

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 newsletter for the APSA section on the Middle East and North Africa, we are proud to present the latest issue, which highlights some of the groundbreaking and creative work undertaken by our section membership as well as the broader community of MENA-oriented political scientists. We have prepared full and engaging content in this issue: A stand-alone article; two symposia; and a roundtable book discussion.

The stand-alone article by Daniel Tavana discusses the unintended consequences of authoritarian elections by challenging the conventional wisdom that incumbents rarely lose. Tavana argues that elections in the MENA region can generate the forces that they aim to control in the first place. By focusing on the origins of political opposition in Kuwait, Tavana shows how elections have been generative sources of political opposition. His analysis engages with the challenges of collecting electoral data in authoritarian regimes. Unlike the electoral data in the developed world, the electoral data in autocratic settings can be unreliable and difficult to obtain and polls fail to provide quality data that can be used to infer political behavior. Tavana argues that semi-structured interviews with elites provide ample opportunities for uncovering the mechanisms that link elections to opposition in authoritarian regimes.

His argument is based on over 50 interviews that he conducted with various elites in Kuwait between 2021 and 2022.

The two symposia address timely and important issues. The first symposium brings together five scholars who reflect on researching refugeehood and displacement in the MENA region. They highlight what is being done “right” in existing research and what could be done “better.” Collectively, the contributors reflect on ethical principles for conducting fieldwork and collecting data on the ground and address the challenges that scholars must face in navigating diverse but interconnected web of actors. The authors call for a more reflexive scholarship that go beyond conventional concepts and theories and offer innovative concepts and approaches to better understand and study displacement as a phenomenon.

The second symposium features four researchers who pursue new directions of research in the Gulf region beyond the traditional foci on resource curse, geostrategic conflict, and monarchical durability. Each contributor takes a new and innovative approach to studying politics in the Gulf. Together, they address issues ranging from how small states flourished against the larger states, how Islamists have found ways to influence public authority through working with

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## Letter from the Editors (continued)

the state, how women's rights have been perceived in society, and why citizens mobilize despite the lure of material benefits that awaits them.

In the book roundtable, Curtis Ryan, Deen Sharp, Summer Forester, and Chantal Berman read Jillian Schwedler's book, *Protesting Jordan: Geographies of Power and Dissent*. The book puts forward an original and unequivocally different understanding of politics in Jordan through spatial and temporal analyses of protests. The intellectual exchange between the author and the reviewers further highlights how the book's findings contribute to studies on contentious politics, political geography, and feminist international relations in a way that is generalizable far beyond a single country case.

Finally, we would like to reiterate our call for new contributors to propose ideas for each of our sections—stand-alone articles, symposia, and roundtable. Please send your proposals no later than December 1, 2022. Send stand-alone article proposals to Nermin Allam ([nermin.allam@rutgers.edu](mailto:nermin.allam@rutgers.edu)), symposium proposals to Gamze Çavdar ([gamze.cavdar@colostate.edu](mailto:gamze.cavdar@colostate.edu)) and roundtable proposals to Sean Yom ([seanyom@temple.edu](mailto:seanyom@temple.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:  
Nermin Allam at [nermin.allam@rutgers.edu](mailto:nermin.allam@rutgers.edu) for stand-alone article proposals,  
Gamze Çavdar at [gamze.cavdar@colostate.edu](mailto:gamze.cavdar@colostate.edu) for symposia proposals, and  
Sean Yom at [seanyom@temple.edu](mailto:seanyom@temple.edu) for roundtable proposals.

## Editorial Board Updates

We thank three outgoing Newsletter Editorial Board members—Alexandra Blackman, Shima Hatab, and Lama Mourad—who have sat on the board and served the section for the past three years. We welcome the following three new Editorial Board members, who begin their term starting in 2023:



Ian M. Hartshorn is Associate Professor and Director of Graduate Studies at the University of Nevada, Reno. He earned his Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Pennsylvania.

Prior to that, he graduated from Bucknell University with majors in Religion and Middle East Studies as a first-generation student.

His research focuses on labor and working-class contentious politics under authoritarian and democratizing regimes, with a special interest in the strategic choices made by trade unions. Other projects analyze higher education, qualitative research methods, and the role of rentier and state-led economic strategies in comparative perspectives. His research has been published in multiple venues including *Political Research Quarterly*, *Global Governance*, and *Economic and Industrial Democracy* as well as *The Washington Post* and *Jadaliyya*. He is the author of *Labor Politics in North Africa* from Cambridge University Press, a former co-chair of the American Political Science Association Labor Politics group, and sits on the editorial board of *Mediterranean Politics*.

Dr. Hartshorn is co-PI of the Regimes and Political Parties Project (RPPP) with Dr. Allison Evans.



Rana B. Khoury is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Previously, she was a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Niehaus Center for Globalization and Governance at Princeton University. She received her Ph.D. in Political Science from Northwestern University, M.A. in Arab Studies from Georgetown University, and B.A. in Political Science from American University.

Rana's research interests include contention, displacement, and humanitarianism in the Middle East, as well as qualitative and multi-method research designs. Her book project explains the relationship between international aid and civilian activism in the Syrian war, using data from field-based immersion and interviews, and original survey and social media data. Her academic research has been published in *Perspectives on Politics*, *Middle East Law and Governance*, and *Forced Migration Review*, while her public writing can be found in *The Washington Post Monkey Cage* blog, *The Los Angeles Times*, and *Lapham's Quarterly* among other outlets. Rana is also interested in inequality in the United States; her first book, *As Ohio Goes: Life in the Post-Recession Nation*, was published by Kent State University Press in 2016 and received an Independent Publishers Book Award ("IPPY") for current events in 2017.

## Editorial Board Updates (continued)



Bassel F. Salloukh is Associate Professor of Political Science and Head of the Politics and International Relations Program at the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies. He obtained his MA and Ph.D. (Honour List) in Political Science from McGill University, Canada, and his Honours BA (Summa Cum Laude) in Political Science from McMaster University, Canada.

His main fields of specialization include Comparative Politics (Global South and Middle East), Political Theory (Philosophy of Reconciliation and Interculturalism), and International Relations (Middle East IR). Salloukh is a member of the Arab Political Science Network's (APSN) Advisory Committee, the Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) Steering Committee, the American Political Science Association (APSA) MENA Politics Section's Workshops Planning Committee, and Editor at Middle East Law and Governance. His most recent publications include the co-authored *The Politics of Sectarianism in Postwar Lebanon* (Pluto Press, 2015) and articles in *PS: Political Science and Politics*, *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, *International Studies Perspectives*, *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, and *Middle East Law and Governance*. His current research focuses on a critique of power-sharing arrangements in post-colonial and postwar states, and the political economy of Lebanon's postwar collapse.

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## News from the APSA MENA Section

It was wonderful to see so many members of the section at APSA 2022 in Montreal. The intellectual vibrancy of the section was on full display, beginning the day before the meeting with the short-course on research ethics and methods and extending through a rich program of panels and presentations. The section's award-winning books were feted in the exhibition hall, while their winners were celebrated at the reception cosponsored by the section and POMEPS. While it was great to see so many members of our community in person, we regret that the Canadian venue intensified existing barriers to access for some members of the section, as did limitations on remote or hybrid activities. I am grateful that both Jillian Schwedler and Bassel Salloukh now serve on APSA Council, where our section's concern over equitable access will undoubtedly be reflected in APSA-wide discussions about future venues and formats. Speaking of service to the section, as I announced at the business meeting, we will be looking to identify more than a dozen section members to serve on prize committees for the coming cycle, to serve on a nominating committee to recruit new section leaders for the 2023 election, and to contribute some programs we will be continuing in partnership with other MENA-focused groups. If you are interested in volunteering some of your time for the section, please reach out to me or to another member of the section leadership as soon as possible.

While the enjoyable part of the section business meeting in Montreal was the awarding of prizes for wonderful MENA-focused Political Science scholarship, the most edifying component was treasurer Richard Nielsen's presentation of a demographic analysis of our current section membership and its recent

fluctuations. The section has an observably high level of "membership churn" – I want to encourage people to opt for 3-year memberships when they next renew in order to help stabilize our membership numbers and ensure that we can support robust programming. From Rich we also learned that close to half of the section's members are current graduate students and nearly 17 percent of members are based in the MENA region. This is exciting on both counts and is fueling conversations at the section leadership level about how to best support the work of these cohorts.

One such initiative – which comes in response to feedback from graduate students who participated in the REMENA short course in Montreal – will involve creating a graduate student caucus in the section to reflect the distinctive needs and interests of student members. We will also continue to pursue collaborative programming with a range of other political science initiatives working directly in the region, including APSA's MENA Workshops and the Arab Political Science Network. Please be sure that you are registered with the section to receive section updates through APSA Connect and that you follow @ASPAMENA on Twitter, where we promote a range of activities and opportunities beyond those sponsored directly by the section. If you are involved with programming you'd like us to know about or circulate to section members, please reach out to a member of the leadership team.

Stacey Philbrick Yadav  
MENA Politics Section Chair

# News from the APSA MENA Section

## New Section Officers

We would like to thank Matt Buehler, the outgoing Vice Chair, and Marwa Shalaby, the outgoing At-Large Officer for their service. We welcome the following two new section members, who begin their term starting in 2023:



Yael Zeira, Vice Chair

Yael Zeira is associate professor in the Political Science department at the Maxwell School for Citizenship and Public Service at Syracuse University. Her research examines the causes and consequences of public opinion, group identities, and political behavior in conflict settings and authoritarian regimes.



Allison Hartnett, At-Large Officer

Allison Hartnett is an assistant professor in the Political Science and International Relations department at the University of Southern California. She specializes in comparative political economy, with a focus on inequality and redistribution, colonial legacies, rural politics, and state formation.



# News from the APSA MENA Section

## Section Prize Citations

### 2021 Award for Best Book (senior)



The first award recipient is Mona El-Ghobashy for her book, *Bread and Freedom: Egypt's Revolutionary Situation*, published by Stanford University Press. El-Ghobashy has written the essential monograph on a most turbulent and controversial period of modern Egyptian politics. El-Ghobashy argues that during the struggle to establish political authority following the 2011 Uprisings, Egypt's revolutionary situation was characterized by "genuine confusion" and uncertainty about the balance of power between old and new political actors. The previous political order was moribund, but the new order was yet to be consolidated. To understand the struggle to establish authority in this period, El-Ghobashy analyzes legal proceedings, legislative deliberations, political campaign materials, election returns, and a rich and diverse set of other primary materials. A major contribution to the field of Middle Eastern politics, *Bread and Freedom* will be the go-to book for generations of students and scholars seeking to understand the political aftermath of the 2011 Uprisings in Egypt.



The co-recipient for the 2021 Best Book (senior) award is Khalid Mustafa Medani for his book, *Black Markets and Militants: Informal Networks in the Middle East and Africa*, published by Cambridge University Press. Medani has written a highly original account that explains how economic globalization – particularly, labor remittances originating in the Gulf states – impacted social, religious, and political communities in Egypt, Sudan, and Somalia. Despite robust scholarly literatures focused on migration, Islamist militant groups, informal networks, and political economy, Medani has written a breakthrough account linking these diverse subjects in a single coherent narrative. Medani argues that boom and bust cycles of capital inflows interacted with underlying levels of state capacity and local political cultures to construct divergent social and political outcomes. An instant classic, Medani's expert case knowledge and facility with bridging diverse scholarly literatures makes *Black Markets and Militants* an exemplar for the field of comparative politics.

# News from the APSA MENA Section

## 2021 Award for Best Book (junior)



In similar fashion, the committee selected two books in the junior category. Raphael Lefevre received the 2021 Best Book (junior) award for his book *Jihad in the City: Militant Islam and Contentious Politics in Tripoli*, published by Cambridge University Press. Lefevre has written a fascinating and intricately detailed study about the rise and fall of the “Islamic Emirate” of Tripoli in the early 1980s. Lefevre asks and answers essential questions about this important episode in Lebanese political history. How did Tawhid recruit adherents? What role did ideology play in the success of the organization? And what factors contributed to later forms of political fragmentation? Lefevre highlights the ways that local conditions, particularly local spatial relationships, generated a kind of “neighborhood Islamism.” Lefevre argues that cities (and even neighborhoods within cities) have unique political identities that have the potential to shape how social movements emerge and develop in urban spaces.



The second winner for the 2021 Best Book (junior) category is Avital Livny who has written *Trust and the Islamic Advantage: Religious-Based Movements in Turkey and the Muslim World*, published by Cambridge University Press. Livny breaks with conventional wisdom to explain the rise of Islamist organizational success in Turkey. Rather than focusing on economic grievance or increasing personal religiosity as drivers of Islamist organization growth, Livny argues that support for the AKP and for Islamist business associations can be attributed – at least in part – to a societal need to encourage and sustain cooperation among average Turkish citizens. Livny makes the case that Islamic identity is conceptually distinct from personal faith – and by focusing our analytic attention on that distinction, it is possible to demonstrate how Islamist organizations generate forms of interpersonal trust needed for Turkish citizens to cooperate effectively with one another. Livny is relentless in her use of empirical evidence to demonstrate observable implications of her arguments – as well as to decrease confidence in long-standing competing explanations.

# News from the APSA MENA Section

## 2021 Award for Best Fieldwork



The winner of the 2021 award for Best Article from the APSA MENA Section is Sarah Parkinson's "(Dis)courtesy Bias: 'Methodological Cognates,' Data Validity, and Ethics in Violence-Adjacent Research," published in *Comparative Political Studies*. This article changes how we think about the politics and practice of research in the MENA region and beyond. Drawing on evidence from fieldwork in Iraq and Lebanon, Parkinson argues that researchers deploying common methodologies like surveys and structured interviews in vulnerable, over-researched populations may unwittingly obtain low-quality data. Rather than passively answering questions, Parkinson shows how research subjects use or withhold their responses strategically: to minimize their effort, increase their chances of assistance, and to resist the encroachment of researchers in their communities. This argument has implications for the political economy of research in every part of the world and for political methodology in every empirical subfield.



Receiving honorable mention for the 2021 award for Best Article from the APSA MENA Section is Lisel Hintz's "The Empire's Opposition Strikes Back: Popular Culture as Creative Resistance Tool under Turkey's AKP," published in the *British Journal of Middle East Studies*. This article shows how cultural conflict is playing out in Turkey between a government that seeks to impose political and cultural hegemony and citizens resisting. Using a wide array of fascinating alternative sources from pop culture, Hintz shows the AKP's "Ottomania" obsession with glorifying an idealized Islamic past through popular culture, and the resistance this engenders through small acts of defiance in television shows, rap songs, and host of other art forms. The creativity of this article, its attention to careful interpretation of Turkish culture, and its insights about "everyday" forms of resistance make it a model for scholars beyond Turkey and the MENA region.

# News from the APSA MENA Section

## 2021 Award for Best Fieldwork



The winner of the 2021 award for Best Fieldwork from the APSA MENA Section is Dina Bishara, for “The Generative Power of Protest: Time and Space in Contentious Politics,” published in *Comparative Political Studies*. This article develops a theory of how the act of protesting can sustain a protest movement facing repression under authoritarian rule. Drawing on over 100 interviews conducted in Egypt, Tunisia, Jordan, and Morocco conducted over multiple trips totaling 21 months, Bishara develops a new typology of the potential for different protest actions to help sustain a movement, either by deepening commitment to a cause among existing followers, broadening the base of followers, or occasionally doing both. The findings transcend the cases Bishara studies, and have implications for our understanding of the role of protest worldwide. The fieldwork was essential for achieving the theoretical insights of the article, showing the continued importance of qualitative fieldwork in challenging settings for generating new insights about politics.

## 2021 Award for Best Data Set/Qualitative Analysis



The winners of the 2021 award for Best Data Set/Quantitative Analysis from the APSA MENA Section are Neil Ketchley and Thoraya El-Rayyes, for their “Unpopular protest: Mass mobilization and attitudes to democracy in post-Mubarak Egypt,” published in the *Journal of Politics*. This article makes an important discovery: Egyptian citizens came to hold less favorable attitudes towards democracy when they were exposed to long-lasting street protests in their districts in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. Ketchley and El-Rayyes introduce new protest event data, coded from the newspapers al-Masry al-Youm and al-Shuruq, to accurately measure where protests happened and what they were like. They match this data with a survey of Egyptians from the 2nd wave of the Arab Barometer to show how protest soured public opinion about democracy by changing perceptions of what life under democracy entails. The protest data are of great use to other researchers, the combination with existing survey data is innovative, the analysis is transparent (with code and data posted online), and the corroboration of the key findings with qualitative vignettes makes this paper a mixed-methods tour de force.



# News from the APSA MENA Section

## 2021 Award for Best Dissertation



Jannis Grimm's outstanding thesis, "Contesting Legitimacy: Protest and the Politics of Signification in Post-Revolutionary Egypt," studies the intersection of mass mobilization, discourse, and repression during a critically important period in contemporary Egyptian politics: the end of Mohammed Morsi's Presidency, the July 2013 coup, and the massacres that followed. Grimm successfully merges qualitative and quantitative approaches, marrying protest event analysis with extensive interview and content analysis that highlights the social and political meanings inscribed in these contentious events. Grimm makes a convincing case for greater scholarly focus on the "discursive architecture of contention" by demonstrating the ways in which discursive shifts open up new political possibilities — that are both rights-expanding and extremely violent. This project presents an important contribution to the study of Egyptian politics, contentious politics, and interpretive social science more broadly.



Earning honorable mention in the 2021 Best Dissertation category is Steven Schaff, whose "Litigating the Authoritarian State: Lawful Resistance and Judicial Politics in the Middle East" is a major contribution to the study of judicial politics in the Arab world. This dissertation asks when and why do citizens in authoritarian states use the law to resist the state. It challenges prevailing depictions of the co-optive and repressive nature of courts in autocracies by highlighting how often citizens engage in litigation against the state in courts across the Arab world. Schaff argues that far from being mere appendages of the regime, courts in authoritarian states can be meaningful sites of resistance. "Litigating the Authoritarian State" welds interviews, survey experiments, historical case studies and an original dataset on court cases in Palestine, Jordan and Egypt to demonstrate courts' potential and power to hold authoritarian regimes accountable. "Litigating the Authoritarian State" will appeal to scholars of law, authoritarianism, and contentious politics.

# 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, 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, APSA's MENA Program returned to in-person programming in the spring of 2022. The [Arabic-language Research Development Workshop](#), held in May in partnership with the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies in Qatar, was the first APSA workshop to use Arabic as the language of instruction. Bassel Salloukh (Doha Institute for Graduate Studies, Qatar), May Darwich (University of Birmingham, UK), and Ammar Shamaileh (Doha Institute for Graduate Studies, Qatar) led the 4-day hybrid workshop, which focused on providing opportunities for participants to discuss and advance their research. Fourteen fellows from nine countries across the Arab MENA region participated.

In June, APSA held a workshop in Amman in partnership with Al Mustakilla (IIACSS), NAMA Strategic Intelligence Solutions, and the Center for Strategic Studies (CSS) at the University of Jordan. The 1-week program on ["Studying Public Opinion in the Contemporary Middle East"](#) brought together 18 fellows and four co-leaders to 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. Karl Kaltenthaler (University of Akron, USA), Mujtaba Isani

(King Fahd University, Saudi Arabia), Yuree Noh (Middle East Initiative, Harvard, USA), and Daniel Silverman (Carnegie Mellon University, USA) led the workshop sharing methodological best practices and techniques designed to meet the increasing challenges facing researchers on the ground. A key component of the program included research panel sessions where participants presented their work examining public opinion in MENA and received feedback from peer discussants and co-leaders. In addition, the program featured keynote speakers from local survey research organizations to draw on regional expertise in the field. All participants received a three-year complimentary membership to APSA and are eligible to apply for alumni grants to support their research and professional development.

APSA returned to Amman in July to hold a three-day MENA Political Science Conference on ["New Landscapes in MENA Politics Research"](#). Organized in partnership with Columbia Global Centers | Amman, the Arab Political Science Network (APSN), and the Special Commission on Social Science Research (REMENA), the conference was attended by approximately 70 scholars, including 39 PhD students and early-career scholars from the MENA region. The conference provided an opportunity for scholars to share and receive critical feedback on their research

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## News from the APSA MENA Program (continued)

manuscripts, network with colleagues from across the MENA region, and contribute to contemporary debates in the discipline. Fifteen leading faculty in the field of MENA Political Science served as discussants on research panels. In addition to small working groups, the program included plenary sessions, roundtables, professional development discussions, and an Exhibit Hall reception was highlighting the work of various scholarly and policy-oriented research organizations in Jordan.

We continue to partner with IQMR and ICPSR to support Arab MENA scholars in receiving qualitative and quantitative methods training. Over the summer, APSA supported six early-career scholars and PhD students from the MENA region in receiving methods training at the summer Institute for Qualitative and Multi-Method Research (IQMR) at Syracuse University and the Summer Program in Quantitative Methods of Social Research (ICPSR) at University of Michigan.

