

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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Greetings from the Editors of *MENA Politics*, the official newsletter of APSA's MENA Politics Section!

We are thrilled to share the fall 2023 issue of the newsletter. With each passing issue, our commitment to providing you with engaging, informative, and thought-provoking content only grows stronger. In this latest issue, you will find a standalone reflection offering critical and practical guidance on navigating the challenges of fieldwork in the Middle East and North Africa, along with two exciting symposia and a lively roundtable book discussion.

In the first section, our standalone article digs deep into the evolving landscape of fieldwork in MENA. Lisa Anderson looks at the intricacies and challenges of conducting fieldwork in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), a topic that the field continues to grapple with given the politically sensitive nature of the region and the diverse range of subjects under study. While acknowledging these potential dangers, Lisa Anderson underscores the importance of avoiding the securitization of research in MENA, which can penalize scholars and compromise the integrity of their work. In this context, we see REMENA as a valuable resource, offering practical guidance and ethical considerations to ensure relevant and meaningful research in the region

is conducted with utmost respect for the safety and well-being of researchers and their subjects. We encourage colleagues to utilize [REMENA](#) and integrate its principles into their training programs, equipping the next generation of scholars with the tools and knowledge needed to navigate this challenging terrain while upholding the highest ethical standards.

The two symposia address timely and important issues. The first symposium explores the political tension concerning the existing regimes' interest in controlling the judiciary in Egypt, Israel, Lebanon. Devoting particular attention to the gendered aspects of this tension, the symposium includes five articles featuring Mona El-Ghobashy, Alon Yaktar, Lina Khatib, Ruth Halperin-Kaddari and Rola El-Husseini.

The second symposium examines the left-wing politics in the MENA region. The symposium aims to shed light on important and timely issues, such as why the left-wing's power and influence has declined since the 1960s and the 1970s and what could be the future of the left in the region. These broad questions are further grounded in case studies that aim to shed light on individual countries and their left-wing movements. Egypt, Iran, Morocco, Israel and Turkey are

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## Letter from the Editors (continued)

among those case studies included. The symposium includes seven articles featuring Idriss Jebari, Sune Haugbolle, Hesham Sallam, Siavush Randjbar, Sevgi Adak, Avraham Shilon, Khalil Dahbi and an interview with Gilbert Achcar.

Finally, the roundtable presents a creative discussion convened by Rana B. Khoury, member of the editorial board, and Sean Yom on the principles and process of conflict research in the Middle East. It presents an edited transcript of a Zoom discussion involving five junior and senior scholars (Anne Irfan, Kevin Mazur, Sarah Parkinson, Stacey Philbrick Yadav, and Jonah Schulhofer-Wohl), who have all recently published well-received volumes on civil or interstate wars in the region. The wide-ranging dialogue touches on many important issues, among them the perils of fieldwork, the dilemmas of data sensitivity, the challenge of conceptualization, and which forms of knowledge production matter for the academy.

Fall issues hold a special place in our hearts. It is that time of year when we express our gratitude to departing editorial board members and section officers while extending a warm welcome to our new comrades eager to shake things up in our field and profession. We thank two departing members of the newsletter's editorial board, Lisel Hintz and Kevan Harris, as well as three departing officers of the section—Stacey Philbrick Yadav (outgoing Chair), Rich Nielsen (outgoing Treasurer), and Nadine Sika (outgoing at-large officer)—for their dedicated service.

We welcome two new editorial board members, Eric Lob and Sebnem Gumuscu, while the MENA Politics Section welcomes three incoming officers: Curtis Ryan (Chair), Zahra Babar (Treasurer), and Lama Mourad (at-large officer).

