

AMERICAN POLITICAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATION

# MENA POLITICS

*Newsletter of the Middle East and North Africa Politics Section of APSA*

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# Letter From the Editors



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As the incoming editors of MENA Politics, the newsletter for the Organized Section on Middle East and North Africa Politics, we are deeply honored and delighted to introduce our first issue.

We assume a three-year editorship over a newsletter that predates the section itself. During 2016-18, the newsletter served as a publication under the APSA MENA Program and its impressive base of scholarly alumni who had helped lead its workshops. Upon its 2018 establishment, the MENA Organized Section accepted responsibility for the newsletter, and Marc Lynch – also one of the founding members of the section – served as its inaugural editor. We are grateful to the APSA MENA Program for having begun the newsletter six years ago, as well as to Marc for having steered both the new Section and newsletter over the past three years with tireless commitment. We are also thankful to our editorial board, which as in the past continues to guide our work.

MENA Politics aims to convey important scholarly debates and new research findings to our primary audience – the nearly 500 members of the organized section, as well as the wider community of political scientists studying the MENA region. However, we have two further goals: 1) to diversify the content of the newsletter, by exploring understudied topics that we feel have intellectual value, but which may receive little

attention in disciplinary journals; and 2) to diversify the contributors of the newsletter, by drawing upon junior researchers, section members outside the U.S., and those whose work may not appear visible in mainstream venues.

To implement that vision, we are repurposing elements of past newsletters to create a fairly uniform structure for this and future issues.

Each edition of MENA Politics will feature, first, stand-alone article/s written by invited scholars on a contemporary debate or issue; second, symposia of short research-based essays that tackle common themes; and third, a roundtable-style discussion of a prominent book or recent publication.

In this issue, readers will find an eclectic and rewarding set of engagements. The stand-alone article is an insightful meditation about the unexpected challenges of teaching classes about the MENA region amidst the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. While much has been written – including within this newsletter in past issues – of the difficulties imposed by the pandemic upon our research, the essay reminds us that at colleges and universities, our role is as much inflected by what happens in the classroom, and with our students and advisees, as what occurs in the field.

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## Letter from the Editors (continued)

The two symposia likewise address important and timely issues. The first consists of six essays authored by eight scholars about subnational democratic contestation and authoritarian practices. The diverse cases raised by this cluster – Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Iraq, Syria, and Israel – as well as the topics unpacked – such as, social mobilization, structures of governance, and the coding of democracy – underscore a critical fact. MENA specialists know that excessively focusing upon political elites and state institutions through what we might term “methodological nationalism” misses how political order is made legible, transacted, reproduced, and disputed at the local level. Attending to the local, and reconfiguring conceptions of space and scale, remains as imperative as ever.

The second symposium comprises four essays focused on Sudanese politics, and its relevance for theory-building and regional understandings. It remains astonishing that Sudan remains practically invisible to Western political science despite its rich history and ongoing revolution. Historically, few regional specialists studied the place, partly due to its perceived inaccessibility and partly due to its straddling the imagined boundary between the Arab world and Africa. Yet Sudanese politics touches upon many phenomena that captivate comparativists: militarized rule, civic activism, transnational authoritarianism, coups and coup-proofing, ideological coalitions, Islamism, and more. The four authors of this cluster give a tantalizing taste of this.

In the new book roundtable, Valentine M. Moghadam, Carolyn Barnett, and Meriem Aissa review Aili Mari Tripp’s book, *Seeking Legitimacy: Why Arab Autocracies Adopt Women’s Rights*. The book puts forward much needed

comparative analysis of women’s rights reforms in the Maghreb countries of Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia, and compares them to their Middle Eastern counterparts. The intellectual exchange between the author and the reviewers further highlights the key findings and the conceptual advances of Tripp’s book and charts new venues for future research. Their critical interventions raise important questions on the effects of political economy, religion, and public opinion on the agenda of women’s right in the Maghreb countries. We look forward to continuing to showcase prominent publications in the field in our future issues.

Finally, in line with our mission to diversify both the content and the contributors of the newsletter, we welcome new contributors to propose ideas for each of our sections – stand-alone articles, symposia, and roundtable. We will review the proposals with the help of the Editorial Board. Please send your proposals no later than June 1, 2022. Send stand-alone article proposals to Gamze Çavdar ([gamze.cavdar@colostate.edu](mailto:gamze.cavdar@colostate.edu)), symposium proposals to Sean Yom ([seanyom@temple.edu](mailto:seanyom@temple.edu)), and roundtable proposals to Nermin Allam ([nermin.allam@rutgers.edu](mailto:nermin.allam@rutgers.edu)). Section members outside the U.S. are particularly encouraged to submit their proposals and ideas.

- Nermin Allam, Gamze Çavdar, and Sean Yom

If you have comments, suggestions, or ideas for future issues and new features please contact:

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## News from the APSA MENA Section

The APSA MENA section – and APSA more broadly – is looking forward to a return to a semblance of normalcy in 2022. While many of us are more than eager to return to in-person meetings and workshops, it is nonetheless with an awareness that digital programming has allowed us to reach wider audiences and include a more diverse array of participants that was possible in the past. Members of our community have contributed and will continue to contribute to webinars sponsored by the APSA MENA section in collaboration with the MENA Workshops and other partners. Growth in the number of members based in the MENA region and in Europe speaks to the way in which these formats help us connect in new ways.

I am delighted to report that the section is a co-recipient of a Special Projects grant from APSA for new programming on research ethics planned for summer and fall 2022. Working with the Research Ethics in the Middle East and North Africa initiative (please see [the REMENA update](#) in this newsletter), to which many section members already contribute, the grant will support two workshops – one in Amman over the summer and one at the annual meeting in Montreal – that seek to advance conversations about ethical research practices under distinctive constraints in the MENA region. In particular, we hope to address the needs of graduate students who may be supervised by advisors with limited familiarity with local research conditions. We will rely on the help of section members in encouraging these target audiences – both students and advisors – to attend and participate in relevant components of the programming as details become available.

The annual conference, of course, will be the centerpiece of APSA MENA programming for the year. I look forward to announcing at the business meeting the winners of our prizes and awards and am grateful to the prize committees for their work in reviewing the impressive pool of submissions. Thanks to the substantial work of our program co-chairs, Marwa Shalaby and Nadav Shelef, we look forward to sponsoring seven panels and one poster session on a broad range of topics, including religion and politics, public opinion, gender and political processes, ethnic identity and patterns of conflict, and governance and political institutions. The papers reflect a diverse range of methodological and geographical foci. Given the breadth of our section membership, more than one third of the presenters are affiliated with international and/or MENA-based institutions. Most of our panels in 2022 will be co-sponsored, which both indexes and advances the relevance of our section's work to the wider APSA.

Stacey Philbrick Yadav

MENA Section Chair

American Political Science Association

# News from the APSA MENA Program

*The American Political Science Association's MENA Program is a multi-year effort to support political science research and networking among early-career scholars across in the Arab Middle East and North Africa. Through a series of workshops, departmental collaborations, research grants, and other opportunities, the program extends APSA's engagement with the international political science community and strengthens research networks linking American scholars with colleagues overseas. The goal of APSA's MENA Workshops, generously funded by Carnegie Corporation of New York through 2021, is to enhance the capacities and resources of political scientists in the Arab MENA region, while also providing a forum for supporting their ongoing research.*

## Greetings from APSA's MENA Program!

After two years of virtual events, we are pleased to return to in-person programming starting in the Spring of 2022. Our first [Arabic-language Research Development Workshop](#) will be held in Doha from May 18-21. Organized in partnership with the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies, the workshop will use Arabic as the language of instruction and bring together up to 15 scholars from institutions across the Arab MENA region. The training will be led by Bassel Salloukh (Doha Institute for Graduate Studies, Qatar), May Darwich (University of Birmingham, UK), and Ammar Shamaileh (Doha Institute for Graduate Studies, Qatar). Participants will present their research and receive individual feedback from co-leaders and their fellow participants.

An English-language workshop on [“Studying Public Opinion in the Contemporary Middle East: Challenges, Opportunities and Best Practices”](#) is scheduled to take place in Amman from June 12-17, in partnership with three local research institutions, and will be led by four facilitators: Mujtaba Isani (King Fahd University, Saudi Arabia), Karl Kaltenthaler (University of Akron, USA), Yuree Noh (Rhode Island College, USA), and Daniel Silverman (Carnegie Mellon University, USA).

Together with selected workshop fellows, co-leaders will discuss the growing body of research that use surveys, experiments, and focus groups to understand what MENA populations think and want on a wide range of issues, from gender to conflict to religion to democracy.

Our [Departmental Collaboration Initiative](#) continues to grow as APSA partners with more political science departments at Arab universities, to provide tailored support for graduate students and faculty members. Last fall, APSA awarded a grant to the faculty of Economic Studies and Political Science at Alexandria University to organize a three-day workshop to support early and mid-career researchers with publishing their papers in peer-reviewed journals. We also extended our support to the American University in Cairo for a project which provides training for graduate students in experimental research. This spring, APSA is helping the Social Science Department at the College of Humanities and Social Science (CHSS) at Zayed University in UAE organize a two-day introductory workshop on machine learning for the Social Sciences.

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## News from the APSA MENA Program (continued)

APSA continues to partner with IQMR and ICPSR to support Arab MENA scholars in receiving qualitative and quantitative methods training. We will be supporting four early-career scholars based in MENA countries to attend each program this summer.

Looking ahead, we plan to organize an APSA MENA political science conference to be held in Amman this July. Organized in partnership with Columbia Global Center–Amman, the three-day program will bring together workshop alumni, especially those who participated in our virtual workshops during the last two years, alongside non-alumni scholars from a wide range of institutions working on MENA politics. The conference will offer an opportunity for participants to receive critical feedback on research manuscripts, network with colleagues from across the region, and contribute to contemporary debates in the discipline.

Finally, the Arab Political Science Network (APSN) is holding its first [webinar](#) of the year in collaboration with the African Association of Political Science (AAPS) on Teaching Political Science in/on Africa. The webinar is part of a series that will shed light on cross-regional approaches to political science teaching and research in the Middle East and Africa region. An annual research development workshop on “Nation Building, Economic-Transformation and Populism in the MENA Region” was held virtually in March. The program brought together 13 scholars to discuss and develop their papers across four sessions, one of which will be in Arabic.

In addition, APSN will be kicking off its first virtual Summer School on Quantitative Methods in collaboration with the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies from May 29-June 2. The program is intended for advanced MA and PhD students from the Arab MENA region.

If you are interested in learning more or getting involved with the APSA MENA Project, please contact us at [menaworkshops@apsanet.org](mailto:menaworkshops@apsanet.org) or go to our website at <http://web.apsanet.org/mena/>.

Best to all in the coming months and stay well!

Andrew Stinson and Dana El-Issa

APSA MENA Project

American Political Science Association

## Bulletin from REMENA (Research & Ethics in the Middle East)

REMENA is a two-year project organized by the Middle East Institute at Columbia University, in collaboration with the Columbia Global Centers, the American University of Cairo, the Rabat Social Studies Institute, and the Arab Council for the Social Sciences. It is dedicated to developing guidelines for the conduct of responsible, ethical, and constructive social inquiry, with the dual aim of raising awareness of the structural context of social science research in the region as well as developing responses to improve the quality of that research.

As mentioned in MENA Section Chair Stacey Philbrick Yadav's [announcement in this newsletter](#), REMENA's work is being supported by the MENA Section through a Special Project grant from APSA. That grant will underwrite an initiative drawing upon an interdisciplinary team of social scientists from the REMENA network, as well as scholars involved in the APSA MENA Program, with the goal of helping political scientists serving as faculty advisers address the ethical implications of research in the Middle East and North Africa. The animating question of this new collaboration is: how should doctoral students and early career scholars be sensitized to the ethical concerns inherent to researching within social communities under duress—for instance, among refugees, in conflict zones, or under political environments of authoritarian rule?

The first workshop, to be held in conjunction with the APSA MENA Program's workshop in Amman during July 2022, will navigate ethical challenges in designing and conducting research, with a particular emphasis on early career scholars. Some of the questions that we shall pose to our participants include:

What do they wish they had known before beginning their research? How well prepared do they feel in confronting the ethical dilemmas of their research? What would they recommend be included in the education and training of the next generation of scholars?

The second workshop, to be held in conjunction with the 2022 APSA annual meeting in Montreal, will bring together PhD candidates anticipating or already conducting fieldwork with experienced faculty researchers and invited Directors of Graduate Studies. The focus will fall upon the advising and mentoring processes that facilitate awareness of ethical obligations in research. The questions we will invoke, among others, include: at what point in graduate training should ethical issues be raised and confronted? And how should senior faculty and advisors – particularly those with little or no research experience in communities under duress – mentor and support their students, and junior colleagues in the MENA, when they face such challenges?

Reports and outputs of these workshops, including recommendations for enhancing attention to ethical responsibilities, will be published in future issues of this newsletter, posted on the REMENA website, broadcast through APSA-sponsored outlets, and in the MENA itself circulated through Al-Fanar, an online newsletter on higher education in the region.

Anyone interested in learning more about the project or participating in our workshops should contact REMENA via its website (<https://www.mei.columbia.edu/remena-about>) or e-mail: [remena@columbia.edu](mailto:remena@columbia.edu).



# Teaching During the Pandemic: From Compassionate Pedagogy to Compassionate Institution

*Selin Bengi Gümrukçü*



*Selin Bengi Gümrukçü is a Postdoctoral Associate at the Center for European Studies at Rutgers University in New Brunswick. She received her PhD degree from University of Zurich in 2014. She studies various aspects of social movements, political parties, the far right, violence, and Europeanization and Euroscepticism, mainly focusing on the case of Turkey. Her publications have appeared in journals like Terrorism and Political Violence, Turkish Studies, Southeast European and Black Sea Studies, Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies, and in edited volumes. She is currently working on her first book, to be published with Routledge: Protest and Politics in Turkey in the 1970s: The Making of a Protest Wave.*

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has significantly altered the ways in which we think, learn and teach. While we were caught unprepared at the beginning, after two years both the faculty and students are still struggling. This calls for an urgent need to rethink not only our teaching in the light of the pandemic, but the broader, long-term implications for higher education. This short essay starts with the impact of the pandemic upon teaching on Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, and discusses wider concepts and implications, with the goal of initiating a productive discussion on how to recuperate and move forward.

## Teaching on MENA During the Pandemic

I arrived in the US in September 2018 as a displaced scholar from Turkey. Thus, when the pandemic hit, I was still trying to navigate American academia, both in terms of research and networking, as well as teaching.

The pandemic, and switching to remote teaching as a result, has made especially the latter more difficult.

It did not take me long to observe that while there is significant interest in the Middle East and North Africa among students in America, lack of knowledge and/or prejudice is also prevalent. My way of dealing with this has been to employ mindfulness. I start the first class of each semester with a brain mapping exercise in which I ask students to tell me single words, keywords, and ideas that come to mind about a specific concept/region, in this case the Middle East.<sup>1</sup> While a variety of responses are coming out, some are more stereotypical, such as conflict, war, and Islam. Speaking about issues like these can be challenging for some students, as they might feel peer pressure or just be shy about speaking up. Challenging these stereotypical ideas can also be difficult. Building up a sense of community in the classroom, and knowing students at a more personal level, I believe, is one way of overcoming that difficulty.

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\* I would like to thank Mimi Kirk and the editors of the newsletter for their valuable comments and suggestions on earlier versions of this article.

<sup>1</sup> I repeat the same exercise at the very last class of the semester to show students if and how their perception of the region has changed.

The remote learning experience, especially at the beginning, made it harder to build up that sense of community and trust. With the general student practice of turning off the cameras, for privacy or other reasons, we have lost the “human” contact which helps build up the trust and inclusivity. There will be many former students of ours by whom we will pass on our campuses without knowing that they were in our classes, as we never got to instruct them in person.

Another helpful tool for me to teach on the MENA region has been to bring multimedia sources, especially documentaries, to the classroom in order to give students not

***Sharing experiences sometimes mean being vulnerable, and for this we need real human faces and bodies in front of us, instead of virtual, small, black boxes on Zoom adorned by names on a computer screen.***

only a different perspective, but also to provide various means to learn and thus present a better chance of absorbing information. The visual aspect of the documentaries as well as the narration and first-hand inter-

action with the people of the region can help to “see” and “hear” what the society, culture and politics are like at least in some parts of the region, instead of someone simply lecturing them on these topics. One essential part of this is to collectively discuss the documentaries, instead of just watching them on our own.

Here, the pandemic has made things more difficult, too. While I still assigned documentaries, discussing them without seeing their reactions during a Zoom call, or reading comments on discussion tabs if the class was asynchronous, took away the richness of

facial impressions, and being able to respond to each other in real time.

For me, a critical part of teaching on the region has been to also share parts of my story, as a displaced scholar, woman, and an immigrant, and the challenges I faced and continue to face. This, I believe, provides the students with a real-life human perspective on the concepts or events they learn in the class. They can read what the definition of a military coup is, but it is rare for them to hear what it actually is like to experience a failed one. Sharing experiences sometimes mean being vulnerable, and for this we need real human faces and bodies in front of us, instead of virtual, small, black boxes on Zoom adorned by names on a computer screen.

### **Compassionate Pedagogy & the Changing Role of Instructors During the Pandemic**

As much as it got more difficult for us to teach in general, it also got more difficult for our students to learn because of the pandemic. In one of numerous training courses organized by my university and department, I came across the concept of compassion in higher education, as well as compassionate pedagogy. I was, of course, familiar with the concept of compassion, but I had no idea that it could be incorporated into teaching in higher education.

The word compassion derives from Latin and means “suffering together with another, participation in suffering; fellow-feeling, sympathy” (Oxford English Dictionary n.d.). While compassion can be employed in many settings, “within the classroom environment, [it] amounts to looking towards students with kindness, generosity, and care” (Center for Teaching and Learning at the University of

Colorado-Boulder n.d.). An important aspect of this for me is to see the students not as “students,” as in a homogenous and soulless group, but human beings, coming from different social, economic, racial, ethnic, religious, and educational backgrounds who might be dealing with many issues outside of the classroom – just as their teachers do. This became especially important during the pandemic, as research showed its negative financial, social, and health-related impact on students (Frazier et al. 2021; Hartocollis 2021a, 2021b; Klass 2020).