This fall, APSA announced a call for applications for the 2022 [alumni professional development grants](#). Every year, we award individual and collaborative grants to MENA Workshops alumni in an effort to continue supporting their research and professional development. Applications are also open for the [MENA Mentorship Initiative](#), a program that pairs early-career scholars who are citizens of countries in the Arab MENA region with advanced-career scholars for feedback and mentoring on a project-specific activity over a period of three to six months.

The Arab Political Science Network (APSN) had a busy year so far and we are excited to share some of the updates with all of you.

They started off the 2022 activities with a webinar on [Teaching Political Science in Africa](#) in collaboration with the African Association of Political Science (AAPS). Speakers shed light on the interests, priorities, and challenges facing political science research and teaching in Africa. In March, they organized a virtual [annual research development workshop](#), bringing together nine Arab scholars working on populism, nation-building, and top-down state projects and economic transformation. In May, APSN held the first [quantitative methods summer school](#), in collaboration with Doha Institute for Graduate Studies. The virtual five-day program provided participants with foundational knowledge on using quantitative empirical methods and training in descriptive and inferential statistical applications using RStudio and SPSS.

With the ongoing developments and transformations in Tunisia over the past year, they worked with the South Mediterranean University (SMU) in Tunisia, to organize a [virtual workshop](#) on September 9-10. The 14 participants and 6 discussants were divided over 5 panels (3 in English and 2 in Arabic) to discuss and receive feedback on their papers. A workshop report will be published on their [website](#) soon.

As part of APSN's commitment to engage with other organizations and scholars, they convened a [panel](#) at the APSA MENA summer conference in Amman. The panel featured representatives from the Arab Reform Initiative (ARI), Tafra, Politics and Society Institute (PSI), and the Institute for Social Science Research in Algeria (ISSR). They also organized a [roundtable](#) at the APSA Annual Meeting in Montreal that invited three scholars to discuss minorities and national

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## News from the APSA MENA Program (continued)

identities in Arab countries.

APSN continued contributing to the growing interest in and need for Arabic content and translated material to support research and teaching. [Nineteen videos](#) on qualitative and multi-method research approaches are now subtitled in Arabic. Their website will soon also have other subtitled videos on qualitative and quantitative methodology and professional development in collaboration with APSA and POMEPS. Currently, they are also collaborating with [Ghayn](#), an Arabic language podcast, on season two of their interviews with social science authors who wrote books about the region. You can find it on wherever you listen to podcasts.

Finally, APSN is organizing two webinars and workshop before the end of the year. The first webinar was on September 28, and focused on the [International Politics of Infrastructure](#), by looking at ports and transport corridors in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. The second one will be on *October 25*, in partnership with AUB's Beirut Urban Lab, focusing on *Urban Politics and Space in the Arab World*. They will hold their annual teaching workshop in-person this year and it will be focusing on Teaching Research Methods at Arab universities. The workshop will bring together approximately 15 faculty members from the region to share experiences and discuss new and different pedagogical approaches related to the teaching research methods.

Please visit their [website](#) for more information and latest updates including their continuously updated [syllabi bank](#). You can also follow them on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), [YouTube](#) or [LinkedIn](#).

To learn more about the APSA MENA Program and our activities, please visit <https://web.apsanet.org/mena/> or contact us at [menaworkshops@apsanet.org](mailto:menaworkshops@apsanet.org).

APSA MENA Project Team  
American Political Science Association



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

As reported in the [Spring issue](#) of this Newsletter, the REMENA project, devoted to developing guidelines for the conduct of responsible, ethical, and constructive social inquiry in the Middle East and North Africa, has collaborated with the MENA Politics Section through a Special Project grant from APSA. This grant has underwritten two workshops designed to develop guidelines and other aides for political scientists serving as faculty advisers to address the ethical implications of research in the Middle East and North Africa.

The first workshop, held in conjunction with the APSA MENA Program's workshop in Amman in July, tested a draft "check-list" of questions about the ethics of their proposed plan researchers should address as they design their research projects. About forty PhD candidates and early career scholars met with half a dozen senior colleagues (including co-editor of this newsletter, Sean Yom) in small groups over several hours to discuss both the substance of the questions they should reflect on, as well as when and how that reflection might be inserted in the development of their projects. Among the questions were considerations regarding obligations to be sensitive to the circumstances of research participants; the prospect of physical or emotional risks to researchers themselves; the possibility of security sensitivities; responsible management of data; and review of external funding, dissemination plans and conflicts of interest.

Despite—or perhaps because of!—the varied experiences of students in PhD programs in North America, Europe and the Middle East and North Africa, as well as early career scholars employed both in and outside the

region, and in and outside of academia, the workshop was very lively and productive. Suggestions for revisions in the wording of some of the questions accompanied nearly universal agreement that, whether or not they are technically required to vet their proposals with Institutional Review Boards, all political scientists would profit from this sort of review of their research plans.

The second workshop coincided with the Annual Meeting of APSA in Montreal in September. Unfortunately, unforeseen scheduling difficulties and visa denials made turn-out smaller than planned. Some of the graduate advisors, with whom we intend to discuss how to integrate this kind of review into the mentoring and advising of PhD candidates, were not present. Thanks, however, to two other of this Newsletter's editors—Nermin Allam and Gamze Çavdar—and section president Stacey Philbrick Yadav, we still had a very fruitful discussion of the REMENA project and the Ethics checklist with the participants who were able to make it.

To ensure that we reach as many representatives of the APSA academic leadership as possible, however, we will be convening an online discussion, facilitated by APSA itself, with department chairs and graduate advisors, later in the fall. This workshop is designed to ensure that we know our audience—the faculty advisors and senior scholars who shape research design and planning, and take responsibility for mentoring and nurturing PhD students—and will be able to advocate effectively for incorporating an ethics assessment into the development of research proposals. This means, among other things, that anyone unable to join us for our first two workshops will have one more

(CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE)

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chance—albeit online—to add their voice to this discussion before we finalize our recommendations.

Anyone interested in learning more about the REMENA project or participating in future REMENA-APSA activities should contact us via our website (<https://www.mei.columbia.edu/remena-about>), by official e-mail ([remena@columbia.edu](mailto:remena@columbia.edu)), or by simply sending a note of interest to Lisa Anderson ([la8@columbia.edu](mailto:la8@columbia.edu)).

# The Unintended Consequences of Authoritarian Elections: Insights from Elite Interviews in Kuwait

Daniel L. Tavana



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Elections are the *sine qua non* of democracy. Yet some form of electoral competition exists in nearly all the world's authoritarian regimes. Levels of competition vary, but this variation belies a persistent reality: incumbents rarely lose. Existing research reflects the seeming hopelessness of elections held in authoritarian regimes, as scholars “generally view the establishment of elections as a means by which dictators hold onto power” (Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009, 404). Several canonical studies of what are referred to as “authoritarian elections” have uncovered the mechanisms linking elections to the stability of authoritarian rule.<sup>1</sup>

My research challenges this conventional wisdom by showing that elections can generate the very oppositional forces they are designed to control. Though elections in authoritarian regimes rarely trigger the kind of party or elite turnover required of democratic consolidation (Huntington 1991),

this does not necessarily imply that elections cannot generate other processes that may destabilize authoritarian rule, such as political liberalization and large-scale collective action (Howard and Roessler 2006; Beaulieu 2014). Oppositions are key actors in theories of authoritarian politics that describe how dictators use elections to coopt and coerce rival elites and social groups (Zartman 1988, 78). Paradoxically, this presentation reifies the very illusion of democratic governance that sustains authoritarian rule (Albrecht 2010). However, there is ample evidence of elections catalyzing ruptures to this illusion (Bunce and Wolchik 2010), including recently in Armenia, Belarus, and Malaysia. Taken together, these findings indicate that the ontological status of opposition in authoritarian contexts is contested.

Opposition cannot simultaneously be both a feature of and a bug in the broader authoritarian system of which it is a part. Unfortun-

<sup>1</sup> For a review of the authoritarian elections literature, see Gandhi and Lust-Okar (2009), Brancati (2014), and Schedler (2015). Elections provide incumbents with important opportunities to gather information about societal discontent and provide economic rents and policy concessions to rivals in response (Gandhi 2008; Gandhi and Przeworski 2007). Semi-competitive elections reveal the regime's material, coercive, and symbolic strength, signaling the uselessness of opposition (Wedeen 2008; Simpson 2013). Incumbents use elections to distribute patronage and government sinecures (Lust-Okar 2005; Pepinsky 2007; Lust-Okar 2006; Magaloni 2008; Blaydes 2011). Elites may use elections to monitor the activities of the ruling coalition, and vice versa (Gelbach and Keefer 2012; Svobik 2012).

ately, this ambiguity has resulted in the construction of theories of authoritarian politics that speak, often unhelpfully, about opposition across conceptual registers. This is particularly true of theories that center the strategic interaction between regimes and ruling coalitions, on the one hand, and oppositions (broadly defined) and other social groups on the other. By assuming some exogenous presence of opposition, existing theories tend to overlook its origins. As a result, scholarship should not rule out the possibility that elections provide oppositional forces with opportunities to shape the very antecedent conditions that encourage their success and failure.

In my dissertation, a book-length project focused primarily on the origins of political opposition in Kuwait, I argue that elections can be generative sources of political opposition. I define opposition as “a group of elites who initiate routine, public, and goal-oriented activities in formal institutions of the state when those activities aim to limit either (a) the extent to which state institutions implement the policy prerogatives of the ruling coalition or (b) the ruling coalition’s effective control over state institutions themselves” (Tavana 2021, 31). I use this definition to build an original theory of endogenous opposition that focuses on the effect of repeated, strategic interactions between candidates and voters across elections. By analyzing the electoral districts in which these interactions take place, my research focuses on the microfoundations of opposition success. Repeated elections in authoritarian regimes—often seen as a mechanism of authoritarian stability—can lay the foundations of successful oppositional challenge.

Collecting enough data and evidence to answer the question of whether elections generate opposition is challenging in authoritarian regimes. Electoral data can be unreliable and difficult to obtain (Carlitz and McLellan 2021). Few openly accessible public opinion polls include questions and data about electoral participation and voter behavior. In some contexts, polls are of poor quality: the very act of polling citizens and publishing responses “creates an impression that individual opinions count, in an environment where the opposite is often true” (Conduit and Akbarzadeh 2020). Last, and most notably, citizens face pressure to falsify their preferences (Kuran 1995; Truex and Tavana 2019). This makes it challenging to infer preferences from behavior, even in the context of tolerated elections.

In this short essay, I argue that semi-structured interviews with elites can overcome some of these challenges. Specifically, data and evidence from these interviews can reveal the generative mechanisms that link elections to opposition in authoritarian regimes. To substantiate this argument, I draw primarily from over 50 interviews with various elites in Kuwait conducted from December 2021 to February 2022.<sup>2</sup> Most of these individuals are current and former legislators and candidates who participated in previous National Assembly elections.

Kuwait is a communally diverse, oil-rich, Arab Gulf monarchy led by the ruling Al-Sabah family. The country has held regular legislative elections since 1963, with two brief interludes from 1976-1981 and 1986-1992. Electoral competition occurs across socially salient cleavages: two types of divisions in particular shape different identity categories

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<sup>2</sup> I thank Abdulaziz T. Al-Nassar for his research assistance during my fieldwork in Kuwait.

across electoral districts throughout the country. First, a religious cleavage divides citizens into members of one of two large sects (Sunni and Shia). Second, an origin cleavage divides citizens into members of one of several smaller and localized groups. These groups include Northern and Southern Arabian tribes (badu) as well as large kin- and family-based networks (hadhar) whose ancestors retained communal, cultural, and commercial ties to their place of origin after settling in Kuwait City. The salience of origin is rooted in patterns of migration and settlement that facilitated Kuwait City's rise as a thriving commercial settlement before the discovery of oil in the twentieth century.

In my dissertation, I show that the presence of opposition in the Kuwait National Assembly grew steadily following the onset of mass politics in 1981, when the Emir Sheikh Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah restored the legislature after a nearly five-year unconstitutional dissolution that began in 1976.<sup>3</sup> How did it come to pass that—in a context of abundance and super affluence—the ruling Al-Sabah family struggled to constrain the disruptive oppositional activity of elites in the legislature? What can evidence gathered from these elites tell us about the origins of opposition in Kuwait? Interviews can reveal several aspects of the causal processes that generate opposition: the way candidates understand the socio-spatial composition of their electoral districts, the informal institutions candidates use to limit in-group conflict, and the learning that takes place between elections. The paragraphs below clarify these processes and provide examples from Kuwait.

<sup>3</sup> The 1980 electoral law divided 42,000 registered male voters over the age of 21 into 25 districts—a system that remained in place until 2008. The small number of voters registered in each district at the time (approximately 1,700 on average) made it easy for the ruling family to identify large, or dominant, groups in each district and trade access to the state for compliance with the government's policy agenda in the National Assembly.

<sup>4</sup> Personal interview, January 31, 2022.

First, in contexts where ethnic-, identity-, and group-based divisions are politically salient, elite interviews reveal the different ways candidates understand the socio-spatial composition of their electoral districts. These contexts shape the incentives candidates have to cooperate with or oppose the government. In most cases, I begin interviews by asking candidates to describe the social composition of their districts. One candidate who ran in District 16 (Omariya) under the 25-district system recalled the tribal and social composition of the district vividly:

The largest number of registered tribal voters belonged to the Rashaida tribe. Then you have the [Sunni] hadhar. Then comes the Mutran tribe. Then you have the Shia. Last, you have the Northern tribes: Shammar, Aniza, and Dhafeer. Among the Rashaida tribe, I usually won 65% to 70% of those votes. From the Mutran tribe, I did not take any: maybe 5%. Among the [Sunni] hadhar, I took around 30%, 40%. From the Shia, none. From the other tribes, I took another 30 to 40 votes. This was the breakdown.<sup>4</sup>

Pairing the socio-spatial reconstruction of individual electoral districts with detailed census and demographic data can be informative. In my own research, I use these pairings to make two separate, but related, claims. First, under the 25-district system, larger, or dominant, groups were less aware of the smaller minority groups in their districts. Because the ruling family favored candidates representing larger tribes in particular, these candidates tended to divert their attention and resources exclusively towards their tribe.

They did this primarily to ensure high turnout on election day through clientelism and other forms of in-group favoritism and mobilization. Second, candidates representing smaller, minority groups were more likely to run with ideological labels. In Kuwait, these labels typically signify membership in, closeness to, or an affiliation with a particular Islamist, liberal, or populist movement. Because this strategy allowed these candidates to appeal to a larger number of registered voters outside their group, these candidates were usually able to retell the social composition of their districts with greater accuracy in my interviews. How elites perceive their mobilizational options in their respective districts is difficult to assess using quantitative data: but they are key to understanding how electoral competition can create incentives for elites to oppose the government once elected.

Second, in many authoritarian regimes where party organizations are weak or non-existent, candidates rely on informal institutions to resolve in-group conflicts over nomination and selection. This is the case in Kuwait, where tribal and sectarian groups have held informal primaries to select candidates since at least the early 1970s. In some districts, where tribes can nominate candidates without internal conflict, election day results are almost a foregone conclusion. But in other districts, tribal or in-group cohesion is harder to achieve. These internal disagreements are impossible to discern from electoral results. It is difficult to systematically evaluate or understand informal institutions using limited quantitative data alone.

One candidate who participated in elections in the 1990s described how the government sought to undermine his candidacy—even

though he was a minister in the legislative term preceding the election:

Before the election, I was a member of the Council of Ministers [Cabinet]. But the government still tried to make me lose. They asked someone in my tribe to run against me in the general election, even though I won my tribe's primary. The government wanted someone who would do whatever they wanted. After I left the government in the middle of the legislative term, I became a regular legislator again. I started to criticize the government more often. Other ministers tried to persuade me to vote with the government, but I refused. I won the election anyway, but barely. And right after that, they asked me to be a minister again!<sup>5</sup>

Perceptions of the regime's motivations like the above are extremely difficult to verify, even if electoral results and other journalistic sources suggest they are true. But the purpose of collecting evidence in this way is not necessarily to corroborate a single observation in an electoral district. Rather, it is to collect systematic evidence that helps uncover similar causal processes across time and space. And from there, to use this evidence to reveal the generative mechanisms that link processes to outcomes of interest.

A final insight concerns how punctuated elections obscure processes that take place over longer time horizons. When an election ends, analysts, observers, and scholars prioritize assessments of the winners. Often, these analyses suffer from winners' bias: winners are compared to those who won the previous election, and evaluative claims and predictions are made about the forthcoming legislative term. This approach is sensible. But

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<sup>5</sup> Personal interview, December 20, 2021.

often, beneath the surface, there are slow moving processes that are rendered invisible by focusing only on winners.

Specifically, elite interviews may offer an opportunity to better understand the role of individual effort and learning in these processes. Elections in authoritarian regimes are rare moments when the preferences of elites and citizens can be momentarily revealed: these revelations take the form of both public commitments and private exchanges. And the lifting of this curtain can prompt cognitive change, or political learning (Bermeo 1992). Here, elections are better understood as events, rather than institutions, with the potential to generate short-term instability (Knutsen et al. 2017).

During a meeting with one candidate who ran in District 8 (Hawaly) in the 1990s, he described why he decided to nominate himself as a candidate:

There are both liberals and Islamists who run in this district: but there are also a lot of free votes. People were frustrated with the two incumbent legislators from this district. One, a liberal, served as minister of education and voted against a law that would have segregated classrooms at Ku-wait University. And this law was popular at the time. Voters perceived the other legislator, an Islamist, as being too close to the government: he did not do enough to stop the passage of a controversial debt law after the liberation of Kuwait. After studying this area, I thought it was suitable: because the incumbents were too close to the government. And people did not like this.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Personal interview, February 6, 2022.

<sup>7</sup> Though Parkinson and Wood (2015) raise this point in the context of transparency and the release of interview transcripts, scholars must think carefully about the limits of informed consent when working with interlocutors in these contexts.

Public opinion is an important component of electoral competition—even in authoritarian regimes. But the quote above indicates the bidirectional nature of legislator behavior and the preferences—or perhaps mood—of ordinary citizens. These observations can provide important insights into how perceptions of district-level attitudes, as well as the activities of other elites, shape elite behavior.

The examples above are not to suggest interviews with elites are not fraught with challenges. As some of the quotes indicate, rumors and gossip make it difficult to validate data generated from interviews. Cognitive biases concerning issues of recall, attribution, egocentrism, and overconfidence are common. These constraints heighten the importance of triangulation when relying on interview-based evidence. But most importantly, scholars must be aware of the different forms of harm that can be caused by the careless release of information: even if that information is obtained with the consent of those who are interviewed. Parkinson and Wood (2015) summarize this point clearly in their discussion of interviews with 'Arab Spring' activists: how do participants “know” the information they share with researchers will not later be used against them?<sup>7</sup>

Evidence from elites in the Kuwait case suggests that elections can generate forms of political opposition. In my research, I use this evidence to challenge existing conceptions of electoral and authoritarian politics. In diverse autocracies where identity is politically salient, meaningful opposition can emerge endogenously from repeated elections. My argument suggests that unfair elections do

not mechanically manifest the providence of dictators who hold them. Authoritarian elections may not always facilitate democratic representation, but this does not imply they are incapable of generating powerful challenges to the vagaries of authoritarian rule.♦

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# Research Symposium: How to Study (and *Not* Study) Refugees in the MENA

## Introduction

*Diana B. Greenwald and Sean Yom*

Human displacement is a defining feature of the modern Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Those displaced across international borders often fall under the legal category of asylum-seeker or refugee — millions of Syrians in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, for example, meet such definitions, while countries such as Iraq, Mauritania, Yemen, and Algeria are less frequently mentioned hosts for hundreds of thousands of asylum-seekers and refugees. Further, many millions more in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Palestine, and Libya have been displaced within their country of residence. Successive wars have fueled both of these trends, from the 2003 US-led invasion in Iraq to more recent, post-2011 conflicts. All told, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) estimates that, as of 2022, the MENA region has around 16 million forcibly displaced people; although, as several authors in this symposium note, this figure overlooks additional, hidden categories of displaced people, including Palestinian refugees who fall under the mandate of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) and other migrants who have not (or not yet) sought formal protection from persecution.

We are privileged to curate this symposium of reflections on refugeehood and displacement in the MENA region, drawn from some of the leading scholars of politics and policymaking in this field. In designing this collection, we asked our contributors to reflect on what is being done “right” in existing research on ref-

ugees and migrants, and what might be done “better.” We quickly realized that the shared impulse among our colleagues was a reflexive one. The authors in this symposium contend that to meaningfully research migrants and refugees in the MENA requires an extraordinary degree of self-awareness. Broad, ethical principles for conducting field-based research can collide with complex realities on the ground. Researchers carrying the affiliation of Western-based institutions are frequently understood as outsiders — foreign to the displaced population itself and, often, to the country in which the research is being conducted — and yet their presence can inherently transform local dynamics and the social equations of daily life. Scholars must engage in active, careful work to cultivate and maintain their local networks, especially in the wake of shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The welfare of refugee and migrant populations is shaped by an interconnected web of actors — local NGOs, international humanitarian actors, multilateral institutions, and national governments, based in both the MENA region and the West, for example — with which the researcher may have varied relationships. Thus, scholars of displacement must be exquisitely sensitive to not just *what* or *who* they are engaging on the ground, but also *how* and *why* they are doing it—and whom the ultimate audience might be.