As always, we are happy to receive your ideas and suggestions for each of our sections—stand-alone articles, symposia, and roundtable. Please send your proposals no later than December 1, 2023. Send article proposals to Sean Yom ([seanyom@temple.edu](mailto:seanyom@temple.edu)), symposium proposals to Nermin Allam ([nermin.allam@rutgers.edu](mailto:nermin.allam@rutgers.edu)), and roundtable proposals to Gamze Cavdar ([gamze.cavdar@colostate.edu](mailto:gamze.cavdar@colostate.edu)). MENA Politics section members outside the U.S. are particularly encouraged to submit their proposals and ideas.

- Nermin Allam, Gamze Cavdar, 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 symposium proposals,  
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Sean Yom at [seanyom@temple.edu](mailto:seanyom@temple.edu) for article proposals.



## Editorial Board Updates

We extend our thanks to two departing members of the Newsletter Editorial Board: Lisel Hintz, whose tireless efforts in reviewing, editing, and providing insightful feedback have consistently ensured that the newsletter's content remains engaging, informative, and relevant to our readers; and Kevan Harris, for his dedicated service.

We are thrilled to introduce our new Editorial Board members, Eric Lob and Sebnem Gumuscu, who commenced their terms in Fall 2023.



Eric Lob is an associate professor in the Department of Politics and International Relations at Florida International University. His research focuses on the intersection of politics and development in the Middle East. He is the author of the book *Iran's Reconstruction Jihad: Rural Development and Regime Consolidation after 1979* (Cambridge University Press, 2020). His articles have appeared in the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, *Iranian Studies*, *Middle East Critique*, *The Middle East Journal*, *The Muslim World*, *Third World Quarterly*, and others. He is a Non-Resident Scholar with the Middle East Institute (MEI) Iran Program and a Board of Trustees member.



Sebnem Gumuscu is an associate professor of political science at Middlebury College and the author of *Democracy or Authoritarianism: Islamist Governments in Turkey, Egypt, and Tunisia* (Cambridge University Press, 2023) and co-author of *Democracy, Identity, and Foreign Policy in Turkey: Hegemony Through Transformation* (with E. Fuat Keyman) (Palgrave, 2014). Her research on Islamist movements, political parties, and democratic backsliding and breakdown have also been published in scholarly journals.

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**MENA POLITICS**  
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# News from the APSA MENA Section

## Letter from the Outgoing Section President

It is my pleasure to offer a final overview about the APSA Middle East Politics section's activities for 2022-23 academic year. In addition to the routine work of planning for the annual APSA conference and overseeing section awards and elections, our leadership undertook three primary activities, all of which were guided by the section's commitment to advancing the needs of graduate students, early-career researchers, and scholars from the MENA region.

The first project involved the continuation of work begun in 2021 in cooperation with the Research Ethics in the Middle East and North Africa (REMENA) working group. Following up on a grant-funded program held in conjunction with APSA's 2022 annual meeting in Montreal, members of the section leadership continued to contribute to refinement of an instrument for graduate advisors. This tool is meant to mainstream discussion of field research ethics earlier in graduate training, and to support graduate advisors who may be advising students working in the MENA region (whether or not the advisors themselves have experience working in the region). Members of the section leadership participated in a workshop in Tunis designed to troubleshoot the instrument with a number of colleagues from across the MENA region; we also worked to refine the instrument in light of some ethical concerns that have been brought directly to the section. Rich Nielsen, our outgoing treasurer and a participant in the Tunis meeting, will pilot a revised version of the instrument in his Scope and Methods graduate course at MIT this fall. Since ethical practices are iteratively responsive to changing conditions and require our collective

commitments and insights, I encourage section members who are interested in advancing this work to contact Lisa Anderson, who chairs the REMENA initiative.

The second major section initiative involved a co-sponsored Research Development Group in concert with the APSA Democracy and Autocracy section. The RDG was thematically focused on the latter section's themes but targeted its call to early career researchers from institutions in the Middle East and North Africa. Elizabeth Nugent, who has been actively involved with both sections and the driving force behind this collaboration, and Nermin Allam organized the workshoping of a number of papers in advance of their presentation at the 2023 APSA meeting in Los Angeles.