Not surprisingly, all this has impact upon students’ academic performance. If there were two or three students each semester before the pandemic who missed deadlines or asked for an extension, or who had issues understanding the details of an assignment or had difficulties focusing, the number has multiplied since the advent of COVID-19. Faculty were advised to be more flexible during the transition period. For those of us who were willing to employ compassionate pedagogy this meant offering extensions, extra-credit options as well as arranging extra meetings with students if/when they could not make it to office hours because of work, depression, unavailability of the computer at that hour, or other issues. A compassionate pedagogy also entailed responding to student e-mails out of work hours, and simply be willing to be there to support them.

This not only prolonged work hours, thus unbalancing work and life and significantly increasing workload for the faculty, but also made some of us act almost as front-line mental health workers for those students who suffered from the mental impacts of the pandemic, ranging from overall uncertainty to not being able to focus upon more dire situations such as losing a loved one. For one,

my office hours or individual online meetings with students frequently turned into informal chats about their issues where I directed them to relevant offices at the university, as some did not have people around them to whom they could talk.

## **Rethinking Both Teaching & Instructors**

As much as we still have students struggling because of the psychological impacts of the pandemic, faculty members are still struggling, too. A survey conducted in late 2020 revealed a phenomenon that may be even higher today: one-third of respondents reported considering changing careers and leaving higher education.

When the pandemic hit, most faculty who taught anything but a face-to-face course until then had to spend long hours to adjust to online teaching, trying to learn utterly new tools and online pedagogy under pressing and time-sensitive conditions, that took away from the time dedicated to their research and writing. In addition, some scholars have not been able to conduct fieldwork or have had to postpone archival work, some have

lacked social connections, some have had to homeschool their children, and some have had to deal with their own or their loved ones’ physical

or mental health problems – all while trying to learn about the pedagogy of online teaching and attempting to protect their students from the damages caused by the pandemic. While some universities extended the tenure

***All these added up to anxiety among faculty, especially for those of us working under precarious conditions, who are on the job market, or those preparing for tenure.***

clock, less has been done for PhD students trying to finish their dissertations or postdocs navigating the job market, which, in addition to the structural problems already in place, were also negatively impacted by the pandemic. All these added up to anxiety among faculty, especially for those of us working under precarious conditions, who are on the job market, or those preparing for tenure.

Teaching, interacting with students, and supporting students during the pandemic have been very rewarding for me personally and academically. But, the emotional labor exerted by faculty over the last two years, as well as what we might call “compassion fatigue,” remains invisible to many administrators. To put this in relation to compassion and compassionate pedagogy, as we see our students as human beings struggling with life outside of the classroom, do not faculty (as vital constituencies of universities) also deserve to be seen as human beings struggling with life outside of their (virtual) offices and/or classrooms? This would be the first step to acknowledge the emotional labor that we have invested, and the psychological burden that we have undertaken, during the pandemic.

### **Moving Forward: Compassionate Institutions**

Institutions should recognize that now with the easing of the Omicron “tsunami” in most parts of the US, “going back to normal” is not going to magically erase the burden that faculty have undertaken during the pandemic, and its potentially profound implications for the future of higher education. They should acknowledge that the pandemic exacerbated the inherent inequalities in academia and that non-privileged faculty such as women, Black, brown, gay, nonbinary, disabled, and displaced faculty experience even more

heightened levels of stress, and be mindful of the increased stress and uncertainty among non-tenured, adjunct faculty and postdocs who already had insecure and unstable working conditions and disproportioned teaching loads, which have been exacerbated by the financial burden of the pandemic claimed by universities. In doing so, they should develop intentional strategies to support faculty in recovering and moving forward.

These interventions can include, first, generating an authentic response to the many difficulties faculty members face by creating safe spaces for faculty to share emotions in relation to the pandemic. Several universities held town hall meetings for students to express freely how the pandemic has impacted their overall well-being and learning processes, but they did so rarely for faculty. Institutions should ask faculty what they need to move forward and act on those recommendations. This would also increase the sense of being heard and establish a sense of community in universities, especially in large public ones where people do not necessarily know one another. Second, taking tangible and meaningful actions by providing bonuses to compensate faculty for their additional work. The bonuses might ease the financial burden temporarily, but it will not erase the difficulties faculty have faced since March 2020. Additional raises, lighter teaching loads, increased research budgets, allowing unused research budgets during the pandemic to be used during “normal” times might work for faculty to ease their burden and further flourish their research. Third, in tenure and promotion procedures, universities should develop a way to consider the time and effort faculty put into learning about the pedagogy as well as the technicalities of online teaching and accommodating the needs of students. Fourth, at least for the period covering the

pandemic, universities should consider ranking a faculty member's teaching load as equal to or higher than publications vis-à-vis promotion. In doing so, promotion and tenure committees should also be mindful that teaching evaluations during the pandemic might have been negatively impacted by transitioning to online teaching (Garris and Fleck 2020). Universities should thus provide faculty with the options of opting out from them being used for promotion. This would give the faculty with good evaluations during the pandemic to use them to show what they were really doing in the classroom during promotion or re-appointment. And finally, during the job search, tenure, and promotion processes, committees should forgive the gaps on the CVs of non-tenured faculty and those on the job market that were created by the pandemic. ♦

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# Research Symposium: Subnational Democracy & Authoritarian Practices

## Rethinking Local Governance and Contention: A Subnational Democracy and Authoritarianism Lens in MENA Studies

*Lisel Hintz and Noora Lori*



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When studying political regimes, scholars typically use measurements based on national-level institutions, policies, and practices. While many quantitative studies use such metrics – often drawn from the Polity, Freedom House, and other off-the-shelf datasets – to explain cross-case variations, in-depth qualitative studies often point to the uneven distribution of democratic or authoritarian practices *within* states. Largely derived from research on Latin America and the United States – although Sean Lee’s piece on Israel included here evidences the benefits of extending the model – the subnational authoritarianism literature demonstrates that specific regions, provinces, or municipalities may become (or remain) authoritarian despite being embedded in larger democratic national

structures (Fox 1994; Gibson 2005, 2013).

Studies on subnational authoritarianism highlight the importance of studying subnational variation, but their regional provenance means that this literature has largely focused on enclaves of authoritarianism in states whose regimes are widely categorized as democratic. This leaves enclaves of democratic institutions and practices in authoritarian or autocratizing regimes comparatively undertheorized. Expanding the regional scope of subnational governance research can help address this gap, highlighting how local politics can serve as a space of burgeoning democratic practices and the local tools regimes use to target these spaces (Hintz and Ercan 2021). The rapid processes of decentra-

lization and recentralization in the post-Soviet space, for example, produced cases that are useful for explaining variation in electoral competition across subnational units (Gelman 2010; Saikkonen 2016) and the emergence of local opposition actors (Gorokhovskaia 2018).

This symposium explores the empirical and analytical leverage to be gained by identifying subnational pockets of political practices that deviate from national-level classifications of regimes in the Middle East. Given the highly authoritarian nature of many states in the region, the existing literature understandably focuses more on the repressive nature of its regimes, overlooking possible spaces of democratic governance and contention.

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capturing the social and political processes that, at the more localized level, can drive both sudden moments of change and long-term, slow-moving transformations (2011). Adopting an analytical lens that highlights subnational spaces is a useful corrective, allowing scholars to identify nascent forms of democratic norms, practices, and processes of contention—however fleeting they may be—that are obscured at the national level in research and in practice.

However, as Gause argued more than a decade ago, the tendency to focus on the durability of dictatorships and their centralized institutions may prevent us from

Each of the contributions to this symposium identifies tensions and juxtapositions between national-level regime types and subnational institutions or practices, drawing upon case studies of Syria, Qatar, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Israel. Rather than adhere to strict definitions of subnational democracy and authoritarianism, we explicitly asked our authors to think broadly and creatively about the role of *space and place* in conceptualizing patterns of governance and contention in their respective cases. As a result, some of the pieces focus on *places* – local communities, ([Leber](#)), cities ([Dukhan](#)), and disputed territories ([Mako](#)) – while [El Kurd's piece](#) focuses on *spaces* of regime-tolerated activism – pro-Palestinian mobilization – that can foster the development of political agency and civic participation skills. [Lee's](#) application of a more traditional subnational authoritarian lens to the occupied Palestinian territories provides both a useful baseline of comparison for our more loosely defined cases, and an important contribution to ongoing debates about how Israel should be coded in terms of its regime type. In combining these pieces, this symposium makes several interventions in the study of political regimes in the Middle East, with four wider implications for the comparative study of democratization and authoritarianism.

First, attending to subnational spaces of democratic practices reveals important variations across states that may have similar scores on the regime-type datasets that gird many prevailing theoretical models. As [El Kurd](#) points out, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar have similar democracy scores, similar formal restrictions on civil society organizations, and even similar demographic characteristics, with non-citizens comprising the vast majority of the population (close to 90 percent) in both states. However, informal

pro-Palestinian social networks and groups in Qatar have proven to be more difficult to co-opt, and their presence has created opportunities for activism, political learning, and spillover effects on civil society in Qatar that have proven far more fruitful than what pro-Palestinian advocates have experienced in the UAE. Meanwhile, Leber's discussion of regional governors in Saudi Arabia explains how communities in the Southern regions have gained meaningful concessions from the central government. These successful acts of contention are concealed by national-level metrics that have consistently characterized Saudi Arabia as durably authoritarian since the inception of the state. Focusing on subnational spaces of democratic contestation, and even accountability, allows for a deeper understanding of how practices of autocracy vary among marginalized groups, who may be otherwise obscured by their sublimation into the category of a national society or populace.

Second, applying a subnational lens allows for a more process-based, interactive understanding of regime characterizations that can explain how democratic openings and authoritarian retrenchment may unfold concurrently. Dukhan and AlJasem's contribution shows how Aleppo University was transformed into a "micro-space of democratic norms and practices" from 2011-2013, creating a hopeful political opening before the Assad regime co-opted the Al-Berri tribe to put down the protests with a veneer of legitimacy obtained by patronizing local Sunni actors. This democratic experiment was short-lived but impactful, as the university space played an important role for organizing protestors and inspiring mobilization across other localities.

Third, while subnational variation is most frequently applied to federal systems and the

unit of analysis is often a geographically concentrated space (region, province, or municipality), the contributions to this symposium show that jurisdictional units are not the only way to leverage subnational comparisons. The contribution by El Kurd on social networks in Qatar, and Dukhan and AlJasem's discussion of Aleppo University, both demonstrate how ostensibly non-political, informal, and even virtual spaces can emerge as subnational arenas of democratic practices and contention.

Fourth, selecting a subnational level of analysis does not mean focusing solely on domestic actors as catalysts of change. International actors can cause subnational variation in governance structures by strategically fostering democratic or authoritarian practices. Mako's study shows how Western intervention in Iraq created bifurcated governance at the national and subnational levels after 2003, producing areas of limited statehood that undermined democratization processes and facilitated the proliferation of armed non-state actors.

Finally, seriously engaging subnational variation in governance practices can force scholars to rethink how they conceive and code national regimes in the first place. As Lee points out, Israel has consistently received high democracy scores since the state was formed. However, this assessment can only be maintained by artificially excising "Israel proper" from the rest of the territories the Israeli state controls, along with its treatment of Palestinians. Attending to authoritarian enclaves within Israel therefore allows us to characterize the nature of its regime more accurately, and better contextualize its similarities with neighboring states, instead of treating it as a democratic outlier in the region.



By focusing on juxtapositions between governance practices at different levels of analysis, this symposium moves beyond national-level characterizations of regime types to explain how authoritarianism and democracy may co-exist. In addition to deepening our understanding of how authoritarianism operates in the MENA region, it also suggests that such circumstances can be quite common in modern states, and deserve more attention from comparativists.

As a coda on spaces and places, we wanted to share that the idea for this symposium originated in a conversation among several of the contributors on the sidelines (ok, Zoom breakout room) of last year's annual Project on Middle East Political Science conference. Randomly assorted into groups, a few contributors quickly recognized a common interest in thinking subnationally and locally about governance structures in the MENA. That virtual place provided the space for the brainstorming, networking, and collaboration that made this wider symposium, and the futurefuture research we fervently hope will build from it, possible. ♦

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# The Theoretical Utility of Studying Informal Spaces: Dissent and Opposition in the Case of Qatar

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Subnational variation often implies comparisons made across states, counties, or other geographically delineated spaces. However, as Soifer notes, theory should decide what level of analysis to use, based on the level at which the “proposed cause operates” (Soifer 2019, 93). Thus, when it comes to studying opposition, the unit of analysis is not always a jurisdictional unit. Rather, non-jurisdictional spaces such as informal social networks and groups may also be the appropriate unit for analyzing subnational spaces of resistance. Focusing on these spaces within authoritarian regimes can help identify the potential for political shifts that a national level focus might obscure. Building on my forthcoming paper, I use the Qatari case to demonstrate the utility of focusing on informal spaces in highly repressive environments, by applying the concept of non-jurisdictional units to my analysis (El Kurd 2022).

## **Pro-Palestinian Activism in Qatar**

Qatar is a small country, with 306,948 citizens that make up a mere 12% of the overall population (Gulf Labour Market and Migration 2015).<sup>1</sup> Political movements have been mostly sidelined, and the state is comprehensive

in its control over formal institutions which might mobilize society (al-Kuwari 2014). This has created a number of structural impediments to activism. In response to the Qatari state’s control of formal civil society, informal organizations and networks have emerged to challenge the status quo and provide a space for independent opposition. These informal organizations play an effective mobilizing role and have long-lasting ramifications on activists, as well as on broader public discussions of democracy, accountability, and self-determination.

In this context, I argue that a specific type of informal organization – the pro-Palestine group – is uniquely suited to fostering opposition, especially in the Arab world where repression remains high and authoritarianism constitutes the modal regime type at the national level. I provide evidence that these pro-Palestine networks have three specific effects: 1) introducing activists in their formative years to the idea of political agency, 2) providing a space for activists to engage in citizenship-building practices, and 3) generating spillover effects in civil society more broadly. Moreover, these groups operate within and across cases in the region.

<sup>1</sup> These calculations are based on last available Qatari government census data, released in 2015.

Historical and contemporary examples of pro-Palestine activism from across the region support the idea that such groups can help mobilize citizens. Rather than being a niche issue area for a certain milieu of organizers, previous research shows how pro-Palestine activism has often provided a venue for politicization (Abou-El-Fadl 2012; Schemm 2002; Schwedler 2022). Such groups build capacity for future activism and even serve as pre-cursors for uprisings in some cases. While certainly facing regime repression from time to time, the moral weight of the Palestinian cause means such groups are often insulated to a greater degree than other forms of dissent. This applies to regime messaging as well; a number of Arab regimes utilize pro-Palestine discourse and legitimize their rule partly via support for Palestinians. This makes repressing pro-Palestine activism more difficult. Moreover, given the regional significance of the Palestinian cause, such activism has the potential to build on and connect with other movements across state boundaries.

Previously, a number of studies has outlined the importance of formative years in shaping perception of political agency. Greenwald and Tessler (2022) discuss in particular the impact of witnessing uprisings in formative years, whereas Neundorf and Pop-Eleches (2020) focus on the impact of regime type and how that might affect attitudes towards democracy. Both focus on the external context which might impact an individual at a certain point in their life, with or without their explicit participation. Both focus on the external context which might impact an individual at a certain point in their life, with or without their explicit participation.

On the other hand, I focus more on specific

spaces and organizations in which individuals choose to participate. I argue that in cases like Qatar, pro-Palestine spaces that exist well below the overarching structure of the national state introduce members to the idea of political agency, and the ability of members to influence both national and transnational politics, in a unique way because such spaces are fundamentally political. This lies in contrast to formal civil society groups, which are more tolerated by autocratic regimes across the region and which focus on social or professional issues without necessarily making political demands.

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When activists reflect on the Palestinian issue, to which they feel they and broader society are committed, they eventually conclude that their government's foreign policy does not represent them. Thus, to change policy, they realize that they must make political demands of their state. Subsequently, whenever they succeed in getting state authorities to react, they recognize their political agency further.

## **The Rise of QAYON**

In Qatar, the main pro-Palestine group is Qatar Youth Opposed to Normalization (QAYON), which activists inspired by the Arab Spring founded in 2011. QAYON's objectives are to educate the public on the Palestinian cause, and pressure the government to end forms of normalization with Israel.<sup>2</sup> They are an informal group in that they have no offi-

<sup>2</sup> See QAYON.org for their main objectives and mission statement, as well as [instagram.com/qayonn](https://www.instagram.com/qayonn) for their infographics.

cial permission to organize. This dynamic is beneficial to the group in some sense because they are able to remain truly independent of the state. Their decentralized nature also makes it easier for members to work on their areas of expertise, and disappear when the pressure mounts.

QAYON's rise and operation leave behind several important implications on how scholars think about political contestation and social mobilization within informal spaces. First, the trajectory of activists involved with QAYON demonstrates the mechanism of political agency. For most members, the motivation to join is initially born out of humanitarian concern, but morphs into a politicized position against their government's policies. Members learn to make demands of their government, driven by the view that normalization with Israel perpetuates Palestinian suffering. QAYON releases statements, organizes petitions, and coordinates with groups across the Gulf to boost their impact.

Even when the group faces setbacks, involvement in QAYON gives members experience in practicing political agency. For example, the space for organizing has narrowed considerably in the last two years. QAYON can no longer rely on utilizing Qatar University for their events, or use public spaces such as Katara, a cultural institute known for hosting forums and meetings for a variety of groups. Yet rather than demobilize members, such closures have led some to question how they might push their demands further. As one member told me: "We can see that... challenging the state in these ways is not preventing the regime from doing what it wants. Perhaps we need new strategies. Perhaps we need to rethink the regime itself."

Secondly, through such groups, members of

pro-Palestine solidarity networks practice and experience citizenship. This includes an "individual's participation in the public sphere" (Brandtstädter, Wade, and Woodward 2011, 168). Scholars of Arab Gulf states have often pointed out how the lack of political engagement in these countries means citizens do not "practice citizenship" in the full sense of the term, or engage in claims-making (Al-Naimi 2019). Instead, they are often treated as acquiescent recipients of policy.