Despite these challenges, contributors to this symposium are forward-looking. For

instance, Arar and FitzGerald warn about siloed approaches to the study of displacement, arguing instead for a “systems approach” that understands displacement as a phenomenon with roots and legacies that span history, country borders, legal categories, and intra-familial experiences. Frost interrogates the concept of “protracted refugees,” showing that rigid legal categories often fail to capture lived realities, and arguing that an improved understanding of protractedness in this context can, in fact, enrich research on citizenship as well. Hajj reflects on the COVID-19 pandemic, noting how this sudden global shock contributed to the collapse of the academic and communal networks that previously anchored many projects, while offering important insights into how such sites of reciprocity can be rebuilt. Drawing on her own experiences, Norman considers the ethical dilemmas raised by the researcher’s relationships in the field, while concluding with creative suggestions for how to make scholarship on migrants and refugees less extractive. Dhingra reviews the state of the literature on service provision for refugees and displaced populations. Looking ahead, she encourages researchers to consider partnering with local stakeholders who are often overlooked, while also critically engaging with how Western resettlement and asylum policies have profoundly influenced the lives of the displaced.

By illuminating the contours of more reflexive scholarship, these social scientists move beyond conventional concepts and existing theoretical constraints to posit new possibilities for this challenging, yet hopeful, field. The field is challenging because, sadly, forcible displacements of people continue to unfold in a regional context of frequent conflict and foreign interventions. It is hopeful, though, because of our colleagues devoted to making it more impactful, ethical, and humane. ♦

# Siloed Knowledge Production in Refugee Studies

*Rawan Arar and David Scott FitzGerald*



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Scholarly examinations of refugee issues often engage knowledge producers across disciplines and beyond the academy. Journalists tackle moral and political questions that are captured in news headlines. The law guides how lawyers and advocates label people who crossed a border and reinforce a boundary between refugees and other migrants. Humanitarian professionals carefully maneuver around the interests of stakeholders including influential donors and host governments.

Each of these groups offer invaluable insights that can inform scholarship, but their positions are limited by the politics of knowledge production. The journalist is incentivized to cover timely events, deprioritizing historical contexts in favor of current human-interest stories. The lawyer must be singularly focused on arguing in favor of a client's asylum claim, regardless of the implications for other migrants. The humanitarian diplomatically bends to the interests of state officials who exercise ultimate authority over access to

refugees in the host country. Scholars are not limited by the responsibilities of practitioners, who depend on categories of practice over categories of analysis to achieve their goals. Although they may be constrained by their profession when making their work legible to others in the field or appealing to funding institutions, the scholar can break away from the incentives that inform reporting on popular topics, restrict transparency, and amplify the experiences of some refugee groups over others. The scholar has the independence to say things that other knowledge producers cannot.

The challenge for the scholar is to strike a balance between learning from these various knowledge producers without recreating the restrictions on the scope of their analysis, conclusions, and implications. Drawing from our recent book, *The Refugee System: A Sociological Approach*, we provide an assessment of six distinct limitations that appear throughout the refugee literature—what we

call “siloe d approaches”—and examine how a “systems approach” can be used to reimagine the state of displacement, expanding with examples from the MENA region.<sup>1</sup> We push against the above tendencies by considering how a displaced individual may see the world through interactive connections among places of origin, transit, and destination. A systems approach shows how changes in one part of the system reverberate elsewhere. Earlier migrations shape later movements. Blocked paths of mobility in one place redirect migration along other paths. Government policies today are shaped by historical legacies, behaviors of other states, and the actions of displaced people. All these processes are forged by deep inequalities of power. Scholars can miss these connections across geographies and through time because of siloe d knowledge production.

The first three siloe d approaches include: 1) the tendency to be ahistorical (policy and humanitarian reports); 2) the failure to explain, or the purposeful neglect of, the causes of displacement (humanitarian, especially reports from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR]), and 3) the use of an exclusively legal definition of refugees to define the scope conditions of the study (legal approaches). Note that the critique of siloe d approaches is not a moral judgement suggesting that siloe d approaches are inherently illegitimate. These forms of knowledge production can be fundamental and even necessary to the work that practitioners do.

Scholars can also perpetuate siloe d knowledge production in three additional ways. Following the Convention definition of a refugee, scholars may set their scope conditions

to only consider people who have crossed state borders and, in doing so, neglect those who stay home despite the threat of violence. We present this critique against our previous article (FitzGerald and Arar 2018), and broaden our analysis in *The Refugee System* to consider refugees’ expansive networks across borders. Scholars may also focus too much on the UNHCR’s “durable solutions” of voluntary return, local integration, and resettlement, which limits their analysis by following humanitarian objectives and ignores alternatives that include continued mobility across international borders. Finally, there is a tendency to study a single isolated stage of displacement, such as resettlement, divorced from other stages of displacement. Below we describe and explain each siloe d approach and offer lessons that emerged from our examination of the benefits of a systems approach.

### **Silo 1: The Tendency to Be Ahistorical**

Humanitarian and policy reports are written with a focus on the present. They may convey changing demographic data, contemporary social issues in host countries, including access to housing or schooling, and changes in policy. The parameters of such reports are informed by their intended audiences and can be used to fundraise and shore up goodwill. These documents are both a source of information for policymakers and donors and a justification for the work being done. Reports are often characterized by a sense of urgency, sending a clear message to donors that a timely response is needed. The most urgent refugees are portrayed as those currently in transit or those who face mortal threat in search of safe haven, even though most of the

<sup>1</sup> For a review of refugee issues in MENA see Arar et al. (2022) and Arar (2022), which includes an extended bibliography of MENA refugee scholarship.

world's refugees have been displaced for generations and their onward movement may have stagnated. In turn, findings from such reports are shared with the public through news outlets that provide updates on the most recent displacements of pressing concern.

Scholars can be seduced by timeliness as well, and succumb to “a failure to situate the subject(s) of study in appropriate historical context or value the role of history in current events” (Arar et al. 2022). While scholars benefit greatly from engaging humanitarian and policy reports and drawing upon accounts in the media, they are not beholden to the same parameters of study. The scholar has the privilege of being able to interrogate the limits of such knowledge production, weaving these reports into the larger tapestries of knowledge that are not bounded by the politics of aid and statecraft. While humanitarian and policy-centered approaches cauterize contemporary displacements from legacies of forced displacement, war, and genocide, scholars are free to make these important connections. For example, scholars may examine ethnic and religious diversity among displaced refugees from Syria or investigate how Syrian reception in neighboring states has been shaped by previous groups of refugees by exploring the antecedents of the war in 2011.

Considering the *longue durée*, a systems approach maps *how earlier movements have shaped later movements*. For example, the original displacements of more than one million Palestinian refugees as a result of the 1948 Arab-Israeli War (*known as the Nakba*) and 1967 Arab-Israeli War (*known as the Naksa*) have fed into additional deportations and expulsions of Palestinians from Arab host states throughout the decades.

This includes Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Libya in the 1950s; Jordan in 1970; Libya in the mid-1990s; Iraq after the US-led invasion in 2003; and Syria as a result of the war in 2011 (Rosen 2012). One striking example is Kuwait's deportation of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians in the wake of the 1990-91 Gulf War, illuminating the relationship between labor migration and refugee displacement, the respective examination of which has traditionally been relegated to distinct fields of study (FitzGerald and Arar 2018; Adamson and Tsourapas 2020). Some Palestinian refugees who could secure work in Kuwait emigrated as labor migrants. By 1990, the Palestinian population in Kuwait totaled between an estimated 400,000 and 450,000 people. During and after the Gulf War, most fled and approximately half were never allowed to return, leaving behind an estimated \$33 billion in property (Rosen 2012).

Taking a systems approach exposes *how early receptions can shape later receptions*. Host governments throughout MENA drew upon their experiences with previous refugee groups, namely the Palestinians, which shaped their response to Syrian refugees after 2011. Lebanon's “standoffish” policymaking, notably their stance against building official refugee camps for Syrians, was informed by “a fear ... a paranoia [within the country] ... concerning what could be related to the Palestinian experience” (Mourad 2017, 260). Refugees may also benefit from others in the diaspora who migrated previously. As Achilli and Abu Samra (2019) argue, some Palestinians from Syria were able to move to Europe through informal ties and solidarity networks that paved the way.

## **Silo 2: Failure to Explain, or Purposeful Neglect of, the Causes of Displacement**

A presentist bias can let perpetrators off the hook when the ties between displaced populations and the reasons for their forced exodus are severed. Humanitarian knowledge producers are mandated to remain apolitical, which facilitates their access to refugees and aid operations (Barnett 2013). For example, in 2019 the UNHCR published a statement about the “Iraqi refugee crisis” but avoided assigning any blame to the US government for the 2003 invasion, which led to the death of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, displaced millions, destabilized the country, and facilitated the emergence of ISIS.

The Iraqi refugee crisis is the result of decades of conflict and violence in the region. In 2014, an escalation of violence surged when the Islamic State (ISIS) launched attacks in northern Iraq. As a result of the conflict, millions of families were forced to flee their homes and half of the country’s infrastructure was destroyed. (UNHCR 2019)

This assessment fails to mention state actors, including the US and Iraqi governments. Criticism of the US may have jeopardized an important relationship with the top financial supporter of UNHCR operations. The US has been the leading donor to UNHCR, giving more than one billion dollars annually since 2013. Criticism of the Iraqi government might jeopardize humanitarian access to internally displaced people. By contrast, holding ISIS rhetorically accountable does not threaten relationships with donors and states of origin. While this approach may appease host and donor states, it is in stark juxtaposition to refugees’ inherent interest in the reasons for their displacement and calling

out perpetrators.

When siloed approaches treat refugees as though they simply appeared on a given territory, refugees’ movement is taken for granted. Applying a systems approach pushes scholars to recognize that movement must be explained, not assumed. By critically examining movement, scholars avoid a third siloed approach, the overemphasis on the Convention definition of a refugee which requires a person to flee across an international border.

## **Silo 3: The Use of an Exclusively Legal Definition of Refugees**

The word “refugee” has legal and social implications that can be in tension. Individuals who are legally recognized as refugees, most notably those who meet the definition described in the 1951 Refugee Convention, can sometimes secure protections that are restricted to other migrants including those fleeing climate disasters, famine, or poverty. In this way, states have turned “refugee” into a privileged legal category that applies to a specified group of people. According to the Convention, a refugee is a person who

...owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.

Lawyers may strictly adhere to this siloed approach to make the strongest case for their clients or offer practical interventions that

operate within the parameters of the law. In the face of US President Trump's 2017 Executive Order, notoriously known as the "Muslim ban" because the first version of the law targeted migrants and refugees from seven Muslim-majority countries, lawyers were able to secure protections for asylum seekers even while the number of resettled refugees plummeted. In 2018, 714 Syrian asylum seekers were granted protection while only 62 Syrian refugees were resettled in the US.

Scholars are not bound by this tremendous responsibility. They can define refugees more liberally, taking into consideration a wider array of lived experiences and structural conditions (Hamlin 2021). Scholars who adopt a *sociological realist* perspective emphasize that individuals and groups may be *de facto* refugees even if they are not assigned the legal label. For example, Somalis who may be categorized as labor migrants in the UAE may be received as resettled refugees in the United States (Abdi 2015). Individuals fleeing violence may enter a receiving state on tourist visas or to seek medical treatment, then seek asylum after overstaying their visas (Davis et al. 2016). Refugee self-identities are also important to consider. Some people who are legally classified as refugees may eschew the label, or use it situationally, while others may express an affinity for the title (Pearlman 2018; Jensen 2021).

#### **Silo 4: Only Focusing on People Who Have Moved and Ignoring Those Who Stay Home**

Refugee status is usually determined on an individual basis. An overemphasis on the 1951 Convention's definition of a refugee places the focus solely on people who flee across an international border, ignoring fami-

ly and community members who stay behind. By doing so, siloed approaches neglect the full effects of armed conflict, ethnic cleansing, and genocide. Often, refugees are those who were privileged enough to leave. Exit cannot be taken for granted. Consider the two million Palestinians in Gaza who, from 2008 to 2021, experienced four wars and indiscriminate Israeli airstrikes across the tiny territory. They cannot seek refuge in neighboring states due to a land, air, and sea blockade upheld by Israel and Egypt.

Not all people who face violence decide to flee. Among those who become refugees, not everyone leaves at the same time. The overemphasis on movement neglects those who perished, remained besieged, or were otherwise left behind, creating an artificial divide between refugees and their family members. These ties shape refugees' decision-making processes. Through our book's longitudinal case study of one Syrian family, the Asfours<sup>2</sup>, we introduce the *new economics of displacement* to explore how refugee households make decisions together, taking into consideration how family members' gender, age, individualized threats, abilities, income, and earning potential influence who among them will migrate and where that person will go. As of 2021, half of the Asfour family was still in Syria while the other half had become refugees in Jordan and Canada.

#### **Silo 5: A Singular Focus on the UNHCR's "Durable Solutions"**

The UNHCR advances three "durable solutions": voluntary repatriation to refugees' country of origin, local integration usually in a neighboring state in the Global South, and resettlement to a third country usually in the Global North. Humanitarian objectives uph-

<sup>2</sup> A pseudonym.



old the priorities of states while also serving refugees. Durable solutions are state-centric solutions. They put refugees back into single nation-state containers. By breaking away from “durable solutions” frameworks, scholars can avoid what Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller (2003) call “methodological nationalism” when researching post-displacement scenarios.

Scholars can apply a systems approach to interrogate the limitations of UN policy. The language of solutions suggests a universal applicability, or best practices approach, to refugee displacement. Yet, more than 20 percent of UN-recognized refugees are unable to access two of the purported solutions. An estimated 5.8 million Palestinian refugees registered with United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) in 2021 are unable to voluntarily return or resettle to a third country (UNHCR 2022). Local integration as a solution is further complicated because it overlaps with protracted displacement. Through empirical analysis, scholars can examine how a “solution” and a “problem” can be empirically indistinguishable. Refugees are simultaneously living in protracted situations, while also (potentially) integrating.

### **Silo 6: The Study of a Single Isolated Stage of Displacement Divorced from Other Stages**

Humanitarian knowledge production often begins with a “durable solutions” framework, focusing on resettlement or reception in a particular country. Treating these as separate stages of displacement, distinct from one another, overlooks the ways in which *Southern and Northern host practices mutually constitute a global refugee system*. In addition to being the final destination for most of the world’s refugees and providing territorial

space for Northern resettlement operations, Southern states are the foundation of the contemporary system of refugee management. Across the world, rights-oriented refugee reception, including adherence to the Convention and the protections outlined in national asylum policies, depend on mechanisms of immigration control that limit the number of individuals seeking refuge. The current configuration of Northern refugee reception—even in the most generous states—is only possible because Southern states contain and control most refugee movement. Given the MENA’s oversized role in global refugee reception, the region is fundamental to the global system of refugee management.

A consideration of the global “architecture of repulsion,” in which rich liberal democracies repel asylum seekers, reveals how *reception policies are interlinked across states* (Fitzgerald 2019). The practice of containment in the MENA is the result of coordination among states in partnership with humanitarian organizations (Norman 2020; Abdelaaty 2021). These partnerships are not a one-way street. MENA states exercise their authority over the extent to which they are willing to serve as buffer states, and officials make strategic choices regarding how best to leverage their refugee hosting—and refugee containing—capacity (Arar 2017; Freier et al. 2021).

*Immobility in one circuit shapes movement in others*. Mechanisms of “remote control” are written into bilateral agreements (Zolberg et al. 1989). For example, Libya’s proximity to Italy and Malta makes its geographic position an asset to EU officials interested in restricting the movement of those who plan to travel through Libya to seek asylum in Europe. In 2000, Italy and Libya signed an agreement that addressed coordination on issues related to terrorism, organized crime, drug smug-

gling, and irregular migration. Over the next two decades, bilateral agreements expanded the partnership to include a Libyan commitment to deport irregular migrants, a readmissions agreement in which Libya agreed to accept people deported from Italy, and the construction of immigration detention facilities funded by Italy (FitzGerald 2019). As the Libyan route became more difficult to transit, new routes opened around the Mediterranean.

### **Conclusion: Illuminating Connections Across Different Stages of Displacement**

Refugee experiences are often studied in stages of displacement. The scope of investigation may be on violence in the home country, reception across borders to neighboring states in the Global South, or asylum seeking and resettlement in states of the Global North. Such scope limitations often do not reflect refugees' lived experiences or their priorities. Reproducing nation-state borders in defining what will be studied can also conceal how states cooperate to manage the (im)mobility of refugees and others on the move. A systems approach allows us to examine how *refugeedom*—the relationship between refugees, state, and society—interacts with *refugeehood*—the experience of becoming and being a refugee. ♦

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# Advancing Refugee and Citizenship Studies through Research on "Protracted" Refugees

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A major challenge and important trend in refugee and migration studies is moving beyond established legal definitions of refugees toward more comprehensive, richer conceptualizations. Recently, scholarship has proliferated on interrogating potential distinctions between refugees and other migrant groups (Mourad and Norman 2019), dismantling these distinctions (Hamlin 2021; Zuntz 2021), and forging new categories to capture areas of overlap between these groups (Betts 2013). Grounded research that draws from the experiences of refugee groups, explores trends in how receiving states forge policies toward them, and reimagines ways to mitigate the precarities these groups face—much like the research of the contributors to this symposium—can address the inadequacy of existing labels and conceptual frameworks in capturing empirical realities.

Cases from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) are, unfortunately, excellent sites from which to conduct this research, with diverse refugee groups (e.g., Sahrawis, Palestinians, Syrians, Iraqis, Eritreans, Sudanese, Somalis, Afghans, Yemenis) in diverse receiving states (e.g., Algeria, Egypt, Sudan, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Israel, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, Iran). These cases, most of which in-

volve groups remaining refugees for generations, highlight the importance of developing concepts and theories of “protracted refugee groups.” This brief essay will explore paths for conceptualizing protracted refugee groups and then consider the ways that researching such actors can advance not only refugee but also citizenship studies.

## Existing Definitions of Protracted Refugee Groups

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) defines protracted refugee situations as “those where more than 25,000 refugees from the same country of origin have been in exile in a given low- or middle-income host country for at least five consecutive years” (UNHCR 2022, 20). They also are those where refugees are “without immediate prospects for implementation of durable solutions,” which include repatriation, resettlement, or local integration (Milner 2014, 3). Although UNHCR recognizes that the 25,000 threshold is a “crude measure” (UNHCR 2004, 2), it uses this definition to specify 15.9 million UNHCR refugees—74% of the global UNHCR refugee population—as protracted (UNHCR 2022, 20).

The focus on UNHCR refugees reflects that the protracted refugee definition relies on the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees to define the term “refugee.” In Article 1, Section A(2) of the Convention, a refugee is a person who as:

“a result of events occurring before 1 January 1951<sup>1</sup> and owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it” (UNHCR 2010, 14).

The 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees then expanded the temporal and geographical scope of this definition beyond 1951 and Europe, respectively, by omitting these conditions but otherwise preserving the

definition.<sup>2</sup>

However, key groups have remained outside this definition,<sup>3</sup> the most prominent of which is Palestinian refugees from the 1948 Arab-Israeli War who fall under the mandate of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).<sup>4</sup> These Palestinian refugees are not defined in law, and their status has relied on UNRWA’s provisional definition of who can receive its assistance (Takkenberg 1998, 68; Feldman 2007, 134).<sup>5</sup> The exclusion of UNRWA refugees from the Convention reflects the active efforts and preferences of Arab states in 1951 “to absolve themselves of the burden of caring for Palestinian refugees” (Hajj 2016, 12–15). Moreover, many MENA states are not parties to the Convention or its Protocol.<sup>6</sup> These divergences from the international refugee regime highlight the critical lens needed when studying refugees in the region.

1 Where “events occurring before 1 January 1951” meant “either: (a) ‘events occurring in Europe before 1 January 1951’; or (b) ‘events occurring in Europe or elsewhere before 1 January 1951’, and each Contracting State shall make a declaration at the time of signature, ratification or accession, specifying which of these meanings it applies for the purpose of its obligations under this Convention.”

2 However, a signatory could expressly maintain the geographical restriction of the original Convention (e.g., as Turkey did).

3 Other non-European refugee populations also were excluded from the 1951 Convention (Feldman 2007: 133), including those in India and Pakistan (Hamlin 2021: 44).