Finally, our section leadership spent considerable time over the summer addressing the challenges presented by the hospitality workers' strike in Los Angeles. Following APSA's decision to allow remote presentation and/or individual withdrawals, we were informed of a large number of intended withdrawals. We became concerned about programmatic integrity and the probability that a number of carefully constructed panels would be hollowed out. Working with the 2023 program co-chairs (Nadine Sika and Curtis Ryan) and the 2024 program co-chairs (Allison Hartnett and Shamiran Mako), the section decided to offer a panel-level option designed to retain programmatic integrity. If all panelists on a section-organized panel agreed before August 7, then that panel would be deferred to next year's APSA meeting in Philadelphia. In the

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# News from the APSA MENA Section

## Letter from the Outgoing Section President, continued

end, six out of our 14 panels opted to defer, no panel opted to move to remote format, and the remaining eight panels proceeded in person in Los Angeles.

I would like to offer an observation about the section's deferral option, in light of arguments advanced by APSA's executive director about the disparate impact of cancellation on early-career researchers and graduate students. Individual withdrawals from the program were not reported to the section in any comprehensive way and disappeared from the online program quickly, making a complete portrait of the impact unclear. But looking at the panel-level decisions, it is clear that early-career researchers and graduate students were equally likely to defer to 2024 as they were to attend in person. As section chair, I was pleased that communication and cooperation among section leaders and program chairs allowed us to embrace this additional option.

There are a few remaining points of uncertainty regarding the fallout of the 2023 meeting, however. First, since section panels will roll over from this year, we can expect that selection for 2024 panels will be a bit more competitive than would otherwise be the case. Second, while APSA's leadership pledged that cancellation would not have any negative impact on individuals, they have not yet clarified how withdrawals will impact individual sections as the plan for the Philadelphia meeting. If panel allocations are based on 2023 attendance numbers, the MENA Politics section may face reduced allocations for 2024. But given some precedents, my hope is that allocations will be frozen at the 2022

level, and I trust that the incoming section leadership and section members who currently serve on APSA Council will continue advocating for this.

It was a bit of a bumpy end to my two years as section chair, but I am grateful to my fellow section leaders for their commitment and unflagging good cheer, as we found ourselves navigating the unexpected. All were a pleasure to work with this year, and I know that Yael and Allison will ensure a smooth transition for the new team.

Stacey Philbrick Yadav

Outgoing MENA Politics Section Chair

# News from the APSA MENA Section

## Letter from the Incoming Section President

Our academic year started with no shortage of controversy and difficulty, as the 2023 annual meeting of the APSA was held in Los Angeles amidst a major strike by hotel workers. While our members differed on how best to respond to this, APSA eventually decided to move all panels and other activities out of striking hotels, and the L.A. Convention Center itself was not part of the strike. That left each and every member with some tough decisions to make. No one was put in the position of crossing a picket line, and I certainly would never cross one. But I do think that our section had one of the best and most flexible responses to the issue, allowing panels to pick one of three choices: go online, present in-person in L.A., or defer acceptance until APSA 2024 in Philadelphia.

We have several goals and challenges moving forward. Perhaps foremost amongst these is simply the issue of membership. We currently have 371 members, almost half of whom are graduate students, which is great. But the overall number is also lower than in the past. Our section is a great professional support network for scholars of Middle East politics, so please plan on renewing your APSA membership, so that our section can grow and expand its activities and its presence within APSA.

We plan to continue working on key issues such as research ethics especially in field research in the region, so we look forward to continuing to support the important work of the Research Ethics in the Middle East and North Africa (REMENA) working group led by Lisa Anderson.

We will also continue to support other professional groups like the Arab Political Science Network and we encourage our members to apply to the many opportunities and workshops created by APSA-MENA Workshops, led by Andrew Stinson and Dana el-Issa. Please check the [APSA-MENA website](#) and [APSA Connect](#) for updates on these and other opportunities. You can also follow section news on [@APSAMENA](#) on Twitter or X, and [Bluesky](#) with the same handle.

