The MENA Region as a Shared Space: Emerging Discourses of a Shared Past; Ponderings of a Shared Future

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In many contemporary discourses, Jews and Arabs (or Jews and Muslims) are viewed as distinct and mutually exclusive categories, if not outright enemies. In the MENA region, Israel is most often viewed by its neighbors as a foreign entity whose existence is illegitimate and temporary. These assumptions dictate popular sentiment, political attitudes and decisions, and the telling and writing of history. Within Israel, those parts of Israeli society and identity that most clearly render it integral to the history and cultural tapestry of the region, are often the ones most marginalized or silenced.

Current dominant discourse in the Arab/Muslim world often conflates Jews and Israel/is, and purports to convey history when in fact it is subjugating its representation of the past to contemporary political dynamics and power relations. Within Israel, the attempt to portray Israel as primarily a western country that just happens to be “in the wrong neighborhood,” and the systematic marginalization of the identities and voices of Jews from Arab lands by the state, lie in contradiction to Israel’s claim that it is indigenous and integral to the region. Moreover, the social construction of Jews from Arab lands as Mizrahi, Sephardi, or *anything but Arab*-Jews also puts a wedge between these groups and the Arabs among whom they had lived for millennia.

In other words, the very groups of Jews that are the living proof of Jews’ (as a religious and national group) historical existence in and indigeneity to the MENA region are undermined by the Jewish state – to its detriment. And in Arab states, the denial of the
historical existence of Jews, or at least the suppression of that fact, make little sense in those states’ historical narratives and incite further conflict.

Despite all the above, these dominant discourses are being increasingly challenged by alternative narratives that recall – and for the most part reminisce over – a different past. In Morocco, Tunisia, Iraq, Lebanon, Egypt, Israel, Yemen, and even Saudi Arabia, researchers, writers, musicians, filmmakers, and activists are shedding light on a different past, and offering hope for a better future. These voices emphasize the coexistence of Jewish, Arab, Amazigh, and other communities, and the integral roles all communities have played in the history and culture of their countries and of the region as a whole.

The paper discusses specific initiatives – books, films, political gestures, social movements and organizations – that defy the compartmentalization of peoples and space and tell a different story of the past; this past that was not uniform or ideal, but from it we can nevertheless learn a great deal. It can serve as a positive precedent of what existed, and a tentative blueprint of a possibilities for a shared future.