This is an accurate assessment when it comes to formal civil society organizations. Such groups are required by the Qatari government to affiliate directly with a specific ministry. This requirement is a common tactic across the Gulf, which helps states control groups by threatening to withdraw affiliation at any time. This restriction also narrows the scope of group activities; groups cannot expand in new directions on topics they engage with, or must approach issues from a narrow ministry-approved perspective. Thus, such forms of civil society actually provide the regime avenues of cooptation and control, rather than a true public sphere with an exchange of ideas and opportunities for social connection. formal civil society organizations. Such groups are required by the Qatari government to affiliate directly with a specific ministry. This requirement is a common tactic across the Gulf, which helps states control groups by threatening to withdraw affiliation at any time. This restriction also narrows the scope of group activities; groups cannot expand in new directions on topics they engage with, or must approach issues from a narrow ministry-approved perspective. Thus, such forms of civil society actually provide the regime avenues of cooptation and control, rather than a true public sphere with an exchange of ideas and opportunities for social connection.

Given this environment, scholars of Arab Gulf states point out that the few organizations that exist which attempt to remain truly independent of national state institutions can serve as meaningful sites of citizenship practice (Al-Naimi 2019; Al-Hashimi 2019; Al-Shehabi 2019). Although these organizations are few in number, and must be loosely and informally structured to avoid repression, such groups are particularly impactful because they allow individuals to engage in practices that facilitate their understanding of their rights vis a vis the state.

QAYON qualifies as one such group. In a wider sense, pro-Palestine groups represent one such site of citizenship practice. Membership in such groups often leads individuals to making claims upon their own states. My fieldwork shows that, in the process of opposing the state position on Palestine, many participants come to the conclusion that they indeed have a right to be represented by their country's policies. They then invoke the discourse of being citizens of the state to argue that their right to shape policy is being violated. In this way, they develop a sense of themselves as politicized citizens, with rights owed to them by their governments.

We can see this clearly in the case of QAYON. Members have appeared in viral videos confronting pro-Israel advocates, as well as Qatar University officials. These confrontations led to discussions within and outside the group on the idea that the regime had to be accountable when crafting policy. Another way in which QAYON served as a space for practicing citizenship is in the initiatives it spurred on the topic of identity. When individuals got involved in QAYON, many cited a sense of shared Arab identity as a primary motivation. From that perspective, the regime's weak stance on the Palestinian issue,

and occasional outright cooperation with the state of Israel, seemed to many members an attack on this identity.

This contributes to a third mechanism: spillover, in which initial participation in an informally organized social movement can have important downstream effects on popular discourse and political action in other issue areas. In QAYON's case, some members have become involved in initiatives outside the group, challenging the state's official discourse on what it meant to be Qatari. One such group, Talee'a, specifically argued that the state was pushing a narrow conception of Qatari identity, flattening the diversity of society and the multitude of backgrounds which made up modern Qatari society. As a result, they wanted to hold discussions addressing untold histories, unrecognized cultural icons, and the political and constitutional development in Qatar that remained ignored. "We want to speak for ourselves," said one activist, "not be spoken for." Engagement on such issues can be considered a prime example of "social and political practices of membership" which form the basis of citizenship (Lazar 2016).

Talee'a, then, is one example of how pro-Palestine activism has spilled over on to broader civil society in Qatar. This occurs because a group like QAYON facilitates organizational capacity and fosters social ties, which activists then use to develop other political initiatives. Moreover, given the subject matter, pro-Palestine groups foster an awareness of transnational linkages and concerns, as well as bring a focus to authoritarianism and its role in facilitating the status quo in the region.

Another example of spillover effects involves student groups at Qatar University. In this instance, involvement in QAYON shifted the

trajectory of pre-existing formal organizations in addition to initiating the formation of new networks. Specifically, student members of QAYON began to push boundaries within other organizations, such as the student council board and the debate club. For instance, the university student council issued statements challenging university policies and attempted to connect with councils at other Gulf universities. Although the university's administration later intervened, it became clear that members who were involved in pro-Palestine organizing brought their skills and, importantly, their ideological orientation, to new spaces.

This analysis leaves a final conclusion. Focusing on pro-Palestine groups when explaining the development of Arab civil society is crucial. Such groups are major drivers of dissent and mobilization, even in highly repressive environments where independent civil society is almost nonexistent. For scholars of authoritarianism, this points to the importance of understanding the salience of certain transnational issues. Palestine is one such case, although it is often discounted as a niche cause of interest only to those with humanitarian concerns or particular ideological commitments.

In the same way, the role of groups such as QAYON show us that disaggregating national-level categorizations is critical for a more nuanced understanding of state-society relations. For example, although Qatar and the United Arab Emirates are similarly coded in regime type datasets – both being classified invariably as cases of ruling monarchy or closed autocracy, with relatively few democratic attributes at the national level – focusing on informal spaces inhabited by new social forces and networks reveals very different dynamics about how politics links the local

to the national and even the transnational. The fact that pro-Palestine activism exists in Qatar but not the UAE says a great deal about the level and scope of repression against pro-Palestinian advocacy in the latter, which national-level measurements do not always capture.

All in all, informal organizations such as QAYON show that subversive politics can develop in unlikely, and understudied, spaces, and can reveal a great deal about the trajectories and future directions of Arab civil society. ♦

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# “If Only the Governor Knew”: Subnational Contestation in Saudi Arabia

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MENA autocracies typically lack subnational democratic legacies and curtail the authority of any elected local governments (Gilley 2010, 398-400; McMann 2018, 30), thus making them unlikely subjects for the study of subnational “democracy” in many country cases. However, taking subnational regimes seriously beyond contrasts with *national* regime types (contra Dahl 1971, 12-13) offers new insights into the challenges that autocrats face in extending their rule across considerable territory. Even in the absence of competitive elections or formal federal arrangements, for example, subnational structures within MENA autocracies can provide avenues for local communities to contest centralized policy. In this article, I draw on extensive fieldwork to demonstrate how subnational regimes create openings for creative contestation even in the seemingly unified authoritarian regime of Saudi Arabia. In two cases of communities in Southern regions pressing claims against the central government, I show that the kingdom’s system of regional governors (Samman 1982) allows relatively minor acts of resistance to generate meaningful concessions from national-level institutions.

## Local Politics in the Saudi Context

Western media outlets and at least some Saudi commentators once thought political contestation in the kingdom might come through local elections (Al Ghamdy 2011, 128-131). However, Saudi rulers ultimately tolerated local elections only where they had not already decentralized political authority. Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, international scrutiny of Saudi Arabia helped create an opening for domestic Saudi activists to press for political reform, such as an elected legislature (Lacroix 2004, Al Rasheed 2009). What Saudi rulers conceded, though, was the partial election of municipal councils, oversight bodies for municipalities (local administrative units) which remained under the executive control of state-appointed municipal “mayors.”<sup>1</sup> Today, such municipalities fall under the relatively powerless Ministry of Municipalities and Rural Affairs (MOMRA), remain subordinate to regional governors (themselves overseen by the historically powerful Ministry of Interior, or MOI), and focus only on low-level concerns such as formally issuing building permits (Abdulaal 2008).

As a result, municipal elections have not

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<sup>1</sup> More accurately, the precise term for these positions that control partially elected municipalities is “municipality executive.” In Saudi Arabia, multiple local offices are roughly equivalent to what we might call “mayor” in the American context.



offered a meaningful forum for subnational contestation of policy. Even during the initial 2005 elections, just 17% of the electorate voted (Al Ghamdy 2011, 109), declining to only around 6% turnout by 2015.<sup>2</sup> Much as the elections initially attracted outsized Western media and diplomatic attention as an indication of the kingdom “experimenting with democracy,” state-regulated domestic media in Saudi Arabia generally downplayed any connection between elected municipal councils and political change (Alghamdy 2011, 130-131 and 223-224). Most tellingly, the Saudi regime has repeatedly delayed elections without sparking substantive pushback. In 2021, the MOMRA placed municipal election on indefinite “hiatus,” with domestic media criticizing the councils as a waste of resources (*Al-Watan* 2021).

However, even if local elections and municipalities do not constitute a pathway for change, subnational contestation still exists. Saudi communities have directed considerable, localized contestation of state policies at a particular set of subnational actors, namely the kingdom’s 13 regional governors (typically members of the Al Saud royal family) and overseeing officials in the MOI. Past work on political contestation in Saudi Arabia has explored social fault lines of identity and geography to challenge models of the kingdom as a simplistic, services-for-loyalty “rentier state” (Okruhlik 1999; Lacroix 2011; Al Rashied 2013; Matthiesen 2014; Alamer 2018). Yet two cases from the early 1970s and the 2000s flip this script, showing how local Saudi communities with minimal political influence – at least as measured at the national level –

nonetheless exploited the regime’s administrative divisions to secure modest concessions. While much has changed in Saudi Arabia since the early 2000s, the enduring political role of the kingdom’s regional governors indicates the continuing relevance of these subnational dynamics.<sup>3</sup> In each case, the kingdom’s system of subnational governance created openings for marginalized groups in Southern regions to deploy “weapons of the weak” (Scott 1985, 29-33) by indirectly threatening governors’ reputations (and hence political careers) at the national level. Accordingly, I examine cases where Saudi Arabia’s subnational regime structures have permitted quite “small” forms of collective discussion and coordination (Johnston 2006, 196-198) to assert local agency in shaping national policy.

## The Farasan Islands

The first prominent example, still discussed in Saudi print and social media to this day, concerns the efforts of residents of the Farasan Islands to attract greater development assistance during the first oil boom of the 1970s. Farasan is located 25 miles offshore from the Southern region of Jizan, itself underdeveloped due to a combination of poor regional governance and national development places that favored major cities elsewhere in the kingdom. To circumvent these restrictions, Farasan residents worked to take advantage of a 1978 regional tour by Prince Nayef bin ‘Abd al-‘Aziz (as Interior Minister, responsible for regional governance throughout the kingdom) to press their development priorities in person (Muharraq 2012). At a

<sup>2</sup> Author estimates based on reported numbers of registered and actual voters (Al-Riyadh 2015) and population statistics (General Authority for Statistics, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> In 2020, for example, the Governor of Makkah, Khalid Al Faisal, replied to a Twitter campaign criticizing a rap video from a young Saudi woman about Makkah by ordering an investigation of the video’s creator (Okaz 2020).

welcoming ceremony that Prince Nayef and his entourage were custom-bound to accept as an offer of hospitality, Farasanis arranged for schoolteacher Ibrahim al-Muftah put forward a number of requests in the form of a poem:

*Do we have any hope, Your Highness, our honored guest?  
Of gazing upon a hospital that heals us?*

*How much our patients have suffered  
The solution is in Jizan, or death on the quayside*

*We suffer greatly from our problems  
Wherever we go, a problem calls out to us<sup>4</sup>*

In addressing Prince Nayef specifically, the poem contains the implicit threat of spreading word of Nayef's inability to help the region (perhaps through further poetry) if he failed to deliver "immediate, de facto gains" (Scott 1985, 33) for Farasan. Given the importance of Saudi royals' perceived power and competence in their efforts to build coalitions within the greater royal family (Herb 1999, 102-104), more critical verses might have damaged Nayef's reputation even in the halls of power in the capital. Soon after Nayef returned to Riyadh, a state-sponsored ferry service appeared to connect the archipelago with the mainland, while the 3rd Saudi Development Plan (1980, 396) highlighted Farasan and "the transport difficulties of islands in the Southwestern region" as a national development priority. While Prince Nayef's oversight of regional governance provided an opening for Farasanis to press their demands, their narrations of the event emphasize communal agency in changing state development policy through this small

but significant act.

## Isma'ili Activism in Najran

The second subnational case took place decades later. Along the mountains of the Yemen-Saudi border, Isma'ili Shi'a Saudis in the Southern region of Najran pushed back against sectarian discrimination through small acts of defiance, in particular airing their grievances with foreign reporters and researchers. In the late 1990s, the MOI (still headed by Prince

Nayef) sought to subvert any religious practices that deviated from the Sunni orthodoxy espoused by regime-aligned religious clerics, triggering in an outbreak of Isma'ili protests targeting Najran's governor, Prince Mish'al bin S'aud (BBC 2000). Locally based security services responded with an expansive bout of repression, including hundreds of direct arrests and mass firings of Isma'ili Saudi government employees (HRW 2008, 24-28 and 41-45). Efforts to utilize "official" institutions to express grievances went nowhere. Petitions to then-Crown Prince (and from 2005, King) 'Abdullah went unanswered. Participation in municipal elections (where turnout was high by the standards of the Southern regions) did not trigger a response.<sup>5</sup>

Still, Najrani Isma'ilis continued to press for change in risky yet less-visible ways, including reaching out to Human Rights Watch (HRW) researchers during their visit in

***...Saudi Arabia's system of regional governance created openings for activists from each community to influence national policy through small acts of collective action.***

<sup>4</sup> Author's translation of poem quoted in Muharraq (2012).

<sup>5</sup> Turnout in Najran was over 15%, compared with around 14% for Jazan, 10% for 'Asir and less than 9% for Al-Baha.

2006 (HRW 2008, 6, 81). The culmination of these efforts—despite threat of arrest for speaking out—was a 2008 report by the US-based NGO that highlighted mistreatment of Isma‘ili Saudis and was sharply critical of Prince Mish‘al in particular (HRW 2008, 46-47). Barely a month after HRW published its findings, Prince Mish‘al suddenly announced his resignation—almost certainly not his choice—and was quickly replaced by King ‘Abdullah’s sixth son (also named Mish‘al). While not a dramatic departure from past governance practices, the new Prince Mish‘al made at least some efforts to combat sectarian discrimination against Najrani Isma‘ilis (Worth 2010). Whether HRW’s Najrani interlocutors truly believed that Prince Mish‘al was the main source of their poor treatment by the Saudi regime, or calculated that his removal was the most that the regime might concede, the end result was the same.

## Communities, Contestation, and the State

Both these cases reveal much about the importance of exploring how political contestation plays out within subnational spaces in authoritarian contexts. While the Farasan Islands and the Isma‘ilis of Najran each sit at a considerable political and physical distance from Riyadh, Saudi Arabia’s system of regional governance created openings for activists from each community to influence national policy through small acts of collective action. From this, a few conclusions can be drawn out.

First, these cases point to the fact that the “messy stuff of contestation” not only “often occurs outside the domain of electoral outcomes” (Wedeen 2007, 63) but may entail communities pressing their demands at a

distance from centralized regime authority. Accounting for subnational regime structures can help us provide a fuller account of contestation within a given country even where elections are limited and open contestation risks severe repression.<sup>6</sup> Second, national and subnational regimes may vary in their responsiveness to contestation even when there is little formal difference in regime “type.” As Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman converts regional governorships into proving grounds for a new generation of royal allies, for example, local communities might subtly leverage the ambitions of these young princes to their own advantage—even as mounting repression forecloses already limited opportunities for contestation at the national level.

Finally, this piece points to a productive line of potential MENA-region research at the intersection of literatures regarding subnational regimes (Giraudy 2015), non-democratic accountability (Truex 2016), and regional gov-

ernance strategies (Carter and Hassan 2021). Further investigation of numerous MENA regimes’ appointed governorships might help illuminate regime and opposition behavior that appears puzzling when considering only national regime authority. ♦

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<sup>6</sup> See Fenner (2018) for a similar point on opposition spaces in Egypt.

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# The Syrian Regime's Instrumentalization of Tribes as a Legitimacy Tool in Aleppo

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In 2011, Syria faced an unprecedented protest movement that took the world by surprise, considering the constrictive grip of the Assad regime that had ruled the country for more than four decades. Starting from Dar'a in southern Syria in March and spreading like wildfire, the protest movement shook the streets of Aleppo a month later. Contemporary historians of the Syrian uprising have highlighted the role played by the tribes of Dar'a in the protest movement and armed conflict against the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Accordingly, tribal solidarity networks among the protesters played a significant role in igniting the uprising and maintaining opposition against the regime (Leenders and Heydemann 2012, 139–159).

In Aleppo, the picture contrasted dramatically. Here, the regime instrumentalized its networks among Arab tribes to suppress the protest movement. This brief piece will therefore focus on how the Assad regime, under its Alawite leadership and elites, leveraged clientelist networks among the Arab tribes,

particularly the Al Berri clan, to confront opposition at Aleppo University between 2011 and 2013. We argue that the regime used such loyalist networks to build internal legitimacy within a target population, where the state was perceived to be ruled by a sectarian group – the Alawites – that sought to oppress local Sunni-majority communities. As the Assad regime and its repressive forces were largely viewed as outsiders by many in Aleppo, engagement with Sunni tribes worked to counter this perception by re-centering the conflict: it portrayed the revolutionary confrontation as one of locals versus locals, not a centralized national regime attempting to suppress a local protest movement.

Focusing on Aleppo not only touches upon the localized political behaviors guiding our theoretical framework, but it also provides useful within-country variation. Many researchers of the Syrian conflict have focused upon Dar'a, given its early resistance to the regime and status as the starting point for the uprising. In such work, Dar'a, as well as

Homs, serve as pivotal cases showing how tribal solidarity networks enabled protesters to endure regime repression. The subnational case of Aleppo, however, presents a stark contrast revealing how the regime's *instrumentalization* of tribal networks can result in the suppression of opposition and undermining of collective resistance.

### **The Protest Movement at Aleppo University as a Micro-Sample of Subnational Democracy**

By the time the Syrian uprising had spread into the cities of Dar'a, Homs, and Deir Ezzor, Aleppo, in contrast to the other cities, had witnessed substantial pro-government rallies and mobilization. The Assad regime also allocated significant resources to counter any anti-government demonstrations. Such actions were facilitated by informal intermediaries and local institutions. As has been the case in other contexts, such as those in Latin America, institutions "inter mediate[d] between local and national politics, and [served

***Their slogans focused on demanding basic rights, such as dignity, freedom of expression, political pluralism, and reforming the political system.***

a month after the first demonstrations, students congregated at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities of Aleppo University to protest the violence perpetrated by regime forces in Dar'a and other cities experiencing revolts (Aljasem 2021).