4 Specifically, as UNRWA (n.d.) explains on its website, “The Convention does not apply to Palestine refugees ‘who are at present receiving from [UNRWA] protection or assistance,’ unless ‘such protection or assistance has ceased for any reason, without the position of such persons being definitively settled in accordance with the relevant resolutions adopted by the General Assembly,’ in which case they ‘shall ipso facto be entitled to the benefits of the Convention.’”

5 This definition generally has defined Palestine refugees as “persons whose normal place of residence was Palestine during the period 1 June 1946 to 15 May 1948, and who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict.” It also includes the descendants of male (though not female) Palestine refugees. See <https://www.unrwa.org/palestine-refugees> for UNRWA’s current definition as well as Takkenberg 1998 and Albanese and Takkenberg 2020 for an in-depth analysis of Palestinians in international law.

6 Nine states that are parties to the Convention and Protocol include Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Israel, Morocco, Sudan, Tunisia, Turkey, and Yemen. Eleven states that are not parties include Libya, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Oman, Bahrain, Kuwait, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria.

## Paths for New Definitions

The deficiencies of the Convention's legal refugee definition highlight one of the ways we can deepen our understanding of protracted refugees to open new lines of research and strengthen its analytical leverage. As academic scholars<sup>7</sup>, we do not have to limit our categorization of protracted refugee groups—and refugees in general—as based on whether any or all individuals within that group have legal refugee status according to the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol. We can instead categorize refugees more broadly as people in need of a new place of residence, either temporarily or permanently, due to the brutality of their previous government or its inadequacy in protecting their physical security or vital subsistence needs (Gibney 2004, 7). From there, we can distinguish whether protracted refugee groups completely, partially, or do not fall under the Convention definition (if such a differentiation is important for the research question at hand). We also can assess whether these refugees crossed an international border as well as what kind of political entity displaced them (e.g., empire, mandate, colonial government, state, or sub-national government). This approach allows for a more comprehensive study of refugees as an analytical (versus strictly legal) category, while still distinguishing refugees as a specific type of migrant group (and protracted refugees as a type of refugee group).

In addition, we can conceptualize different extents of “protractedness” by differentiating between those displaced for multiple generations and those who just became protracted. Such distinctions can impact both

the experiences of a refugee group and the policies receiving states adopt toward them. For example, highly protracted groups can forge and occupy a status between citizen and foreigner. This in-between status can give highly protracted refugee groups citizen-like rights, duties, and senses of belonging despite lacking nationality (i.e., legal citizen status) in that state (Frost Forthcoming), as I discuss in more detail below.

We also can evaluate protracted refugee groups based on their size. Groups that comprise a considerable portion of the receiving country's population likely are harder to ignore than those that comprise a small minority. In other words, governments may be more likely to act, rather than be “unwilling to act,” when refugee groups are relatively large and visible (Jacobsen 1996, 658), which might make “indifferent” or “ambivalent” policies less feasible (Norman 2018; 2020). In these cases, states can be forced to recognize and adopt policies toward protracted refugee groups. My ongoing work on the adoption of “intentionally ambiguous” policies highlights one approach state leaders can take to respond to policymaking imperatives by splitting a policy into, and saying different things with, its law and implementation components (Frost 2020a). This includes ambiguous policies that are simultaneously inclusive in law and exclusionary in implementing regulations toward a group, as seen, after 1988, with Jordanian nationality revocations targeted toward Palestinian refugees who were displaced from the West to the East Bank after the

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<sup>7</sup> This approach presents many more practical problems for those litigating the rights of asylum seekers and refugees and using legal approaches to advocate for groups that do fit the Convention's definition. I focus here on what we can do as scholars to capture empirical realities and thoughtfully, but carefully, push back on existing legal systems.

1967 War (Frost and Brown 2020).<sup>8</sup> It also includes ambiguous policies that are exclusionary in law and inclusive in implementing regulations, as seen with the Jordanian passports distributed to Palestinian refugees displaced to Jordan from Gaza after the 1967 War (Frost 2020a).<sup>9</sup> Other examples of duplicitous policymaking responses include adopting informal, ad-hoc policies (Natter 2021), outsourcing a group's rights to other states (Lori 2019), and delegating refugee management to international organizations (Abdelaaty 2021; Norman 2020).

Another way to categorize protracted refugee groups is based on the primary source of their protractedness. These sources could include ongoing war, uncontrolled violence, the absence of a comprehensive peace settlement, political persecution, or environmental degradation in the sending state. Variation in these sources can shape whether protracted groups believe repatriation is feasible and the extent to which they want to integrate in a receiving state. They also may influence the traits receiving communities attribute to the group, such as being more or less “deserving” and “vulnerable” (Hamlin 2021, 3). These sources also can influence when the receiving state labels a protracted refugee group as “refugees,” which can privilege them in terms of their access to a sustained legal residence and greater protections from deportation, but it also can limit their access to work and ownership, particularly if they must live in a refugee camp.

These four dimensions, namely internation-

al legal status, extent of protractedness, size of the group, and source of protractedness, suggest starting points for distinguishing between different types of protracted refugees and identifying how these types could align with distinct experiences and policies in receiving states. Deeper conceptualizations of protracted refugee groups also can inform scholarship on refugee choices to pursue onward migration, become involved with violent groups, or assimilate in their receiving state as well as on host community attitudes or donor responses toward different types of refugee groups. Likewise, further research in this area can help reveal more feasible approaches to improving the rights and everyday lives of protracted refugees in MENA and beyond.

### **New Avenues for Researching Protracted Refugees and Citizenship**

Greater study of protracted refugee groups as a distinct and widespread form of refugee also holds exceptional potential to enrich our understandings of citizenship. To start, large and highly protracted refugee groups can challenge clear distinctions between being refugees and being citizens in the receiving country (Feldman 2007; Barnett 2001), this pertains to both groups who receive access to nationality, such as “non-traditional” refugees (Shevel 2011, 25), and groups who lack nationality but form citizen-like relationships with the host state and community. For example, noncitizen protracted refugees highlight how we can study migrants as “*internal* others, who are not necessarily treated as

<sup>8</sup> Jordan gave all Palestinian refugees displaced from the Mandate of Palestine to Jordanian-controlled territories between 1948 and 1954 full Jordanian nationality by law and implementation in 1949 and 1954. The implementation of this nationality policy did not change until after Jordan's legal and administrative disengagement from the West Bank in 1988. After the disengagement, regulations from the Ministry of Interior created conditions, not found in the nationality law, to revoke the Jordanian nationality of Palestinian groups.

<sup>9</sup> These refugees never received access to Jordanian passports in law, but Ministry of Interior regulations enabled their distribution in implementation, starting in 1967.

foreigners” (Klotz 2013, 56, emphasis in original), and as such, are sometimes portrayed as fifth columns (Frost 2022). Despite pioneering research on in-between statuses in a variety of contexts—for example “denizens” in Europe (Turner 2016; Joppke 1999), “semi-citizenship” in the United States (Cohen 2009), “the grey areas of citizenship” in East Asia (Chung 2017, 448), and “precarious” citizenship in the Arab Gulf (Lori 2017; 2019)—most scholarship still equates citizenship with nationality. Disentangling nationality from other components of citizenship, such as sets of rights and duties, senses of belonging, and citizen acts or practices, can help in understanding how diverse population groups relate to the state and to each other.

Relatedly, studying protracted refugee groups can more effectively bring migration and citizenship studies in dialogue with each other. Despite existing beneath one subfield, citizen and migrant groups often are not studied together. This occurs even though—particularly in more authoritarian and less wealthy contexts—the rights of “native” citizens and non-citizen migrants can look remarkably similar in practice. Comparisons between these groups can illuminate how the “rightless” can include citizens and noncitizens (Hamlin 2021, 159; Arendt 1943) as well as similar patterns in rights, where citizens and noncitizens both have more social and economic rights than they do civil and political (Frost and Shteiwi 2018). Such similarities highlight the benefits of breaking down state responses to protracted refugee groups by policy area—versus as one over-arching response—in order to capture the complex combinations of rights that characterize protracted refugee groups’ everyday lives.

Lastly, greater attention to protracted refu-

gees can reveal the impacts their presence can have on different aspects of citizenship in their host states. For example, protracted refugees can shape citizen demands on the state (Baylouny 2020), the content and repertoires of protest (Schwedler 2022), civil society organizations (Brand 1988), women’s nationality rights (Frost 2020b), the implementation of naturalization policies (Frost 2020c), and state responses to new refugee groups (Frost 2021). Further research particularly could expand these studies, which focus primarily on the Levant, to cases in North Africa and the Gulf states.

Overall, rigorous research on protracted refugees can help advance conceptualizations of citizenship as well as better capture and explain empirical realities on the ground. In addition, this research opens up diverse new lines of research for junior scholars to explore and advance. For those interested in cross-regional comparisons, protracted refugee research, unfortunately, presents many opportunities, with numerous cases globally of large, highly protracted refugee groups, including those in Bangladesh, India, Thailand, Nepal, China, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya, Serbia, Ecuador, and Venezuela. Further, with 74 percent of UNHCR and 100 percent of UNRWA refugees considered protracted (UNHCR 2022, 20), developing concepts and theories of protracted refugee groups is not only academically fruitful but also acutely policy relevant. ♦

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# Our Comeback Quotient: Resurrecting Networks of Reciprocity in the Field of Refugee Studies

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While reading *The Comeback Quotient*<sup>1</sup>, I learned that successful endurance athletes make three important choices when under extreme duress. Fitzgerald (2020) says they:

- 1) Accept the full disaster they face and recognize that there is, in fact, a serious challenge.
- 2) Embrace the catastrophic situation rather than spend energy spinning wheels or wishing it away.
- 3) Address the disaster dynamically, in the moment, using their existing skillset and tools.

According to Fitzgerald (2020), this “comeback quotient” ensures athletes are able to return time and again from setbacks, improve incrementally over time, and persist for the long term. It occurred to me that it might also serve as a useful milestone for resurrecting academic and community networks in the field of Middle East and North Africa (MENA) refugee studies.

## Step 1: Admit that we are in the midst of a “network collapse” in the field of refugee studies.

The field of MENA refugee studies is in the midst of a “network collapse” due to pandemic safety restrictions that make field-based work nearly impossible. As Allam et al. (2021) note, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing challenges and created new barriers to research in the MENA region. However, the inability to travel is not just bad because we cannot meet communities where they are, hear their voices, or let them inform our work (Laitin 2020). It is a catastrophe for new researchers because they have not had the opportunity to develop the academic and community networks that scholars later rely on in their careers to facilitate future research agendas.

I was struck by Amaney Jamal’s chapter in *Stories from the Field* where she notes that Middle East politics has, over the years, shifted away from “fieldwork-based data acquisition” to “acquisition of data from the field.” She notes that it may seem like semantics, but it is not (Jamal 2020, 217). According to

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<sup>1</sup> Sometimes, post-tenure, you get to read for the pure fun of it. Certainly, I am not a great runner but I am a good, steady long-distance runner who aspires to continue trudging forward at my average pace for decades to come. Reading about how amazing athletes accomplish extraordinary feats in *The Comeback Quotient* inspires me to ‘keep runnin.’

Jamal,

“Our discipline is moving in a direction that incentivizes data acquisition from the field rather than field-work based data acquisition, and this momentum has consequences for how we conduct research- and for how our colleagues in the field perceive our research- but also deprives our discipline of some of the positive externalities linked to fieldwork, such as network building” (Jamal 2020, 218).

In her chapter, Jamal shares how her expansive Rolodex of friendships and contacts has served her well in getting out of sticky situations. In one example, she secured the quick release of junior researchers from a Jordanian jail by calling on a good friend that assured her “there must be a misunderstanding” (Jamal 2020, 216). In my own experience, building community networks with Palestinians helped my early research on institutional formation and property rights in refugee camps develop in novel directions not anticipated by existing theories (Hajj 2020, 83-87; Hajj 2016). In fact, I adopted the motto, “Let go, and let Ali” for releasing control of the research process and opening myself to the unexpected lessons that Ali, a Palestinian refugee respondent, and other refugees could teach me (Hajj 2020, 86).

These kinds of anecdotes hint at the importance of field-based research for the cultivation of academic and community networks. These networks are not the result of academic or personal entitlements (Jamal 2020, 219). Rather, they are developed by investing years in the field (Jamal 2020, 219). Most graduate students initially rely on their faculty advisor’s networks to begin research. However, an important part of the long-term success of

the field and one’s own research agenda is for junior scholars to build new networks for their own students (Jamal 2020, 219). Cultivating the network is critical for the long term resilience and robustness of our field.

## **Step 2: Embrace the network collapse, do not deny it.**

The collapse of networks is not simply solved by dictating an immediate return to the field. Thinking like that denies the reality of the pandemic and its concomitant challenges (Allam et al 2021). Instead, the collapse requires us to accept that things are bad and reimagine how scholars might build networks of reciprocity, a cooperative action marked by the mutual exchange of favors and services, in the absence of field-based opportunities. Digital spaces, commonly theorized as hotbeds of *fake news*, filled with *smombies* (smart phone zombies), and rife with *slacktivists* (people that perform activism on an issue online but do not take action in their actual communities), might, in fact, serve as a site for generating reciprocity (Hajj 2021).

In *Networked Refugees: Palestinian Reciprocity and Remittances in the Digital Age*, I found that refugees utilize digital platforms to motivate reciprocity and informally seek aid and connection with their transnational diaspora communities. In the absence of political party, host state<sup>2</sup>, and aid agency support, Palestinians crafted digital sites patterned on kinship ties where they communicate needs and devise collective solutions for solving them. In effect, these digital sites serve as a place to foment and cement reciprocity, which I measured by charting the exchange of economic and social remittances that flow into and out of the camps. Based on

<sup>2</sup> Kelsey Norman’s (2020) work does an excellent job of describing the opportunities and challenges of the “reluctant reception” refugees receive in the MENA.

surveys conducted with Palestinians in the diaspora, interviews with those inside Nahr al-Bared refugee camp in Lebanon, and data pulled from online community spaces, these findings emphasize the productivity and resilience of digital networks in times of crisis.

For example, in late May 2019, several images of a badly burned child from Nahr al-Bared refugee camp, located in Northern Lebanon, popped up on the Samoie village Facebook page<sup>3</sup>, accompanied by a short narrative of the tragedy. The young boy had been playing near his father's workshop when an accident occurred, and he was burned on over 80 percent of his body. He was expected to survive with proper medical attention including skin grafts and physical rehabilitation. However, UNRWA medical aid would not cover all the costs of the procedures, and private hospitals nearby in Tripoli, Lebanon, require payment in advance. The initial costs of treatment were estimated at roughly US \$20,000. To bridge the gap in services in the refugee camp, the Samoie village Facebook users appealed to the diaspora network. Astonishingly, in less than a day, the transnational network of Palestinians from Samoie met the young boy's needs and funded his grafts and rehabilitation.

The community did not cling to some unrealistic wish that a crippled UNRWA would swoop in to help them or that Lebanon's rejection of *tawtin*, or integration, would magically disappear. Palestinians accepted the failure of existing welfare and aid networks and used novel technologies, like Facebook pages and WhatsApp groups, to activate a digital network of reciprocity that could meet their needs in times of crisis. I think the field of refugee studies can learn a lot about how to

resurrect academic and community networks from the Palestinian refugee example.

### **Step 3: Respond dynamically to the collapse of field based academic and community networks with our existing tools and skillsets.**

What tools and skillsets might we use to re-imagine academic and community networks for MENA refugee studies scholars amid the dearth of opportunities and limitations for field based research?

Of course, previous APSA MENA newsletters have done a very good job talking about new approaches that may support remote data collection. In the Spring 2021 issue, Scott (2021) uses GIS tools to map the flow of humanitarian aid. Furthermore, Kubinec (2021) offered thoughts on new methodological approaches which could strengthen the use of online surveys. Greenwald and Abrahams (2021) offered ideas on using geospatial data to study Palestine. Moreover, Parreira (2021) showed how satellite imagery and nighttime light data can be used to explore state capacity, or lack thereof, in the MENA region.

Though these tools are producing amazing research, they still do not generate reciprocal academic and community networks. If one ever encountered trouble making sense of remotely collected findings or needed a specific question answered about how business *really* unfolds on the ground in a refugee camp, one would still likely need to 'phone a friend' just like Jamal (2020) did in Jordan. In much the same way that Palestinian refugees responded dynamically to their crises, we need to embrace the anomie of the pandemic and find ways to replicate her Rolodex by crafting

<sup>3</sup> The majority of pre-1948 Palestinian villages have their own Facebook pages (Hajj 2021).

digital sites patterned on shared scholarly concerns and values that may, in turn, foment reciprocity.

In my experience, the Critical Refugee Studies Collective (CRSC) website served as a fantastic place to connect to a network of scholars, students, activists, and artists during the pandemic. It was a four-year initiative (2017-2021) that allowed the University of California system to serve as a central intellectual space and resource for critical research, teaching, and public initiatives that address the concerns, perspectives, knowledge production, and global imaginings of refugees. Researchers (even those outside the University of California system, like myself) could submit blog posts, engage with their interactive digital refugee story map, and connect with community organizations working with refugees all over the world. Coming from a small liberal arts college with limited opportunities for scholarly networking, *especially in the pandemic*, I was able to tap into the Collective to develop a wide network of reciprocity.

For example, the Collective introduced me to a book series and editor for my second research project, inspired a series of phone and Zoom conversations with the activist and MENA political cartoonist Sara Qaed who later illustrated my book cover, and launched email correspondences with new graduate students in the field. I did not just “take” from the group. I tried to give back. I participated remotely in a graduate student summer research conference in summer 2021, read dissertation manuscripts, and offered constructive (*I hope*) feedback and encouragement. The Collective shared common values about *how* to ethically work with refugee communities, linked scholars to community groups working with refugees, and connected

researchers to people that could help them conduct and publish that research, all while the pandemic still raged. In summary, the Collective provided me with a digital Rolodex of refugee scholars and community organizations that facilitated a host of meaningful, reciprocal relationships.

In fact, if there is enough interest, this *MENA Politics* refugee studies symposium might transform beyond a single publication. It might pattern itself on the Critical Refugee Studies Collective and serve in a similar role for researchers, junior scholars, and graduate students. Building on the existing framework established by the Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS), a subgroup of similarly focused refugee studies researchers could develop. Like the Palestinian refugee community that I have learned so much from, we can respond dynamically to the collapse of our academic and community networks by engaging in scholarly reciprocity in digital spaces. ♦

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# Is Research with Migrants and Refugees Inherently Extractive?

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A growing body of work on the ethics of researching migration and refugees discusses fatigue among oversampled refugee populations (Karooma 2019; Omata 2020), why refugees might construct specific narratives that they believe researchers want to hear (Arar 2022), the challenges of field research for particular groups such as Syrian nationals (Masterson and Mourad 2019), and how IRB requirements protect universities rather than interviewees (Luetz 2019). In this article I consider my own journey over the last decade of conducting qualitative, interview-based research with migrants and refugees in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) to weigh some of the benefits, as well as numerous risks, that this type of work entails.

## **Understandings of Policy Informed by Lived Experiences**

The core argument of my first book, *Reluctant Reception* (2020), is that the academic literature on migration in the Global South typically mistakes the absence of formal policy as neglect or limited state capacity. In reality, an absence of formal policy often reflects what I call “strategic indifference” driven by domestic political incentives and geostrategic imperatives. The three states I examined – Egypt, Morocco and Turkey – experienced

increasing migration in the last decades of the twentieth century and first decade of the twenty-first century. By proclaiming to be indifferent to this development, the host states invited international organizations and local NGOs to step in and provide services to migrant and refugee populations on the state's behalf.

By allowing migrants and refugees to integrate locally into large informal economies, and by allowing organizations to provide basic services, these host countries receive international credibility while only exerting minimal state resources. However, the states were still aware of, and had developed relationships with, the international and domestic organizations providing services, regulating how and whether these organizations could operate, monitoring their activities to ensure they did not cross red-lines when it came to security issues and state sovereignty, and encouraging the use of international funding to not only benefit migrants and refugees but also citizens.

While my book primarily focused on the host state, the lived experiences of migrants and refugees residing in Egypt, Morocco, and Turkey formed the backbone of my thinking for the project, allowing me to construct policy typologies from the “bottom up.” Specifi-

cally, I carried out fieldwork across the three countries between 2012 and 2015, conducting more than 80 interviews with migrants and refugees of various nationalities, in addition to approximately 50 interviews with elite actors.

The positive feedback that I received on the book revolved around this methodological approach. One incredibly generous review claimed that the stories and narratives relayed in the book, “offer a model for how political scientists can present rigorous research while also bringing to life its significance for the people under study” (Pearlman 2021). But it was also this methodological approach that resulted in ethically ambiguous moments while in the “field.” Research on refugees is meant to meet the dual imperative of both adhering to academic standards while simultaneously improving the lives of refugees (Jacobsen and Landeau 2003), and, as with any type of research that involves speaking to people, the benefits are meant to outweigh any risks. Yet I felt extremely conflicted about whether the alleged benefit of publishing an “informed” academic book drawn from the experiences of migrants and refugees compensates for the inherent extraction involved in said research. I provide two examples below.

