In Republican Turkey it was considered as a curse."

1998): an Islamist one, a Western-oriented one which considered Egypt as part of the Mediterranean world, a regional trend that emphasized the Pharaonic and Coptic heritage, and an Arabist stream. The rural-pharaonic stream was in vogue among the artistic milieu of the twenties and thirties (Ostle 1995). But the Arabist stream finally succeeded in imposing itself among Egyptian intellectuals and the political elite. This success led to the founding of the Arab League, and the organization of Arab Cultural Congresses. Finally, the 1952 revolution fully endorsed this cultural option and lent it crucial support.

Since Independence, the same situation prevails in most Arab States with more or less dramatic consequences. Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) has been introduced as the official and national language, sometimes along with the former colonial language (cf. French in Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia; see Benrabah 1999, Grandguillaume 1983; Holt 1994). Colloquial Arabic and non-Arab vernaculars are denied access to formal institutions and formal recognition. Arabic (MSA) is taught at the primary level and foreign languages are introduced at the late primary or secondary level. At the university level, humanities are taught more and more in Arabic while natural sciences and medicine are taught in French or English. The Arabization policy is more advanced in Syria, while the Arabization of scientific departments at the university level is still a controversial issue in a country like Egypt. In Algeria, Arabization started in the seventies but French still plays a crucial role and the polarization between the tenants and opponent of Arabization is extreme (Benrabah 1999). In Morocco, the government officially supports a bilingual policy. The media use Arabic (MSA and sometimes colloquial) and foreign languages.

Minorities' languages are almost totally excluded from public life and at best are accepted in their "folkloric" forms, i.e. as popular arts (*funun sha'abiyya*), in songs or dances. They are almost never taught in primary schools or at the university level. In Egypt for example, the Nubian campaign of 1966 succeeded in salvaging huge archeological monuments but no efforts were made to preserve the living culture of displaced Nubians. Nubian cultural activities were confined to Nubian associations. It is only very recently that the Nubian culture and heritage began to be acknowledged by the government of Egypt. In most cases the linguistic and cultural activities of minorities have developed in the Diaspora and not within the country of origin. Books, newspapers, radio or satellite television are printed or broadcast from European capitals such as Paris, Berlin, Oslo, etc.⁴

Things start to change slowly in the Maghreb with the emergence of a relative pluralism in the political and associative levels. The Berber culture and the Berber language started to be recognized as essential component of the national identity in Algeria and Morocco (Boukous 1995, 1997; Chaker 1997, 1998; Ennaji 1995, 1997). This new 'opening' was dramatically expressed by King Hassan II of Morocco in his declaration of August 20th 1994 proclaiming that "Berber is an intrinsic part of the linguistic and cultural heritage of Morocco and it should be preserved by speaking it and teaching it in schools." Practically these new political climate led in Algeria to the creation of a department of Berber language and culture at the University of Tizzi Ouzou in 1990, broadcast in Berber on both radio and television, creation of an institutional body, the "Haut Commissariat à l'Amazaghité". In Morocco, King Mohammed VI is also acting for the creation of a Berber Institute. But in both countries, Berber is not yet recognized as an official language in the Constitution.

The intransigence of the modern Arab States towards their "minorities" (being Arab or non-Arab) has to be understood as a reaction to the former colonial powers' policies which often resorted to the famous "divide and rule" device and were always keen on manipulating the different communities according to their own interests.⁵ Therefore, as we will see in the case of

⁴For the linguistic and cultural activities of the Kurds in Europe, one can refer to Joyce Blau's paper in Suleiman 1996 and to Chakou's paper in the same volume for the Berbers .

⁵ Many examples can be found in Nisan (1991). One of the clearest examples is the Frenchs' obsession to distinguish between Berbers and Arabs as two people requiring two kinds of legislation, *dâhir* for Berber and *Sharf*'a for Arabs.

Sudan, the new independent States often thought that minorities' claims were fabricated and would disappear following an appropriate assimilation policy. However, history cannot be easily erased. In the case of non-Arab minorities, the colonial era was not just a period of domination and divide and rule policy. It was also a time of access to a new "scientific" production focusing on their own countries, their own history, and their own people. As remarkably described by Chaker in the case of Kabylia, the self-perception of the Berbers changed starting at the end of the 19th century :

It is obviously the direct result of the French academic production and diffusion of a scientific knowledge on the Maghreb. Before the colonial era, the Kabyl intellectual would refer to tribal groups, to social values, to saints; while after it, he started to refer to language, ancient history, and to the Maghreb's Berber character... He discovered that his country had a pre-Islamic Berber history, that his mother tongue may be considered as the only indigenous language of the Maghreb, and that since ancient times it has its own alphabet... In the XXth century, the main reference becomes language...

