

This is my final issue as editor of the APSA's MENA Politics Newsletter. I'm very proud of what we've done with it over the last three years, with the enthusiastic support of an active and brilliant editorial board. I would like to publicly thank Holger Albrecht, Nermin Allam, Lindsey Benstead, Alexandra Blackman, Gamze Cavdar, May Darwich, Justin Gengler, Diana Greenwald, Kevan Harris, Shimaa Hatab, Lisel Hintz, Noora Lori, Lama Mourad, Jillian Schwedler, Nadav Shelef, Daniel Tavana, Stacey Philbrick Yadav, and Sean Yom for their exceptional service on the editorial board, including the organization and editing of many of the symposia featured in the volumes. I would also like to thank Lauren Baker, Prerna BalaEddy and Tessa Talebi for their editorial assistance and hard work in producing the six issues of the Newsletter.

During my tenure as editor, we published innovative methodological symposia on the applications of GIS to MENA politics; new approaches to historical archives; new survey research methods and applications; the uses of large scale automated text analysis; and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. We also published substantive symposia on Israeli politics; Turkish foreign policy; Islamist movements in protracted wars; and a full special issue on women and gender in MENA politics. We also published standalone essays on topics as diverse as the ethics of research with refugees, the marginalization of Iraqi Islamists in political science research, the impact of COVID on scholarship, approaches to Yemen, comparisons between Latin America and MENA waves of democratization, publication trends within the field of political science, and many more. These short essays and symposia, in my view, have made a real, substantive contribution to the subfield of MENA political science which will stand the test of time.

We leave the Newsletter in good hands. The new editorial team of Nermin Allam, Gamze Cavdar and Sean Yom bring a wealth of talent, experience and new ideas to the table. They have laid out exciting plans for new features and formats. I am excited to see what they do with the Newsletter over the next three years, as they continue to make it a central forum for our rich and vibrant subfield of MENA political science.

It's also the end of my three year tenure as founding Chair of the MENA Politics Section. I'm eternally grateful to Lindsey Benstead, Steven Brooke, Matt Buehler, Bassel Salloukh, Marwa Shalaby, and Jillian Schwedler for their tireless work to establish and build the section during the last three years. The new chair Stacey Philbrick Yadav, and new executive committee members Rich Nielsen and Nadine Sika, inherit a healthy and thriving Section with a robust membership, exciting programming, and a healthy presence at the APSA's Annual Conference. Building a Section from scratch has been an eye-opening experience, and I'm delighted to pass the torch to the next generation of leaders.

For this final issue, in lieu of a feature essay, I would like to offer some reflections on the state of the field of MENA political science. The issue then features two fascinating symposia, one methodological and the other substantive. The first, The Uses and Abuses of Datasets, looks at the limitations and potential biases of the off-the-shelf datasets which have become so widely used in our research and publications. There's no question that the availability of these datasets has been a boon for MENA scholars, who long suffered from the unavailability of the kind of quantitative social data that scholars of other regions could use in their publications. The Arab

Barometer has emerged as a definitive source for reliable survey data, across multiple waves and all open access. A variety of protest and violence event databases have allowed for behavioral analysis. But, as the contributors to this symposium demonstrate, there are serious potential biases and absences in those databases which could systematically distort research findings across multiple issue areas.

The second symposium, Tunisia's Democratic Crisis, brings together nine scholars of Tunisia to reflect upon the July 25 decision by President Kais Saied to dissolve the Parliament and suspend the constitution. A fierce debate has broken out since then over how to think about his moves, and how to respond. In the Middle East Scholars Barometer, a biannual survey of academic experts on the Middle East which I run with Shibley Telhami, 58 percent said it was a coup, while only 14 percent disagreed. Interestingly, 28 percent said they didn't know — by far the largest such response to any question in the survey. Political scientists were eight percentage points more likely to call it a coup than were scholars from other disciplines. Overall, 76 percent of the scholars assessed said that these actions by the president made democracy in Tunisia less likely a decade from now. That's what scholars from the United States, Europe and across the Middle East think – but what about Tunisians, and those deeply immersed in studying the country? Our symposium goes deep into the conceptual issues as well as the politics at a potentially pivotal moment.