### **Navigating the Murky Role of “Impartial Researcher”**

In 2014, as I was interviewing a representative at a United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) office in Egypt, I asked about the refugees lining up outside the office whom I had noticed on my way inside. She smiled at me conspiratorially, informing me that, “There’ll always be people who wait out there, no matter how well or not well the system works. They think that if they’re there phys-

ically, then we’ll move through their case faster. Sometimes they even sleep out there.”

After my meeting, I stood outside the UNHCR office checking my phone and was approached by a man who wanted to show me his yellow UNHCR card, designating his status as an asylum seeker. He started explaining his situation—how long he had been in Egypt and how he hoped to move onward—and asked for help. As he was speaking, more men and women gathered around me in a circle. As one person finished relaying their story—the difficulties they faced in Egypt and how badly they needed to be resettled—another individual would come and begin telling me his or hers. Most began by showing me their blue or yellow UNHCR cards or sometimes even health documents and medical receipts. Reading the dates on the UNHCR cards was heartbreaking. A blue or yellow card lists each time a person has met with someone at the UNHCR, and one woman’s card read: 2009, 2011, 2014. She told me that her next appointment with the UNHCR was not scheduled until 2019.

I tried offering the names and phone numbers of the organizations I had interviewed during the course of my research in Egypt, but those gathered around me responded despondently, saying they had tried the various organizations and no longer trusted them. Those with health problems had already visited the leading international health organization providing services to refugees in Cairo, and those with legal difficulties had already tried the Egyptian nonprofit with lawyers on staff who can sometimes assist asylum seekers. Even though I tried to explain my role as a researcher, these individuals likely saw me—a white American woman—standing outside the UNHCR office as someone who could offer some better option than those

that had thus far failed them.

In my book, I frame these moments as “accidental ethnography” (Wedeen 2010; Fujii 2015) and explain how an ethnographic sensibility helped me better understand power hierarchies, the importance of networks, and the complexity of the system that migrants and refugees face in attempting to access services and assistance. While this is true, the benefit I derived – a richer and more sensitive text – seems woefully inadequate in the face of my inability to provide direct assistance to individuals who clearly need more help than a friendly ear.

Later in 2015, while conducting fieldwork in Morocco, I crossed the alleged divide between “impartial researcher” and “concerned human” by providing direct assistance, though it backfired. Throughout my research I used snowball sampling, asking one respondent whether they knew of other individuals who might agree to speak with me. In Rabat, one interviewee from Mali gave my contact information to a friend whom I will call Issa. Issa agreed to meet me at his home in Taqadum, a traditionally low-income neighborhood known to house migrants and refugees but otherwise populated by poorer Moroccans. Issa’s house was divided into three apartments. More than fifty migrants – mostly men, but also several women – lived in the building in total. The house was damp and dark, with three bedrooms on the bottom floor and two bedrooms shared between fifteen young men on the top floor.

On the bottom floor, I observed a makeshift kitchen—a space next to the stairs with a large pot resting above an open fire. I failed to ask whether communal meals were the norm, but it appeared that way and Issa told me that people took turns cooking. As a graduate

student at the time worried about correctly following protocols and adhering to the disciplinary norm of maintaining an “unbiased” research sample, I knew I was not supposed to “reward” or unethically compensate interview subjects. But, I could not stop thinking about the conditions under which these fifty individuals were living.

I decided to return a few days after interviewing Issa with provisions from the nearby market. While the members of the household were grateful for the food and produce, it became clear that the household did not function as I had understood. Those who were home at the time carefully divided up the food between the upper and lower apartments and then among individuals, doling out handfuls of rice and vegetables. I stood by watching awkwardly, as I had not bought enough food for all fifty individuals and had naively assumed that it was shared communally. Even when I abandoned the role that I thought I was supposed to inhabit – impartial researcher – my attempt at generosity was woefully inadequate and based on incorrect assumptions. Thinking back, nothing I had read, nor the limited training I had received during the “fieldwork” portion of the Institute for Qualitative Research Methods, had prepared me for making on-the-spot ethical decisions about how best to assist the communities from whom I was benefiting, whether and under what circumstances to provide material support or, in other circumstances, whether or not to loan seemingly desperate individuals money.

Because of the extreme inequality between researcher and interviewee, I have shied away in recent projects from interviewing migrants and refugees directly, focusing instead on other actors involved in migration governance, including international organizations,

NGOs, and government figures. In a project examining the domestic impact of migration management aid with Nicholas Micinski, we are interviewing key informants at the EU, UN, and domestic government agencies, as well as representatives from civil society and refugee-led organizations, with the explicit desire not to force the recitation of victim narratives or risk the retraumatization of refugees. In a recent comparative study of Mexico as a new country of asylum, I chose to interview civil society organizations that work with migrants and asylum seekers rather than migrants and asylum seekers themselves.

And yet, having just concluded fieldwork in Mexico City, I can say that the project felt more hollow than previous studies. I was not able to understand policy from the “bottom up” as I had with my book, nor do I have a strong sense of policy implementation derived from experiences of individuals whose opinions matter most. Having come full circle in my thinking, I now believe that minimizing research with migrants and refugees is not the answer. Rather, we can take stock of and apply lessons from the growing literature on ethical fieldwork with migrants and displaced populations, as well as the literature and courses available on research in fragile political contexts, to move forward as a field.

### **Moving Forward: Resources and Best Practices**

There are numerous examples of careful, ethical work – much of which explicitly discusses methodological approaches and self-reflective practices – when it comes to research on migrants and refugees. In the MENA context, this includes recent publications by Hajj (2016), Stel (2020), Pearlman (2017), Janmyr and Mourad (2018), and Arar and Fitzgerald (2022), to name only a few. Rana Khoury

(2020) and Lea Müller-Funk (2021) have also written excellent articles explaining the mechanisms of survey techniques appropriate for refugee populations, both of whom draw on their experience surveying Syrian nationals. And Melina Beloni’s (2019) careful study of Eritreans residing in Ethiopia, Sudan and Italy contains an appendix on the “backstage” of conducting research with asylum seekers and refugees that can be emulated for book-length projects.

The growing body of work on the ethics of conducting research in fragile political contexts also offers a number of insights and resources directly applicable to research with migrants and refugees. Cronin-Furman and Lake’s (2018) article expounds upon the ethical dilemmas that researchers are likely to face in post-conflict environments and offers a number of guiding questions that researchers can ask themselves before and during fieldwork as well as after leaving the field. Lake and Parkinson (2017) explore the consequences of failing – as an academy – to provide adequate fieldwork preparedness training, and together the authors have since established the Advancing Research on Conflict (ARC) Consortium which, among other activities, provides a week-long summer training for graduate students. Finally, Thaler (2021) argues that positivist research in violent settings should draw from interpretivist methodologies in order to reconcile some of the ethical dilemmas that researchers are likely to face.

Lastly, I will share two ways that I have attempted to counter the extractive quality of conducting research with migrants and refugees. First, even if an IRB does not allow a researcher to directly compensate interviewees during the course of fieldwork it may still be possible to provide other forms of assistance

after the conclusion of a study. One former interviewee with whom I developed a friendship was eventually resettled to the United States, and asked to list me as a job reference. Another former interviewee asked for a letter of recommendation in order to apply for Columbia University's scholarship for displaced people, and ultimately received it. A third eventually found his way to Germany and asked me to connect him with my networks in Berlin in order to help with housing. While maintaining close contact with every interviewee is likely infeasible, staying in touch with, and checking in on, interviewees with whom you develop rapport may lead to unexpected opportunities to provide assistance in the future.

Second, scholars can consider ways to expand the reach of their research beyond academic audiences. Directly interviewing migrants and refugees as part of my research helped me correct my own thinking about the possibilities that are available to these populations living in MENA host states. All too often—in the interest of highlighting the securitized borders and violent policing practices that keep migrants and refugees from accessing Western states (Helton 2007; Jones 2016)—individuals who do not make it past such borders and instead live in “transit” countries are dismissed by researchers and the media. Because they reside in states where their rights may not be recognized in law and formal policy, they are perceived not to have agency and unable to contribute in important ways to their temporary host state.

Such a perspective discounts the experiences and activities of the vast majority of my interviewees, who managed to access livelihoods (albeit usually informally), found ways of sending their children to school, formed communities, and engaged in social

and sometimes political activities. With this understanding of migrants and refugees as fully-fledged actors possessing social and political agency, I felt it was incumbent to translate my academic research into more widely accessible publications with the explicit aim of changing narratives around migration, if not policy. Policy-oriented writing may not be for everyone, but in an era when migration is highly politicized and securitized and when migrants and refugees themselves are dehumanized, small actions at the local level, such as giving a public lecture at a nearby library, community center, or religious organization, or writing an op-ed in a local newspaper, can help to change the wider debate.

The stories I have shared from my own experience with fieldwork are not unique. Likely everyone involved in face-to-face research with migrants and refugees has had similar experiences that expose the underlying power inequalities between researcher and respondent. Of course, those dynamics are not the same for all researchers. Scholars without Western passports must themselves contend with onerous visa regimes, and scholars of color or those with close ties to the communities they research may also face persecution from the governments of the countries they research (Bouka 2015).

I hope it is clear from this article that there are no easy answers to ethical questions surrounding research with migrants and refugees, in the MENA, or elsewhere in the Global South. Researchers will need to make the best assessments possible in individual circumstances. That said, there is a greater wealth of knowledge, and even additional courses available, than when I began this type of research a decade ago. While it may not be possible to entirely eliminate the extractive quality of research with migrants and refu-

gees, I believe there are a number of best practices and strong examples to minimize the potential for harm and to maximize potential benefits. ♦

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# The Academic and Policy Significance of Research on Service Provision in Refugee-Hosting Countries

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The study of distributive politics, public goods, and nonstate service provision in developing states has long been central to political science. A rich body of literature has examined ethnic diversity, electoral competitiveness, informal actors, the role of non-state and international actors, and center-periphery relations in explaining variation in communities' access to and quality of education, health facilities, water and sanitation, and key services (Alesina et. al 1999; Habyarimana et. al 2007; Tsai 2007; Baldwin 2013; Cammett 2014). Yet until recently, research on the politics and economics of service delivery specifically for refugee, migrant, and displaced communities has been relatively limited. Within the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) context, studies of service provision for refugee communities were conducted primarily by anthropologists and sociologists (Challand 2008; Wick 2008; Hanafi and Long 2010; Gabiam 2012).

The past decade, however, has seen increased interest by social scientists across disciplines in examining the consequences of rapid displacement for service provision and access to services in host communities. In addition, recent work has examined the political, economic, and behavioral effects of varying modes of service delivery and international

assistance for refugees and host community members. In the MENA region, the massive, ongoing internal and external displacement of approximately 13 million Syrians as a result of the 2012 civil war has been the key driver of this turn towards the study of service delivery for displaced and host communities. This number excludes the millions internally and externally displaced over the past 10 years from Yemen, Iraq, and other countries across the region (UNHCR 2022).

The growth in research on refugee-related service provision reflects a recognition of the academic significance of the political economy of service delivery and aid for refugees, migrants, and host communities. Mass displacement can present shocks to host state and nonstate service provision, pose policy challenges for host governments, and trigger shifts in domestic political dynamics. Understanding patterns of state and nonstate provision of both basic services including health, education, and water as well as programs aimed at increasing service access during refugee presences has significant implications for the study of distributive politics in developing states. The potential of transnational phenomena to shape domestic politics and distributive strategies is particularly applicable during refugee presences, which introduce both new international resources as well



as pressures.

This expansion of research is also a product of an increased emphasis by academic, state, multilateral, and private organizations on funding policy-relevant research on displacement. State donors such as the UK Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) and multilateral and private donors have dedicated funding towards research on refugee-related service delivery within academia (World Bank 2021; IPA 2022). Partnerships between academics and service providers themselves have become more common, particularly in conducting surveys and randomized control trials (RCTs).

The expansion of research on refugee-related service provision already promises to both tangibly improve access to services by vulnerable populations and address an understudied area within political science. In this piece, I examine some key successes of this growing body of work, while also highlight areas of consideration for future research. Moving forward, I argue that political scientists should focus on 1) addressing gaps in the study of international aid politicization and host state service delivery; 2) examining the different dynamics between research partnerships with local and international organizations; and 3) more centrally considering the relationship between Western resettlement and asylum policies and service delivery interventions in the MENA context. I propose that future studies of refugee-related service delivery overall need to be firmly contextualized in the power dynamics between refugees and service providers and the incentives involved in knowledge production. This is particularly the case in a global context of increasingly restrictive policies towards migrants, refugees, and asylum-seekers by many of the same states that fund refugee-related

research.

## Successes of the Field

As global forced displacement soared over the past decade—with over 100 million displaced as of May 2022—academic researchers rose to meet the challenge of both addressing serious existing academic gaps in the study of service delivery and conducting policy-relevant research. Such research has been marked by two significant positive developments: 1) an explicit focus on the political economy of refugee-related service delivery in weak state contexts; and 2) direct connections between researchers and international and local service providers.

Recent political science work in the MENA region has examined the politics of service delivery and assistance by international aid actors for displaced persons in fragile and developing states. This shift is particularly important given that over 86 percent of refugees were hosted in developing countries as of 2021. For example, Cammett and Şaşmaz (2022) find that neither secular nor non-secular provider discrimination affects health-care quality for Syrian refugees in Lebanon, while Lupieri (2020) highlights the limited role of aid in expanding healthcare access for refugees in Jordan. Dhingra (2022) and Scott (2019) examine the political economy of humanitarian responses and service delivery by INGOs for refugees in Jordan and Lebanon. Mourad (2017) and Norman (2020) have shown that state vacuums in service delivery for refugee populations can be deliberate, increasing the role of civil society and non-state actors. The role of local government in shaping refugee rights' has also been explored in articles by Kale and Erdoğan (2019) and Mourad (2017). Other work has explored the limits of state attempts to blame refugees for

impacts on the economy and public services (Alrababa'h et. al 2021), and the potential for political mobilization as a result of disparities illuminated by refugee presences (Baylouny 2020). Such work is characterized by explicit and implicit considerations of the nexus between refugee presences and migration and existing political science research on distributive politics, diversity, and external shocks.

A second promising development is that research partnerships between academics and international and local organizations have become more common over the past decade. Economists and political scientists have begun to utilize qualitative case studies, surveys, survey experiments, and randomized control trials (RCTs) that either evaluate existing service interventions or test the impacts of new interventions for displaced and host communities. The Syrian Refugee Life Study by Miguel et. al (2022) in Jordan tested the impact of shelter assistance for refugees on a range of outcomes in a partnership with the Norwegian Rescue Committee (NRC), while qualitative studies and RCTs by Blackwell et. al (2019) and Lehmann and Masterson (2020) in partnership with the International Rescue Committee examine the effects of cash assistance in Lebanon and Syria.

Impact evaluations have become increasing facts of life for international NGOs over the past 20 years, amidst a donor push for evidence-based programming as well as academic and practitioner concerns over knowledge gaps on aid effectiveness (Mitchell 2014; Easterly 2008). Such evaluations have most commonly taken place either by internal monitoring and evaluation units or third-party firms contracted by INGOs. However, direct partnerships with academics can significantly improve the rigor and generalizability of findings and relieve much-need-

ed bandwidth for service providers.

## **Areas Where More Effort Is Needed**

With the expansion of social science research on refugee-related service delivery across regions, certain subjects merit additional attention by scholars—related to both the substance and practice of research. First, important work has already explicitly focused on the politicization of international assistance and state responses towards refugees, demonstrating how states can leverage refugees for economic and policy concessions (Norman 2020; Tsourapas 2019; Kelberer 2017). However, the effects of international involvement on host state service delivery, the politics of refugee access to state services, or the attitudes and behaviors of citizens and elites towards the question of shared access to host or nonstate services remain relatively underexamined within refugee-related research in the MENA region.

In the MENA context in particular, a surge of both international and local actors attempting to fill in the chasms of already-weak state service provision has intensified following the Syrian civil war. Important work within political science has stressed the importance of examining the implications of nonstate service provision on political dynamics in developing states (Cammatt and MacLean 2014). Recent work has examined how the varying roles of national and local government in refugee access to services has created increased space for nonstate actors in service delivery (Mourad 2017; Norman 2020). Less research, however, has explored how this variation may shape the short or medium-term effects of refugee presences on state-led service delivery systems or host country distributive political dynamics, offering a fruitful avenue for

potential research for MENA scholars.

Second, research partnerships and connections with nonstate service providers such as IOs and INGOs represent an important step forward for research on service delivery in refugee-hosting contexts. Humanitarian organizations such as the International Rescue Committee, MercyCorps, the Norwegian Refugee Council, and others have increasingly collaborated with academics in conducting policy-relevant work that directly examines programs most often relied upon by refugees. Partnerships with large INGOs with dedicated research units ease the burden of academic-INGO partnerships, since these organizations are often already familiar with academic practices.

However, such partnerships can be at the expense of connections and work with local organizations already neglected by donors. While local organizations may face challenges in bandwidth and capacity to partner with researchers, they are also the actors that may benefit most from academic studies and knowledge-sharing. Amidst a global push to “decolonize” and “localize” aid, academics working on service delivery should make concerted efforts to engage local organizations and stakeholders. This engagement can take several forms: interview or observational-based research, direct partnership in evaluations and RCTs (though smaller organizations may require additional support or staff to manage RCTs), or the dissemination of research findings to actors involved in a study’s service sector.

Finally, both research partnerships with international organizations and the study of aid politicization relate to a key area that has been relatively neglected in the MENA context: the relationship between Western

resettlement and asylum policies and service delivery interventions. The rise of academic-INGO research partnerships is in many ways a direct result of “evidence-based policy” pushes within donor and INGO spaces in the past decade. Yet many of the primary research funders—such as the United Kingdom and European Union—have explicitly utilized foreign aid to MENA countries hosting refugees and asylum-seekers to prevent onward migration.

Deals with Turkey and Libya have been struck with the stated goal of improving refugee and asylum-seeker access to legal rights and basic services in exchange for tamping down irregular migration flows (European Parliament 2016; European Council 2022). For example, the 2016 EU-Turkey deal emphasized funding “concrete projects for refugees, notably in the field of health, education, infrastructure, food and other living costs” in Turkey and expanded access to the labor market for Syrians. In practice, however, scholars and policymakers have argued that the deals have undermined international law and actively harmed refugees and asylum-seekers (Amnesty International 2022; Lehner 2019; Eleftherakos et. al 2018). Examining the relationship between resettlement and asylum policies and host country service provision and access for refugees from the lens of international relations holds particular promise for MENA scholars. Within comparative politics, studying the political and economic implications of service and labor programs tied to such migration deals is increasingly possible over a decade after the start of the Syrian civil war and the mass displacement it caused.

## Conclusion

The increased scholarly interest in examining service provision in refugee contexts is an important step in contributing to an understudied area within political science with distinct policy implications. As this article has demonstrated, this new research agenda has been distinguished by direct partnerships with refugee service providers—both state and nonstate—and an explicit focus on the political economy of refugee-related service delivery in weak states. Moving forward, refugee-related research in the MENA region would benefit from increased substantive focus on the political implications of aid and effects on host state service provision and exploring the relationship between Western state resettlement and aid policy and refugee access to services in MENA hosting states. I also argue for increased inclusion of local nonstate service providers in both conducting research and disseminating findings.

Above all, researchers should consider the power dynamics embedded in the study of service delivery for often-marginalized refugee and displaced communities. Research on service delivery must consider that many refugees and vulnerable host community members participating in any study may depend on those services for survival, and there is an explicit hierarchy embedded in the relationships between researchers, service providers, and refugees. This concern is not new, and has been consistently raised by scholars of refugee studies (Parkinson 2019; Masterson and Mourad 2018). The very act of research on service provision for vulnerable communities is a form of extraction, with resources that could be utilized for direct service provision used instead for the production of knowledge. While this power dynamic requires a high bar of care by researchers, it

also underscores the deep importance of work that may improve access to and quality of crucial services for refugees and host communities reliant on these services. The expansion of research on refugee-related service delivery therefore represents a promising development within the field of political science. ♦

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# Research Symposium: New Directions in the Study of Gulf Politics

## Introduction

*Sean Yom*

This symposium features a cohort of researchers pursuing new directions in the subfield of Gulf studies. Western literature on the politics of the Persian or Arabian Gulf has long revolved around a few identifiable themes. One was rentier state theory, which drew a host of startling economic and institutional implications from the exploitation of hydrocarbon wealth—i.e., the so-called “resource curse.” Beyond the nexus of energy and politics, another was geopolitical struggle invariably involving Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the US, and driven by the tendency to construe local and regional interactions as strategic theater for great power conflict. Yet another was authoritarianism and democracy, which often peered deeply into the arcane workings of these ruling monarchies to explore how elites and regime institutions survived over time.