What made the university protests unique was its spontaneous mobilization and solidarity with opposition in other Syrian cities. The protest was entirely peaceful, as demonstra-

tors did not have any means to use violence. Their slogans focused on demanding basic rights, such as dignity, freedom of expression, political pluralism, and reforming the political system. By conceiving such activism as a micro-space of democratic norms and practices, we see that the university played an important role in inspiring mobilization in other subnational spaces across Syria, mirroring what other comparativists have called "emulation" in the Color Revolutions of the 2000s (Beissinger 2007). Actors in other Aleppo neighborhoods like Salahuddin, Seif al-Dawla and Bustan al-Qaser were inspired by the presence of protests at the university, emulating their example to mobilize their own populations in protest against the Assad regime (Aljasem 2021). Moreover, in a recognition of the heroism of the university students, the opposition adopted a name of one of the Fridays after Aleppo University, calling it "the Heroes of Aleppo University" (*France 24*, 2012).

An important factor that benefited the student protests was the absence of sectarian tension inside Aleppo, especially when compared to other protest sites like Homs and Latakia. In those regions, the regime depended heavily on sectarian thugs (*shabbiha*) to counter opposition. In Aleppo, however, the regime relied on other sources of repression in addition to the classic intelligence forces. It wanted to mix up the cards and show that the "people of Aleppo" were on its side against the protesters rather than being against the "state." Fawaz Haddad memorably calls this strategy "the fighting of people against people" (2014).

## Authoritarian Instrumentalization of Tribes as a Counterbalance to the Protest Movement in Aleppo

For instrumentalists, tribal identity is a strategic weapon used by leaders that seek political power and resources (Dukhan 2022). In order to understand how the Assad regime established patronage networks with some segments of the Arab tribes in Aleppo to neutralize subnational democratic spaces, it is important to review some history.

From the 1960s onwards, Aleppo, like other Syrian cities, experienced a massive demographic change with a large influx of rural newcomers to the city, due to the growing employment opportunities generated by a thriving industrial sector (Pagani 2016). Many members of the tribes, such as Al Berri and others, moved to the eastern part of the city and inhabited the Bab al-Nayrab and al-Marjeh neighborhoods. Although market reforms in the 1970s, and again during the 1990s and 2000s, had benefited Syria's commercial bourgeoisie in Aleppo, the regime also cultivated rival elites of rural and tribal origin by incorporating them into its own monopolistic economic networks and, importantly, its coercive structures (Haddad 2004, 37–76). This was both part of a broader strategy to empower tribes in exchange for political compliance, and a way to buy their support in counterbalancing the traditional Sunni bourgeoisie, which had supported a Muslim Brotherhood-led revolt in 1982 (Dukhan 2014, 1–28). For instance, prior to the 2011 uprising, groups such as Akl al-Hamadeen of the Al-Baggara tribe and Zeino Berri of Al Berri clan had become members of the Syrian Parliament (Al-Mustafa 2015). They often acted as intermediaries between their communities and the regime and provided the state with the intelligence needed to

tighten its grip on the community in Aleppo in terms of security.

When the violence of the Syrian uprising intensified, members of Al Berri and other tribes saw an opportunity to prove their loyalty and rejuvenate Assad's need for their support. Those who supported the regime hailed from those patronage networks that the regime had previously woven with tribal leaders and their families. For example, Zaino Berri, the leader of the Al Berri, came to form his own *Shabbiha* militia group, which included hundreds of his own tribespeople and family members from his own stronghold in Bab al-Nayrab and from the village of Tell Shegheb (Awad 2022).

This group played a major role in the crackdown on the student protests at Aleppo University. The Al Berri clan, in collaboration with the head of the Air Force intelligence directorate (*mukhabarat*), Adeb Salameh, formed "popular committees" to pre-empt any demonstration at the University of Aleppo. These popular committees served as the nucleus of the pro-regime repression. They were tasked with being first-response groups and were embedded within groups of students suspected of organizing protests. When students tried to mobilize for demonstrations, Al Berri members would attack them and prevent them from inciting others to join. Moreover, these groups would arrest students and hold them until official police and security forces could arrive to the campus. At the university, hence, tribal thugs preceded the riot police and mostly accompanied them in their campaigns to arrest activist students. On Fridays, likewise, Al Berri members went to mosques adjacent to the university campus. They would wield batons, sticks, electric shocking devices, and plastic handcuffs to intimidate activists and deploy these tools in



in their oppressive acts.

In the aftermath of one student demonstration, Zaino Berri roamed the campus of the university with his traditional tribal long robe and sandals, shouting “Aleppo is ours. We will not let you disturb the tranquility of the city and the love for our leader, Bashar al-Assad” (Aljasem, forthcoming). Beyond such coercive containment and intimidation, the Al Berri also organized pro-regime rallies to drown out students protest. These pro-regime gatherings were known as “Homeland Tent” (khaimat watan), and intended to propagate support for the regime and salute Bashar al-Assad for his staunch position in the face of a perceived global conspiracy against all of Syria.

## Conclusion

This essay has traced how national regimes can deploy localized tools to nullify and suppress subnational spaces of democratic life. In Syria, exploitation of tribal identities through clientelistic networks enabled political forces supportive of Assad’s political order to regulate and repress peaceful student protests at Aleppo University. This also helped disguise the narrow sectarian base of Syrian autocracy, and leverage local tribal knowledge about Aleppian social life. Aleppo, however, is not unique in the context of the Syrian civil war. Other examples exist of powerholders exploiting social structures and local communities to quash localized threats to authoritarianism. In Homs and Latakia, for example, we see various arrangements in which the regime utilized sectarian identity to control challenges from these locales (Hinnebusch and Rifai 2021). In the end, the manipulation of tribal networks served as an instrument to burnish regime legitimacy and mobilize political resources during an era of

revolutionary uncertainty. ♦

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# Foreign Intervention, Contingent Sovereignty, and Areas of Limited Statehood: The Case of Iraq's Disputed Territories

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Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 led to a series of interventions that transformed its own sovereignty. The case thus serves as a useful window into the potential cascading effects of foreign interventions on national and subnational authoritarianism. Although UN Security Council Resolution 688 of 1991 fell short of mandating a no-fly zone, Britain, France and the United States established their own multilateral no-fly zone above the 36th parallel administered under Operation Provide Comfort and subsequently under the Combined Task Force Operation Northern Watch. Such actions culminated in the territorial consolidation of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) as a semi-autonomous entity comprising of the provinces of Dohuk, Erbil, and Sulaymaniyah. Viewed as "operations other than war" (Rayburn et al. 2019, 5-6), the no-fly zones, both at the 36th parallel and the 33rd parallel in southern Iraq, were seen as a "necessary precondition for any effective action against Saddam Hussein's regime" (US Congress, 1996, 27). Iraq's history with foreign interventions therefore raises important questions about the ways in which international actors deconstruct and reconstitute state sovereignty through interventions.

Although a rich body of literature has exam-

ined the relationship between sovereignty, statebuilding, and legitimacy within the context of international interventions, little attention has been paid to the ways in which foreign interventions produce or reinforce areas of limited statehood and contention between national and subnational governments (Lake 2016; Emizet and Pickering 2022; Zaum 2007). In this vein, this short essay addresses two central question. First, how does contingent sovereignty produce areas of limited statehood? Second, what impact does this have on democratization and statebuilding in divided polities with national and subnational fractionalization? Iraq's disputed territories illustrate how contingent sovereignty—the principle undergirding statebuilding through foreign interventions—can produce areas of limited statehood, undermine democratization, and allow for the proliferation of armed non-state actors at the subnational level. A focus on these territories demonstrates how hybrid governance in areas of limited statehood can foster competition over territorial control by state and non-state actors at the local level, and between national and subnational governments.

## Contingent Sovereignty & Foreign Intervention

The doctrine of contingent sovereignty emerged as a normative challenge to the sacrosanct principle of state sovereignty and non-intervention following 9/11. Predicated on strengthening weak and fragile states that threatened international peace and security, and rebuilding failed ones that “lack the legitimacy and capacity to translate their nominal sovereignty into effective governance,” its proponents argued that stopping genocide, fighting terrorism, and preventing the spread of mass destruction served as sufficient causes for global actors to limit the claimed sovereignty of certain states (Haas 2003). Placing sovereignty and statehood on a spectrum characterized by formal, irregular, and transnational equivalents, Nell similarly treated sovereignty as contingent on state capacity, and outlined conditions under which the dissolution of external sovereignty may be permitted for states incapable of maintaining internal sovereignty (Nell 2018). As a paradigm, contingent or “earned sovereignty” effectively places limitations on the principle of *uti possidetis* by dividing sovereignty into transitional stages managed through territorial autonomy arrangements as a conflict mitigation strategy (Elden 2006). Within the foreign policy toolbox, contingent sovereignty bridges the humanitarian-security nexus that undergirds international interventions, democratization, and statebuilding.

In what follows, I use the case of Iraq’s disputed territories, situated geographically outside the formal boundaries of the KRI, to illustrate how foreign interventions that relegate sovereignty to contingent status produce areas of limited statehood defined as areas of a country “in which central authorities (governments) lack the ability to implement and

enforce rules and decisions or in which the legitimate monopoly over the means of violence is lacking, at least temporarily” (Risse 2011, 5). This, in turn, reveals how foreign interventions produce areas of limited statehood that impede the emergence of democratic norms and practices while reinforcing authoritarianism and insecurity at the sub-national level.

## Challenges to Governance in Areas of Limited Statehood: the case of Iraq’s Disputed Territories

Beginning with the Gulf War and following the U.S.-led invasion in 2003, foreign interventions in Iraq produced political and territorial ruptures. As an externally-installed caretaker government, the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) of 2003 gave Paul Bremer, leader of the CPA, full sovereignty powers of government to “restore conditions of security and stability” (Coalition Provisional Authority 2003). Key decisions, including CPA Orders 1 and 2, created a political and security vacuum for U.S. statebuilding efforts in Iraq particularly given that the Combined Joint Task Force for Iraq and the Coalition Forces Land Component Command had hoped to rely on vetted Iraqi security forces for post-invasion tactical operations and security and stabilization (Mako 2021b,

***Minority communities, like Yazidis and Assyrian Christians who reside in the disputed territories, therefore resorted to establishing independent local armed forces...***

12-13). With growing instability, the U.S. authorized Kurdish peshmerga and asayesh (secret police) forces to assist the American 101st Airborne and 4th Infantry Divisions in areas outside the KRI. The “Memorandum for

KDP/PUK Leadership,” signed by U.S. commanding generals and the leaders of two ruling Kurdish parties, enabled the peshmerga to expand their territorial control beyond established KRI boundaries (Kane 2011, 11, nn. 11, 36). Kurdish elites and security forces thus expanded their influence into these disputed territories and gained support through patronage politics (Skelton and Saleem 2019, 7).

As a conflict between established entities within a sovereign state (Wolff 2010, 1364), the ensuing dispute over control over territories outside the KRI’s boundaries heightened local grievances and bifurcated governance at the national and subnational level. U.S. reliance on Kurdish cooperation for security and stabilization since 2003 allowed Kurdish ruling elites to exercise near absolute political and security control in the disputed territories after ISIS’s takeover in 2014 (International Crisis Group 2018a). In Kirkuk, the most contested city, Arab and Turkmen residents accused Kurdish security forces – particularly the *asayesh* – as well as politicians of discrimination, electoral fraud, and cooptation, which heightened communal distrust of power-sharing arrangements (International Crisis Group 2018b). Fractured governance and contention over territorial jurisdiction, the allocation of local security, reconstruction funds, and representation during various electoral cycles consequently shaped acts of violence and disenfranchisement of minority populations (Human Rights Watch 2009). For instance, in the Nineveh province, Assyrian Christians, Yazidis, and Shabaks have since accused both Baghdad and Erbil of controlling and undermining minority representation during local and federal elections, thereby undermining post-ISIS reconstruction, security, and reconciliation (O’Driscoll 2018).

Competition over control of the disputed territories as cross-territorial frontiers hence produced a security and governance power vacuum and undermined reconstruction and security sector reform (Hasan and Khaddour 2021). Exploiting state weakness and, at times, its absence, armed non-state actors have become a fundamental and constitutive feature of political order in the disputed territories, and Iraq more broadly (Ahram 2019, 35). ISIS’ takeover of large swaths of territory in Iraq’s disputed regions and Mosul, its second largest city, exacerbated the tensions between Baghdad and Erbil. In the disputed territories, local communities were left vulnerable to ISIS’ onslaught when peshmerga forces under the command of the KDP unexpectedly retreated and abandoned Yazidi towns as ISIS fighters approached in early August 2014 (International Crisis Group 2018a). Although the Sinjar Agreement signed between Baghdad and Erbil sought to devise coordination and cooperation over security and reconstruction, it failed to implement cohesive and durable implementation strategies conducive to the needs of local populations (Mako 2021a). Minority communities, like Yazidis and Assyrian Christians who reside in the disputed territories, therefore resorted to establishing independent local armed forces, some of which formed alliances with not only Kurdish forces but also other security providers, including the Iraqi security forces, the Popular Mobilization Forces, and PKK-backed groups in Sinjar.

## Conclusion

This short reflection examined the ways in which foreign intervention and contingent sovereignty can both produce and heighten disputes over governance and security between national and subnational governments in areas of limited statehood. A case study of

the disputed territories in Iraq contributes to the growing body of literature on how areas of limited statehood structure national, sub-national, and international politics (Risse 2011; Santini, Polese and Kevlihan 2021). The hybridity of governance in the disputed territories is embedded in contention over political, economic, and territorial jurisdiction over some of Iraq's most diverse, fragmented, resource-rich, and geostrategic spaces. Although political and territorial power struggles between Baghdad and Erbil are historically rooted in pre-2003 conditions (Bengio 2012), the relegation of sovereignty to a foreign interim administration in 2003 reconstituted Iraq's internal boundaries and exacerbated fractionalization at the national and sub-national level. By bridging theoretical insights from the literature on external intervention, statebuilding, and territoriality, Iraq's disputed territories offer a nuanced exploration of the external drivers of authoritarianism, insecurity, and fractionalization in other territorially contested spaces across the MENA including, but not limited to, Rojava in northeast Syria and Yemen's southern Hirak secessionist movement. ♦

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# One State, Two Regimes: Subnational Authoritarianism in Israel

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On February 1, 2022, Amnesty International released a report entitled *Israel's Apartheid Against Palestinians* (2022). It began with an epigraph from a former Israeli Prime Minister: "Israel is not a state of all its citizens ... [but rather] the nation-state of the Jewish people and only them." This report was preceded by another one released by Human Rights Watch nine months earlier, entitled *A Threshold Crossed: Israeli Authorities and the Crimes of Apartheid and Persecution* (Shakir 2021). The report came on the heels of a position paper by the Israeli rights organization B'Tselem, subtitled simply "This is Apartheid" (2021) – a description echoed by a growing majority of scholars of the region (Lynch and Telhami 2021). Other Israeli organizations like Yesh Din and Adalah have come to similar conclusions (Sfard 2020; Adalah 2020). Palestinian thinkers have, for their part, compared Israel with South Africa's apartheid regime for decades (Sayegh 1965: 27-8; Suleiman 1970, 144; Abu Lughod 1977; Said 1992 [1979], 36; Zureik 1979, 16).

How is it, then, that the most commonly used democracy indices rate Israel as being

democratic? Polity V, for instance, gives Israel a perfect score of 10 on its institutionalized democracy variable from 1949 until 1966, a 9 out of 10 from 1967 until 1980, and a 7 out of 10 from 1981 until 2018.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, Israel scores 0 out of 10 on Polity's institutionalized autocracy scale from 1949 until 1980 and 1 out of 10 on the same scale from 1981 through 2018. As such, Polity classifies Israel as a democracy for its entire existence. To make sense of this discrepancy, I briefly discuss conflicting studies of Israeli regime type and suggest the use of subnational authoritarianism as an analytical lens.

## Debating Israeli Democracy

The debate about Israeli regime type can be broken down into three strains of literature that span the gamut from classifying Israel as a liberal democracy (Dowty 2018), as a flawed democracy (Smootha 2002), and as a non-democracy (Ghanem et al. 1998; Yiftachel 2006; Lustick 2019).<sup>2</sup> Much of this wide variation in the description of post-1967 Israeli regime type can largely be accounted

<sup>1</sup> Israel's Polity IV scores were even higher: a perfect 10 for every year between 1949 and 2015 with the exception of a score of 9 between 1967 and 2000.

<sup>2</sup> See Yiftachel (2006) and Ariely (2021) for summaries of this debate. The literature characterizing Israel as a non-democracy can be further split into approaches that focus on settler colonialism and/or apartheid.



for by differences in the conceptualization of Israel's boundaries.<sup>3</sup> The literature that focuses on Israel as a democracy, liberal or otherwise, has as its object of analysis what is often referred to as "Israel proper," which excludes the occupied West Bank and Gaza.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, the literature that focuses on Israel as a non-democracy generally refers to all areas under Israeli control, including the West Bank and Gaza. Recently, this has been expressed by the term "Israel/Palestine."

Whether implicitly or explicitly, the conceptual underpinning for distinguishing between "Israel proper" and the rest of the people and territory under Israeli control is the understanding of the occupation as temporary, and thus somehow a departure from Israel's democratic norms. After half a century of

***Israel is not a state of all its citizens ... [but rather] the nation-state of the Jewish people and only them.***

Israeli occupation, however, it is difficult to justify thinking about the situation as temporary. The occupation now accounts for nearly 55 of the state's 73 years of existence. For comparison, apartheid in South Africa lasted 46 years (1948-1994). Besides the length of the occupation, another reason it no longer makes sense to ignore the occupied territories when thinking about regime type is the continuous settlement of this territory by Jewish Israeli citizens. Already in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Israeli journalists were describing the Jewish settlements in the Palestinian territories as permanent obstacles to the

establishment of a Palestinian state (Lustick 2020). In 1982, the former deputy mayor of Jerusalem Meron Benvenisti, who was also a political scientist, described the settlements as *de facto* annexation and the situation more generally as "five minutes to midnight," meaning that Israel had arrived at a point of no return (Lewis 1982). This opinion was shared across the Israeli political spectrum, even as some saw the situation as a positive development while others considered it as a threat to democracy (Lustick 1993, 11-21).