Finally, allow me to reflect briefly on our field. My first observation, after three years as Section Chair and over a decade running the Project on Middle East Political Science, is that we are an exceptionally generous and supportive group of scholars. The willingness of scholars in our field at all career stages to step up in support of their colleagues is nothing short of extraordinary. I have organized literally hundreds of research workshops over the last decade, both for article length papers and for full book manuscripts, and I can count on my fingers the number of people who turned down a request to serve as a volunteer discussant without a really good reason. Busy, even overwhelmed scholars eagerly join selection committees, share their research, and step up to create a supportive environment. There are a wide range of research workshops and other forms of support to junior scholars, including but not limited to POMEPS, which have fleshed out a field with a distinctively supportive culture. That culture is one of the great achievements of our field over the last decade or two.

Second, the longstanding complaint that MENA political scientists are distanced from the rest of the field by either methodology or disposition is just clearly no longer the case. MENA political scientists have been publishing in ever greater numbers in both fieldwide and specialist disciplinary journals. The Arab uprisings generated enormous interest across the discipline of political science and with the general public, which brought MENA scholars into ever closer dialogue with political scientists from outside the regional specialization. In a 2000 review essay, Ian Lustick noted that in the previous three years only three members of the Middle East Studies Association had published articles in the two leading comparative politics journals (*World Politics* and *Comparative Politics*).<sup>1</sup> In a recent Newsletter essay, Melani Cammett and Isabel Kendall [found](#) that “from 2000 to 2019, the number of articles per year focusing on the Middle East rose from 4 to 18 articles, with a peak of 22 articles in 2016.” In my own study for the

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<sup>1</sup> Ian Lustick, “The Quality of Theory and the Comparative Disadvantage of Area Studies,” *MESA Bulletin* 34,2 (2000): 189-92.

forthcoming Oxford University Press volume *The Political Science of the Middle East*, which I edited with Jillian Schwedler and Sean Yom, I found that the same two journals Lustick looked at two decades ago published 20 articles by 24 MESA members (including co-authorship) from 2017-20. Taking the comparison a bit further shows a similar trendline. The *American Political Science Review*, the flagship journal of the American Political Science Association, published only one article on MENA from 1997-2000 and 9 from 2017-2020. *Comparative Political Studies* published only 2 MENA articles from 1997-2000, and 9 from 2017-2020. Meanwhile, *Perspectives on Politics*, a second APSA flagship journal launched in the 2000s, which explicitly set out to be a home for methodologically diverse political science research, published 23 MENA articles between 2011-2020.

Third, the MENA political science field is robustly diverse and inclusive, and is becoming ever more so. It is diverse in its methods, with leading scholars doing quantitative, qualitative and mixed research. It is increasingly diverse in the issues and areas it covers, with the Arab uprisings and their aftermath unlocking a wide range of research programs and debates. It increasingly intersects with non-MENA research in a dizzying range of research areas, and increasingly challenges the limits of the conventionally defined Middle East in its comparisons and analyses. And it is diverse in its membership, with an ever greater number of scholars from the MENA region participating in its networks and publishing in its journals and book series.

Such a benign view of the field stands at odds with the typical decennial lamentations about our field's failings. "The Middle East field is in a crisis within the broader discipline of political science," warned Jerrold Green in 1994.<sup>2</sup> For James Bill a few years later, "political scientists in the United States have made little progress in the past 50 years in understanding and explaining Middle East political systems."<sup>3</sup> Middle East political science was charged with failing to predict the Iranian revolution in 1979, the rise of Islamism in the 1980s, or Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990.<sup>4</sup> It failed to anticipate al-Qaeda's attack on the United States in 2001 (though it proved quite prescient in its warnings about the likely disaster of the 2003 invasion of Iraq).<sup>5</sup> And, most recently, critics demanded to know "Why Middle East Studies Missed the Arab Spring."<sup>6</sup> A thoughtful post-mortem in *Perspectives on Politics* argued that the field had "failed to predict the Arab uprisings a decade ago due to its "focus on authoritarianism and the obstacles to democratization which marginalized questions relevant to the dynamics of popular mobilization, and deemphasized their potentially inherent importance aside from their relevance to regime change."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Jerrold Green, "The Politics of Middle East Politics," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 27,3 (1994): 517-8.

<sup>3</sup> James Bill, "The Study of Middle East Politics: A Stocktaking," *Middle East Journal* 50, 4 (1996), pp. 501-512.

<sup>4</sup> Rashid Khalidi, "Presidential Address to the MESA Annual Meeting" (1994); Lisa Anderson, "Scholarship, Policy, Debate and Conflict: Why We Study the Middle East and Why it Matters," *Middle East studies Association Bulletin* 38,1 (2004): 2-15.