These themes still matter. Yet, over the past decade, new ideas have suffused the study of the Gulf. Partly catalyzed by the rise of Gulf-based universities and research centers—which have often counterbalanced Western-centric views of the region—and reflecting as well the subfield’s increasing interdisciplinarity, Gulf researchers today explore topics far beyond the resource curse, geostrategic conflict, and monarchical durability. Some provide a fresh take on the systemic position of the Gulf itself, which has traditionally been characterized as an exceptional place by which nation-states could emerge. Not so fast, Steve Monroe’s essay shows.

Monroe highlights the structural conditions and agential strategies by which stereotypical “small states” like Qatar, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates have not merely survived but flourished, particularly in an era where larger Arab states like Syria, Iraq, and Egypt have seen their stature and power collapse. His thesis is subversive. Whereas regional scholars previously saw Gulf states as inherently deficient given their exotic distinction *from* the West, Monroe suggests the opposite. The small Gulf principalities have followed a *European*-like pathway to stability—one where embeddedness in the global economy and other institutional underpinnings have helped resolve late developmental dilemmas.

Other scholars have begun their forays at the level of society. In the wider Gulf literature, issues of citizenship, migration, belonging, activism, and identity have catalyzed a new wave of research. No longer are Gulf societies, as some Westerners prejudicially imagined long ago, faceless monoliths defined by tribal atavism or religious conservatism. They are, instead, cauldrons of pluralism and change. Social forces are not necessarily revolutionary, but they are credible vectors of transformation. Courtney Freer, for example, investigates how Islamist mobilization in the Gulf operates at a different scale and through dissimilar logics than from the rest of the Arab world. In Gulf states where access to power is nonexistent under closed monarchical regimes, and where rentierist wealth

forecloses the provision of social welfare to gain popularity, Islamists ostensibly have their work cut out for them. Even so, Freer shows, Islamists have found ways to creatively influence some venues of public authority, such as education, and thereby rally support. They work *through* the state, not against it.

The same dynamism characterizes the issue of women's rights, as Yuree Noh shows. Leveraging public opinion data, Noh argues that state-driven initiatives to grant women more rights in countries like Saudi Arabia and the UAE—such as through social reforms and legislative visibility—elude easy explanation. To be sure, other scholars working on authoritarian feminism have long noted the irony of undemocratic rulers selectively empowering women for the supposed purpose of enhancing democracy. Noh begins with an even more basic quandary. While social scientists have long focused on how female voices respond to state-based reforms, they seldom consider how *everyone else in society* perceives them. The absence of robust attitudinal data means that assumptions are fraught with peril: for instance, if some Saudis deride Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman's social reforms, do they do so on basis of opposing his rule or resisting gender equality? We must answer such questions, not least because we—as a social scientific community—cannot deign to write about populations and communities whose most basic norms are still mysteries.

Finally, contemporary Gulf specialists are also upending the conventional wisdom of classical theories. Jessie Moritz's contribution, in this vein, tackles one of the holiest presumptions of rentier state theory—that profuse wealth funded by lavish oil and gas rents results in relatively demobilized citizenries and domestic peace. Rentier citizens

tend to protest during hard times, when free-flowing jobs and public services trickle to a halt; otherwise, they happily surrender their autonomy under the materialist umbrella of co-optation. Moritz disagrees, and rightly so. Plenty of recent protests, from Saudi Arabia to Bahrain to Oman, show that citizens mobilize against state authority *despite* the lure of material benefits that await them should they cease opposition. In these cases, some protesters saw their sub-national identities or sectarian affiliations as a vital basis of dissent; others saw political and social change as a much higher goal than any economic payoff. Calculations about whether to mobilize or not, in other words, are driven not by a brutal, zero-sum tradeoff involving rentierist benefits; they are, as we might expect in everyday life, far more complicated.

These four essays only scratch the surface of Gulf studies today, which builds upon the core themes of past literature to expound upon novel topics. Theoretically creative and empirically deep, such scholarship is paving a fecund path for new findings. I am, hence, excited to see what the next decade beholds for this subfield. ♦



# Small Gulf States in World Markets

Steve L Monroe



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Twenty-five years ago, Ian Lustick blamed the absence of great regional powers for the Middle East's mounting developmental challenges (Lustick 1997). Colonialism and foreign intervention prevented large states like Egypt, Iraq and Syria from evolving into regional powers like Germany or the United Kingdom (UK). This robbed the region of the large-scale state-building wars that catalyzed European nation building and industrialization. Instead, the region's large states remained weak and subdued. Defeat in the Six Day War and Iraq's routing in the 1990 Gulf War epitomized their 20th century fragility.

If the failure of large states cast a pall over the Arab world a quarter century ago, then small Gulf states – Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – crowd the narrowing spotlight of economic development in the region today. And while large European states' historical development bears little resemblance to their Arab peers, some of the institutional underpinnings of the prosperity experienced by small European states exist in the Gulf. As in Europe, open markets and large public sectors have embedded small Gulf states into the global economy, pairing economic integration with political stability. This has helped Gulf regimes capitalize on their vast resource abundance, powering unprecedented prosperity over the

past half century.

## The Rise of Small Gulf States

The 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar is one of many markers of small Gulf states' economic ascendance. Almost two hundred Fortune 500 companies have regional headquarters in Dubai, making it the city with by far the largest corporate presence in the Middle East and Africa (Arabian Business 2017). Small Gulf states host two of the world's ten busiest airports (Airports Council International 2022), over fifty branches of international university campuses (Kinser and Lane 2022), and the only Louvre outside of France. Small Gulf states' developmental success extends beyond glitzy stadiums and college campuses. They lead the region in the United Nations Development Programs (UNDP) Human Development Index, an index that measures development in terms of educational, health and economic outcomes. All of the Gulf's small states obtained the index's "high levels of human development" in 2020 (United Nations Development Programs (UNDP) 2020, 369-370).

This is not to deny the developmental challenges confronting small Gulf states (Kabbani 2020). Their private sectors remain state-dependent (Hertog 2013). Female labour force

participation is low. Migrant workers – who constitute the bulk of small Gulf states’ labour force – toil under poorly regulated and precarious conditions (Human Rights Watch 2018). Nevertheless, over the past decade rulers of small Gulf states have weathered popular uprisings, low oil prices, a global pandemic and for Qatar, an economic blockade, to provide levels of public service and political stability that are the envy of the region.

Resource wealth is clearly key to small Gulf states’ economic success. Small Gulf states sit on fourteen percent of the world’s oil and seventeen percent of the world’s natural gas reserves (Fattouh and El-Katiri 2012, 10). Despite efforts to diversify, small Gulf states’ economies remain largely tethered to their oil and gas industries (Kabbani and Ben Minmoune, 2021).

But resource wealth is only part of the story. Not all oil abundant small states are prosperous. Equatorial Guinea has the tenth highest oil production per capita in the world (BP Statistical Review of World Energy 2022). But three-quarters of its population live in poverty (World Bank 2022). Azerbaijan’s oil rents (oil revenue minus oil production costs) as a percentage of GDP were more than twice as high as Bahrain’s in 2020 (World Bank 2020), yet its citizens’ average life expectancy was four years lower (World Bank 2022).

Larger states’ protection also explains some of the small Gulf states’ economic success. The United States sheltered small Gulf states from Saddam Hussein’s Iraq and now Iran. Saudi Arabia’s intervention stopped mass uprisings in Bahrain from potentially toppling the ruling Al Khalifa family. But foreign patrons are only part of the story as well. Foreign support, like oil, can be a curse. US protection and aid has not turned Egypt and Jordan into

developmental states (Zimmermann 2017).

## **The Institutional Underpinnings of Small Gulf States’ Prosperity**

In his classic book *Small States in World Markets: Industrial Policy in Europe*, Peter Katzenstein argues that low populations and scarce territory make small European states highly dependent on international trade (Katzenstein 1985). Consumers in small states need imports because their state lacks the domestic labour force and diversity of resources to produce many goods locally. Meanwhile, small state producers need to export because their domestic market is too small for major expansion. This dependency on international trade render small European states’ welfare highly vulnerable to fluctuations in the global economy. These vulnerabilities pushed leaders of small European states to open their markets and provide generous welfare programs. The twinning of economic integration and social protection “embedded” small European states into world economy (Ruggie 1982), allowing their economies to profit from open markets while mitigating the political and social costs of international competition.

Like their European peers, small Gulf states are highly dependent on international trade. This dependency predates the oil era. With little arable land and sparse populations, small Gulf states’ economies have historically flourished and withered with the changing tides of the global economy. In the early 20th century, their economies boomed and quickly crashed with the rise and fall of pearl prices – their primary export (Carter 2019). Strong mercantile interests formed in these highly trade-dependent economies. And while the political and economic influence of the Gulf’s merchant groups have waned in the oil era

(Crystal 1995; Moore 2004), small Gulf states remain open to international trade and investment.

Indeed, small Gulf states boast the region's most open markets. They belong to the Arab world's only customs union. Two out of the US' four free trade agreements (FTAs) in the region are with small Gulf states. Small Gulf states are also all members of World Trade Organization (WTO), a non-negligible feat considering that more than a third of Arab League states are still outside of the world's largest international trading organization.

Open markets have bolstered small Gulf states' economic development. International trade lowers prices, diversifies goods and promotes competition. International trade agreements attract foreign direct investment (FDI) (Buthe and Milner 2014) and incentivize adopting global standards. This pushes small Gulf states to protect property rights, enforce contracts and follow international regulations. Small Gulf states frequently led the region in the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business global rankings (World Bank 2019).

Like small European states, small Gulf states also offer their citizens generous safety nets. This welfare is chiefly in the form of public sector employment. Small Gulf states have some of the highest rates of public sector employment of in the world, as measured as a share of the national labour force. Though fed by oil and gas revenues, this high rate of public sector employment stems from small Gulf states' small domestic population size. States with small populations have relatively larger public sectors (Randma-Liiv 2002; Spolaore and Alesina 2003, 172). The minimum labour needed to police, protect and regulate a modern state occupies a relatively higher share of small states' national labour force.

Large public sectors helped embed small Gulf states into the global economy. This is because they minimize domestic opposition to international trade. Cheaper imports do not threaten the livelihoods of bureaucrats and soldiers. For this reason, states with larger public sectors tend to have more open economies, all else being equal (Nooruddin and Rudra 2014).

Furthermore, as in many European states, small Gulf states have exclusionary welfare regimes. Strict citizenship laws prevent immigrants from diluting small Gulf states' welfare provision. This produces "exclusionary openness" (Goodman and Pepinsky 2021): open trade and open labour migration. Small Gulf states have some of the highest rates of foreign labour in the world. Almost two-thirds of the residents of the Gulf's small states were born outside of the Gulf in 2010 (World Bank 2022). Migrants make up 88% of the UAE's population (International Organization for Migration 2019, 70). As a result, unlike many small states, small Gulf states do not suffer from labour shortages. Open labour migration policies coupled with strict citizenship and welfare policies powered Germany's post-war recovery. A similar pairing may propel small Gulf states' diversification from oil as Gulf leaders and business funnel high and low skilled foreign labour into new industries.

In addition to market openness, small Gulf states' large public sectors entrench political stability. Public sector employment has made the state the chief provider of welfare for a majority of Gulf citizens. This helped displace competing non-state distributors of patronage (Valeri 2009). Ruling regimes' monopolization of patronage reinforces their rule. All of the small Gulf states' ruling families have remained in power since independence, far

outlasting their peers in the rest of the region. While foreign patrons and oil rents propped up their rule amidst Arab Spring protests (Yom and Gause 2014), the combined benefits of open markets and protected employment no doubt muffled calls for revolution to many Gulf citizens.

## Small and Big Powers in the Middle East

What are the developmental and political ramifications of small Gulf states' economic ascendance for the rest of the region? For one, small Gulf states' economic rise has deepened large Arab states' dependence on their smaller neighbors for aid, investment and remittances (Kerr 1981). Foreign capital can strengthen authoritarian rule (Ahmed 2019). It remains to be seen whether large Arab states can use Gulf capital for productive purposes. Second, ruptures between small Gulf states will have greater aftershocks for the rest of the region. Oman and the UAE's territorial disputes in the 1950s and Qatar and Bahrain's island feuds in 1971 were barely noticed in Baghdad, Cairo, and Damascus. This was not the case in the 2017 Qatar blockade. Small Gulf states' rivalries have surfaced and exacerbated conflicts in Syria (Wehrey 2014) and Libya, and infiltrated Egyptian and Tunisian politics (Al-Anani 2022; Mezran and Henneberg 2022). Now more than ever large states in and outside of the region have strong incentives for regional organizations like the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to foster Gulf harmony. Larger Arab states' prosperity will increasingly depend on their smaller Gulf neighbors. ♦

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# The Forgotten Islamists of the Gulf: Revisiting a Social Movement Approach to Islamism

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Over the last decade, in what has come to be called the post-Arab Spring era, emerging literature on Islamist mobilization has focused on the ability of Islamists to capture positions within government institutions following gains made by Islamist parties in post-revolutionary Tunisia and Egypt. This literature, though certainly important—particularly in explaining developments in the states that underwent systemic political changes—has had, in my view, two blind spots. The first is theoretical in failing to account for the mobilizational capacity of Islamists outside of government institutions, whether through contesting elections or establishing their own state apparatuses. The second blind spot I recognize is geographical, as much of the emerging literature has not allowed for religion to have a mobilizational (though not necessarily oppositional) capacity within the authoritarian rentier states of the Gulf.

Since Islamists managed to capture state power in Tunisia and Egypt and to craft an independent state through ISIS in Iraq and Syria, writing on Islamist movements has tended to focus not on their qualities as social movements, but instead on their capacities to (a) gain seats in government and (b) to govern. Missing from this discussion is broader acknowledgement that Islamist movements

are far more than merely political actors or parties. The social movement approach to Islamists, which dominated scholarship in the early 2000s, highlighted the multifaceted nature of Islamist actors, with work by Quintan Wiktorowicz and Carrie Wickham fundamentally changing our understanding of Islamists as actors equally important in not only the political but also social realm.

Since the Arab Spring, however, Islamists have increasingly been viewed through an institutionalist lens. Some Islamists have, as Marc Lynch has highlighted, renewed a division between party (*hizb*) and movement (*haraka*) (Lynch 2016). Most famously, Tunisia's Ennahda split its political party from its broader movement, with members branding themselves as "Muslim democrats" (Lynch 2016). Such divisions exist elsewhere and highlight the duality of Islamist movements. As a consequence of a focus on elections, however, Islamists in states in which either political parties are banned or in which legislatures have limited political authority have been overlooked, with the Gulf in particular largely absent from broader discussions about Islamism and its future.

Considerable scholarship (including my own) has highlighted the shortcomings of rentier

state. theory in accurately describing the political environments of oil-wealthy states. Indeed, though Giacomo Luciani's straightforward conclusion that "democracy is not a problem for allocation states" may make sense considering the longevity of monarchical regimes in the Gulf, it certainly does not mean that these states are somehow exempt from having domestic opposition movements (Luciani 1994, 75). While scholarship emerging in the past two decades has demonstrated the existence of independent political movements and ideologies in the Gulf, what has received generally less notice is the unique way that rentier states interact with religion and religious movements. Political scientists have, understandably, fixated on institutional shifts, particularly those that have taken place since the Arab Spring and which have fundamentally altered the priorities of Islamists. Nonetheless, the persistence, and in many ways consistency, of the influence of Islamist actors in Gulf states, both inside and outside of legislatures, continue to be overlooked. By bringing back to the fore a social movement theory approach, we can better understand the activities of Islamists in Gulf states in which – unlike elsewhere in the region – they can neither contest elections as formal political parties nor provide social welfare benefits.

When Islamists emerged as the primary successors to the *anciens régimes* of Egypt and Tunisia following the Arab Spring, Gulf states had particularly strong reactions, with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) leading the way in denouncing Islamist organizations. In 2014, they designated the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization. These strong reactions signaled the extent to which opposition from the religious segment of society had been considered a viable political (and in some sense, social) threat. While the Emirati regime, for instance, has sought

to diversify its economy largely through modernizing and Westernizing reforms, a conservative or traditional backlash has emerged. In such an environment, it is logical that the most viable opposition would come from the Islamist sphere, a view apparently shared by the ruler of Abu Dhabi himself. As recently as 2008, "Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Zayed repeatedly describe[d] to visitors how the UAE educational system has been 'hijacked' by the Muslim Brotherhood" (Wikileaks 2008). It is no coincidence that the UAE has restructured its education system in recent decades, announcing wholesale reforms in May 2022 (Saseendran 2022).

Such a fear of Islamist influence outside the organs of institutionalized political power illustrates the extent to which religiously motivated groups are able to operate and exert influence without political openings. It also reveals the shortcomings of considering them as solely political actors. Indeed, Islamists have only used elections to form single-party governments in Turkey since 2002 and Egypt during 2012-13, otherwise existing within institutionalized power structures through coalitions in parliament or through appointed cabinet positions. Thus, in the Gulf states, there is no rational reason to fear an Islamist takeover (Curtis 2022). Nonetheless, the Saudi and Emirati governments have vociferously denounced such organizations; only social movement approach accounts for their banning in places like Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

My own work has shown the extent to which Muslim Brotherhood groups emerged in wealthy Gulf states not by constructing alternate networks of social welfare or even contesting elections, as they have elsewhere, but instead by working *through* state structures, such as education and *awqaf* ministries



(Freer 2018). In so doing, Islamists can have an impact on curricula and religious practices – and, consequently, on political ideology and social practice. Scholarship on the Gulf, for the most part, tends to obscure or dismiss these factors, because the political or social mobilization that might result is unlikely to lead to a change in leadership.

Further, the experience of Islamist mobilization in the Gulf also demonstrates that independent Islamist mobilization does not necessarily imply opposition to the state. The case of the Bahraini Muslim Brotherhood is instructive to this end, as the organization, although notionally independent of the state and consistently contesting seats in parliament as a bloc, has been reliably loyalist, particularly since the Arab Spring. With the current king's uncle, former labor and social affairs minister Isa bin Muhammad al-Khalifa, having been involved in the founding of the Bahraini Brotherhood and serving as its leader between 1963 and 2013, the Brotherhood has struggled to find an identity outside its traditionally loyalist political platform. This demonstrates that independent Islamist blocs are not necessarily oppositional, and indeed can become clients of rentier governments.

In addition, cases from the Gulf illustrate that oppositional Islamist movements in the Middle East are not solely Sunni. Shi'i Islamist mobilization in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia during the Arab Spring sparked fear of broader mobilization predicated upon religious grounds, despite the fact that these groups lack institutionalized channels to exert influence upon politics. Such protest movements showed that political contestation remains possible even among marginalized Shi'i communities in the Gulf, and harsh government crackdowns on these movements

further demonstrated the extent to which they were considered existential threats by rulers (Matthiesen 2013). The religious field in the Gulf, then, showcases a variety of Islamist activity, some of which but by no means all falls within the domain of state institutions, whether elected or appointed.

Beyond the domestic political roles of Islamists in the Gulf, considerable work since the Arab Spring has focused on the geopolitical drivers for the anti-Muslim Brotherhood stances taken by the Saudi and Emirati leaderships. Within the Gulf, two strands of thought on Islamists appeared to emerge, with the Saudi and Emirati stance being firmly anti-Islamist and the Qatari position considered broadly pro-Islamist, bolstered by its alliance with Turkey. This division solidified when diplomatic relations broke down between Qatar and its neighbors between March and November 2013 and again between June 2017 and January 2021, mostly due to Qatar's (real or perceived) support for Islamist actors after the Arab Spring, particularly in Egypt and Syria. When it came to the role of Islamists at home in the Gulf, however, they received far less scholarly treatment, largely because the main shift in their treatment was their prior banning in Saudi Arabia and the UAE in 2014. In reality, domestic politics – through fears of Islamist mobilization in the states that banned the movement – fueled these actions, rather than solely geopolitical competition with Qatar.

Since the Arab Spring, political scientists have investigated how Islamists perform at the polls, how they can become represented in government structures, or why certain Gulf leaders have tried to diminish their appeal. Absent from this discussion, though, are the ways in which Islamists can mobilize support in the absence of democratic political

openings or institutionalized access to state power. Returning to a social movement theory approach as applied in the Gulf context, in my view, would help broaden the universe of cases analyzed about Islamist mobilization, and thus add nuance to conversations about Islamism and post-Islamism after the Arab Spring. ♦

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# (Re)thinking Women's Rights Reforms and Public Opinion in the GCC

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In recent years, countries in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have implemented a wide range of gender-based reforms to improve women's political, economic, and social rights. To highlight a few, royal decrees have allowed women in Saudi Arabia to obtain a driver's license and travel abroad without a male guardian's permission in 2017 and 2019, respectively. In the United Arab Emirates (UAE), women now represent 50 percent of the national assembly and 27 percent of the cabinet, above the global average (UN Women 2020). In Kuwait, women were sworn in as judges for the first time in national history in 2020.