Since then, the number of Jewish settlers and permanence of their presence have only grown. In the 1980s, the specter of 100,000 settlers was seen as shocking by analysts like Benvenisti. Today, B'Tselem (2019) estimates the number of Jewish settlers in the West Bank and East Jerusalem to be over 620,000.<sup>5</sup> In other words, Jewish settlement of the West Bank and East Jerusalem has continued at a brisk pace for the last half a century, leaving Dov Weisglass (2012), an advisor to former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, to note with approval: "Israel has the authority of the sovereign in the territories – without the obligations." In short, as Ian Lustick has recently put it, "There is today one and only one state ruling the territory between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River, and its name is Israel" (2019, 2). He continues:

*[N]o state whose policies toward half the people under its control include overwhelming rates of incarceration, heavy and constant surveillance, a strangulating system of pass laws and checkpoints, collective*

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted, however, that this cannot account for discrepancies in regime type classification for the period between 1949 and 1967 when the vast majority of Palestinian citizens of Israel lived under military rule and lacked fundamental civil rights (Jiryis 1976; Zureik 1979; Lustick 1980; Robinson 2013).

<sup>4</sup> "Israel proper," however, presumably includes areas that Israel has annexed *de jure*, namely East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights.

<sup>5</sup> Of these, around 200,000 are in East Jerusalem (B'Tselem 2019).

*punishment, and bloody violence can convincingly claim the mantle of democracy.* (Lustick 2019, 123)

Likewise, although Arend Lijphart includes Israel among the 36 states under discussion in his work comparing varieties of democracy, he nonetheless remarks that Israel has violated the principle of universal suffrage “on account of its control over the occupied territories” (2012, 50).

### **Understanding Authoritarian Enclaves**

If it is no longer tenable to conceptually separate “Israel proper” with its democratic institutions, flawed as they may be, from the rest of the territory it controls and occupies, how are we to make sense of such widely divergent governing regimes under a single government without engaging in the egregious conceptual stretching inherent in disregarding the core meaning of democracy? In the context of differences between the conceptualization of democracy and its operationalization regarding women’s suffrage, Pamela Paxton has convincingly shown how such gaps can have important analytical consequences (2000). I argue the insights Paxton offers can influence in substantial ways how we think about the situation in Israel/Palestine. For instance, regime type could influence public opinion on foreign military aid.

Rather than rely on further graded or disaggregated measures of democracy (e.g., Coppedge et al. 2011) or diminished subtypes (Collier and Levitsky 1997), the concept of authoritarian enclaves offers a more useful analytical tool. In particular, the concept

can be fruitful for analyzing Israeli politics, because it allows for what Edward Gibson has called “regime juxtaposition,” which he describes as “two levels of government with jurisdiction over the same territory operating under different regimes” (2013, 5). In the context of the Americas, where this situation has been most thoroughly theorized, this regime juxtaposition is typically observed in federal systems.<sup>6</sup> Israel does not have a federal system, but the divisions between territory and people subject to either military or civilian rule operate in a similarly distinct manner. The concept of subnational authoritarianism can help us tease out this distinction.

Part of the confusion about regime classification is the way the civil/military regime cleavage in society cuts across several different types of categories: namely, territory, ethno-religious belonging, and citizenship status. These three categories relate to each other in complicated ways, which creates a patchwork of different statuses for different groups of non-Jews under Israeli sovereignty at different times. Territorially speaking, status on either side of the green line is extremely important, but due to the citizenship differential between Jews and most non-Jews in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, territory is insufficient for predicting regime type. Jewish settlers are subject to civilian rule, while their Palestinian neighbors are subject to military rule.

Likewise, ethno-religious belonging is also insufficient, since the status of Palestinian citizens of Israel has fluctuated over time and territory. For instance, Palestinian citizens of Israel now enjoy civil rights inside the green line, but this was not true between 1948 and

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<sup>6</sup> Gibson (2013) uses cases studies from the United States, Argentina, and Mexico, while Dickey (2015) looks at Mississippi, South Carolina, and Georgia. Fox (1994) also compares Latin American cases with the United States.

1967, when most Palestinian citizens of Israel were subject to military rule.<sup>7</sup> Further, they have more rights than most Palestinian residents of annexed East Jerusalem. Some argue that differences in regime are a simple issue of citizenship, but this ignores the ethno-religious bases of citizenship in a state that explicitly privileges one ethno-religious community at the expense of others, as well as the history of unequal citizenship during the nearly two decades of military rule over Palestinian citizens of Israel. Subnational authoritarianism based on military or civilian rule can help make sense of the three overlapping but different categories of territory, ethno-religious belonging, and citizenship.

### Israeli Regime Juxtaposition in Theoretical Perspective

One could argue that the Israeli system is too complex for more generalized typologies — in other words that Israel is exceptional or unique, but this same argument for exceptionalism has previously been made about authoritarian enclaves elsewhere (Fox 1994, 109; Gibson 2013, 4). Authoritarian enclaves are not peculiar islands of uniqueness; rather, their maintenance “in a nationally democratic country is driven by strategic interactions between local and national politics” (Gibson 2013, 6). It is exactly this connection between the national and local that is important for understanding Israel’s regime juxtaposition.

By thinking about Israel through the lens of subnational authoritarianism, it is possible to better integrate the study of Israel in the field of MENA politics, not just as an exceptional

case or exogenous factor that influences the regional international environment or intervenes in the domestic politics of neighboring states, but instead as a case that can be leveraged for studying varieties of regional authoritarianism. Instead of thinking about Israel as a regional outlier, scholars of Israel might have important insights into the politics of authoritarian enclaves across the region – for example the use of military trials for sections of the population in neighboring Egypt. In short, thinking about Israel in terms of subnational authoritarianism can help us make conceptual sense of a single state with two regimes while simultaneously offering instructive comparisons within the region. ♦

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<sup>7</sup> This situation is described in a fictional account by Emile Habiby in his novel *The Secret Life of Saeed the Pessoptimist*, when the Arabic language broadcast of Radio Israel tells the “defeated Arabs” in 1967 to raise white flags on the roofs of their homes. The narrator Saeed, a resident of Haifa and citizen of the state, is confused about which “defeated Arabs” are being referred to, so just to be on the safe side, he raises a white sheet on a broomstick.

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# Research Symposium: Sudanese Politics in Theoretical Perspective

## Sudan at the Crossroads

*Mai Hassan*



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Writing more than a half-century ago, Giovanni Sartori (1970) recognized that the end of empire in the decades prior had increased the political units available for political scientists to study, and thus had resulted in research, in his day, that engaged in “world-wide, cross-area comparisons.” But, he bemoaned, this research was often done by taking precise concepts developed by scholars from and about the West and clumsily fitting them onto substantially different political phenomena in radically different political systems. The resulting conceptual stretching meant that comparative politics research was unable to make valid inferences, therefore limiting researchers’ ability to say anything meaningful at all.

As a field, we have since course-corrected from this state. We have seen a move towards single-case research that privileges internal validity and precision in concepts (Pepinsky 2019), and many researchers now refrain from making worldwide comparisons from the conclusions they draw from a single case.

Instead, the modest external validity that many of us are willing to claim is often limited to countries that are geographically proximate to our case.<sup>1</sup> This, of course, makes sense. Similar political macro-developments (e.g., war, levels of socio-economic development) and inherent initial conditions (e.g., climate zones, cultural landscape) mean that comparative political scientists can make more precise extrapolations about countries that neighbor their field site than other countries clear across the world. And in turn, there are large potential returns to be had in consuming research from and about these neighboring countries when developing theories to explain the variation we see in “our” particular case.

While scholarly attention to cases proximate to one’s own is a natural consequence, what is not is a focus upon only those nearby countries that also belong squarely to one’s region of study (or rather, the West’s perception of one’s regions). To be sure, academia as a vocation has reified the dissection of the world into set regions such as the “Middle East and

<sup>1</sup> New, exciting initiatives like EGAP’s Metaketa tackle external versus internal validity simultaneously. But the funding required for these types of studies is prohibitive for many scholars.

North Africa” (MENA) and “sub-Saharan Africa.” Professionally, we are pushed to burrow further within pre-set regions so as to make our CV’s more legible for jobs and promotions, our papers more amenable to editors of area journals, and to grow our networks of scholars who specialize in said region who evaluate us for said jobs and publications. Going to scholarly professional associations for a comparativist’s region of study is almost as important as attending the annual APSA conference.

But in the rest of this reflection, I aim to show how research on countries that sit awkwardly on the boundary of conceptualized regions

***The political landscape in Sudan resists an easy slotting into either region and has been rejected by both.***

– ultimately, however, fitting squarely into none – benefits from drawing liberally from scholarship developed for the world regions it does not fully belong, and in turn, scholarship on these border countries can help scholars of countries that do nest into those regions better understand the unstated assumptions in their work. Though we should continue to be mindful of how far theories developed in a particular case travel so as to avoid conceptual stretching, we need not draw a razor-sharp discontinuity at the boundaries of arbitrarily defined world regions.

### **Locating Sudan**

I make this case through a focus on Sudan, a country at the crossroads of the MENA and sub-Saharan Africa regions within academia. The political landscape in Sudan resists an easy slotting into either region and has been rejected by both.

Scholars of Africa shun comparisons with Sudan, arguing that the country’s pre-independence conditions – Arabic as the lingua franca, the importance of Islam in politics and society, and its history of Turko-Egyptian, instead of solely Western European, colonization – seemingly disqualify it from membership with the rest of Black Africa. Indeed, the oft-quoted refrain among scholars of the region – that Ghana was the first Black African country to achieve independence in 1957 – completely ignores Sudan’s independence the year prior.

Similarly, scholars of the Middle East look to Sudan’s post-colonial developments – the country’s two protracted civil wars, weak state capacity, and the political salience of ethnicity instead of clan or sect – as making it fundamentally different from the region. And Sudan’s Blackness – the name “Sudan” itself is derived from the Arabic word “black” – means that its people do not readily fit into Western perceptions of what Arabs looks like. Either way, when the Arab Spring succeeded in toppling autocratic regimes, many scholars and pundits claimed that these were the first instances of successful popular uprisings in the Arab world, conveniently forgetting Sudan’s ousting of autocrats through mass protests in 1964 and 1985.

Moreover, the difficulty of classifying Sudan into any particular region has seemingly had a measurable impact on scholarship: there have only been two articles published on Sudan in top general and comparative journals since 2000 (Cammett and Kendall 2021).<sup>2</sup> This is an outrageously low figure for any country, but especially so given Sudan’s current estimated population of 45 million, a population second in the Arabic-speaking world only to Egypt. Countries with smaller

<sup>2</sup> This figure subsets the data to single-site research studies.

populations, but that are indisputably part of the Middle East, have seen substantially more research despite similarly hostile research environments: there have been ten articles published on Iraq during these years (current population of around 40 million), six on Syria (17 million), and three on the United Arab Emirates (10 million).

Given this deficit of comparative political scholarship, focusing on the different political processes and events in Sudan vividly illustrates how research on the country necessarily draws from literatures that cross academic regions, and how future work on these topics could do so as well.

## An Islamist State

The prevalence of political Islam continues to grow across the MENA, from the short-lived reign of Mohammed Morsi to the perpetuation of ISIS in different pockets across the region to the on-going presence and clout of Islamist parties across electoral regimes. In this way, the former Islamist *Inqaz* (salvation) regime of Omar al-Bashir (1989–2019) provides MENA scholars with a decades-long case study of political Islam in practice.<sup>3</sup> Scholars of Sudan have grappled with the role of ideology as purely a strategy for regime survival versus the strongly held beliefs of many regime elites in their duty of implementing God's will on Earth (Massoud 2013; Mann 2014; Roessler 2016; Hassan and Kodouda 2019; Medani 2021; A. Young 2021).

This tension between political Islam as a mission versus authoritarian tactic is probably best epitomized through the former regime's reliance on *tamkeen* (empowerment). *Tamkeen* refers to the philosophy and process

by which the *Inqaz* regime staffed the state with loyal Islamist followers. MENA scholars might see this as an iteration of *wasta*, in which one's ability to access the state is not dependent on citizenship or legal doctrines but instead on an intermediated connection – the putative “in.” Scholars of sub-Saharan Africa, alternatively, are likely to classify *tamkeen* as ethnic favoritism on behalf of the regime's ethnic in-group, since extra preference was given to Islamists from Riverine ethnic groups, where the regime's core elites hailed.

However, using only one of those concepts to describe *tamkeen* would be inadequate. Simply labeling the phenomenon as ethnic favoritism misses that the main driver in *tamkeen* was not ascriptive identity factors but instead earned markers of loyalty, ideology, and shared experiences and connections – a point I describe in a paper with Ahmed Kodouda (Hassan and Kodouda 2022). Similarly, conceiving of *tamkeen* as *wasta* alone overlooks the role of intrinsic identity markers as a shortcut for evaluating how *tamkeen* beneficiaries would, in turn, use their state authority and the role of ideology more generally in this form of favoritism.

In this way, future work on *tamkeen* has the potential to serve as an empirical exploration of a broader conception of patronage in which ethnic favoritism and intermediated connections are theorized not as disparate notions, but instead variations on a common theme – how one's de facto capacity to procure *de jure* guaranteed state services depends on the political salience of different identity cleavages and specific definitions of one's in-group, with fluid understandings of both ascriptive and earned identity markers.

<sup>3</sup> Throughout this piece, I privilege Sudanese pronunciations of Arabic for transliterations. This includes *Inqaz* (instead of *Inqadh*), and *tamkeen* (instead of *tamkin*).



## Contentious Politics

Empirical studies on the MENA and sub-Saharan regions both highlight the implications of cheap internet access for connecting citizens to each other and to elites within the regime. For example, literature in both these regions has argued that information and communications technologies (ICTs), as embodied by the Internet, lay at the root of increased episodes of contention, from the Arab uprisings (Steinert-Threlkeld, 2017) to armed conflict (Pierskalla and Hollenbach, 2013).

But the similarity between these research areas ends there. Given the ability of the state to use ICTs to identify active on-line dissidents, new MENA research examines how autocrats in the region have taken to silencing those at the center of important networks (Pan and Siegel 2020) or using their geo-referenced information to better target violent repression (Gohdes 2020). On the other hand, literature on ICTs in Africa has begun to focus on the different emotions that online messages may rouse within Internet users, and their subsequent participation in off-line collective action (Davis and Morse 2022; L. Young 2021).

My own research on ICT usage in Sudan has been theoretically bolstered by engaging with these disparate agendas. For instance, in a paper that examines ICT usage during the 2018-19 Sudanese Uprising, I find that ICTs were critical for coordinating mobilization, similar to findings from corollary research regarding the earlier Arab uprisings and subsequent mobilization campaigns. I also find that the public nature of coordination via online forums such as Twitter and Facebook allowed the regime to identify, and violently repress, collective action. In response, some dissidents planned secret, parallel protests

to those that were discussed on social media precisely so as to lessen government repression (Hassan 2022).

In other work, I draw on the literature on emotions in politics from research on ICTs in sub-Saharan Africa. With Ahmed Kodouda, we find that dissidents used social media to increase participation in risky collective action both by generating friendly competition and feelings of pride among different groups of dissidents and by outing and shaming security officers to lessen their willingness to repress protestors (Hassan and Kodouda 2020).

## Concluding Thoughts

This brief essay has highlighted some new research on Sudan which has benefited from melding research from the two geographic regions upon which it straddles. However, I have barely scratched the surface on the range of topics possible to study further, or upon the academic questions which MENA scholars can apply to Sudan.

For instance, researchers interested in migration and refugees might study Sudan as a comparison case, or one upon which to develop new theorizing. Hundreds of thousands have been displaced due to internal conflicts, while the country has also become home to migrants displaced by war elsewhere. Sudan has long hosted refugees from the Horn, and since the Arab Spring, has seen an influx of refugees from Syria and Yemen. Similarly, scholars of urban politics might look to Sudan's capital, Khartoum – one of the largest cities in the region and set to become a megacity before the end of the century. The country also promises fertile terrain for scholars interested in rentier states, climate change, and civil-military relations.

And as politics becomes more global, those studying the MENA would do well to keep up with Sudanese events as a harbinger of trends that are trickling northward from sub-Saharan Africa to the Middle East.

While this essay is a call to scholars of the Middle East and North Africa, it could have instead been written to APSA's African Politics Conference Group with the same underlying message: real engagement with the Sudanese case – or, more generally, cases that sit in-between regions – can help us reap intellectual rewards precisely because they do not fit the mold of the world regions they border. ♦

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# Lost in Translation: Sudan's Counterrevolution and Regional Politics

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Since October 2021, hundreds of thousands of Sudanese demonstrators have been back to where they were three years ago, at the height of what has become known as the December Revolution: on the streets of the country's cities, protesting the brutality of a regime headed by a general and demanding an immediate transition to civilian rule (Hassan and Kodouda 2019). The standoff between the multitudes demonstrating and the security services and their political allies shows no sign of abating. Both sides have framed their positions as being about the prevention of civil war and the saving of Sudanese statehood, predicting violent fragmentation should the other camp triumph. While grandiose rhetoric is not uncommon in (counter)revolutions, in Sudan's case fears about ethnic violence, regionalized conflict, and state collapse are as well-founded as they are omnipresent. Following the 1989 coup that birthed the Al-Ingaz ("Salvation") regime, the first two decades of military-Islamist rule saw a dramatic expansion of state power and government's ability to penetrate the territory and society (Verhoeven 2015). The 2010s, however, saw the retrenchment of state authority in all major regions of the country, a protracted economic recession, and the loss of one-third of the national territory through

the secession of South Sudan.

