

# MAQHA

## CONVERSATIONS

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Season **1**  
September 2023 – July 2024

EWANA Center for Cultural Understanding  
[www.ewanacenter.org](http://www.ewanacenter.org)



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## About the MAQHA Conversations

Welcome to our virtual *maqha* ('café' in Arabic), where we host interesting and engaging conversations!

In the virtual dialogue series MAQHA Conversations, we invite people to explore topics relevant to Europe, West Asia, and North Africa (the EWANA region) with the aim of increasing mutual understanding between the three regions. The topics to be tackled relate to culture in its broadest sense, including: spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional features that characterise societies or groups.

The MAQHA Conversations is held on a bi-monthly basis and takes the form of closed 90-minute discussions. In each session, three to four selected speakers present on the session's topic followed by a group discussion with the registered participants. Simultaneous translation between Arabic and English are provided.



# The role of art in strengthening cultural understanding in the EWANA region

## September 2023

Report by Mirjam Schmidt

The kick-off event of the EWANA Maqha Conversation Series, an online discussion series on cultural topics related to Europe, West Asia, and North Africa (the EWANA region), brought together two artists, filmmaker and sound designer Mahoor Mirshakkak from Iran and Islam Shabana, interdisciplinary artist and digital media designer from, Egypt, as well as Tomas Van Respaille, Institutional Advisor to Bozar – Center of Fine Arts Brussels in Belgium. The session was held on September 14, 2023, with the title “Art & cultural understanding in the EWANA region”.

### **What is art & an artist?**

While what is art can only be defined broadly, all three discussants agreed that the context in which art is created forms an important factor in the creation of art, as does the medium that is used. It was even discussed if it is possible to narrow down what art is at all.

The understanding of art has changed throughout history, and in this respect, it needs to be acknowledged that the main discourse around art focuses on the history of Western art. Therefore, as all speakers agreed, art needs to be taught in schools and other institutions, but not just from a Western perspective.

Similarly, the idea of what an artist is has developed over the centuries. They can be a philosopher and scientist at the same time, as well as a narrator figuring out different truths through art. In this respect, the healing power of art was emphasized, supporting humanity in different stages of life. One participant pointed towards the doctoral prescription of art in some countries in order to support the curing of psychological illnesses. The connection of health and art has not just been seen by consumers of art, but also by artists, for example through the concept of radical care, which puts the artists’ mental well-being at the core of their work. Beyond this, artists ask questions, scrutinize what is perceived as ‘normal’, and engage with the audience through their art.

## **Challenges of art creation in the EWANA region**

### *Donors and political projection*

All speakers described the tendency of donors to project political meaning in art. This was found problematic especially due to the sensitive context some artists from West Asia and North Africa work and live in. In these contexts, political art is less straightforward than in most donor countries. The support for artists from West Asia and North Africa based on political projection by European donors therefore at times creates a problematic situation. Often art that is financed by foreign donors already has an inherently political dimension, concludes one participant. One recommendation to counter this is not to link the support of artists to the diplomatic umbrella of a certain state. Such a detachment offers less direct political pressure on the artists.

Overall, the support of culture by especially European donors in North African and West Asian countries was emphasized as highly important, though bearing several problems. One problem pointed to by the participants is the accessibility of information on funding lines and the actors behind them. Often funding possibilities are shared with already established artists and do not reach young practitioners or those that are not based in central locations.

Beside this issue, the conception process of such funding lines should be reformed.

### *Funding lines and power relations*

As all three speakers agreed, many projects are not designed with input of artists, cultural workers or institutions from the countries addressed, and only poorly fit the needs of the actual beneficiaries. It is recommended to include artists or partners working in the art sector in West Asia and North Africa in the process of designing funding lines for artists and the cultural and creative sectors in these regions. This could also help to develop strategies for including a wider range of people who are in need of such funding and platforms.

During the process of funded art production, both artists recounted that often the communication taking place between the donor and the artist is not eye-to-eye, but has a difficult power dimension to it. This, as one of the artists elaborated, sometimes also goes hand in hand with a clear vision from the donors about what the artists are supposed to create. One artist mentioned having the experience, while being in a residency program in Europe, of being expected to create art that commented on political developments in their homeland, even though this was not their wish.