Needless to say, the advancements of women have been remarkable. However, they were driven by GCC regimes without citizen involvement in the policymaking process, and we know little about how the public views these seemingly progressive reforms. Consequently, we do not know whether and how societal values and cultural norms dampen the reforms' (supposed) aims to empower women. This essay argues for the importance of understanding public attitudes toward the top-down, women's rights policies in the GCC.

## Women's Rights Reforms and International Reputation

Scholars have argued that authoritarian regimes might adopt gender-based legislations strategically to strengthen their rule (e.g., Bjarnegård and Zetterberg 2016, Donno and Kreft 2019). In particular, autocrats have successfully used the reforms to garner international legitimacy (Bush and Zetterberg 2021). Compared to other reforms, such as those concerning elections, women's rights reforms are considered a less costly strategy for improving autocrats' international reputation (Donno, Fox, and Kaasik 2022).

Consistent with the literature, the GCC regimes have effectively used women's rights reforms to win over international audiences. For example, Jean-Pierre Lacroix, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Peace Operations, applauded the UAE for launching a military and peacekeeping program for Arab women and added that "gender parity is achievable with sustained effort by all partners" (Lacroix 2019). Similarly, Qatar Airways<sup>1</sup> received praises from various European officials – including members of the European Parliament, the European Commissioner for Transport, Directorate-General for Mobility and Transport – for operating a flight

<sup>1</sup> Qatar Airways is fully owned by the Qatari government.

made up of an all-female crew. A member of the European Parliament, Isabella De Monte, commented that “[g]ender equality is about concrete actions and I praise Qatar Airways’ commitment to make concrete steps in that direction” (Qatar Airways 2019). In Saudi Arabia, even as prominent women’s rights activists were jailed, Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman (MBS) was hailed as a reformer for his ambitious social initiatives, at least until the murder of Jamal Khashoggi. Even as late as in July 2022, a prominent Washington Post columnist referred to MBS’ reforms as “revolutionary” (Boot 2022).

### **Lack of Public Opinion Research in the GCC**

While Western audiences generally view the gender-based reforms in a positive light, we know little about how GCC publics perceive them. There is limited public opinion data available from the region. Existing cross-national surveys such as the Arab Barometer and the World Values Survey have made important contributions toward understanding Arab publics’ attitudes about important political, economic, and social issues. However, GCC countries are often missing from the dataset. While there have been seven waves of Arab Barometer surveys since 2006, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia were included only once (in 2007 and 2011, respectively), and Kuwait was included three times (2013, 2018, and 2022). Arab Barometer has not carried out surveys in Qatar, Oman, and the UAE.

The 2011 wave conducted in Saudi Arabia included a set of questions to gauge the public perception of women. One question asked respondents whether they agreed with the statement that “it is permissible for a woman to travel abroad by herself.” The respondents could strongly agree, agree, disagree, or

strongly disagree. Only 37 percent of the respondents (28 percent of male and 46 percent of female respondents) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. Even among the younger respondents (age 18-29), only 42 percent agreed. While this data is valuable, it does not uncover how much the Saudi public supported the 2019 royal decree – allowing women to travel alone. Perhaps there had been a significant increase in support for women’s independent travel from 2011 to 2019. It is also possible that the majority of Saudis still oppose the measure today. Without data, we cannot accurately assess the effectiveness of this reform on women’s advancement.

Similarly, we also lack data on public perception of female drivers in Saudi Arabia. As of January 2020, 147,383 licenses have been issued to Saudi women (General Authority for Statistics 2020). While this is historic, the number is less than 2 percent of eligible Saudi women. The low number suggests that there still exist barriers to women obtaining licenses. Again, without data, we cannot determine whether those barriers are social, financial, or something else.

Not only are we unable to answer such policy questions, it is also premature to make theoretical conclusions on basis of the informational terrain. For instance, have these reforms induced greater loyalty on part of female citizens to their regimes, as they have done in other autocracies (Clayton and Zetterberg 2021)? Moreover, as other Arab regimes used women’s rights reforms to distinguish themselves from conservative Islamists and gain domestic legitimacy (Tripp 2019), how have the reforms changed the relationship between the monarchy and Islamists in the GCC states, if at all?

The lack of data is understandable, given the challenges associated with studying authoritarian publics through either surveys or fieldwork—especially in the Gulf. Not only are surveys expensive to conduct in the affluent GCC, but they also encounter government scrutiny (Benstead 2018). In most Gulf countries, survey questions must be reviewed and approved by a state ministry. Even when surveys are permitted, they suffer from a social desirability bias. Male respondents may distort their answers to conform to perceived social norms (Barnett 2022). Moreover, survey enumerators in the Gulf are almost always migrant workers. To the best of my knowledge, there is no research that studies the effects of expatriate enumerators on responses.

### **Top-Down Reforms and Backlash against Women**

In our working paper, Sharan Grewal, M. Tahir Kilavuz, and I suggest that without public support, these gender-based reforms may not be effective in advancing women's rights in the long run. We examine Arab publics' support for gender quotas in legislative bodies, a popular mechanism in both democracies and autocracies to increase women's political representation. Unlike in democracies, however, citizen support for gender quotas in autocracies may be associated with *both* their support for women's rights *and* their support for opposition to the regime. Since quotas benefit both women and the regime, they generate a unique trade-off for authoritarian publics, between advancing women's rights and legitimizing the regime. Accordingly, we posit that regime opponents are less supportive of gender quotas, all else equal (Noh, Grewal, and Kilavuz 2022).

First, we provide evidence in support of our argument from a survey experiment in Algeria. We primed three treatment groups with gains from gender quotas to (1) women, (2) the regime, and (3) both. The results show that Algerians are generally more favorable of quotas when primed with the gains to women but not when primed with both the gains to women *and* the regime. Additionally, we find that regime opponents are less supportive of quotas. Second, we provide evidence from the region-wide Arab Barometer surveys. We again find that regime opponents are less likely to support quotas than regime supporters. While our analysis of the Arab Barometer only included one GCC country, Kuwait, it is plausible to think that the results might translate to the other Gulf monarchies.<sup>2</sup> Overall, our research highlights the importance of studying public opinion toward women's rights reforms in autocracies (Noh, Grewal, and Kilavuz 2022).

In addition to the perception of the regime, social contexts in the Gulf are likely to play a role in determining public attitudes toward top-down, women's rights policies. In a separate paper, I also highlight the importance of social norms and contexts in shaping these attitudes. I argue that authoritarian publics are more likely to be resistant to women's advancement for two reasons. First, patriarchal values and conservative norms are often more widespread in authoritarian societies (Lindberg 2004). When women suddenly become visible in these societies, a backlash may be inevitable. Second, men may begin to see women as their competitors and a threat. Considering status discontent theories (e.g., Morgan and Buice 2013), I suggest that resistance to women's advancement may be more pronounced for men in autocracies, many

<sup>2</sup> In fact, when we analyzed the Arab Barometer data by individual country, our results—a significant, positive correlation between support for regime and support for quotas—from Kuwait were particularly strong.

of whom suffer from political and economic exclusion (Noh 2022).

There are reasons to believe that GCC publics in particular may be resistant to women's advancement. Western ideas of gender equality may clash with patriarchal and tribal societies in the Gulf. Additionally, women's economic and political presence has historically been minimal in the region, even compared to neighboring Arab countries. In most GCC states, women gained the right to vote in local or national elections (where they exist) only during the 2000s. In Saudi Arabia, labor force participation rates of female nationals have been exceptionally low, reaching a nadir of 10 percent in 2002, one of the lowest in the world. However, over the last two decades, the rate jumped to 33 percent (Tamayo, Koetti, and Rivera 2021). While these achievements should be celebrated, in a country where the unemployment rate, especially for the youth, is relatively high, it is difficult to tell whether women are viewed by men as competitors or collaborators.

There also exists ample anecdotal evidence suggesting resistance to women's gains. In Saudi Arabia, when the Shura Council passed an anti-sexual harassment law in 2018, it was met not only with celebration by some but also with mockeries by others on social media (Harrison and El Aassar 2018). In Kuwait, women won the right to vote and stand as candidates in national legislative elections in 2005; four women won seats in the parliamentary elections for the first time in 2009. However, in subsequent national elections, female candidates have been less successful. In the most recent election in 2020, no women won a seat, though two women were elected in September 2022. Public opinion research is crucial to help understand why such backlash to top-down women's rights reforms

persists.

Moreover, the top-down nature of these reforms undermines their durability. Since these reforms are often directly associated with a certain regime or an autocrat, they may not endure regime change. In Algeria, gender quotas implemented by former President Bouteflika have been watered down under current President Abdelmadjid Tebboune, who wanted to distance himself from his predecessor following the 2019 mass protests that resulted in Bouteflika's deposition (Noh, Grewal, and Kilavuz 2022). Here, public opinion data would play a vital role in helping scholars accurately assess the short-term and long-term benefits or costs for women in contexts of political change. For instance, even if Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman of Saudi Arabia were to ever lose power, it remains unclear what parts of Saudi society would welcome the complete reversal of his social reforms.

## Conclusion

This essay has highlighted the importance of understanding public attitudes toward women's rights reforms in the Gulf, where monarchical regimes have generally been the predominant political actor in determining the scope and pace of gender equality. The questions raised here will become only more important given the increasing wealth and strength of these regimes, especially since current global energy market conditions—driven by the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and rising energy prices—have generated an unexpected financial boom for the GCC kingdoms. While it remains challenging to carry out public opinion research in the Gulf, such data are necessary. In the past, when we overlooked the preferences and attitudes of authoritarian publics, we failed to anticipate

key events such as the Arab Spring revolutions.♦

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# Co-optation and Citizen Agency in Rent-Rich Gulf States

Jessie Moritz



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Studies of the resource curse in the Gulf typically rely on the assumption that wealth distributions from the state prevent political mobilization, thereby allowing authoritarian regimes to endure. My research focuses on identifying the limits of this type of material co-optation and understanding why citizens demand reform despite ongoing co-optive governance (and repressive governance, although this has been published elsewhere and is not the focus here [Moritz 2021]). In this article, I draw on insights from fieldwork in four Gulf states over multiple trips from 2013-2018 to argue that pursuing society-centric micro-analyses of political mobilization in petroleum-rich societies can help us to understand why co-optation is ineffective in certain contexts, and reveal productive new avenues for research.

## Causal Mechanisms in Rentier State Theory

In the ten years since the Arab Spring protests emerged in 2011, political economy research on the Middle East has repeatedly grappled with the effect of rents—excess revenue derived from lucrative industries such as oil and gas exportation—on political mobilization. While initial reactions suggested that oil might “drown” the Arab Spring across the

Middle East and North Africa (Ross 2011), more recent studies have argued instead that “it is overwhelmingly a regional phenomenon restricted to the major oil-producing monarchies of the Arabian Peninsula” (Smith and Waldner 2021, 3).

Even if oil perpetuates authoritarianism *only* in the Gulf region, this outcome typically relies on a rational choice mechanism through which “individuals believe states to be legitimate the more they perceive themselves to be prospering” (Gilley 2006, 50), and political loyalty can be bought through transfers of wealth from state to society, including preferential loan schemes, land reform, public sector job-creation, and direct cash transfers (Albertus 2012; Levitsky and Way 2012). Ross’s “fiscal theory of democracy,” for example, depicts citizen loyalties as entirely “determined by the government’s impact on their incomes... if their government provides them with large benefits and low taxes, they will support the ruler; if it provides them with few benefits and high taxes, they will try to replace him” (Ross 2012, 68). Thus, theories of political mobilization in the Gulf have tended to focus on contexts in which the state is either unable or unwilling to co-opt citizens, such as during periods of low oil and gas prices, during processes of subsidy reform as part of economic diversification and sus-

tainability programs, or as a result of political decisions by the state to marginalize certain communities from receiving an equitable share of rent distributions (Nonneman 2006; Luciani and Moerenhout 2021).

Outside the Gulf, however, this type of narrow, wealth-based co-optation has been found to be a highly inefficient form of legitimacy-building (or vote-buying where elections occur), as citizens can accept rent-based benefits and yet still support opposition groups (Hicken and Nathan 2020). More problematically, this approach has lent itself to a focus in the Gulf on *how rent-rich states govern* rather than on *how citizens respond* to this governance, particularly at the subnational level. As Leber (2022, 21) found in Saudi Arabia, focusing on “creative contestation” at the subnational level can help to redress the assumption that the absence of national-level mass demonstrations equates to societal passivity.

In this article I assess the efficacy of rent-based co-optation by focusing on citizen experiences of rent distributions, and on personal and group justifications for engaging in (or refraining from) political activities during periods of co-optive governance. As I lay out in the following sections, this allows us to reassess key causal mechanisms and generate productive new avenues for research.

### **Assessing Rent-based Co-optation**

In order to assess these issues, my research traced several dynamics at the individual and group levels: Gulf nationals’ personal sense of material satisfaction with wealth distributions from the state; whether they mobilized or refrained from mobilization in the post-2011 era; whether their demands for reform focused on rent-seeking demands (that is,

demands for further wealth transfers from the state) or on non-material issues such as demands for greater political participation or specific policy reforms; and whether they ceased political activities (demobilization) after the state increased rent distributions. I also asked pro-government activists to explain why they had mobilized in favor of the regime, in order to assess whether this loyalist defense of rent-rich regimes is indeed driven by rent distributions.

There was clear evidence of political mobilization due to frustration with unemployment, in response to subsidy reform, or dissatisfaction with government services, such as the demonstrations in-person and online in Oman in 2018-2019, or in Saudi Arabia during the #April 21 movement of 2017. For example, 2011 demonstrations in Sohar, Oman focused heavily on employment, originating amongst a group of unemployed youth who went to the Sohar branch of the Ministry of Manpower to request help finding work. Frustrated and alienated after being jeered by employees, they staged a sit-in. As one demonstrator explained to me: “If we have no jobs, we must demonstrate. ... When a lion is hungry, what is it he to do? He will look for any opportunity, for he must eat.” Their stated motivations suggested, initially, that co-optive governance *could* be effective: if the state offered them employment, they were likely to cease protesting.

However, once the protests were underway, reformers from Muscat and other parts of Oman soon arrived, working with the Soharis to release a list of demands that included both rent-seeking and political demands. Further, following regime crackdowns and personal experiences of repressive governance—including arrests, beatings, and intimidation—these Omani interviewees claimed they could

no longer be placated with a purely financial response from the government. This suggests that rent-seeking demonstrations that might otherwise be co-opted can transform into political demands in response to regime repression.

Further, for most interviewees asked to explain their decision to mobilize/not mobilize in the post-2011 period, material drivers were not the primary explanation offered. This includes those who mobilized to support the state. In 2017, a young Bahraini Sunni explained his decision to join pro-government demonstrations in early 2011 and subsequently found a civil society organization:

I believe it [the Bahraini Spring] has been controlled by some radical thinking from some people who take advantage of what happened in Middle East... What we saw was sectarian, and it was targeted villages, because those people in village especially... the people on the villages are very religious. And the people who lead or consider themselves as the leaders were mainly Islamic clerics at that time... Where[as] the people from our side, for example, we stood against them and said, "Stop. Guess what? we are not with you."

This suggests a *distrust of alternatives* as his primary motivation, not rent distributions. This logic was also visible when Qataris pointed to the destabilization and violence in Syria, Yemen, and Libya when asked why they had not personally mobilized in the post-2011 period.

When other pro-government Qatari, Omani, Bahraini, and Saudi citizens were asked why they personally supported the government, their responses most often focused on a perception of regime responsiveness to their social or value-led concerns. The exact

causal pathway differed by country. Qataris, for example, pointed to the government's support of cultural institutions and heritage sites, or to the regime's responsiveness in swapping the language of instruction at Qatar University following a public outcry. In Saudi Arabia, young artists and filmmakers claimed in 2018 that they felt included and heard as the Saudi government announced a major reinvigoration of the arts and entertainment sectors. Resource wealth improves state capacity to pursue these goals, but the fact that wealth distributions themselves (in terms of statements that the government provided economic opportunity, offered employment, raised salaries, subsidized healthcare & education services, direct cash transfers in times of protest, and so on) were only secondarily referenced, if at all, suggests that for these citizens it was a sense of responsiveness on social issues, distrust of alternatives, and other factors that shape pro-government attitudes more than direct co-optation.

Among those who had mobilized to demand reform, many interviewees explicitly rejected the idea that they should support a government that provides for their material well-being. "Everybody wants dignity," explained a former member of Bahraini opposition political society al-Wefaq, "and your dignity is not taken when you are poor... Lack of democracy drives change; it's not about salaries." "To be honest," averred the exiled founder of online opposition forum *Bahrain Online*, Ali Abdulemam, "I wish that they will take tax, but give me my dignity." Others scoffed at the 1000 Bahraini dinar rent distribution the Bahraini government offered as the Arab Spring protests threatened regimes across the region. "There were jokes among the protesters about that," explained a Bahraini activist. "The king funded the Lu'lu' [Pearl] protests, because many protesters received it and then

donated it to the protests, buying food for other protesters.” Those expressing these views included citizens who expressed a personal sense of material satisfaction and had received benefits from the state, including scholarships for education, free or subsidized healthcare, employment, and cash transfers. Tellingly, politically active interviewees were well aware that they risked losing these benefits by opposing the state: they were actively rejecting co-optive governance.

Why, then, was co-optation ineffective in these cases? In Bahrain, nationally representative survey research from 2009 suggested sub-national group affiliation is key: Shi’a interviewees were likely to have protested in the past three years even if they personally felt materially satisfied (Gengler 2015). More recent survey data on Qatar similarly found that perceptions of inequality significantly dampened satisfaction with rent distributions, no matter the individual’s objective socioeconomic well-being (Mitchell and Gengler 2018). My own interviews found that personal and kinship experiences with repression were crucial drivers of political mobilization. More specifically, repression had a dual effect—it could de-mobilize citizens in some contexts (Girod, Stewart, and Walters 2018), but even if the regime’s power was perceived to be overwhelming, those with family members incarcerated were still likely to mobilize. “When you come from a Shi’a family, you have a family member in jail,” said a Bahraini civil rights activist, who linked his personal motivation for political mobilization to the imprisonment of his uncle. In Oman, too, prominent reformer Said Sultan al-Hashimi, upon being asked for his reaction to his personal arrest, said: “the price of speaking out just made me more determined to push for reform.” Exposure to and adoption of certain politicized ideologies also

prompted political mobilization despite active co-optation efforts. This helps to explain the persistence of reformist elites, but also why co-optation may be less effective on, for example, Islamist organizations (Freer 2018).

## Implications for Governance

Individual and group explanations for political mobilization must be carefully corroborated with meso- and national-level data in order to understand how and why sub-national mobilizations escalate, or fail to escalate, into mass political action. Nonetheless, society-centric micro-studies can help to identify why co-optation fails to preclude political mobilization in certain contexts—and in locating these limits also expands scope for productive new lines of inquiry. For example, if co-optation is not effective in preventing political mobilization in certain contexts, then what is? If responsiveness is as crucial to pro-government attitudes as suggested here, how do Gulf states determine which demands should be responded to, and which ignored or repressed? Given that, as seen in Sohar, dissatisfaction with rent distributions is still a key driver of political mobilizations, to what extent will Gulf states be able to redirect spending into alternative forms of legitimacy-building, particularly as they pursue ambitious economic diversification projects that entail cuts to traditional rent distributions?

Emerging research on authoritarian learning, social engineering, and performative responsiveness will be crucial to answering these questions (Jones 2019; Ding 2020; Hall and Ambrosio 2017). It also explains why Gulf states commit such extensive resources into digital surveillance of citizen attitudes and micro-mobilizations (Shires 2021). Yet the success of these governance strategies ultimately depends on how they are experienced

and responded to, collectively, by Gulf citizens. Despite the exceptional extent of repression and co-optation exacted upon Gulf societies in recent years, there remains significant scope to continue to investigate subnational contestation and citizen agency in the Gulf states.

As Herb and Lynch (2019, 6) have previously argued, the rentier social contract is a dynamic “social construction, one that must be created and renewed over time.” The Gulf is a critical place to assess the effectiveness of this contract and of co-optation more generally: if the exceptional financial benefits offered to citizens in these states do not produce societal quiescence here, how could they be expected to do so in less rent-rich states such as Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, or Syria? ♦

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## Book Roundtable

### ***Protesting Jordan: Geographies of Power and Dissent*** (Stanford University Press, 2022)

by *Jillian Schwedler*

*In this book roundtable, our contributors read Jillian Schwedler's book, **Protesting Jordan: Geographies of Power and Dissent**. Schwedler argues that protest has been a key method of political claim-making in Jordan from the late Ottoman period to the present day. More than moments of rupture within normal-time politics, protests have been central to challenging state power as well as reproducing it. She considers how space and geography influence protests and repression, and, in challenging conventional narratives of Hashemite state-making, offers the first in-depth study of rebellion in Jordan. She also examines protests as they are situated in the built environment, bringing together considerations of networks, spatial imaginaries, space and place-making, and political geographies at local, national, regional, and global scales. Critical interventions from Curtis Ryan, Deen Sharp, Summer Forester, and Chantal Berman 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. Schwedler then responds to these questions by drawing attention more acutely to the spatial dynamics of protests and how they play a central role in the construction of both state and society.*

## Curtis R. Ryan, Appalachian State University



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Jillian Schwedler's *Protesting Jordan: Geographies of Power and Dissent* is a career achievement for an author who had already been breaking new ground and setting new standards for our field in her previous scholarship. Here, many inter-disciplinary strands of influences and interests come together to tackle an enormous topic, but in a way that is generalizable far beyond a single country case or even of multiple episodes of protest. The book in fact eschews these more limited approaches, inviting scholars of comparative politics to broaden their own horizons, and to think of the politics of protest and repression as central to both state-making and state maintenance, and hence as continual and dialectical processes, rather than as separate locations or events. "Protests are also not exceptional 'events' that rupture 'normal' institutional politics," she writes, "[R]ather, challenges to political authority are routine and ongoing, and protests work to structure the political terrain on which authorities seek to produce and maintain their power" (p. 5).