Therefore the non-Arab communities and their intellectuals went through the same process of identity construction as that of the Arabs. Language became a primordial means of identification for these groups who during the same period were witnessing major socio-linguistic changes. Since the second half of the 20th century, and owing to mass education, social changes, mobility and urbanization, many former non-Arabic-speaking groups are being Arabized and are losing their mother tongue.⁶ But as stated above, this language shift does not lead automatically to ethnic or cultural assimilation. Anthropological and sociolinguistic studies have shown that mobility and increased contact with others strengthen ethnicity. Social discrimination (whether economic or cultural) is also an important factor of ethnic maintenance or revival. As minorities are de facto involved in a process of language and cultural change, they tend to put more and more emphasis on their cultural specificity because they feel threatened, marginalized or despised. This cultural specificity becomes a reason for mobilization for their intellectual elites and thus breeds political claims. Authoritarian linguistic policies do not create the appropriate conditions for smooth language changes. On the opposite it pulls oil on fire, as the Sudanese case dramatically shows.

The Sudanese Case : The Failure of Arabization

Within the Middle East,⁷ Sudan somehow represents a specific and exemplary case as regards language and cultural issues. Since Independence, linguistic policy and cultural options have held a large part in the political debate. With about five hundred ethnic groups and with no less than one hundred languages still spoken, the process of national building could not afford to leave out the issues of identity, diversity and national integration. At this point, and in spite of many years of military rule, the cultural debate in the Sudan has been far more outspoken than in many other Middle Eastern countries. But while linguistic diversity reminds us that Sudan is an African country, it shares with the Arab world the emotional investment towards the Arabic language. In Sudan as everywhere else, language issues cannot be separated from other political and social issues as linguistic policies stem directly from the ideological choices of the State.

In previous studies (Miller 1985, 1986, 1989), I dealt extensively with the language situation in Sudan, the process of Arabization and the different linguistic policies implemented

⁶ See Boukous 1995 and 1997 for the Berbers and also Bentahila and Davies 1992.

⁷ Sudan is often included in the Middle Eastern countries, which is quite problematic. Because of its size, geographical location, history, population and various cultures Sudan belongs both to the Horn of Africa, the group of North Eastern African countries, the Saharan and Sub-Saharan countries .

by the Sudanese government since Independence. Main references concerning the linguistic map of Sudan, the Condominium linguistic policy, the Southern case and the ethnic issue can be found in Beshir 1969, Hurreiz 1968, Hurreiz and Bell 1975, Hurreiz and Abdel Salam 1989, Mahmud 1983, Nyombe 1997, Sanderson and Sanderson 1981. The brief historical sketch that follows seeks to shed light on the present crisis.

Arabization of Sudan : The Historical Process

The Arabization of Sudan started late and took place gradually. The *baqt* treaty which regulated Arab-Nubian relations from 652 AD up to the fall of the Christian Nubian Kingdoms protected Sudan from direct Arab colonization. The Arabization of Central Sudan took place between the 13th-16th century as a result of Arab migration. But it doesn't seem that Arabs initiated military campaigns to spread Islam. No organized military expedition or religious persecution was reported in this area (Hurreiz 1989). Between the 16th-19th century, Islamization and partial Arabization spread westward and eastward but were mainly limited to the Arabization of the local ruling elites of the Muslim kingdoms (Hasan 1973). It is only during the second half of the 19th century that Arabic was introduced as a lingua franca in Southern Sudan (Mahmud 1983, Miller 1986) following the "opening" and the conquest of Southern Sudan by the Turkish-Egyptian government in 1841.