Finally, on behalf of our entire section, I want to thank our previous chair, Stacey Philbrick Yadav, our outgoing treasurer, Rich Nielsen, and at-large board member Nadine Sika for their years of successful service to the section.

If you are planning on attending the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) meeting in Montreal in November, look for our joint reception with the Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS), and I hope to see you there.

Curtis Ryan

MENA Politics Section Chair



# News from the APSA MENA Section

## New Section Officers

### Curtis Ryan, President



Curtis Ryan is a Professor of Political Science at the Department of Government in Justice Studies at Appalachian State University. He served as a Fulbright Scholar (1992-93) at the Center for Strategic Studies, University of Jordan, in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, and was twice named a Peace Scholar by the United States Institute of Peace. In addition to his contributions to *Middle East Report*, Dr. Ryan's articles on Middle East politics have been published in the *Middle East Journal*, *The British Journal of Middle East Studies*, *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, *World Politics Review*, *Middle East Insight*, *Arab Studies Quarterly*, *Israel Affairs*, *Orient*, *Southeastern Political Review*, *Journal of Third World Studies*, *Middle East Policy*, and the *Journal of Middle East Law and Governance*. He is the author of three books: *Jordan in Transition: From Hussein to Abdullah* (Lynne Rienner, 2002), *Inter-Arab Alliances: Regime Security and Jordanian Foreign Policy* (University Press of Florida, 2009) and *Jordan and the Arab Uprisings - Regime Survival and Politics Beyond the State* (Columbia University Press, 2018).

### Zahra R. Babar, Treasurer



Zahra R. Babar is an Associate Director for Research at the Center for International and Regional Studies at Georgetown University in Qatar. She has published several articles and book chapters on areas of her research interest, including: "The 2022 World Cup and Migrants' Rights in Qatar: Racialized Labour Hierarchies and the Influence of Racial Capitalism," with N. Vora, in *The Political Quarterly* (2022), "Qatar, the World Cup, and the Global Campaign for Migrant Workers' Rights," in *Football in the Middle East: State Society and the Beautiful Game*, Ed. Abdullah Al Arian (Hurst/OUP 2022), "Skilled migration to emerging economies: the global competition for talent beyond the West," with M. Ewers and N. Khattab, *Globalizations* (2021); "The Vagaries of the In-between: Labor Citizenship in the Persian Gulf," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, (2020); and "Purveyors of Dreams: Labour Recruiters in the Pakistan to Saudi Arabia Migration Corridor," *Migration and Development*, (2020).

# News from the APSA MENA Section

## New Section Officers

### Lama Mourad, At-Large Officer



Lama Mourad is an Assistant Professor at the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs at Carleton University. Her research interests are focused on the intersection of forced migration, local governance, and the politics of borders, with a regional focus on the Middle East. She previously held fellowships at Perry World House, University of Pennsylvania, and with the Middle East Initiative at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government. Her research has been supported by a number of institutions and agencies, including the Harvard Kennedy School's Middle East Initiative, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). Her work has been published in both academic and public outlets, including the *Journal of Refugee Studies*, *Middle East Law and Governance*, *Forced Migration Studies*, the *European Journal of International Relations* as well as *The Atlantic*, *Lawfare*, *The Washington Post's Monkey Cage*, and *The Toronto Star*.

# News from the APSA MENA Section

## Section Awards

### 2022-2023 Award for Best Book

**Committee:** Khalid Medani, Holger Albrecht, Avital Livny

**Winner:** David Patel, *Order Out of Chaos: Islam, Information, and the Rise and Fall of Social Orders in Iraq* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022).

**Honorable Mention:** Sarah Parkinson, *Beyond the Lines: Social Networks and Palestinian Militant Organizations in Wartime Lebanon* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2023).

The committee received a number of excellent nominations for the Best Book award. We identified three criteria by which to evaluate them: conceptual and theoretical innovation; empirical substance and originality; and methodological depth.