*Protesting Jordan* provides the definitive account of protest and repression in Jordan – across its entire history as a state, no less – but it also aims for far more than this, and hence provides generalizable insights far beyond Jordan and indeed, far beyond the Mid-

dle East. The book gives a detailed and rich account of Jordan's social and political history, showing how repertoires of protest and repression created, transformed, and continue to affect state and society in Jordan. But the book is also written in a way that makes it essential reading for any scholar interested in protests, repression, and state development – not just in Jordan, but indeed anywhere else.

As someone who also researches Jordanian politics, I found the book to be exceptional in its scope and depth regarding Jordanian history, society, and political life. And it is clearly a landmark work on the politics of protest. This alone would already make the book an exemplary work. Its methodological innovations and its theoretical and analytical insights also go far beyond even these important topics. *Protesting Jordan* actually makes multiple unique contributions to many fields (not just political science), but in each case invites other scholars to take up these techniques, narratives, and theoretical insights – to usefully apply them in other places, settings, and even time periods.

The book examines shifting geographies of time and space, bringing insights from geography, anthropology, history, and even urban planning to the study of comparative politics. Schwedler examines in detail the changing



interactions of protest, repression, and space over time, and in doing so provides a new reading of Jordanian history and politics. *Protesting Jordan* challenges the carefully constructed Jordanian state narrative (and also the sometimes state-crafted historical amnesia), yielding a fuller and more accurate account of Jordan and its politics from earliest statehood to the present.

Schwedler examines the area that is now modern Jordan, from Ottoman imperial project to British colonial project to Hashemite Kingdom – but making clear that it has always been a contested state, not only internationally, but also and especially within its own borders and from within its own society. Unlike many works of comparative politics, Schwedler’s work is ever mindful of the broader external context – what in the discipline is usually considered international relations. She moves easily across artificial intra-disciplinary boundaries to examine how Jordan’s politics is imbedded within regional and global military and security complexes as well as economic support relationships with allies such as Saudi Arabia and the United States.

In addition, her examination of the political economy of change in the kingdom includes a very effective deconstruction of Neoliberal

development models. This includes a compelling account of mega-projects such as Abdali Boulevard in Amman, as well as the Aqaba Special Economic Zone in the south of Jordan. “Megaprojects,” she notes, “also work as techniques of exclusion designed as bourgeois spaces realized by razing sometimes entire neighborhoods and erasing their history and place-making” (p. 260). *Protesting Jordan* rewrites and restores much of that history. Schwedler also makes the important point that Neoliberal policy does not entail a retreat for the state, but rather a state-directed flow of capital and development, often with devastating effects on local and less affluent communities (like Jordan’s former Abdali neighborhood).

The depth of research here is really striking. It involved dozens of field research trips over decades. The author draws on myriad interviews, documenting and explaining countless protests and demonstrations, and providing an ethnographic analysis that can be seen as a model for other researchers. In this superb book, so rich in ethnographic analysis and field research, Jordan’s own activists, protesters, demonstrators, and dissidents are truly seen and heard, in a compelling narrative that creates a holistic – and therefore more complete and accurate analysis of Jordan’s past, present, and future politics, from the grassroots to the state.

## Deen Sharp, London School of Economics and Political Science



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The opening decades of the 21st Century have been defined by the intensity and frequency of protest. The Arab region, with the uprisings that erupted at the end of 2010, has been central to the rise of 21st Century global urban protest. Over ten years since the self-immolation of Muhammed Bou Azizi in Tunisia and the ostensible start of the Arab uprisings, protests continue to rage across the region – and beyond – significantly altering relations between state and society. I write this review from Khartoum, Sudan where every week (if not almost everyday) a protest is underway against the military coup and its illegitimate rule. Despite the long global history of protests and their particular significance for contemporary politics, scholars are still struggling with how to study protests, their social significance and constitution. *Protesting Jordan: Geographies of Power and Dissent* is a strident contribution to the literature that claims, no less, that protests in Jordan have been central to processes of state-making and state-maintaining.

As a Middle East Geographer, I am delighted that Schwedler has taken up the task of approaching protest in Jordan through a spatial lens. In 2016, I with Claire Panetta, called for greater attention to the sociospatial dynamics of the Arab uprisings beyond the public squares, like Tahrir Square in Egypt (Sharp and Panetta 2016). Schwedler's contribution, albeit with a slightly different angle, responds to many of the frustrations we had with the scholarship on the uprisings at the time – that rarely took space and sociospatial relations as a central category of inquiry. Schwedler in her account, for instance, although focused on Amman is careful to be attentive to other urban areas and their infrastructural connections, the relationships between the periphery and the centre, not to mention other regional and international scales. This is not an

account of protest in Jordan that is trapped in the public square of the metropolis. Schwedler explains the significance and political meaning of the geography of protest in Jordan, and its role in constituting and maintaining the contemporary country we know today. In *Protesting Jordan*, Schwedler articulates how by placing space and place as central to protest, you can provide original political analysis on: the importance of public claim-making to the very constitution of the state and its maintenance; the meaning of protest through where it takes place (notably focusing beyond what is said or how many people gather); and how protests themselves create new spaces and places, as well as possibilities, for politics.

Besides providing a historically sweeping account of the role of protests in the formation and maintenance of the Jordanian state, Schwedler's book is an original contribution to Jordanian urban history. For the most part, the history of protests is the history of urbanization and urban space. Schwedler provides a fascinating historical geographical account as to why and how the Grand Hussein Mosque became central for protests in the 1920s and 1930s and how this legacy has continued to the present day. The book also offers a fine-grained ethnographic account of protests at Kalouti Mosque in Amman. Notably, the significance of protest at both mosques had little to do with Islam but the former the location of government offices and the latter the fact it neighbours the Israeli embassy. Schwedler writes, "individual spaces can be associated with specific issues. The Kalouti Mosque because associated with protests relating to Israel, the Parliament with legislation, the Fourth Circle with the Prime Ministry... The Grand Hussein Mosque is a generic protest location, not associated with any particular issue" (p. 147). This type of

analysis is in stark contrasts with the all too common assessment that protests that emanate in or around mosques are automatically religious in composition. Schwedler articulates how protests can create places and political meaning within cities, and how important deep historically and ethnographically informed research is to understand them.

My main critique of the book is disciplinary in nature, so I will caveat it. Jillian Schwedler is a Professor of Political Science. There are many different debates that Schwedler is responding to within Political Science in the book and one can only do so much. Clearly Schwedler is in direct conversation with debates in social movement theory, in particular, with the work of Charles Tilly. However, I do think that the thin direct engagement with the work of Henri Lefebvre and the more recent work within Middle East studies building on Lefebvre is a missed opportunity. Lefebvre's *Production of Space* ([1974] 1991) is a difficult and messy text, it is referenced and referred to directly in the book and so is his idea of the right to the city. But the engagement is fleeting and rather than a robust

engagement with Lefebvrian concepts, other geographical concepts like "spatial imaginaries" compete for space. Much of Schwedler's book resonates with Lefebvre's broader work. A deeper reading of Lefebvre's concepts, like the right to the city, and the work outlined in *Urban Revolution* ([1970] 2003) but also his extensive engagement with everyday life and rhythm analysis would have enriched the insights that Schwedler has produced. It would also place her in more direct conversation with the rich scholarship that has emerged in the region building on Lefebvre's ideas and specifically around urban protest (See Bayat 2012; Bezmez 2013; Fawaz 2009; Kuymulu 2013; Nagle 2017). I also cannot help wondering if there could have been a productive synthesis of some of the Tillian concepts deployed in the book with Lefebvrian ones.

*Protesting Jordan* is an important contribution to the study of protest. It is a cry and demand not only for scholars to carry on the critical work of studying popular struggle to illuminate its social significance but to forge novel approaches to understand the state, its political economy and urban form.

## Summer Forester, Carleton College



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Jillian Schwedler's book, *Protesting Jordan: Geographies of Power and Dissent*, provides a rich account of how protest and contentious politics have ebbed and flowed over time in Jordan, simultaneously shaping and being shaped by state power. *Protesting Jordan*

offers multi-scalar analyses of history, space and the built environment, and societal relations to demonstrate how and why the modern Jordanian state exists as such. The text offers new insights into both continuity and change vis-à-vis the Hashemite regime, its

power, and its constituents. Schwedler offers an original theoretical account of the inter-related nature of dissent, state building, and state maintenance, supported by empirical evidence from over 25 years of fieldwork.

The book's nuanced accounts of protest and dissent, of different groups' reaction to repression and reform, and of the Jordanian state itself are remarkable in both depth and breadth. Schwedler refrains from treating any single group – from East Bankers and Palestinians to military veterans – as a homogenous entity whose decisions about what, when, why, and *where* to protest are easily understood through a single lens. Instead, she carefully traces shifts in alliances and interests over time, empirically demonstrating how the built environment reflects dissent *and* state reactions to it. And though the book analyzes physical spaces, it also attends to spatial imaginaries, seeking to understand how ideas about belonging and national identity manifest and affect protests and reactions to it.

In the latter part of her book, Schwedler presents a useful typology for those interested in incorporating analyses of the spatial dynamics of protest repression into their own work. *Protesting Jordan*, an “avowedly interdisciplinary” (p. 20) text, demonstrates the utility of traversing both disciplinary and subfield boundaries, and Schwedler's typology will be of particular interest to critical security scholars. The spatial techniques of protest repression that the text presents are each predicated on the militarization of the cityscape. Schwedler explains how the state militarizes a city by making (and unmaking) the built environment to limit the political impact of protests. However, as feminist IR scholars have argued extensively, militarization has consequences for societal relations, identity,

democracy, and more (see, e.g., Enloe 2000; on Jordan, Forester 2019; on Palestine, Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2009). Future research can use this analysis and typology as a springboard for theorizing about the co-constitutive nature of militarization, (in)security, and violence in addition to and beyond protests.

As the previous discussion suggests, Schwedler's work directly speaks to themes from the feminist international relations canon. A point that Schwedler emphasizes throughout the text is that protests are not just events. Instead, they are embedded in and reflective of longer histories of grievances and negotiations, with their impacts extending beyond the end of a protest. Schwedler urges readers to move beyond conceptualizing ‘normal times’ and ‘crisis times’ as binary opposites (p. 227); this echoes feminist scholars who have called for similar interventions with regard to war and security: war is not just an event (Cuomo 1996) and the lines between peace and conflict, between security and insecurity, are blurry. Conceptualizing violence as existing on a continuum, then, requires a widening of the analytical aperture to draw connections between violence that occurs at “moments” of crisis and the everyday, mundane violence necessary to maintain a militarized order (Cockburn 2004). Given that Schwedler similarly emphasizes the importance of focusing on ordinary everyday actions as interesting sites of political action, this marks another excellent avenue for future research that cuts across subfield silos.

Schwedler's work pushes us to think about the effects of social movements above and beyond narrow conceptions of success or failure; the book traces and convincingly demonstrates the myriad ways that regimes learn from protest activity and deploy repressive state power through the construction

(or lack thereof) of cities and communities. Indeed, *Protesting Jordan* serves as a counterbalance to recent scholarship that shows how space can facilitate inclusive democratic processes (see, e.g., Kelly-Thompson 2020).

This growing body of robust theoretical and empirical work engaging spatial politics suggests that we should stay attuned to how the human-made world reflects and shapes ideas about democracy, belonging, and violence.

## Chantal Berman, Georgetown University



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Why does the study of protest seem to teeter on the disciplinary edge of political science? Outside of revolutions – rare, cataclysmic moments when mass revolts manage to topple regimes – our discipline has tended to wall off the study of protests from the institutional questions that have – at least historically – animated the canon of comparative politics. It is no surprise, then, that recent most exciting books in contentious politics have adopted the challenge of placing mass mobilization squarely in the center of institutional development and change. Readers might think of Daniel Gillion’s work on how protests shape American elections, Dan Slater’s work on contentious politics and nation-building in Southeast Asia, or Eleanor Pasotti’s transnational study of activists and urban politics, to name a few.

Jillian Schwedler’s *Protesting Jordan: Geographies of Power and Dissent* takes this impetus to the next level. Schwedler’s ambitious book unpacks the role of protests in making and re-making a state that is often evoked as a textbook study in authoritarian persistence – a monarchy that has weathered decolonial-

ization, mass migration, shifting international alliances, and a regional uprising in 2011 that swept away other long-standing leaders in the MENA. How, the political scientist might wonder, could such a strong state prove grounds for demonstrating the centrality of protests to everyday state-making?

As it turns out, the ways are manifold. Schwedler implores us to view the construction of political order “not (as) a top-down process but a dialectical one.” (p. 9) Demonstrations, riots, boycotts, roadblocks, and labor strikes – Schwedler casts a purposefully wide conceptual net – are positioned in conversation with a host of state functions, from electoral design to the regime’s courting of international patrons. The effects of protests concatenate through political space, notably shaping the perceptions and strategies of other actors, governmental and otherwise. Schwedler’s keen observations are too many for this short reflection, so I will focus on a few contributions and questions that stood out to me.

First, Schwedler’s focus on geography and planning – both historical and contemporary

– welds the evolution of Jordan’s protest ecology to a broader theory of spatial governance. From colonial city planning through gerrymandering in the 1990s through the design of luxury megaprojects imagined in flagrant Gulf style, Schwedler shows how Transjordan’s successive regimes have projected power through manipulation of the built environment. Tensions between urban planning and social forces – a theme animating almost every chapter – become evident in the way that protesters select (and revise) their marching routes, in the shifting of “go-to locations” for protest in Amman, and – perhaps most chillingly – in the ways in which security forces organize and broadcast their intentions of violence. Protesters are equally sophisticated in their understanding of repressive geographies, and their tactics, chants, rhythms, and signage are shown to reflect this.

Second, Schwedler offers an intricate consideration of the protest audience. Who is observing protests, and how, and to what ends? Schwedler aptly reads the behavior of bystanders, such as shopkeepers who remain open to watch demonstrations from the sidelines (and to market provisions to thirsty activists), to sketch the routineness of certain protests. On another scale entirely, Schwedler unpacks the visibility of Jordanian protests to regional and international powers, and the regime anxieties that follow from these displays of dissatisfaction with Jordan’s security and economic entanglements. In this way, Schwedler offers a clever commentary on the trope of regime durability, reflexively tying scholarly projections of state strength back to the regime’s own project of cultivating political space. The Jordanian state, Schwedler observes, strategically wields ideas about its own stability and vulnerability towards varied audiences. And while these protests might stand no chance of tumbling the regime, they

can certainly throw a wrench in the relationships carefully cultivated with outside actors. Protesters watch the regime, watching global patrons, watching protesters... and so on, in an infinity loop of observation, calculation, and anxiety.

Third – and this was my favorite part of the of the book – Schwedler’s later chapters zoom in on a particular series of protests, tracing the evolution of anti-normalization demonstrations adjacent to the Kalouti mosque, which became a protest destination in the 2000s due to its proximity to the Israeli embassy. Chapter five is wholly devoted to an “ethnography of place” of the Kalouti neighborhood, where weekly demonstrations are seemingly tame and highly coordinated, and where “bystanders can often exceed the number of protesters” (p.138). Schwedler theorizes such “routine protests” as “a form of place-making that ensures that certain locations in the built environment will be associated with dissent” (p.146) and further, as a means for parties and organizations to telegraph political commitments to their own members, while avoiding costly confrontation with the state.

When protesters step out of line either spatially or temporally, though – for example by trying to establish a tent encampment in 2009 – they face police violence. In the wake of the 2011 regional Arab Uprisings, Schwedler notes how the eponymous Kalouti group again attempts a transgressive protest. However, it fails to marshal enough supporters, and reverts to the established routine.) Protest routines are thus sustained, even through moments of potential rupture – attesting again, perhaps, to the power of place in regularizing certain forms of dissent (and constraining others).

*Protesting Jordan* is a wonderful read and an ambitious model for writing contentious politics into political history. The Kalouti group case is a testament to theory-generating power of granular observation. Schwedler is one of our field's great ethnographic writ-

ers, and her keen eye for meaningful details and almost-imperceptible shifts in power relations rendered this routine set of protests into powerful grounds for theorizing about the everyday work of contention.

## Response by Jillian Schwedler, Hunter College



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I would first like to thank the editors for selecting my book for a roundtable discussion and the contributors for their thoughtful readings of *Protesting Jordan: Geographies of Power and Dissent*. As Curtis Ryan's comments present a great outline of the book's main arguments, I will forgo summarizing the book to instead engage with the substantive comments.

Curtis Ryan highlights two of my primary objectives in writing the book the way I did: to present a radically different (from much of the extant literature) understanding of politics in Jordan; and to do so through spatial and temporal analyses of protests that is generalizable beyond Jordan. Indeed, I hope scholars of both contentious politics and institutionalized political power will consider their topics from fresh angles developed in the book. Ryan's own work on Jordan has deeply informed parts of my analysis, so I was particularly pleased to read that he was appreciative of my efforts to incorporate insights from International Relations into my

central analysis.

Deen Sharp expresses appreciation that *Protesting Jordan* responds to many of the frustrations he and Claire Panetta voiced in their 2016 edited volume about the lack of attention to spatial and sociospatial relations in the vast literature on the Arab uprisings – a plea that I also made in my own work (Schwedler and King 2014). More recent interventions have also begun to take up spatial dynamics of protests in the region, but mostly with attention to the uprising periods and the spatial dynamics in the main squares (like Tahrir Square in Cairo, Egypt). I differ not only in the long-term temporality I employ (mid-19th century to the present), but also in my attention to how specific locations have distinct spatial routines (e.g., how protests in Amman's downtown area differ in spatial and temporal dynamics from those held in other locations in the capital). I also appreciate that Sharp emphasizes that my analysis is not focused on Amman (although it does receive substantial attention) but is “attentive to other

urban areas and their infrastructural connections, the relations between the periphery and the center, not to mention other regional and international scales.”

Sharp’s critique that my limited engagement with Henri Lefebvre’s work is a “missed opportunity” is well taken, and I agree that my work resonates well with Lefebvre’s broader work and concepts. The book’s limited engagement with Lefebvre’s work was a choice, as my intervention is aimed primarily at challenging political science analyses of both protests and formal state institutions. As Sharp notes, “one can only do so much” in any one book. Because I am (mostly) borrowing from political geography rather than contributing new theories to it, geographers like Sharp will understandably see ways in which my analyses could be pulled more centrally into that discipline’s debates. This “criticism” is thus very gratifying, in that it sees *Protesting Jordan* as rich enough to contribute to major debates around Lefebvre’s work. I may well take up that invitation. The one area where *Protesting Jordan* does aim to intervene in debates within political geography comes in Chapter 8 concerning material obstacles to protest in the built environment. Here I build on the limited attention among geographers to protests per se, offering a new typology and theory of how protests shape the built environment and vice versa.

Summer Forester’s comments emphasize how *Protesting Jordan* might engage well with another body of literature, that of the feminist international relations canon. I admittedly do not know this literature well, so I was excited to learn that this field examines how “militarization is consequential for societal relations, identity, democracy, and more,” and how it likewise sees state-making as an ongoing process (as do anthropological approach-

es to the state). I am excited to read the works cited, including work by Forester that I had not previously read.

Finally, I am delighted that Chantal Berman found the discussion of routine protests in Chapter 5 to be her favorite part. Chapter 5 and other chapters in the book aim to upend the success/failure framing of protests that dominate many analyses. I ask instead, why participants protest weekly to demand something that won’t happen (e.g., canceling the peace treaty with Israel), and why do so in a manner that feels entirely scripted (where to gather, how the protest unfolds, and when and how it ends)? I show that even routine protests can have observable political effects beyond realizing their demands, such as signaling their political engagement to their larger constituency, maintaining known spaces for protest, and placemaking in a manner that when larger crowds inevitably turn out to protest in the future, they will know exactly where to gather.

I am thrilled that these thoughtful authors have found much that is exciting and new in *Protesting Jordan*. I am grateful for their careful reading and insights, as the book has been a labor of love for more than a decade. ♦



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# MENA POLITICS

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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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