What is important to note here is that full Arabization did occur only in areas of extensive Arab migration and intermarriage with the local population (i.e. mainly Central Sudan and the lowlands of Western and Eastern Sudan). In other areas, Arabic became the religious language, penetrated local languages (many borrowings) but mainly remained a high-status language or a lingua franca. Even the ruling elites appeared to have been bilingual. In Dar Fur for example, Fur continued to be used during the Muslim Fur Sultanate (O'Fahey 1980). But literacy and teaching in Koranic schools were in Arabic. Local languages, if written, were transcribed in Arabic. Links with the Muslim and Arab world were strengthened due to the circulation of religious scholars, i.e. *Faki* and *Ulama* (McHugh 1994, Spaulding 1985). Therefore through Islamization and partial Arabization, those remote regions came to consider themselves as being part of the Arab world. Many local ruling elites elaborated and adopted Arab genealogies. However the ideal picture of a tolerant, non-violent expansion of Arab groups all over Northern Sudan and their smooth intermingling with the local populations has to be qualified. The displacement of many local groups and their settlement in isolated or mountainous areas seems to suggest that many local groups retreated as they faced the Arab nomadic groups and also tried to escape slavery raids.

The spread of Arabic in Southern Sudan took place in very specific conditions i.e. the establishment in the 19th century of a large-scale slave trade, and subsequently the creation of trade and military centres which gave birth to a specific Arabic pidgin spoken mainly as a lingua franca. Islamization started in some areas of Southern Sudan (Northern Bahr al Ghazal and Northern White Nile) or within the military garrisons, but at the dawn of the colonial period Southern Sudan was still only hardly islamized. The harshness of this period for many Southern tribes must not be forgotten for it sowed the seeds of distrust and fear between Southerners and Northerners, seeds that the British used to their maximum benefit.

The first two decades of the British Condominium (1900-1917) did not witness any real specific linguistic policy as the British were still relying mainly on Egyptian officers and civil servants. From 1924 onwards, the British tried to stop the spread of Islam and Arabic in Southern Sudan. This was attempted through the implementation of the famous Southern Policy or Closed Districts Policy (1930-1946). Southern Sudan (and Southern parts of the Nuba Mountains) were separated from Northern Sudan. While Islam and Arabic were respected in Northern Sudan, teaching in Southern Sudan was left into the hands of the different missionary congregations (Beshir 1969). Teaching was to be done in vernacular languages at the first levels and English at the higher levels. The Rejaf conference of 1927 selected 7 local languages to be written in Latin script and taught to the local population. The rate of literacy remained

extremely low compared to Northern Sudan. The policy of eradication of Arabic proved to be a failure. In spite of official decrees, Arabic continued to spread in Southern Sudan as a *lingua franca* in the small but multi-ethnic urban and military centres. The main impact of this policy was the creation of a small Southern Christian and English-speaking elite. After 1946 the Closed District Policy was abandoned and Southern Sudan was merged again with Northern Sudan to create the independent Republic of Sudan in 1956.

Linguistic Policies and Cultural Options of the Modern Sudanese State

With Independence, the question of the definition and identification of the nation became crucial. From then on and till now two main trends are in opposition and this is reflected in the endless debate concerning the definition of Sudan as a mainly Muslim-Arab or Afro-Arab country. The Northern political parties which dominated the political scene were created from religious groups (Ansar, Khatmiyya) and/or influenced by the pan-Arabist, Nasserist, Baathist, and Muslim Brotherhood movements. For these parties the Sudan was first an Arab and Muslim nation and the choice of Arabic as the official language was a logical one. Sudan was defined as a melting-pot where minorities would eventually disappear and assimilate into a larger Sudanese cultural whole, mainly perceived in terms of a core culture made up of Muslim Arab values (Abdel Salam 1989). They considered that Southern Sudan had been separated arbitrarily and by force from the rest of the country by the colonial regime. They thought that Arabization and Islamization of the Southern people would counteract the colonial policy and enhance national integration. Therefore, and like other Arab countries, the Sudanese State opted for an Arabization policy including Arabization and Islamization of Southern Sudan. The 1956 constitutional project opted for a united Sudan (article 1) with Islam as the State religion (article 5) and Arabic as the official language (article 4). The Arabization policy was not only linguistically-oriented (i.e. acquisition of Arabic as the first or second language by all the people of Sudan) but more importantly was culturally-oriented. The cultural norms, values and practices of the Central Arabized Sudan became the dominant and standard values which were to be spread by means of education and urbanization throughout the country. Behind the Arabization policy prevailed the idea that the Arabic language and culture were far superior to African culture.