<sup>5</sup> Ibrahim Karawan, "Time for an Audit," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 13, 3 (2002), pp. 96-101; Fawaz Gerges, "The Study of Middle East International Relations: A Critique," *British Journal of Middle East studies* 18, 2 (2002): 208-220; Steven Heydemann, "Defending the Discipline," *Journal of Democracy* 13, 3 (2002): 102-108.

<sup>6</sup> F. Gregory Gause III, "Why Middle East studies Missed the Arab Spring: The Myth of Authoritarian Stability," *Foreign Affairs* 90,4 (2011), 81-90.

<sup>7</sup> Marc Howard and Meir Walter, "Explaining the Unexpected: Political Science and the Surprises of 1989 and 2011." *Perspectives on Politics* 12, 2 (2014): 394-408. But see responses by Eva Bellin, Ellen Lust and Marc Lynch

A similar lamentation thus emerges every decade or so, with grim assessments of the field's meager accomplishments and warnings of what must be done to avoid disaster.<sup>8</sup> There is a ritual quality to these lamentations. But I choose not to join in those festivities. In my view, our field today has matured into an incredibly robust, diverse community of scholars which is producing rich and innovative research, is publishing in ever greater numbers in leading disciplinary and specialist journals, and has a robust infrastructure of support for emerging scholars which is the envy of many a field. It isn't perfect, of course, but what is? There are some popular methods and debates which I don't find personally compelling, there are some trends in what does and doesn't get published in top journals which I find disturbing, and due to toxic mix of political repression and COVID-19, there are growing and painfully real obstacles to doing serious social science research in many MENA countries which will likely have significant downstream effects. Still, this is a healthy field producing vibrant work.

Perhaps one reason I have these more positive views than are typical is the vantage point from where I have been sitting. Over the last few years, I've curated the Twitter feed with almost every peer-reviewed journal article about MENA politics I could find, with over twenty five google scholar alerts and table of contents alerts from most relevant journals. For the Middle East Political Science podcast, I've read and discussed over a hundred books. I've edited this Newsletter and seen the panel submissions at the APSA Annual Meeting. And, as noted above, along with Jillian Schwedler and Sean Yom, I organized and edited a remarkable forthcoming edited volume: *The Political Science of the Middle East*, in which nearly fifty scholars collectively survey the state of the field across ten different research areas. I've seen so much good work that it's difficult to share the obligatory sense of despair.

To conclude: this summer I sent out a request to the membership of the Section, asking what they considered to be the best work of political science on the Middle East in the last year, and over the last decade. The first response I got was from a colleague complaining that "this is the hardest survey question I've ever gotten!" The results of the survey suggest that my friend was not the only one struggling to respond. No book or other work of political science received more than two mentions; the only one that did, Laleh Khalili's fabulous *Sinews of War and Trade*, was not written primarily as a work of political science. Rather than a single field defining book, our scholars highlighted work which spoke primarily to their own particular research interests and subfields. Books named ranged over diverse texts such as Stephane Lacroix's *Awakening Islam*; Ceren Lord's *Religious Politics in Turkey*; Calvert Jones's *Bedouins into Bourgeois*; Lihi Bin Shitrit's *Righteous Transgressions*; Lisa Wedeen's *Authoritarian Apprehensions*; Timothy Mitchell's *Carbon Democracy*; Noura Erekat's *Justice for Some*; Wendy Pearlman's *Violence, Non-Violence and the Palestinian National Movement*; Elizabeth Nugent's *After Repression*; and *The Arab Spring*, by Jason Brownlee, Tarek Masoud and Andrew Reynolds. I'm not entirely sure what I would have chosen myself. I confess to a preference for books over articles, though. I like to read, and books give authors the opportunity to develop their arguments at their full

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in the same issue, and Francesco Cavatorta, "No Democratic Change.. and Yet No Authoritarian Continuity: The Inter-Paradigm Debate and North Africa After the Uprisings," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 42,1 (2015): 135-45.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Kramer, *Ivory Towers in the Sand: The Failure of Middle East studies in America* (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near Eastern Policy, 2001); Lawrence Davidson, "The Attack on Middle East studies: A Historical Perspective," *Middle East Policy* 15, 1 (2008): 149-160.

length, without the constraints of journal word limits or overly intrusive reviewers, and I hope that our field continues to value books in the tenure and promotion process, and in the way we organize the production of knowledge about the MENA region.

It has been an honor and a privilege to lead the MENA Politics Section and to edit this Newsletter over the last three years. I'm excited to see what their futures hold.

- Marc Lynch, (Former) Section Chief and Newsletter Editor