The extraordinary images of people from all walks of life braving the repression unleashed by one of Africa's most authoritarian states made headlines around the globe. Much of the policy literature, media attention and early scholarship on the December Revolution has understandably concentrated on the modes of social organization and activism that has inspired and sustained the demonstrations, despite the decision of the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) to terminate the interregnum with a new coup d'état on 25 October 2021 (Kadoda and Hale 2020; Elamin 2020; Mashri 2021). However, little attention has been devoted to one key feature of politics since the fall of long-time President Omar Al-Bashir in April 2019—the interlocking of Sudan's transition with that of its regional neighbors. To the extent that regional forces have shaped analysis, it has been mostly in the form of comparing Sudan's trajectory with that of polities not immediately physically, economically, or politically linked to it. Analyses often compare Sudan to more distant states in the MENA region, such as Algeria or Tunisia (Grewal 2021), or contextualize its political struggle as part of the growing security interdependence between states in the Horn of Africa and the Persian Gulf

(Verhoeven 2018; Cannon and Donelli 2020).

## The Importance of the Regional Context

Yet crucially, Sudan's attempted move away from authoritarian rule and war coincided with transitions of the political settlement in Ethiopia and Somalia, as well as with a sea change in regional politics as one of the Horn's defining cleavages—the Ethio-Eritrean conflict—appeared to come to an end. Indeed, much of the enthusiasm engendered by Sudan's December Revolution in the Western-led international community cannot be seen separately from the euphoria generated by developments in Addis Ababa, Asmara, and Mogadishu, and from it the sense that a new era of regional openness, reconciliation, and liberalization was at hand.

How attempted overhauls of political order in one polity dovetail with regional tailwinds is an important theme of the democratization literature. One dominant tradition has foregrounded the concept of regional “waves” to account for the retreat of military regimes and police states on the Iberian Peninsula in the 1970s, in Latin America in the 1980s, and in Eastern Europe and Central Asia in the early 1990s (Huntington 1993; Haggard and Kaufman 2016).

Yet how exactly regional dynamics and national struggles interact remains contentious. Some situate the explanation at the level of systemic variables; Gunitsky, for instance, proposed the notion of “hegemonic shocks”—sudden redistributions in Great Power influence—that led to domestic revolutions in various parts of the world through external regime imposition or the emulation of what appear to be more effective institutional mechanisms for societal control or co-

hesion (Gunitsky 2014). For others, the intersecting of the regional and national is mostly a matter of “contagion,” or the mimicking of political practices or behaviors in one state by other states with similar cultural, geographic, or historical features. This includes, increasingly, deliberate attempts by transnational networks to encourage emulation and learning over regional space (Cranmer, Desmarais, and Campbell 2020). In the context of the Arab

***Sudan's December Revolution came at an auspicious time, and the regional context should have bolstered its prospects for transforming politics.***

Spring, which initially appeared to usher in a “fourth wave” of global democratization, contagion and mutual learning shaped not only the tactics of protesting citizenries, but also the policies of authoritarian governments and external actors. They embraced the idea that the determinants of political action were the same across the Arab World—and therefore necessitated similar responses (Volpi 2013).

## Developments in the Horn of Africa

These lessons apply well to the Horn of Africa, the external neighborhood that most directly informs our domestic understanding of Sudanese politics. The late 2010s inaugurated a brief period of potential promise and greater security in this region. In 2017, Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed “Farmaajo” was, against all odds, elected as President of war-torn Somalia; running a campaign that promised to restore nationalist pride and crush corruption, Farmaajo's victory shocked diplomats and ordinary Somalis alike as he defeated former Presidents Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed and Xassan Sheikh Mohamud, both of whom explicitly served specific clan constituencies and were amply resourced by Middle Eastern

states (Menkhaus 2017). Farmaajo's triumph appeared to offer a unique opening to move beyond the two poles that paralyzed the reconstruction process: the ruthlessly efficient jihadist insurgency of Al-Shabab and a civilian politics hopelessly divided by clan but united in their ineffective approach to rebuilding the Somali state.

Events in Ethiopia likewise moved quickly. In 2018, an internal revolt within the party-state of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front saw its historically dominant wing (the Tigray People's Liberation Front, TPLF) marginalized. This led to the ascendancy of a self-styled reformer, Abiy Ahmed, as Prime Minister. Years of unruly protests and repression had preceded Abiy's crowning; his *medemer* discourse promised peace, love and liberalization for all Ethiopians, including his own long-marginalized Oromo population, and the dismantling of the old party-state apparatus (Østebø and Tronvoll 2020). And within months of this changing of the guards, Abiy and Eritrean President Issayas Afwerki ended the "no war, no peace" standoff that since the 1998-2000 Ethio-Eritrean conflict had divided the region and contributed to the destabilization of Djibouti, Somalia, and Sudan (Woldemariam 2019). Abiy won the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize; Western leaders and editorialists could not stop gushing over the "historic" peace between arch-enemies, drawing comparisons to Franco-German reconciliation after World War II to underscore why Western powers should capitalize on this exceptional opportunity. Seen through this lens, Sudan's December Revolution came at an auspicious time, and the regional context should have bolstered its prospects for transforming politics.

In April 2019, facing escalating protests, Sudan's Al-Ingaz regime ruptured as the SAF

military leadership dumped its commander-in-chief and its Islamist allies, and sought to lead the post-Bashir transition. Following months of further demonstrations, an uneasy power-sharing arrangement between the army, civilians, and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF, nominally under the control of SAF but in reality an autonomous actor) emerged. This pact intended to pave the way for a democratic transition, replete with free elections, full civilian rule, and peace agreements with rebel movements in Sudan's peripheries. However, two major faultlines would bedevil this arrangement from the onset: internal divisions—between civilians and state security forces, but also among civilians and security agencies themselves—and shifting regional forces in the immediate external environment, which proved much less conducive to Sudanese stability than American and European enablers of the power-sharing agreement had believed.

These external variables deserve further scrutiny. In Ethiopia, Abiy Ahmed's reputation as a political rockstar faded quickly as he emasculated rival centers of authority, locking up former companions and icons of the very Oromo protests that had catapulted him to the premiership. Instead, Abiy tied his fortunes to that of the resurgent Amhara nationalists who sought to construct an anti-TPLF front. This coalition aligned well with an Ethio-Eritrean peace deal that was never formally institutionalized; instead, Abiy's close alliance with Issayas—under whose reign Eritrea has neither adopted a constitution nor organized national elections—was mostly intended to isolate and crush the TPLF and other ethno-regional competitors, so as to consolidate personal power. Abiy and Issayas also pulled the flailing Farmaajo government in Mogadishu into their orbit, training for him a dedicated security force and encour-

aging the Somali president's intransigence in his own dealings with recalcitrant federal regions. Finally, for good measure, Abiy and Issayas declared the Horn of Africa's sub-regional organization and premier forum for peace and security matters, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), obsolete.

## Negative Regional Spillover Effects

What had initially seemed like an auspicious regional neighborhood for democratic change in Sudan, thus, reversed course. This proved extremely consequential for Sudan's December Revolution. There was negative regional spillover, which went well beyond what has been conventionally described as contagion in the form of the swift re-emergence of modes of rule that prioritized the coercive centralization of authority. For instance, in spite of its reputation as an ineffective regional organization, IGAD served as a guarantor of the Sudanese transition arrangements. It had previously played a key role in mediating the 2005-2011 Comprehensive Peace Agreement that ended the 22-year long (and second) Sudanese Civil War. Abiy's disowning of IGAD therefore meant there was little to no regional pressure to get civilians and security forces in Khartoum to work together.

As another example, Abiy's embrace of the Amhara nationalists rattled the SAF, especially in view of their irredentist claims on the fertile lands of El-Fashaga in Eastern Sudan, where the Sudanese military retains important mercantile interests. Under Bashir's rule, Sudanese and Ethiopian agriculturalists in this coveted area had co-existed. Yet from 2020 onward, Amhara nationalist pressures catalyzed increasingly frequent border clashes that threatened to mutate into full-scale

war. While Abiy downplayed Fashaga's significance, the SAF leadership fumed that he had failed to acknowledge its interests., Perceived Amhara aggression evoked age-old memories of an imperialist Ethiopia—always a sensitive topic in Northeast Africa—while intersecting with an upsurge in violence and inter-ethnic tensions across its eastern provinces of Gedarf, Kassala, and the Red Sea.

The introduction of this threat to territorial integrity made transitional politics all the more uncertain from the perspective of the SAF. Sudan's national security establishment saw this menace as real because of regional antecedents. In recent history, the close alignment of Eritrea and Ethiopia has repeatedly destabilized eastern Sudan, a highly strategic region for those governing in Khartoum. The re-empowerment of Eritrean President Issayas Afwerki, the Horn's most infamous soldier-statesman, through the partnership with Abiy likewise made the SAF extremely worried. Enhancing the Sudanese military's paranoia was the breakdown in Sudanese-Ethiopian alignment over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on the Abay (Blue Nile). Whereas since 2012 Addis could count on the strong support of the Al-Ingaz regime for the dam's construction, the post-2018 Ethiopian government under Abiy committed a series of diplomatic blunders that ignored Sudanese concerns and priorities. The devastating war unleashed on Tigray in November 2020 by Abiy and Issayas amplified the sense of insecurity on part of the Sudanese armed forces.

These outside factors triggered changes within Sudan's transitional politics. The resurgence of authoritarian control in the region, and the crafting of the Issayas-Abiy-Farmaajo axis across Somalia, Eritrea, and Ethiopia, changed the SAF's incentive structure.

It encouraged the Sudanese military to remain the dominant force in Sudanese politics, so as to better secure its own increasingly uncertain economic and security interests. The SAF's competition with other security providers, its belief in the extreme fragility of the Sudanese polity, and its testy relationship with many civilian parties—especially the resurgent Left—had already predisposed it to stay in power for the foreseeable future, regardless of the transition arrangements. But the adverse regional context decisively strengthened those instincts. The sense of a growing Eritrean-Ethiopian menace on the eastern frontier and the risk of a border war allowed SAF hardliners to justify not just its lavish defense budgets, but also its public posture as defenders of the nation, especially among parts of the middle classes and key economic and ethnic constituencies in regional states such as Gedarif, Kassala, and Red Sea.

The shifting calculus of domestic decision-making came on full display during the run-up to the 25 October 2021 coup. In those tense months, crippling blockades in eastern Sudan—and a growing sense of marginalization and besiegement—provided SAF head, General Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan, with the pretext for aborting the promised transition based upon the earlier power-sharing pact. Moreover, in response to the regional imbalance, the SAF pulled Sudan back to its old colonizer, Egypt. Successive Egyptian governments have long worked towards a preponderant role for the Sudanese military in Khartoum, believing, not without reason, that this would ensure alignment with Cairo in key regional dossiers as happened under the dictatorships of Ibrahim Abboud (1958-1964) and Ja'afar Nimeiri (1969-1985). Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi wasted no time in doubling down on the re-established

partnership, encouraging the SAF to dispense with Khartoum's squabbling politicians and reassert its autocratic primacy. In view of the Sudanese military's preoccupation with its internal and external threats, Sisi was pushing at an open door.

## Looking Ahead

In years to come, scholars will undoubtedly pen numerous post-mortems of this period, whether of the failed transition to a more democratic political order in Sudan, of the further disintegration of the Sudanese state and its territory, or perhaps even of the SAF's historical dominance of the Sudanese polity. For large swathes of the Sudanese population, the events of the last years have delegitimized the army as a political actor in ways that even the interminable wars in Blue Nile, Darfur, and Kordofan could not. But wherever the focus of the analysis will rest, it will be imperative to think how Sudan's predicament of interlocks with regional variables and external forces that stretch well beyond its borders. ♦

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# Sudanese Civil-Military Relations in Times of Revolution: 1964-65, 1985-86, and 2019-2022

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The case of Sudan provides a timely opportunity to explore the dynamics of civil-military relations during periods of revolutionary unrest. Here, a fruitful comparison can be made between the present moment with two previous periods of political change linking social mobilization with power struggles – the mid-1960s and the mid- to late-1980s. These intra-case comparisons not only put contemporary events in temporal perspective, but they also hint at the changing theoretical contours by which scholars should approach Sudanese politics.

## **Sudan's Ongoing Revolution**

The current moment is one of immense uncertainty. Throughout Sudan's ongoing revolution, one of the foremost slogans of the protestors has been '*madaniyya!*' – a demand for civilian rule. The refusal of the generals who replaced Sudan's erstwhile dictator Omar al-Bashir in 2019 to concede this demand has been the foremost source of the country's ongoing transitional crisis. After four months of protesting, the civilians had seized upon the anniversary of Sudan's second Intifada in 1985 to stage a mass occupation of the central military headquarters building in Khartoum, to demand that the army bring an end to al-Bashir's thirty-year rule and usher in a civil-

ian led transition. A coterie of generals, militiamen and securocrats with ties to the Egyptian-Saudi-Emirati axis stepped in to remove al-Bashir on 11 April. Yet they were far from keen to sanction a civilian transition, instead forming a Transitional Military Council modelled on that of the 1985 transitional period, which they insisted should retain executive power until elections could be held. The civilians continued to demand a civilian transitional government, and refused to abandon the sit in at military headquarters, remaining there until the military and its militia allies in the Rapid Support Forces brought their occupation to a violent end, forcibly dispersing the protestors and massacring well over 100 of them in the process.

Amidst further street mobilization and under pressure from international and regional powers, the military and the civilian Forces of Freedom of Change (FFC) coalition reached a power-sharing deal in August 2019. The subsequent Constitutional Declaration stipulated a 39-month interim period, during which the generals and the civilians would have equal representation on an eleven-person Sovereignty Council, the chairmanship of which would rotate from the military to the civilians at the mid-point of the transition. The military and civilians agreed to modify

the transitional arrangements after the 2020 Juba Peace Agreement, which led to the establishment of three new seats on the Sovereignty Council to represent the rebel movements. However, this new situation led to further disputes as to when exactly the military should hand over the chairmanship of the Sovereignty Council to the FFC. The military became increasingly uncomfortable about scrutiny from the anti-corruption Empowerment Removal Committee, while the civilians demanded that General Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan hand over his chairmanship in November 2021. Burhan struck first, launching a barely disguised coup on 25 October 2021 in which the transitional prime minister Abdalla Hamdok and several members of his cabinet were arrested. The protestors mobilized on the street once more, promising that they would never again trust in any power-sharing arrangement with the military (Berridge et al. 2022, 198-201).

## Historical Perspective

One of the most notable elements of the current dynamic is that the principal source of political conflict, at least for the time being, has changed from historical patterns. It is no longer the Islamist-secular contestation, or the classic divide between Sudan's centers and its marginalized regions, or the dispute between advocates of one party and multiparty government – it is, more straightforwardly, a face-off between military and civilians. What Burhan's actions, and the response to them mean, in effect, is that there is now an uprising *within* a transition, something which was

***The principal source of political conflict, at least for the time being, has changed from historical patterns.***

not seen to the same extent in 1964 and 1985, when the relationship between the civilian and military transitional leaderships was relatively smoother.

In spite of the fact that the current protestors' demands to remove the military from the transitional government have been seen by some observers as unrealistic,<sup>1</sup> there is a precedent for a purely civilian interim government in Sudan's revolutionary history – the 1964-65 regime that followed Sudan's first major civilian uprising, the October Revolution. The government at this time was entirely civilian. Ibrahim Abboud, whose regime had been ousted by the protestors, attempted at first to stay on to usher in the transition, but was ousted by the civilians a few weeks into the interim period after the outbreak of November 7 protests later termed "the night of the barricades" (Berridge 2015, 156). The governance structure entailed a sovereignty council comprised entirely of civilian professionals, presiding over a civilian cabinet with an independent technocrat, Sirr al-Khatim al-Khalifa, as prime minister, and with cabinet ministers chosen by both the parties and the professional unions (Berridge 2015, 151-153). This was not unlike the cabinet recently ousted by General Burhan, except in that case it was more the parties and the rebel movements that were represented, and with leftist professional actors on the outside. In 1964, the army did not even ask for the position of minister of defense, which went to al-Khalifa as prime minister (Berridge 2015, 152). The government was in effect completely civilian.

This leaves a fascinating question tying past to present: unlike today, why was the Sudanese military willing to allow a civilian government following ruptures in political order in the past, as in the mid-1960s? One reason

<sup>1</sup> British Ambassador Irfan Siddiq tweeted, for instance, "You can't wish away the military" immediately before the August 2019 power-sharing deal (Berridge et al. 2022, 101).

was proximity: the social and political ties between the major revolutionary actors and the officer class were stronger in 1964 than they are today. All the major political factions held substantial stakes in the army. For instance, the Sudan Communist Party and the Arab Socialist Parties had branches in the army through the young radicals Free Officer Movement, which played a major role in preventing the army from firing into the crowds during the Revolution (Berridge 2015, 121-126). Meanwhile, there many generals in the senior echelons of the officer corps were affiliated to the Umma Party and the related Ansar movement. Hence, ambitious soldiers played politics through their civilian affiliates in the government and the political parties, and vice-versa.

Other differentiating factors include more robust institutional pressures upon the military leadership stemming from civilian actors and political parties. When the political left was at its strongest, with Communist Party members or its sympathizers chosen by the unions driving the interim government, demands for the senior generals to face trial for corruption and war crimes were also at their strongest. Those same military elites likewise faced pressures from the radical Free Officers movement, which maneuvered against them. However, the senior and middle-ranking officers with close links to the Umma Party also moved to increase the influence of the Umma and other non-leftist parties in the transitional government. It was they who diluted the power of the radical professional groups by seeking to bring the more conservative parties into negotiations that led to the formation of the transitional government (Berridge 2015, 129).

Thus, when the transitional regime suffered its own internal coup against the transitional

government in February 1965, it was not the military that led this challenge, as is the case today. Rather, it was the Umma Party, which marched its own Ansar supporters into Khartoum, and forced Sirr al-Khatim al-Khalifa to remove a number of Communists from his government (Berridge 2015, 160-161). A swift transition to one-man, one-vote elections then occurred. The subsequent Umma-led government thereafter maintained a close relationship with the military, in fact intensifying the armed campaign in southern Sudan to a greater extent than was the case under the old regime (Johnson 2016, 34).