As a result, orientalist perspectives and specific cultural objectives and symbols are often reproduced, which narrows the creative space for artists. All three participants agreed that such situations cannot produce fruitful cultural exchange and do not enable the artists to share their artistic skills because art is stuck at the level of representation. Therefore, more open spaces, free from cultural preconditioning, should be created, in order to foster true cultural exchange between North Africa, West Asia, and Europe.

#### *Mobility issues*

Additionally, one problem often faced in the course of cultural exchange between the respective regions is that of visa provisions. Artists from West Asia and North Africa face difficulties in obtaining visas to travel to Europe. The long preparation time, as well as the time needed to finalize visa applications is highly frustrating and hindering for artists and organizers, as all speakers pointed out. Other problems include weeks of waiting for the approval and the long time without one's passport (and thus the inability to conduct any other travels outside one's country while waiting).

Especially in politically less stable countries, the outcome of these processes can still be negative, even if local partner organizations are actively involved in the process.

To make this process easier for artists, the speakers suggested creating a special cultural visa for artists. This was also mentioned as one of the lessons learned of Bozar's Halaqat Project, which was presented during the session. Otherwise, projects might miss including important voices. Physical mobility is also crucial for networking purposes by the artists, as well as offering the ability to present their work to new audiences and in different contexts, ultimately enriching their artistic practices and transcending physical borders. In the end the focus of an artist should be on their work and not the administrative processes.

#### *Creating spaces for interaction in the EWANA region*

Overall, the creation of different kinds of spaces is important for the artists from all three regions and supports their creative process and cultural exchange. These spaces can take on different forms with each their own up- and downsides. While in-person exchanges and meetings are still seen as most favorable, the online space has, especially during the global Corona crisis, proven its importance for the art sector. It allows for new forms of exhibitions, is accessible to a wider audience, and offers high exposure with a lower threshold.

Negatively assessed are the structures behind some of the online spaces for sharing art as well as the possibility to be scammed. Therefore, in-person meetings, exhibitions and exchanges cannot be replaced by these new spaces. One aspect pointed out by the artists is that the remuneration for participation is often lower during online than offline events.

Overall, it can be concluded that all different forms of opening spaces for artists from different regions are important and as many artists as possible should be included in such exchanges. Fair and equal payment for all forms of artistic participation still needs to be assured. The negative trend in the field of art in some of the artistic centers in West Asia, and North Africa, such as closure due to scarce finance opportunities and censorship issues, can be countered through the cooperation with European partners. Fair, equal, and inclusive relations are thus crucial for the creation of artistic work and the fostering of cultural exchange.

Many examples of initiatives and projects that support artistic cultural exchange between the three regions were mentioned during the first EWANA Maqha Conversation session. We at the EWANA Center also hope to form an additional space for this incredibly enriching and important work in the future.

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***“When we create together equally, we surpass ourselves.”***



**Speaker info and  
visuals on our website!**

# Disinformation and Polarisation: how fake-news shapes cultural divides in the EWANA region

## December 2023

Report by Walid Al-Aghbari

The second event of the Maqha Conversation online series was organised in response to the amplified hate speech and ‘othering’ discourses within the three regions of Europe, West Asia, and North Africa (the EWANA region).

Disinformation and fake-news have hardened cultural divides, consequently producing the polarisation that has become apparent in the last three months, thus creating clashing narratives, and affecting people and public discourses within the EWANA region. This Maqha session brought together an esteemed panel of guest speakers from the EWANA region with rich academic and practitioner expertise on the thematic topic titled: “Disinformation and polarisation: how fake-news shapes cultural divides in the EWANA region”.

The session was held online on December 13, 2023, and featured the following speakers: Emma Hoes, a postdoctoral research fellow at the Department of Political Science at the University of Zurich, Hussam Falah, a journalist and project officer based in Baghdad, and

Abdellatif El Hamamouchi, an investigative journalist and political science researcher based in Rabat. The session was moderated by Yazan Badran, a postdoctoral research fellow based in Brussels.