The Muslim Arab nationalist trend dominated Sudanese politics from 1956 up to now with the exception of short periods during which the defenders of cultural pluralism were able to be heard at least in the public debate : the revolutionary movement of 1964 up to the first years of the Nimeyri Regime (1968-1972), and the democratic transition of 1985-1989. On the political scene, the pluralist option was first advocated mainly by the Communist Party ⁸ (and mainly for Southern Sudan) and more and more by regional groups. It is only recently and owing to the failure of the previous regimes that other so-called progressive forces (under the National Democratic Alliance) joined the pluralist option in order to face the present Islamic regime. Since the end of the 1980s, a growing number of people, including former advocates of assimilation and the present military government, claim that Sudan will not survive unless it comes under a federal system where cultural and ethnic diversity will be accommodated.

Reactions to Arabization: the call for diversity

The Arabization and Islamization policies were continuously fought in Southern Sudan and are among the main reasons for the two civil wars. The linguistic issues were among the crucial points of the Addis Abeba Agreement of 1972 which put an end to the first civil war. Again the linguistic and cultural issues were and are still systematically raised by the Southern parties, whether the SPLA/SPLM or any other Southern group. In Northern Sudan, non-Arab

⁸ The Communist Party is the only one that in 1954 called for the right of autonomy and cultural specificity for Southern Sudanese.

minorities did not react at first to the Arabization policies, although not a single vernacular language was given official status. The first claims of the newly created regional groups like the Nuba Front or the Beja Front in 1964 were more economic and socio-political, focusing on better political representation and economic equity. But since the mid-1980s, more and more cultural claims are found on the agenda of the Northern regional groups. Today, the issue of cultural diversity within the whole Sudan is a major point of debate. Northern regional formations like the Beja Front and the Nuba Front adopt more or less the ideological discourse of the SPLA/SPLM. Even the more religious formations like the Umma Party or the National Islamic Front (NIF) have had to recognize that the dream of a monocultural Sudan is totally inadequate. All the Sudanese Newspapers published daily papers, columns and letters discussing the issue of the Sudanese cultural diversity and many books, conferences, symposium have been dedicated to this issue.

Forty years after Independence, the cultural situation in Sudan is extremely chaotic and worsening. Arabic has spread all over the country and members of many minorities are losing their mother tongue (cf. the results of all the language surveys made in Sudan). However vernacular languages are still widely spoken and bilingualism or multilingualism is a vivid phenomenon.⁹ Socio-economic changes and especially migration and urbanization, more than linguistic policies are the main reasons for these language changes (Abu Manga and Miller 1992). But linguistic Arabization and partial cultural Arabization did not lead to the expected social cohesion. National unity has been torn apart especially since the mid-1980s. The Southern part of the country has known only ten years of peace. In the other areas of Sudan, the dream of national cohesion and national improvement is collapsing. Ethnic divisions are sharpening and civil war is spreading in the Western part of the country (Nuba mountains and occasionally Darfur) and the South East (Ingessana area). People who were living peacefully side by side are now fighting each other. Of course cultural factors are only one element among many others in the successful fabrics of the Nation. If social, economic and political equality had prevailed in all of Northern Sudan, one may suppose that the (linguistic and cultural) Arabization process would have been successful in bringing together members of different ethnic groups. But the feeling of being subjected to both economic marginalization and racial ostracism impeded any process of assimilation.

The Sudanese case shows the relative ineffectiveness of planned language policies on daily language use (cf. the Condominium period). But linguistic policies which reflect the ideological choices of the rulers have an extremely important symbolic impact. Southern Sudanese oppose the official Arabization policy (and that, while they are using Arabic more and more in inter-ethnic communication) because it is a clear sign of the Northern cultural and political domination. A particularly sensitive aspect of the Arabization policy for Southern Sudanese is the association between the Arabic language and Islam and between Arab culture and "Arab racial hegemony." According to Mansour Khalid (1987), the SPLA/SPLM considers that "Arabic should be the National language of the Sudan but without Sudan being an Arab country." We find here a position very common to many the movements that opposed Arabism: the wish to dissociate between language and culture and to treat Arabic as a mean of communication.

The ethno-linguistic minorities: a religious conflict?

What can we learn from the Sudanese case concerning the issue of minorities? Should we consider the conflicts in Sudan as essentially religious, cultural, racial, or political?