### **Growing Gaps between Soldiers & Civilians**

In essence, whereas soldiers of various political stripes relied upon relationships with civilian politicians to achieve their objectives in the mid-1960s, today the Sudanese military remains fearful of doing so despite furious rejections of military rule on the street. This underscores how much the political gulf between civilians and the military has widened over time, which in turn implicates another important intra-case comparison with the political transition of the mid- to late-1980s. When Omar al-Bashir and Islamists seized power in 1989 through coup, they systematically purged other political factions and potential foes from the military and security forces as part of the wider process of empowerment, or *tamkin* (Gallab 2008, 119; Lesch 1998, 135). That relationship has since evolved considerably. For instance, throughout the current Sudanese revolution, General Burhan and other military leaders were willing to replace a number of senior Islamists on their Transitional Military Council after their initial coming together with the Forces of Freedom and Change in 2019 (Al-Isha, 2019), but brought back one senior Islamist secu-

rocrat as intelligence chief after the October 2021 rift (Al-Khalid, 2021).

The approach of the radical left has evolved to mirror this distancing. In the 1960s, the Sudan Communist Party was torn between factions that wanted to promote grassroots social change, and factions that believed a vanguardist movement could ally with the military to oust the neo-traditional forces it perceived to be holding Sudan back (Ibrahim 1996). Today, the Communist Party has very little stake in the military; both it and the professional groups influenced by its philosophy have rejected any compromise or negotiations, preferring instead to focus on grassroots mobilization to achieve change (Dabanga 2022). The position of the Umma Party has been subtly different. While official links between the Umma Party and the military diminished after the 1960s, some officers still had Umma and Ansar affiliations. In 2019, before his death from COVID-19, Umma leader Sadiq al-Mahdi appeared determined to co-opt members of the Transitional Military Council, even at the cost of alienating others in the Forces of Freedom and Change (Berridge et al. 2022, 101 and 169-170). However, the Umma Party was uncomfortable after the military bypassed it and other civilian groupings during the Juba Peace Agreement with the rebel groups that were eating away at its historic power base in Darfur. After October 2021, it closed ranks with the rest of the opposition.

As another point of comparison, General Burhan has used the 1985 transitional deal as a model for current civil-military negotiations than the 1964 model. The 1985-86 years are an especially important historical comparator in Sudanese politics, not only because they preceded the 1989 coup that brought the Bashir regime to power, but because its

framework has cast a long shadow over current transitional politics. In 1985, a Transitional Military Council (TMC) headed by General Siwar al-Dahab presided over a transitional cabinet under Prime Minister Jizouli Dafa'allah, and duly arranged elections after a one-year period. Al-Dahab is sometimes celebrated by Sudanese observers as a military president who willingly surrendered power, although he also backed al-Bashir's regime after 1989 (Berridge 2015, 199). After 2019, military leaders saw Siwar al-Dahab's council as an exemplar; General Burhan even insisted that he would step down after the interim period. Yet questions cloud whether he will do this, and again the past serves a useful guide here.

When General Siwar al-Dahab handed over power in 1986, he did so because of his confidence in the incoming Prime Minister, Umma leader Sadiq al-Mahdi, to safeguard the army's institutional interests. Al-Mahdi's Minister of Defense, Fadlallah Burma Nasir, had a military background and had served on Siwar al-Dahab's TMC. The Umma Party and other conservative parties like the Democratic Unionists supported the military's efforts to simultaneously clamp down on the radical urban left during the late 1980s (Berridge 2015, 175-184). In 2021, Fadlallah Burma Nasir – who also served as acting leader of the Umma after Sadiq al-Mahdi's death – helped broker a deal between General Burhan and detained interim Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok. Yet not only many protesters but also many Umma members rejected this bargain on grounds that it was too favorable to the military; the latter came to support the former (Berridge et al. 2022, 204).

## **The Path Ahead**

The Sudanese case imparts an important

lesson for theorists of civil-military relations and the MENA region: transitions to a new regime can move forward during periods of revolutionary uncertainty when the military has reliable civilian partners that can channel its interests, serve as surrogates, and ultimately act on their own accord to build a framework for political order. This, in turn, leaves discernible legacies on what those orders look like. The governments that ruled after the mid-1960s and the mid- to late-1980s were deeply shaped by leftist and Islamist ideologues, because those were the interlocutors that mattered during those respective periods of change.

The situation today is different. With most leftists now backing grassroots protesters and the Islamists no longer constituting a credible political actor – and who also face resistance from General Burhan’s regional patrons in the Gulf – the army seems unlikely to forge a durable relationship with civilian surrogates and peers who can appeal to the country’s diverse political classes. As the gap between the military and society grows, the impasse put into place by the October 2021 coup will therefore also persist. ♦

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# Rethinking Peacemaking Failures in Civil Wars: A Revolutionary Perspective from Sudan

Sharath Srinivasan



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Why did it take a popular revolution to bring about political change in Sudan after decades of international peacemaking efforts? Sudan provides a rich case study for how we might rethink relations between war, authoritarianism, civil politics, and peace interventions. Fitting the general pattern of conflict resolution and peacemaking elsewhere (Toft 2009; Mason et al. 2011), foreign interveners pursuing peace in Sudan's civil wars have a poor record (Nouwen et al. 2020). With multiple interventions and unending wars, Sudan therefore presents an opportunity to probe more fundamental reasons for why peace interventions may come unstuck in civil conflicts and, worse, risk fueling greater violent instability. Some insight into why peacemaking may counterproductively reproduce logics of violence comes from contrasting that experience with Sudan's 2019 popular revolution, the failed political transition and military coup since, and Sudanese civilians' stubborn non-violent civil resistance. Insights on past peacemaking failures also wield great importance to what foreign interveners now do in Sudan.

## Peace and the Reproduction of Violence in Sudan

In recent decades, one can count over a doz-

en peace interventions led by a multitude of foreign states and regional organizations in response to conflicts in Sudan and South Sudan. Most important of them all was the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), between the Sudan government and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/ Army (SPLM/A). In *When Peace Kills Politics: International Intervention and Unending Wars in the Sudans*, I use a close-range analysis of Sudan to argue that foreign peacemaking in civil wars may tragically risk reproducing logics of violence and authoritarian rule, an argument reinforced by the counterfactual of Sudan's recent popular revolution. Indeed, Sudan's street protests and neighborhood resistance committees reveal a stark contrast between non-violent political action in the here and now and the modes and means, mentalities and logics of peacemaking. On closer glance, peacemaking may have more in common with violence than political action, and thus risk reproducing further conflict.

In April 2019, Sudan became headline news when president Omar al-Bashir was ousted from power, after nigh-on 30 years of tumultuous rule. Deposed by his own military and security leaders, this was one part a palace coup. Yet the compelling power driving the events came from the street, from the massive

and brave popular uprising that had rippled across the country in preceding months. This was not the first time this century that Sudan headlined global affairs, however. Sudan also stole headlines 15 years earlier, halfway through al-Bashir's long reign, in spring 2004. The focus was not the final weeks of negotiations between the government and SPLM/A that clinched the CPA. Rather, death and destruction in Sudan's Darfur region was the story of global crisis. The UN's top civil servant in Sudan declared ethnic cleansing was happening, and Secretary-General Kofi Annan referred to Darfur at the tenth anniversary commemoration of the Rwandan genocide.

Working in Khartoum at the time, I attended a meeting with the British Ambassador and some visiting Members of Parliament anxious about the international response to Darfur's violence. Days before, the *Guardian* newspaper's front page had declared, "90 days to stop another disaster in Africa." The Ambassador was frank, saying words to the effect, "Everyone wants regime change. This peace process is the best chance of such change in the last 15 years, for the benefit of all Sudan. Put too much pressure on the government and either they'll walk away, or their hardliners will kick out the moderates and we will be waiting another 15 years." The world did, indeed, need to wait another 15 violent and tumultuous years for political change in Sudan, despite the peace deal. And when political change did come during the revolutionary events of 2019, it did not come in the name of "peace" or through foreign peacemaking. Darfur's conflagrating war, al-Bashir's indictment by the International Criminal Court, resurgent conflicts across central and southern Sudan, and finally newly independent South Sudan's descent into civil war—the CPA had hardly resulted in peace at all. Instead, it freshly legitimated and resourced authori-

tarian control by the two "peace partners." Despite laudable provisions for reform, the political realm remained hollowed out. Plural civil politics was suppressed, and power managed through coercion and patronage and inevitably resisted with renewed violence.

The Ambassador's remarks in 2004 are a glimpse into why the origins of this failure lay earlier, during the pursuit of a mediated peace settlement. Through deferral, distortion, and depoliticization of violence in Darfur, peacemaking in Sudan that helped to deliver the CPA in turn resulted in failed conflict management, lackluster human rights protection, and inadequate humanitarian response in Darfur when Darfuris needed that most (Cockett 2010). More generally, peacemaking worked by simplifying and sequencing Sudan's complex intersecting conflicts, reducing its politics to a neater problem-solution conception that facilitated peace by design. Yet in Darfur, Sudan's "north-south" peace process that delivered the CPA was resisted by diverse Sudanese actors, including the SPLM/A leadership who aided the Darfur rebellion. These actors used the communicative terrain of political violence to challenge what "peace" was being made to mean. In so doing, violence was reproduced and new logics of conflict set in motion. In turn, the post-peace promise of political transformation did not come to pass. This pattern repeated itself in the years that followed.

### **The Failures of Peacemaking**

What was the peacemaking playbook in Sudan and what when wrong? Given that the CPA failed to end war or reform politics in both Sudan and South Sudan, its peacemaking logic has been scrutinized (Srinivasan and Nouwen 2021). Some fault a failed liberal peacemaking model, yet the CPA was fore-



most a narrow bilateral deal designed to share spoils between two militaristic foes. Other authors criticize an illiberal deal that undermined democratic renewal, but the CPA's provisions for human rights, legal reform, elections, and political pluralism were many, and did open up civil political space for a time. Similarly, post-CPA state-building and developmental peacebuilding in southern Sudan is often critiqued as too technocratic, overlooking increasingly violent political contestations. Yet the implication of the CPA seemed to necessitate the SPLM/A being granted political hegemony of the south as a state-in-waiting. Finally, the CPA's reductive focus on this "southern war" at the expense of other conflicts is rightly critiqued for shutting out other marginalized peripheries, but in the words of one diplomat, allowing more Sudanese around the negotiating table would have "hopelessly complicated" making any peace at all.

These and other criticisms of Sudan's failed peace are self-regarding. They tend to come from scholars with one set of commitments critiquing others with other commitments. Hence, the meaning of peace is contested in scholarship as much as practice. In any case, peacemaking in practice tends to be a complicated mix of applying many theories, models, and frameworks, alongside incorporating more prosaic influences such as foreign policy interests, diplomatic ambition, and electoral cycles, defying any analysis of whether one or the other theory or model "worked" or "failed."

The more fundamental problem lies not in the notion of peace but in its making, the conceit that peace of any kind can be fabricated by design. Mainstream schools of thought, however much they criticize each other, share this logic. Realist-inclined approaches aimed

at securing belligerent bargains for conflict termination, liberal peacemaking models for democratic transformation and expanding freedoms, and state-building prescriptions that focus on strengthening institutions or delivering developmental dividends all start with assumptions on the general "problem" of civil war and preferred "solutions" that are distant from specific conflict realities and contested political realms. They share a politics of abstraction.

For decades, thus, the predominant diplomatic stance held that some kind of "peace" had to be made in Sudan and South Sudan. Yet conventional modes of peacemaking undermined the broad goal of bringing about a non-violent realm of politics after war. Peacemaking failures in Sudan cannot be accordingly reduced to the choice of actors to implement the wrong conflict resolution model. Neither can foreign peacemakers be simplistically blamed for ulterior motives, duplicitous intentions, faulty designs, or poor implementation. The failures to craft a meaningful peace were also not the sole responsibility of belligerent Sudanese elites. The messy, vexed, and contested nature of peacemaking was an unavoidable reality, and peacemakers often just sought to "make-do," pragmatically, to clinch a deal, and save further advances for post-agreement work: liberal constitutional building, reformist state-building, and developmental peace dividends.

***Their spirit cannot be fabricated, road-mapped, templated, work-planned, log-framed, or donor trust-funded.***

This "make-do" peacemaking, and the everyday expediencies it implied, repeatedly undervalued and undermined non-violent political action, instead privileging armed actors, investing in idealized edifices of

post-war politics and reducing peace as the product of technocratic interventions. Yet, this repeatedly invited resistance that turned violent while reinforcing authoritarian rights to rule, which then led to more make-do peacemaking. When, finally, a space for civil politics was heralded as having been made, civil political action was found to be debilitated, coerced, and absent. Always irrepressible, such action did rise up at moments. But the odds of peace-as-making – which implicate hard-nosed elite bargains, divvying spoils, idealized institutions, technocratic solutions and distributing dividends – were stacked against this corollary field of politics-as-action.

## Implications for the Revolution

Why does this troubled peacemaking experience matter for Sudan's current political impasse? *When Peace Kills Politics* helps recenter such inquiries by reframing understandings of failed foreign peacemaking around the world as the search for a lodestar for rethinking international intervention in civil wars that are grounded, first and foremost, in fostering non-violent civil political action. In many ways, Sudan provides us with that lodestar: the neighborhood popular resistance committees of Sudan's 2019 revolution. They contain within them the power of citizens mobilizing in collective fashion to claim a share in government and enact non-violent civil politics. This is their essence, irrepressible and renewable, but also elusive. Their spirit cannot be fabricated, road-mapped, templated, work-planned, log-framed, or donor trust-funded. If these committees and their essence were made so, the very agency contained in their possibility and power would be defeated. This means, at minimum, that those in charge of peacemaking in conflict arenas – in particular, interna-

tional interveners – recognize that competing narratives of peace and divergent framings of peacemaking can have long-term ramifications for how civil politics can transpire in those arenas when wars ostensibly end, or at least fade.

In this way, the civic mobilization embodied by popular protests and social movement-building throughout the Sudanese revolution can be thought not as the outcome of prior peacemaking, but rather as a separate vector that remains vulnerable to the continual politics of crisis that perpetuates, in many ways, the internationally-ordained deals that sought to resolve previous conflicts. Sudan's political transition after the revolutionary events of early 2019 has been fraught (Berridge et al. 2022). It began with an awkward détente between a diverse coalition of civil forces representing the popular uprising and remnants of Sudan's erstwhile military and security leadership. The civilian uprising's formidable heartbeat, the neighborhood resistance committees, were outside the new "civilian-military" Sovereignty Council. Consensus candidate technocrats were given lead transition roles through this interim body. International donors and financial institutions rolled in with post-conflict plans, debt-restructuring deals, and macroeconomic reforms. A peace deal that brought in armed rebel movements from marginalized rural constituencies further relegated civil political voices of the revolution.

When, in mid-2021, civil leaders sought to assume the helm of the transition per the agreed Constitutional Declaration, the generals maneuvered to achieve a military coup. Yet while the October coup may have rendered the "transitional period" as dead, it has not done the same with the revolution itself.

Massive popular resistance returned to the streets, at once unpredictable and carefully coordinated by the neighborhood resistance committees. The coup plotters have been confounded. When foreign intervenors stepped in by suggesting pragmatic compromises for a roadmap to restore the transition plan, the popular resistance responded with rejection. In their perspective, peace would not be allowed to kill politics this time, however much uncertainty that might bring. ♦

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## Book Roundtable

# *Seeking Legitimacy: Why Arab Autocracies Adopt Women's Rights*

by Aili Mari Tripp

*In this book roundtable, our contributors read Aili Mari Tripp's book, Seeking Legitimacy: Why Arab Autocracies Adopt Women's Rights. The book received the 2021 L. Carl Brown Book Prize from the American Institute for Maghrib Studies. It develops and applies a strategic interactionist perspective to explain why autocratic regimes adopt women's rights legislations. Through analyzing the experiences of the Maghreb countries of Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia, and comparing them to their Middle Eastern counterparts, Tripp investigates the symbolic and instrumental functions of women's rights reforms across different political projects and actors. Critical interventions from Valentine M. Moghadam, Carolyn Barnett, and Meriem Aissa highlight the book's important contributions and raise several important questions relating to the core arguments of the book, the key findings and the conceptual advances. Tripp then addresses these questions by drawing attention more acutely to the limits of legal reforms as well as the effects of political economy, religion, and public opinion on the agenda of women's rights. Her book highlights significant critiques of the current state of the art in feminist studies of the Middle East and charts new venues for future research.*

## Valentine M. Moghadam, Northeastern University



Valentine M. Moghadam is Professor of Sociology and International Affairs at Northeastern University, Boston. Among her many publications, Prof. Moghadam is author of *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East* (1993, 2003, 2013); *Globalizing Women: Transnational Feminist Networks* (2005); and *Globalization and Social Movements: The Populist Challenge and Democratic Alternatives* (2020).

Aili Tripp's book, *Seeking Legitimacy: Why Arab Autocracies Adopt Women's Rights* is a masterful study that applies the accumulated knowledge base of feminist political science and Middle East Women's Studies to Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. Previously known for her work on gendered politics in sub-Saharan African countries, Tripp now turns her attention to North Africa, with a comparative glance at other Arab countries. With her detailed interview, documentary, and statistical data, Aili Tripp shows how the Maghreb countries have converged on women's participation and rights and diverged from most of the Middle East. In addition to solid evidence-based narrative, the book is replete with tables, graphs, and bar charts, along with several reproductions of humorous cartoons that vividly illustrate the narrative. For her efforts in producing such a rich and informative book, Tripp deserves our congratulations and thanks.

In her book, Tripp asks why autocratic regimes adopt women's rights legislation. She underscores the symbolic and instrumental politics of states and ruling parties, and this is inscribed in two of the hypotheses that she advances in Chapter 1; the third hypothesis pertains to intervention by women's rights groups.