### **How does disinformation work**

Taking a step towards understanding the structures that produce fake news, the speakers started the discussion with an attempt to define the concepts of disinformation and misinformation. The three speakers took turns detailing their own conceptualization, and offered their perspective through displaying a number of examples. In a nutshell, one of the speakers defined disinformation: “as a process through which the information that is published or broadcasted undergoes a procedure of manipulation and alteration resulting in deceptive or false news”. This form of systemic disinformation and fake-news is usually exercised by powerful actors, and is geared towards misleading the public in relation to a specific societal or political stance.

### **How can disinformation be polarising?**

The speakers agreed with the fact that state-led misinformation and disinformation is more pronounced in authoritarian regimes in North Africa and West Asia than in Western democracies. These practices of disinformation have been used as a tool for the defamation of political rivals, human rights activists, and journalists, as well as a weapon for inciting hate speech towards specific societal or religious groups. One speaker shed light on the fact that misinformation and disinformation practices are difficult to quantify; however, social media platforms made the phenomena easier to study, ultimately widening its impact to a larger population.

On a different note, the speakers also maintained that distrust towards traditional news resources has contributed to shifting the publics' news consumption from traditional news resources to social media platforms, which have exacerbated rumour spreading, including during the COVID-19 infodemic and the fight against ISIS in Iraq.

Misinformation and disinformation can also amplify polarisation, and the new phenomena of social media bot accounts, "which are automated programs that mimic human behaviour on social media", offer a clear

example of how companies, governments, and electoral campaigns use social media bots to shape public perspectives on specific socio-political topics.

### **Approaches to counter misinformation and disinformation**

It was highlighted by the speakers that the context matters when considering the fight against misinformation. One speaker stressed the point that cases of misinformation are not new, yet they became more pronounced through social media, especially in the West after 2016.

The intervention measures that have been used to track and counter misinformation and disinformation are the subject of a number of studies attempting to determine their effectiveness. On the question of how to counter misinformation, one speaker categorised the interventions into two groups: proactive and reactive. While the first category deals with incorporating preventive measures such as media literacy and training people how to spot fake news, the latter category resorts to practices such as labelling and fact-checking published news. In terms of the effectiveness of these intervention measures, one of the speakers highlighted that they are mostly effective, but that the context matters.

On the other hand, over-alarming people about misinformation and fake news can counterintuitively lead to decreasing trust towards reliable media resources and eventually cause more polarisation.

Moreover, and at the institutional-level, one speaker pinpointed that empowering independent national media monitoring agencies can help in countering the platforms

that spread defamation and fake news. Adding to the role of institutions, another speaker maintained that state-led agencies in authoritarian regimes are mostly co-opted, and independent structures, such as syndicates, are usually ineffective in countering misinformation. The speakers also offered examples as to how formal institutions – based on the context – can lead the way countering misinformation and disinformation if there is effective governance. Alternatively, in authoritarian regimes, civil society attempts towards creating these avenues to countering misinformation are discouraged, if not suppressed.

### **Role of misinformation in conflicts & revolutions**

Besides the examples offered on how misinformation has played a major role in shaping socio-political dynamics in the Iraqi context; the Arab Spring episode was also examined as a period in which there was a boom in freedom of speech in West Asia and North Africa, which also led to increased polarisation and hate speech between prominent political actors, e.g. Islamists vs. Liberals.

This information war, in addition to the lack of reforms of state-led media institutions, helped in inciting propaganda for the then-weakened authoritarian regimes. Some of the participants attested to the fact that news consumption through social media can accelerate polarisation and the spread of misinformation, as the lines are blurred between reliable vs. fake news.

The speakers also veered towards the vital role of big technological companies, such as: META, Telegram, and Tiktok, in the fight against misinformation by social media bots or exacerbation of hate speech; stressing that these companies should be held accountable, without limiting the right to freedom of speech.

The speakers concluded the discussion by sharing some practical recommendations that will limit the impact of disinformation and misinformation, some of which include the following:

- Strengthening civil society;
- Enhancing awareness towards the topic within the national media institutions;
- Ensuring the independence of media and adhering to the right of freedom of expression;
- Regulating the media institutions and issuing governing laws that govern the public and private media institutions;
- Encourage training and capacity-building on media literacy and fact-checking to practitioners in the field of media and journalism.