⁹ In Spring 1995, we undertook field research among communities of West African origin in Gedaref State. We found out that the Hausa and Fulfulde languages are still widely spoken by those rural communities due to ethnic clustering patterns in the settlements.

The history of Sudan seems to suggest a certain pragmatism on the part of Muslim rulers for many centuries i.e. Islam was the official religion of the Sennar and Fur Kingdoms but these rulers did not try to reform all of society : many pre-Islamic traditions were maintained or adapted, and the same can be said for languages. Arabic was adopted but borrowed many lexical items from local languages. Bilingualism was widespread. From this point of view, Muslim kingdoms, as was the case during the Ottoman empire, appear to have been quite tolerant and accommodating. The British colonial administration was the first to clearly amalgamate the Arabic language and Islam in its linguistic policy. After Independence, the Sudanese government continued this policy, especially during the Abbud regime (1958-1964), when missionaries were expelled and Arabization and Islamization were implemented jointly. Northern traditional parties, the Umma Party and the DUP (Democratic Unionist Party), have been unable to escape religious dogmatism and to accept secularism. Two quotations of their leaders are explicit. The first was expressed by Sadiq al Mahdi, the leader of the Umma Party and twice prime minister :

The dominant feature of our nation is an Islamic one and its overpowering expression is Arab, and this nation will not have its identity identified and its prestige and pride preserved except under an Islamic revival (Proceedings of the Sudan Assembly, October, Sudan Government Document 1966, quoted from Nyombe 1997)

The second is found in a DUP document :

It is extremely important to spread the use of Arabic language in the Southern Sudan and the Nuba Mountains. Arabic is the most effective instrument for spreading Arab Islamic culture. The spread of Arabic language in those areas (South and Nuba mountains) is one of the most important arenas for struggle in the name of God and the Arab nation. (DUP Working Paper on the South, 1986, quoted from Nyombe 1997)

The current policy of the NIF (National Islamic Front) is, as stated by Nyombe, "following closely in the footsteps of the previous Northern governments. Perhaps what is different is the NIF's emphasis on religion. But while the other ruling Northern groups have used language overtly and religion covertly as vehicles for realizing Arab nationalism in the Sudan, the NIF has been bold enough, for the first time, to openly invoke Islam as a means to achieving national integration goals." The present Islamic regime initiated a very crude Islamization and Arabization policy. In 1992, *jihād* was launched in Southern Sudan and in the Southern Nuba Mountains to impose Islamization by force. Islamic non-governmental organizations were given priority in the Southern regions controlled by the government of Sudan and in the Southern displaced camps of Northern Sudan. Sudanese Christian fathers were harassed and sometimes killed in Western and Eastern Sudan. Restrictions were imposed on private Christian English-speaking schools in Khartoum, and Arabic and religion were given more and more importance in the Sudanese school certificate.

Therefore one is first inclined to conclude that one of the major factors in the Sudanese crisis is a narrow conception of Islam which does not accept cultural diversity. The tolerant and accommodating Islam of the past centuries has been gradually replaced by a more intolerant and stubborn conception of Arabo-Islamism largely influenced by the dominant ideologies of neighboring Middle Eastern countries. But again this dual vision of Sudanese history has to be qualified. The "tolerant Islam" of the past conveyed also the germs of religious and racial ostracism. The Muslim conception of *Dar al Harb* and of paganism enhanced the legitimacy of slave trade since the beginning of Muslim expansion. In the Southern collective memory, the painful legacy of slavery from the Turkiyya period (19th century) helped to maintain a confusion between Islam, slave trade, and Arabs, a confusion carefully fuelled by the British.

Although records of the slave trade period show that the slave traders were from all nationalities, including Europeans, all traders were identified by Southerners as Turkish and later on as Arab (*mondokoro*). The division between Muslim free men and slaves (*'abid*) remained very present even after the abolition of slavery and it became a deep racial division. This racial and religious division has been totally manipulated during the last twelve years by the political factions, especially during the Sadiq al Mahdi period when ethnic Arab militias were raised to fight SPLA forces. All the present governmental rethoric about *Jihad* testifies to the fact that Islam is here used to establish discrimination on a religious basis.