The hypotheses reveal her familiarity with the range of literature in feminist studies of the

Middle East, from Deniz Kandiyoti's edited volume *Women, Islam, and the State* (1991) and my own *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East* (1993, 2003, 2013) to Mounira Charrad's *States and Women's Rights* (2001). All three early books – themselves inspired by Kumari Jayawardena's *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (1986) and accompanied by a rich set of other studies – showed how states and movements alike had addressed “the woman question” throughout the 20th century. Tripp is especially interested in highlighting the changes that have come about in the 21st century (largely documented in Chapter 3), and her case-study chapters offer the historical backdrop to those changes. Table 7.1 in Chapter 7 nicely summarizes her argument about the salience of modernizing leaders, political parties, and women's rights movements in the three Maghreb countries compared to Lebanon, Egypt, and Jordan. Tripp is correct in noting that the usual longer-term change processes – specifically, economic development, women's labor force participation, and educational attainment – do not account for the adoption of policies and laws for women's rights in the Maghreb.

Female labor force participation (FLFP) remains lower than in other world regions despite women's (Arab and Iranian alike) impressive trends in higher education attainment. Algeria's FLFP rate has been among

the lowest, and yet after gender quotas were adopted, the female parliamentary share shot up to 31.6 percent, which attests to the abundance of highly educated female political leaders in society. The Black Decade of the 1990s and the 2011 Arab uprisings contributed to the state's decision to move forward with legislative changes that aimed to increase women's political representation in formal politics, although Algeria's feisty feminist movement of the 1980s and 1990s played a key role as well. And yet, female parliamentary representation declined to just 8.1% following the 2021 elections.

The Algerian case is an intriguing one, which requires more analysis. Of the three cases, Algeria's state arguably has been least sensitive to its image in the West (this relates to Tripp's "external strategy" hypothesis). During the intense battle against the Islamists in the 1990s, for example, the state and military refused any external mediation and opposed

***Progress on women's economic participation and rights remains slow in Algeria likely because of the continued reliance on hydrocarbons.***

the Sant'Egidio initiative (launched by the Rome-based Roman Catholic lay organization and some members of the Algerian opposition); the initiative also was eventually sabotaged by the Islamists' intransigent demands. The book could have delved more into the importance of Algeria's feminist organizations and how President Bouteflika rewarded them in various ways for their stance – and suffering – during the Black Decade. The Family Law, while amended in 2005, remained the subject of feminist grievance. Bouteflika would not countenance removal of Islamic language although feminists insisted on a secular version, and the Algerian public were not fully

on board with women's equality and rights. Wave V of the Arab Barometer (2018) shows that 72% of Algerians agree that men are better at political leadership than women; in Wave VI (2021), 50% agree or strongly agree that a woman can become President or Prime Minister of a Muslim country, but 49% disagree. Despite the public's vocal and visible dissatisfaction with their (largely masculinist) political establishment, they still did not fully support women in political leadership position. The public is also almost equally divided on the appropriateness of mixed-sex workplaces. On these questions, Algeria is behind Tunisia and Morocco. In all three countries, the public does not favor equal inheritance, but disagreement is strongest in Algeria. The counter-intuitive data in Table 2.6 in Tripp's book result from the misleading nature of the Arab Barometer questions that had been posed in 2016.

Tripp is not the first author to note the distinctive nature of, and similarities between, the three Maghreb countries, and in my own work I have argued that their *gender regimes* have been shifting from *neopatriarchal* to *conservative-corporatist*. Progress on women's economic participation and rights remains slow in Algeria likely because of the continued reliance on hydrocarbons. Tunisia's stagnation can be attributed to the stubborn economic difficulties that have engendered political dysfunction and President Saied's unilateral executive actions in June 2021. The Moroccan state is most involved in international (and intra-regional) initiatives and collaborations, but most women remain informally employed, and those in the agricultural cooperatives that produce for export lack social security. I am certain that Tripp will address these matters in the next edition of the book.

The only other issue I would raise pertains to the significance of unified laws (discussed in Ch. 3). Feminists throughout the region call for unified laws, but these demands have been more possible in the three Maghreb countries because of their relatively homogeneous populations, as compared to countries with Christian populations. This notably pertains to Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Iraq, and especially Lebanon; this also pertains to Iran, which has different provisions for the religious minorities, allowing Christians, for example, to exercise equal inheritance. The Maghreb countries lost their Christian and Jewish communities following independence;

elsewhere, Muslim communities are privileged over non-Muslim (except in Lebanon). As noted above, even in the Maghreb countries, women's right to equal inheritance remains out of reach, at least for now.

The Maghreb clearly is a sub-region on the move, especially for women's rights, and Aili Tripp does an outstanding job of documenting the unfolding developments in their women's rights agenda. The book evidently includes only a small sample of her extensive interview data, and I hope that she will be producing journal articles that include more of them.

## Carolyn Barnett, Princeton University



*Carolyn Barnett is a Ph.D. candidate in politics at Princeton University. Her research focuses on how public opinion, social norms, and behavior in the Middle East and North Africa evolve in response to women's rights reforms and other social policies. Carolyn held a Fulbright scholarship to Morocco in 2018-2019 for dissertation research, was a CASA Fellow in Cairo in 2009-2010, and holds an MSc in Middle East Politics from SOAS, University of London.*

Aili Tripp's *Seeking Legitimacy: Why Arab Autocrats Adopt Women's Rights* is a touchstone for political scientists and others interested in understanding the advance of women's rights in comparative perspective for many years. The book not only sets forth an important set of arguments about why and how autocrats adopt legal reforms for women's rights, it provides an indispensable compendium of information on the advance of such rights in the Maghreb in recent decades. It offers innovative answers to several broad questions: what has happened and when, which actors have been involved, how legal advances relate to existing public opinion, and how reforms have both responded to and shaped political and social battles over the symbolism of women's roles and bodies. The

book is thus attentive to both the high-level politics and complex social dynamics shaping the advance of women's rights in the region.

Tripp marshals a large amount of qualitative data from three countries with the judicious use of quantitative data, especially survey data, and presents insights in ways that are accessible to individuals who may know little about the Maghreb. For scholars with regional expertise, on the other hand, a strength of the book is that Tripp's extensive knowledge of other African political contexts enables her to assess developments in the Maghreb in a broader comparative context. For example, when discussing Algeria, Tripp highlights how developments there reflect common patterns in women's rights in post-conflict

settings across Africa. As most existing works either focus on single country cases or a small set of comparisons within the MENA region, Tripp's ability to place her cases in a more global perspective is especially refreshing. Tripp's work clears the ground for a variety of new research projects on women's rights in the Maghreb and in authoritarian contexts more generally. I suggest here what I see as some of the more important questions, highlighting how they can both build on Tripp's work and address some unresolved issues that her arguments raise.

The first topic that deserves more attention is the implementation of women's rights laws and their consequences, not only for women themselves but for broader political dynamics—authoritarian regime stability, the evolution of civil society activism, electoral dynamics, and more. Tripp quotes a Moroccan interlocutor, for example, who acknowledges the importance of legal gains but inquires whether women have access to procedural fairness and “informational justice” in accessing their new rights (140). Tripp also hints at the likelihood that rights adopted for “instrumental” reasons may face challenges in implementation and create new political problems for women and feminists, such as the potential for rights to “ping-pong” under different regimes (6) or generate backlash (280). We know relatively little about the implementation of many of the recent women's rights advances in the Maghreb. While researching the law-implementation gap may be challenging in restrictive political environments, understanding where and when women's rights advance in practice is the most important next question for research in this area to tackle.

In addition—and related to whether and how reforms are implemented—we need a better

understanding of what these reforms mean to both local and international publics. As Tripp notes, across the MENA region there is often no clear correlation between advances in legal rights and public opinion on gender equality (97). How do pre-existing attitudes on gender issues and more general political preferences condition the impact of reforms, both for women and for the regimes that adopt them? How, if at all, do reforms lead to changes in attitudes? Does the public know about women's rights reforms, and what do they think of them? How does reform adoption affect the reputations of regimes abroad?

Greater attention to public opinion would help clarify the logic of one of Tripp's core arguments, that regimes in the Maghreb have

used women's rights to marginalize Islamists. It is not clear in her book whether and how public opinion affects the net costs and benefits of such a strategy for regimes. Absent widespread

***It is not just the reality of laws and their implementation but also the perception of laws and their impact on society that matter when we investigate the consequences of women's rights reforms.***

public support for advancing women's rights, why do the benefits of putting Islamists in their place outweigh the risk that the public will see the regime as out of line with its values and therefore less legitimate?

Could perceptions of a more receptive versus hostile public explain why, for example, Sisi in Egypt has not followed the path of Mohammed VI in Morocco and Bouteflika in Algeria? Or is public opinion irrelevant? Tripp seems to make the implicit case that public opinion matters less than being in a “sweet spot” of regime autonomy from Islamists—not too encumbered by them, as in Lebanon, but not too dominant over them, as



in Egypt—for the embrace of women’s rights to make sense.

Finally, it is not just the reality of laws and their implementation but also the perception of laws and their impact on society that matter when we investigate the consequences of women’s rights reforms. As Tripp notes, constitutional and legal reforms can signal values and expected behavior through their expressive functions (101) – but do they do anything in practice? In my research, I found that the king’s strategic use of women’s rights reforms in Morocco (even as feminist mobilization was a critical driver of this agenda) has created a new official narrative of the values that Moroccan citizens ought to embrace, but it has paradoxically also contributed to perceptions that existing social norms are too inhospitable for the full implementation of

women’s rights reforms. I explain how perceiving under-implementation affects how individuals interpret the reforms’ expressive value: seeing slow progress can disillusion even strong supporters of women’s rights, undermining their former confidence in the law’s ability to affect social norms.

For scholars studying women’s rights and authoritarianism in the MENA region, Tripp has done a great service by providing careful, context-specific explanations and documentation of the advance of women’s rights in the Maghreb and their comparative absence in the Middle East. Studying whether and how these reforms are implemented, how the public understands and interprets them, and how implementation and public opinion interact represents exciting new avenues for future research.

## Meriem Aissa, Texas Woman’s University



*Meriem Aissa is a post-doctoral research associate at Texas Woman’s University. Her research focuses on gender quotas and women’s representation in Algeria.*

Scholarship on women’s rights in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has sought to challenge Orientalist depictions of the region and its gender relations. Scholars have highlighted the complexity of each country in single country case studies, they emphasized the impact of colonialism, women’s activism, and agency, and more recently the potential for change in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. In *Seeking Legitimacy: Why Arab Autocracies Adopt Women’s Rights*, Aili Mari Tripp makes a significant contribution to the scholarship on gender politics and the

growing body of literature on contemporary authoritarian regimes.

The book is the first study that systematically compares the Maghreb—Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia—and the Middle East. She makes two key contributions to both the non-feminist literature on authoritarian regimes and feminist research in the MENA region. First, Tripp pays significant attention to political symbols, arguing that the symbolism held by women’s rights “extends well beyond the actual rights themselves and they proxy for a range of ideas from modernity to progress,

nationalism, democracy, and secularism” (p. 3). Except for a few exceptions, scholars of authoritarian regimes have not paid significant attention to symbolic politics. For example, Lisa Wedeen’s *Ambiguities of Domination* (1999) argues that authoritarian regimes are more interested in getting ordinary citizens to “act as if” they support the autocrat rather than obtaining legitimacy. In the con-

**The key question is: how will women’s movements respond to democratic backsliding in Tunisia and Algeria?**

text of gender and politics scholarship, Nichola Pratt in her recent book *Embodying Geopolitics: Generations of Women’s Activism in Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon* (2020) show how authoritarian regimes employ women’s bodies and laws to construct national sovereignty. Second, particularly important for feminist scholars is the study’s focus on the presence of “multiple agendas” in authoritarian regimes. Like in democratic contexts, various actors shape policy outcomes.

Eschewing cultural explanations, Tripp focuses on how a combination of factors explains why state actors in the Maghreb enacted reforms. These reforms include gender quotas, comprehensive violence against women laws, reforms to family law, criminalization of sexual harassment, and the ability of women to transfer their citizenship to their children. She argues that state actors adopted women’s rights to sideline Islamists, especially extremists, and to portray their countries as modern and appease the international community.

Even Islamist parties became more supportive of women’s rights to retain power. Furthermore, women’s movements played a key role in pushing for constitutional and legislative reforms during critical junctures, such as

in the aftermath of the Black Decade in Algeria and the Arab Spring protests in Morocco and Tunisia. This is one of the few studies that highlights the role that regional networks play in the diffusion of the goals and strategies of women’s movement in the Global South.

Future research will have to address the implementation of these reforms and incorporate additional actors in studies on gender and politics in the MENA region. For example, in research on the impact of gender quotas on women’s substantive representation, scholars may examine the role that women parliamentarians play in shaping political outcomes. Moreover, scholars can examine the potential impact that nationalism has on women’s rights. For example, in Algeria, state actors, some opposition groups, and many ordinary citizens claim that there is an “external hand” that seeks to destabilize Algeria. Political scientists would benefit from shifting the focus from state actors and opposition groups to “everyday forms of resistance.” How do ordinary women contest the regime in their everyday actions? What impact do women’s rights laws have on ordinary women?

*Seeking Legitimacy* is a great addition to scholarship on women’s rights in the MENA region as well as research on authoritarian regimes. Future research will have to address other key questions, such as the impact of gender quotas on women’s substantive representation, the impact of laws on ordinary women, and potential divergences within the Maghreb, especially considering the mounting repression against pro-democracy groups in Algeria and Tunisia. The key question is: how will women’s movements respond to democratic backsliding in Tunisia and Algeria?

## Response by Aili Mari Tripp, University of Wisconsin-Madison



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I thank the commentators, Valentine Moghadam, Carolyn Barnett, and Meriem Aissa, for their excellent observations regarding themes in my book, *Seeking Legitimacy: Why Arab Autocracies Adopt Women's Rights*. These comments clearly help move the debate ahead on women's rights in the region.

I appreciate Moghadam's comments on how Algerian President Bouteflika rewarded the feminist organizations for their position during the Black Decade and his intransigence around the Family Code, the limitations of which are discussed in the book (pp. 212-215). The 2005 reforms and the limits of the reforms reveal the balancing act that he was playing between the feminists and the Islamists, but also with deeply patriarchal elements within his own party. It reveals the limits of his commitment to women's rights and the extent to which his concern was often reduced to superficial and empty gestures, such as the ritual meeting with women leaders every May 8 for a photo op that is described in the book (p. 192).

I also appreciate the comment about how progress on the economic front from women is slow in Algeria due to the reliance on hydrocarbons. This link to the diversification of the economy is an important one and has bearing on other countries in the region as well. It may be one of the most important explanations for why Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are beginning

to loosen up on restrictions for women as they try to diversify their economies and reduce their reliance on an external labor force, necessitating their greater reliance on their own labor force of women. UAE and Saudi Arabia ended up with the top scores in the MENA region for overall economic opportunity and workplace reforms for women, according to the 2021 World Bank report *Women, Business and the Law*. Saudi Arabia plans to increase employment of women from 21% to 30% by 2030 (Bloomberg Professional Services 2019).

It is true that the Maghreb countries, as Moghadam suggests, have relatively homogeneous populations in terms of religion, making it easier to implement unified laws. Large numbers of Moroccan Jews left to Israel after the founding of Israel in the 1950s and they left Algeria and Tunisia in the 1960s. However, I argue that unified laws and legal system are a necessary condition for gender legal reform, but they are insufficient to explain the difference between the Maghreb and the Middle East when it comes to women's rights. Iraq and Kuwait also have unified laws and a unified court system, and Libya, Yemen, Oman, and Egypt have unified courts (but not unified laws). Yet none of these countries have made the same types of gains found in the Maghreb with respect to women's rights. Both Moghadam and Barnett highlight the importance of public opinion, which I agree plays a role in shaping policy. However, often

one sees little correlation between attitudes and policy, which is perhaps why I do not give as much importance to it as one might expect. Women in the Algerian parliament increased from 2.4 percent in 1987 to 31.6 percent in the 2012 legislative elections, the highest proportion for women in the Middle East and the Maghreb at the time. The increase was due to the adoption of quotas in 2012, at a time when there was little support for women in politics. Only 18.8% of the population disagreed with the statement: “Men

***I believe culture is an important part of the story, but it cannot fully explain the changes that occurred in the Maghreb, which adopted women’s rights more comprehensively, extensively and earlier than the Middle East countries.***

are better political leaders.” At the same time, 40.7% of Moroccans disagreed with the statement, yet Morocco, which also had a quota, only had 20.5% women in parliamentary seats. As

Moghadam notes, after the 2021 legislative elections in Algeria, women held only 8 percent of parliamentary seats. It is unlikely that public opinion drove this drop in representation. Rather it had to do with the fact that Algeria was not enforcing its quota and the ruling party must have thought that having fewer women candidates would be electorally advantageous.

I appreciate Aissa’s and Barnett’s interest in the impact of the policies on public opinion, which is something I do not deal with but would have strengthened the argument in the manuscript. Barnett raises an interesting question about whether the policies themselves influence public opinion and this would be worth investigating. It seems

Barnett has begun to do this in her research, focusing on the perceptions of laws and their impact on society.

Aissa and Barnett call for more analysis of the impact of state policies regarding women. The book provides data on the impact of legal reforms in a number of areas: on women’s political representation, female labor force participation, economic empowerment, education, average age of marriage of women, the use of contraceptives, and other such impacts. However, the area where there needs more research would be the impact of family law reforms. These are the hardest to implement and require more investigation.

I would like to clarify one point regarding the impact of culture. Aissa concludes that I eschew cultural explanations regarding women’s rights. I believe culture is an important part of the story, but it cannot fully explain the changes that occurred in the Maghreb, which adopted women’s rights more comprehensively, extensively and earlier than the Middle East countries. As Aissa correctly notes, I show how symbolic politics has been harnessed to enhance political legitimacy.

Once again, many thanks to the reviewers for their insightful reflections. I hope this exchange will encourage future research on these topics. ♦

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# MENA POLITICS

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## MISSION STATEMENT

The Middle East and North Africa Politics Section is an academic society at the American Political Science Association (APSA), established in 2018 to support, develop and publish research on the politics of the MENA region utilizing interdisciplinary methodological, theoretical and empirical tools. It seeks to fully integrate the rigorous study of the politics of the Middle East with the broader discipline of Political Science, to serve as an institutional home for the community of political scientists dedicated to the Middle East, and to incorporate both scholars from the MENA region and diverse scholars from the United States into the global study of Middle East politics. The section's bylaws and diversity statement can be found on its website, <https://apsamena.org>.

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