**Speaker info and  
visuals on our website!**

# **Ethical Artificial Intelligence for Cultural Good – Challenges and potentials of AI in preserving and advancing cultural diversity**

## January 2024

Report by Desirée Custers

Artificial intelligence (AI) has become an indispensable aspect of our daily lives. But for all the positive developments it offers, there are also negative aspects when it comes to AI's inclusion of cultural diversity. The third session of the Maqha Conversations series brought together an esteemed panel of guest speakers from Europe, West Asia, and North Africa (the EWANA region) who each presented their experiences and expertise on the cultural implications of AI, both in terms of challenges and potentials in the session titled: "Challenges and potentials of Artificial Intelligence in preserving and advancing cultural diversity".

The session was held online on January 11, 2024, and featured the following speakers: Yasmine Boudiaf, a researcher and creative technologist, Mohammed Babikar, a data-analyst, traveller, ex-Comedian, and blogger, and Sophie Decher, a linguist and researcher working on natural language processing (NLP) applications. The session was moderated by Huda Azar, an analytics advisor and was attended by AI practitioners, interested participants, and people working in the field of relations between Europe, West Asia, and North Africa.

### **What is AI? – a broad field of practice**

The Maqha Conversation started with the speakers and participants exploring different definitions of AI. Before long, it became clear that finding one definition of the phenomenon is particularly difficult. The term “AI” may refer, for example, to the field of study, an instance of software used for a particular task, or a particular entity (“an AI”) that has “intelligent” capabilities. Many researchers in the field of AI work with AI models. Once they have been shown many examples of a certain type of task, these statistical models are able to “learn” to accurately complete new similar tasks themselves.

### **Large Language Models: the importance of context**

Perhaps the most well-known modern AI models are those that have been trained on language data. Language models are commonly used in natural language processing (NLP) applications – the field of our first speaker, Sophie Decher– where a user inputs a query in natural language to generate a result. ChatGPT, for example, is based on a large language model (LLM), meaning it has been trained on massive amounts of language data. As such, it is important to take a linguistic perspective when analyzing the way these models work. In linguistics, language can be analyzed on different levels, starting with the smallest grammatical components of an

utterance and working all the way up to pragmatic elements (contextual and/or cultural information that is often not explicitly stated). These levels of linguistic analysis are equally relevant for AI language models. Current research aims to find out how AI models analyze language and which linguistic levels of analysis are involved. Grammatical aspects of language are much easier for models to learn than pragmatic knowledge. It is very important to carefully craft the training data in order to prevent bias towards a particular cultural or linguistic context in the resulting model. Knowledge of how an AI model has been trained can help us understand why it reaches certain decisions in particular contexts and how to best make use of that model.

### **AI and the Quran challenge: a tool to cultivate curiosity and understanding**

The second speaker, Mohammed Babiker, spoke about how AI could play a role in the Quran challenge, meaning the attempts to replicate the miraculous quality, the l’jaz (inimitability), of the Quran. This inimitability is considered to be the main proof of the prophethood of Muhammad ﷺ and Islam as a divine religion revealed by God. Attempts at the Quran challenge have taken place over the centuries, with one of the biggest examples being Musaylimah.

Texts that attempt to match the Quran, as Mohammed explained, meet certain criteria, such as having a rhyming style (القافية), containing a call to a new message and being free from linguistic errors (فصيح). AI is seen as a massive turning point as it lowers the barriers for meeting these criteria. An example of the AI generated Surat Corona was given, which called for the prevention of Covid-19.

Using AI for the Quran challenge, as Mohammed argued, provides a unique insight into AI's potential. It is also relevant for those interested in Arabic and its poetic quality and it can provide a tool to explore the meaning of the Quran and cultivate curiosity for its linguistic value. However, in line with the points made by the first speaker, more specialised AI is needed to accurately combine message and meaning to meet the task of the Quran challenge.

There is no specialised Arabic language AI model, and developing such a tool will need Arabic-language specialists.