But the growing tensions with some non-Arab Muslim minorities of Northern Sudan (cf. the Nuba and Darfurian groups) show that the conflict cannot be interpreted in terms of Muslim/non-Muslim. It also has an important ethnic or racial dimension related to the above mentioned concept of *'abid* (slave). To be Muslim and to speak Arabic as a second or even as a first language do not necessarily mean that the person is identified and wants to identify itself as Arab. It is still very common to hear a Northerner talking about *'abid* when referring to other Sudanese black communities. Even an Islamized and Arabized Nuba may be labeled as *'abid*. Therefore more and more non-Arab Muslim minorities in Northern Sudan called for recognition of their cultural practices. Among many of these groups (Nuba, Kresh, Kara etc.), religion is not a decisive factor of identification. Both the SPLA/SPLM and the regional organizations have continuously insisted on this point : they don't reject Islam as a religion or Arabic as a language or a culture. But they reject it when Arabism is used to convey a sense of political supremacy based on racial heredity. Dominance of the riverside Arab Muslim communities over the others and sectarian and religious bigotry leading to the exclusion of others are their main concerns (Hurreiz 1989). A more structural analysis will thus conclude that Arabism and Islam have been manipulated by the economically dominant groups to enhance and justify their domination over the others.

An interesting point is the intricate relation between the Muslim and Arab identification of the present NIF regime. Like in other Islamist movements, Islamic legitimacy prevails over Arab legitimacy and Islam is considered to have been given historical strength to the Arabs and not the reverse. Without Islam, the Arabs have no legitimacy (Burgat 1988). This rhetoric concerning religious legitimacy is used by the government to challenge the powerful "Arab Riverain" groups¹⁰ and to gain the support of more marginalized groups previously frustrated by the dominance of these Arab groups. For this purpose, the government also develops its own discourse on the legitimacy of ethnic and cultural diversity in the Sudan. As mentioned above the debate on the Sudanese cultural diversity occupy a large place in the Sudanese newspaper and Media. For the first time since Independence, in 1991 Radio Omdurman started to broadcast special programs in local languages, including two regional African languages (Hausa and Swahili), Juba-Arabic and a number of Southern languages (Dinka, Shilluk, Nuer) in order to spread the government's message and ideology (Abu Manga 1995). Moreover, a new Decree came out in 22th November 1997 in order to create a National Assembly for Language Planning. In this Decree, Arabic was recognized as the Official languages, and the other languages as "national languages". The Cultural diversity and linguistic plurality of Sudan was to be protected and was recognized as parts of the Cultural personality of the Sudan. Therefore the same governments which has been launching Jihad and Arabization in 1992 is now praising Linguistic and Cultural (including religious) diversity.

The so-called ethnic minorities' problem in Sudan is the result of a number of historical processes, mainly the legacy of slavery which left deep wounds between the raiding groups and those raided, the British policy which deepened the gap between Northern and Southern Sudan,

¹⁰ Those Riverains groups are mainly the Ja'aliyyin and the Shaygiyya and eventually the Denagla. All these groups are considered to be a mixture of Nubian-Arab blend but claim of course an Arab origin. The peripheral groups of Western and Southern Sudan tend to consider them as the dominating Sudanese Arab groups.

and the ideological stubbornness of the dominant Northern Arabic-speaking groups. Religious, racial and political factors contribute to the marginalization of the non-Arab groups (to the notable exception of Nubians) and their culture. The situation reached such an explosive point that now ethnic fragmentation is the dominant feature. At the same time, Arabic is spreading all over the Sudan and is without any doubt the first language of the country used by almost all Sudanese, including the SPLM/SPLA. But the varieties of Arabic are quite different from North to South and from West to East, and in this context the common use of one language is not enough to create the feeling of all being members of the same nation. The Sudanese case dramatically exemplifies the danger of an authoritarian cultural policy. The causes of the crisis cannot be related only to external factors (i.e. the legacy of colonial policy, foreign interventions, and so on) but also to the social and political conditions of the country. Like in many other countries, the fight or claims of the so-called minorities testify that something went wrong in the process of national building. The previous dominant monolithic conception of nationalism is gradually collapsing and strangely enough people are starting to look back on History to find more adequate models.