### **Ethical AI: preserving cultural heritage & making cultural connections**

The third speaker, Yasmine Boudiaf, presented her projects that use ethical AI to preserve cultural heritage and create cultural connections.

The first An Algerian Techno-Ritual, uses machine learning to document facial tattoos of Algerian women, a cultural practice, as Yasmine described, that is at risk of being erased from collective memory. The second project, Mediterranean Hand Gestures, explores the language of hand gestures that is shared across the mediterranean region, another cultural phenomenon that risks dying out. This project links recorded hand gestures to language and intonation through machine learning.

When implementing both projects, Yasmine is careful not to reproduce the colonial gaze, namely, not to exoticize Arab women and not to collect biometric data in an extractive manner. The projects take a community centred approach, empowering local people while archiving their cultural heritage. Here AI becomes a tool that can produce meaning. A third project, the AI Justice Matrix, expands on the idea of responsible use of AI by mapping ethical AI and the discourses and mechanics of how knowledge is formed and collected through AI.

Using satire and ridicule, the Matrix reflects on policy making around and regulation of AI, which is very unclear and complicated. The project sheds light on the background on which AI is formed, without necessarily providing answers.

### **AI and cultivating cultural diversity**

Throughout the session, the dangers of AI were also discussed, such as the use of AI in the context of war (for example autonomous weapon systems), the AI arms race, and the collection of biometric and other data from individuals. Nevertheless, the Maqha Conversation concluded on the note that if used ethically, AI can also be a tool to produce cultural meaning, explore cultural connections, preserve religious and cultural heritage, and incorporate cultural diversity.

To this end, the following recommendations were made:

- Policy-development on AI is behind, and should be developed to ethically deal with the data collected through AI as well as the protection of its users;
- More clarity should be provided on the way AI is designed and used, specifically on the topic of cultural biases;
- More research needs to be done to understand how AI models are shaped by their cultural context and what the implications are for preserving cultural diversity;
- Culturally diverse AI models should be developed that include a variety of languages and cultural contexts. In the case of Arabic, this could be done with the help of language and cultural experts.



**Speaker info and  
visuals on our website!**

# The power of language: the politicisation of gender issues in the EWANA region

## April 2024

Report by Desirée Custers

The recent years have seen discussions about language usage, especially in the context of gender, all over Europe, West Asia, and North Africa (the EWANA region). The discourses range from identity politics, introducing laws forbidding the usage of certain terms like “gender”, to the fierce discourse within societies about the use of inclusive language.

Similarly, conversations around gender, including in the context of women’s rights, identity politics, and social discourses, have been used as a means for political gain. This politicisation of gender issues at times forms an obstacle to those who aim to advance the legal, social, and economic equality of women and other marginalized groups. This is a trend that is shared across the EWANA region.

The fourth Maqha Conversation brought together three experts on the topic, Dr. Reham El-Morally, Marieke Fröhlich, and Dr. Ilham Makki Hammadi to discuss this topic from the perspective of their own context: Egypt, Germany, and Iraq, respectively.

Their presentations were followed by a lively discussion with the participants. The Conversation, which was titled The power of language: the politicisation of gender discourse in the EWANA region, was held on the 18 of April, 2024.

### **Backlash on Gender discourses in the EWANA region**

In the case of Iraq, there has been a campaign against organisations that work on advancing the position of women with targeted attacks on researchers and human rights activists. The campaign consisted, among others, out of coordinated social media attacks by bots. In addition, as participants explained, religious people have used homophobic and hateful discourse towards the women, framing the focus on gender issues as something implemented by the West, a discourse that had significant influence.

Furthermore, the backlash against the gender discourse in Iraq can be seen at the level of the government, for example when the Iraqi Communications and Media Commission issued a directive banning the use of the term “gender” in all public communications. This month, April 2024, the Iraqi parliament passed a bill making same-sex relationships punishable with up to 15 years in prison.

In Egypt, as was discussed during the Maqha Conversation, similar laws that limit rights of women and other minority groups have been introduced. Egypt women, according to are placed as second and third class citizens. Laws have also been introduced that in a sly manner limit the work of Civil Society, such as law no. 70 of 2017 on Associations.