To Conclude: Islam, Arabic and the minorities

Throughout history, there has been a relationship between language and power. The ruling elite and the ruling political systems imposed one or more languages as privileged means of communication and learning (written and oral). To belong to the dominant circles implied to speak their language(s). The language of the subdued or dominated groups were usually confined to non-official domains. But in large Empires, the official languages was not always the vernacular language of the rulers and different languages could play different functions (political, religious, artistic, etc.).

We have seen that according to the historical periods and the political constructions, the various Muslim states in the Middle East opted for various linguistic policies. The status of Arabic followed the raise and fall of the various political systems. In short, when the Arab component was powerful in the ruling circles, Arabic was the official language (Umayyad period). When the Arab migrants became demographically important Arabic spread as the major tongue of the conquered territories. But when the Middle Eastern countries were incorporated in larger political units or when the ruling elite were non-Arab (Circassian, Turkish, Persian, etc.) multilingualism was the rule among the elite. And in many countries Arabic did not swept out other local languages.

Arabic has always been the language of Islamic religious teaching and learning but one cannot speak of an Muslim model of language policy because there was no adequation between the language of religion, the language of power and knowledge and the language of daily life. Moreover identity affiliation was more based on genealogical affiliation and on religion than on language uses.

The dream of linguistic homogenization between the language of the state and the language of the citizens came out with the construction of Arab nationalism heavily influenced by the European and Balkan nationalism. The correlation between language and ethnicity (to be Arab is to speak Arab) was particularly advocated by prominent intellectuals of the non-Muslim middle Eastern minorities (mainly Syrians) who thought that language could create a common identity that will overcome religious differences. It may not be a hazard that the first waves of the Arab nationalists were secular-oriented and included many Christians. For them the language was the essential basis of national cohesion and the symbol of national vitality (a nation that kept its language remains alive. A nation which has given up its own language is a dead nation). Their objectives was national unity and pan-arabism affiliation in order to be able to face colonialism or Imperialism. This adherence to pan-Arabism led them to undermine the other components of the local society and to consider local dialects, local vernaculars and

cultures as backwards and divisive elements for a modern literate society. The fact that most of the local cultures had only an oral tradition did not help.

The secular Arabism nationalism model failed at two levels:

- First it did not help to assimilate the non-Arab communities. On the opposite it fueled identity revendications in a wave-like process: European and Turkish nationalism fostered Arab nationalist which on its turn fostered non-Arab Middle Eastern nationalism.

- second, it did not succeed to strengthen secularism and the discourse on Arabization has been re-appropriated by the Islamist as a means to enhance Islamization.

The non-Arab minorities oppose the nationalism pretentions of Arabism by stressing the historical depth of the local cultures that often preceded the arrival of the Arabs. In this reformulation of local nationalism (that can be found in the Berber movement as well as in the New Sudan discourse) the Arabic cultural heritage is only an element among others and have to melt with the larger local substratum. Interestingly enough, it is among those minorities that the secular conception of the State is called for while the former Arab nationalists have often turn into a more religious trend. For the Islamists, Arabic is the God's chosen language, the primary Islamic language that convey a 'Universal' message. It cannot be restricted to a secular nationalist discourse. In countries like Algeria or Sudan, the former nationalist discourse was twisted into a more religious one that gives to the Arab a special status among the Muslim by virtue of being the first one to have converted to Islam.

Caught between those two trends (minorities' revendication and Islamist activism) a number of Middle Eastern states tend to slightly change their policy and to give more public space to non-Arab languages and cultures and to officially recognize the plural ethnic component of their country. Those countries oscillated between the two poles (minorities versus Islamists) according to their political weight. In a very recent development, it seems that countries like Morocco, Algeria or Sudan start at least to accept their multicultural heritage. In Sudan this "new consciousness" has clearly been imposed following the failure of the assimilationist policy and the failure of the Islamist regime to impose its social model upon the whole country. But yet it did not lead to clear constitutional changes and the war is going on. In Maghreb, it seems that the Berbers are viewed as important counter forces to the Islamist challenge. But again this did not lead to radical constitutional changes. The slight changes in the Middle Eastern countries may be also due to the propagation of a new global trend where cultural pluralism is becoming a fashionable model. The Government control is weakened by the emergence of new technology. Satellite TV channels, Radio, Newspapers, Internet and the like create widespread networks and give new opportunity for the minorities to express themselves both within the country and in diaspora. This in turn create a new challenge for these communities that want to defend their language and culture: How to write them, how to normalize the various dialects, etc.

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