In Europe, signs of backlash against gender discourse can also be observed. Such as in the case of Germany, where the province of Bavaria earlier this year introduced a ban on gender inclusive language in public institutions arguing that it is ideologically driven. The law was introduced despite other existing equality laws on inclusive language and research that proves that gender neutral language is more understandable. In a similar vein, the French senate last year initiated a bill to ban gender inclusive language, and in Hungary banned gender studies in 2018.

Although the examples mentioned specifically target women through their focus on the gender discourse, in reality it is indicative of a trend that has been in place for a longer time, namely, shrinking spaces of civil societies and increasing pressure on women in the public space, particularly in the countries of West Asia and North Africa. In the case of Europe the trend can be seen in the context of a broader increase of support for right-wing movements which are linked to homophobic discourses and other topics relevant to gender such as laws made around abortion.

Relating to gender issues, the question was thus raised who owns the right to shape language and how it is used. The earlier mentioned examples of laws around the use of language relating to gender issues shaped by power elites, display the immense effects on society as a whole.

### **Peace, Gender, and relations between countries of the EWANA region**

The discussion also focussed on how the gender discourse affected relations between countries in Europe, West Asia, and North Africa, through the Feminist Foreign Policy, a rather recent trend in foreign policy. This policy aims to advance gender equality, and strives towards feminist peace, meaning a holistic peace.

It aims to further gender mainstreaming approaches that have been around for many decades.

Feminist Foreign Policy was first introduced by Sweden in 2014, which it has now abandoned, or at least rebranded their foreign policy efforts without the label feminist. Many countries have adopted similar policies which aim to promote gender equality, and to help improve women's access to resources, human rights, and political participation. Feminist Foreign Policy has impacted the work of NGOs, as it has motivated increased interest and activities in the field of gender equality projects.

Relating again to the topic of language and perceptions, the word feminism often has a negative connotation in the Arabic language, creating negative perceptions on projects including the wording. Yet, feminist approaches underline the necessity for flexibility and adaptation to the local needs and contexts in order to make the policies effective. One participant suggested the Feminist Foreign Policy strategy be reframed as 'gender mainstreaming', which can be useful.

It should be taken into consideration that Feminist Foreign Policy still exists within a non-feminist international structure, and thus implementation is complex. It is thus important to be aware of the use of language, but also the wider context when speaking of issues related to gender and power (in)equalities.

### **Portrayal of women in popular culture and the role of language**

As has become clear, language consciously and unconsciously shapes our thinking and can have an important impact on politics, power-structures, and (in-)equality. It is used to shape narratives, make people invisible, or include "the other" in certain contexts. Language is not merely a tool for communication but serves as a profound influence of societal norms and perceptions, especially regarding gender.

With reference to Martha Nussbaum and Judith Butler, participants in the Maqha Conversation probed into the question how media and popular culture depict women, especially in the Egyptian case, and how this affects the behaviour, or 'performativity' of women in their daily lives. Often, women are dehumanised and portrayed as secondary citizens, or seen through the lens of shame and vulnerability. Women are also portrayed as passive and their role is always related to that of a man. For example two women will not be seen having a conversation with only each other around a topic not including a male love interest in Egyptian literature or tv, which thus blatantly fails at the Bechdel test.

Furthermore, in the case of the Arabic language, as in many other languages, masculine forms are the default for mixed or unspecified genders, which has historically linguistically erased the presence of women and reinforced the notion that public spaces and discourses are inherently male domains. Gender stereotypes are also reflected in Arabic proverbs and cultural use of religious language (see the paper by Dr. Reham El-Morally below for further information).

Such gender stereotyping in language and cultural practices of a society can influence real-world attitudes and behaviours towards women, including violence such as honour killings, and perpetuates gender inequality. It also leads to women internalising a certain gender role and reproducing certain norms. Yet, while language is important, as has become clear, tackling language is a luxury as many women suffer from legal and societal barriers that affect their status as full citizens. Key is thus to ensure women have equal access to all their citizenship rights.

### **Recommendations**

- There is a need for new ways to talk about gender issues that take into account the cultural context they take place in;
- Addressing biases in language use that includes reforming educational curricula to provide more balanced representations, revising media guidelines to discourage stereotypical portrayals, and promoting public discourse that challenges traditional gender roles rather than reinforces them;
- Create ‘third’ spaces and platforms where women and scholars of gender studies can pursue change together and can talk about shared experiences.



**Speaker info and  
visuals on our website!**

# Sports and culture: creating identity in the EWANA region

## July 2024

MAQHA Special edition on occasion of the 2024 Summer Olympics  
& 2024 European Football Championship

Report by Mirjam Schmidt

The fifth online Maqha Conversation took place in July in between two mega sports events, the UEFA Euro 2024 football tournament and the Olympic Games in Paris. While both events sparked high interest within the three regions of Europe, West Asia, and North Africa (the EWANA region), they also pointed towards the ongoing discussion around identity and sports on a national, regional, and individual level. Sport is often displayed as a medium to communicate with each other without the need to speak the same language. The discussion during the Maqha Conversation showed that while sport can have the positive effect of bringing people together and offering a space to display elements of one's own culture and identity, it can also lead to exclusion and othering. The session was held on July 22, 2024 and featured Jasmijn Rana, an assistant professor at Leiden University Institute for Cultural Anthropology looking at gender, race/ethnicity, embodiment and especially in women-

only kickboxing, Chaïmae El-Ghazi, an Moroccan researcher looking at female Moroccan athletes through the intersection of public law, political science, sociology, and anthropology and Christoph Wagner, who's research focuses largely on football and the representation of identity in the media.

### **Sports and cultural identity**

The conversation opened with an exploration into expression of one's individual identity while doing sport or participating in international sports events. Neutrality is seen as an important part of fair play in sports, including bans for athletes to display political symbols or religious signs. While this can open space for people of all backgrounds to partake, it can also have the potential to exclude athletes of minorities who cannot as easily set aside certain cultural markers.

An interesting example for this is the case of the Ethiopian-born Dutch middle- and long-distance runner Sifan Hassan. While performing on the track she often wears short running outfits, in her everyday life she wears a hijab. While she is seen as a role model by many young women with a similar background in the Netherlands, in some countries, like France, her day-to-day outfit, including the hijab would bar her from partaking on the runner track.

Her example points toward the question of how Muslim women in Europe are participating in sports. One of the speakers pointed out that especially sports that happen indoors or in closed settings offer the opportunity for women with a more modest dress code to participate. While jogging happens outdoors, sports like kickboxing can be performed without being exposed to others, especially from the opposite sex. In the Netherlands this has led to closed sports clubs becoming safe spaces for women wearing the hijab, in which they can perform in their clothing of choice.

While there are more and more options for women-only sports clubs, the professional level is often still a closed door for athletes with a Muslim background. Dress code rules ban the hijab as an act of religious display or require clothing that could contradict the preference of individuals, e.g. in the case of women beach volleyball.

During the 2024 Olympic games in France, while being the first games with gender equality between athletes, the French team did not allow their athletes to wear a hijab, arguing it is a religious symbol. While the French law does not explicitly target the hijab, one speaker argued that Muslim women are most affected by clothing restrictions in sports. Since the cultural majority defines what 'neutral' means, some minorities have a very difficult time adapting to these cultural norms without giving up their own identity. The case of Sifan Hassan shows how much the decision in either way is publicly discussed, with her at times being criticised by parts of the Muslim as well as the Dutch community for her clothing.

The problem of representation does not end with certain spaces being restricted to groups from certain cultural backgrounds, but also has a class-element to it. High fees for participation in sports clubs and the costs for outfits or other equipment can create obstacles for milieus with lower income. Such barriers perpetuate the underrepresentation of parts of society and can be seen in sports like tennis or golf. One speaker argued that participation in such sports should be seen as a question of social justice. This also holds true for the participation fee in tournaments and competitions.

Last but not least it has to be mentioned that especially athletes with an immigration background or who have a nationality situated in the global south face large obstacles when it comes to travel restrictions. Receiving visas can become a frustrating individual barrier and restricts athletes from West Asia and North Africa from partake in international events. This is an important issue when it comes to the EWANA region, as exchange in the field of sports is hindered due to mobility issues.

### **Sports and Gender Roles**

While being part of a minority can thus make participation in sport and international sports events difficult, socio-cultural factors at times hinder (professional) participation in sports. As one speaker elaborated, in societies in which cultural and social norms dictate that women take on traditional roles, doing sports and developing professional sport careers are often discouraged.

Looking at the case of Morocco, one panellist asked the question how the female body can fit both the traditional role and be that of an athlete and described this is often seen as an inevitable contradiction, leading to fears of lesser marital chances among Moroccan women.

The accusation that is indirectly raised against women in high intensity sports is that they become physically masculine, or aspire to step out of their societal roles. Language plays an important part in shaping the image of an athlete in a society. Words surrounding high intensity sports in Morocco, for example, are rough and masculine, which contradicts with the ascribed female appearance of softness and modesty.

Yet, the panellist also described that in some more traditional societies, the acceptance of sports as an important aspect of physical and mental health has risen in recent years. This has created a tension field with the prevailing norms and the acceptance of practising sports. For women, the red line is often drawn when it comes to engaging in professional sports due to the high exposure of the body and the way it is presented, as well as the changes in life as a professional athlete, such as perceived limited time for family.

The speaker argued that the last years have shown many cases of intimidation of female athletes in Arab-majority countries. She further stated that a normalisation of women in sports needs to happen and that this does not need to mean a change to their gender identity.

The markers that are linked to (professional) sport as being masculine and rough should be translated into more neutral ones, opening up the field of (professional) sports for women without the fear of not being perceived as feminine any longer. As such, sports is thus an arena for women's emancipation.

### **Sport and national identity**

Lastly, the Maqha Conversation moved to the use of sports as an expression of national identity, with one speaker arguing that major international sports events can lead to a spike in nationalism. The speaker highlighted the usage of war vocabulary in the United Kingdom when reporting on international football tournaments, invoking rhetoric from the Second World War, especially when speaking about the Germans as enemies. Such wording for international reporting supports nationalist sentiments and moves away from fair play, making games less about the sport itself and more about the national display.

The demonstration of nationalism was also visible in the UEFA Euro 2024 football tournament, with players as well as fans displaying national symbols during and around the games.

Comparing the German FIFA World Cup in 2006 with the current UEFA Euro 2024 football tournament illustrates the embedding of such events in the global political sentiment of its time. While in 2006 the slogan "*Die Welt zu Gast bei Freunden*" ("The world as a guest at friends"), was used to display an open and welcoming Germany, while in 2024 Germany was perceived as more nationalistic and less open. One speaker pointed out that parallels can be drawn between the tournament and the elections of the Parliament of the European Union which took place one month before the games and saw a rise of conservative and nationalist parties.

On a positive note, nationalist sentiments can also turn into political action, as in Türkiye in 2013 around the Gezi protests. During this time the normally adverse ultra groups of the big football clubs in Istanbul formed an alliance to support the mostly peaceful protests. This alliance was formed under the umbrella of a shared nationalist idea, as one participant pointed out, in this case working towards political changes on the national level. This example displays how sport clubs, fans but also the athletes themselves, can create attention by using the platforms created through sport events as an activist space.

Overall, the Maqha Conversation brought to light the positive effects sports can have for individuals and societies, connecting groups in fair play and supporting health and community building. On the other hand it also showed that sports can lead to nationalism, exclusion and othering. Countering such sentiments, offering opportunities for everyone as well as creating safe spaces for minorities could increase the positive effect sport can have on creating identities and constructive relations within the EWANA region.

### **Recommendations**

The speakers made the case for more government support for inclusion in local, national, as well as international sports activities, among others through financial support to make sports more accessible. When it comes to the EWANA region, mobility between the three regions should also be made possible more, so that sports can be used as a means to bring together people from different cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, we need to keep asking questions that go beyond our assumptions to understand the relationship between sports and identity more thoroughly, including how sports can be utilised as a means to self-expression, from the individual and recreational level, to the national and international professional level.



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