We named David Patel's *Order Out of Chaos* as the 2022-2023 Best Book and recognized Sarah Parkinson's *Beyond the Lines* as the honorable mention. Both books stood out from the pack of nominees by succeeding on all three dimensions: theory, empirics, and methods.

David Patel's *Order Out of Chaos* theorizes that Friday congregational prayers at mosque played a crucial role in reestablishing social and political order in Iraq after the collapse of the Ba'athist state. The reintroduction of Friday prayers supported coordination among Iraqi Shi'a, developing thick strands of shared information and identity. Patel deftly establishes the importance of Friday Mosque through ethnographic description combined with quantitative evaluation of

non-obvious implications of his theory. In so doing, he offers a vivid picture of an emerging social and political order that has come to define post-Ba'athist Iraq. *Order Out of Chaos* make critical contributions to our understanding of Islam and identity, and the way that social structures reestablish order when political ones are dismantled.

In *Beyond the Lines*, Sarah Parkinson builds on years of ethnographic study of Palestinian militant groups in Lebanon. In explaining the structure and dynamics of these groups, Parkinson centers her theory on the need for information of many forms, and how evolving circumstances breed flexibility and innovation. Within Lebanon, Parkinson highlights how local groups responded to different forms of violence by state and non-state actors, creating distinct networks of militants with distinct organizational structures. Parkinson's vivid descriptions render the book incredibly compelling, as she makes critical contributions to scholarship on militancy and socio-political networks.

# News from the APSA MENA Section

## 2022-2023 Award for Best Article

**Committee:** Sarah Parkinson, Dina Bishara, and Crystal Ennis

**Winner:** Asli Cansunar, “Distributional Consequences of Philanthropic Contributions to Public Goods: Self-Serving Elite in Ottoman Istanbul,” *Journal of Politics* 84, 2 (2022): 889-907.

**Honorable Mention:** Michelle Weitzel, “Access Denied: Temporal Mobility Regimes in Hebron,” *Borderlands* 21, 2 (2022): 168-197.

The committee received a number of excellent nominations for the Best Article award. We named Asli Cansunar’s “Distributional Consequences of Philanthropic Contributions to Public Goods: Self-Serving Elite in Ottoman Istanbul” as the 2022-2023 Best Article and recognized Michelle Weitzel’s “Access Denied: Temporal Mobility Regimes in Hebron” as the honorable mention.

Asli Cansunar’s winning article, “Distributional Consequences of Philanthropic Contributions to Public Goods: Self-Serving Elite in Ottoman Istanbul,” is an exemplar of creative, context-sensitive, robust multi-method work. In it, Cansunar argues that Ottoman elites who engaged in the philanthropic and ostensibly “charitable” practice of endowing public drinking fountains were actually disproportionately benefitting their own neighborhoods and themselves, thus exacerbating urban inequality. The committee was partic-

ularly impressed by the unique geographic data on charitably-endowed water fountains, gleaned from extensive archival work, as well as by the careful attention to measurement that is grounded the lived experience of accessing potable water in Ottoman Istanbul. This piece is an exemplar of how historical cases can inform big, theoretical questions while richly representing historical and regional context.

Michelle Weitzel’s analysis of ‘temporal mobility regimes’ in Hebron masterfully illustrates the relationship between temporality and power. Weitzel’s attention to how temporal dynamics, including interruption and sequence, are harnessed to restrict and govern mobility beyond spatial and physical technologies offers unique insights into the politics and violence of Israeli occupation and political control more broadly.



# News from the APSA MENA Section

## 2022-2023 Award Best Paper Presented at APSA

**Committee:** Lisel Hintz, Bozena Welborne, and Fotini Christia

**Winner:** Basileus Zeno, “The Shifting Rhetorics of the Syrian Uprising: Politics of Sectarianization.”

**Honorable Mention:** Allison Hartnett and Mohamed Saleh, “Rural Intra-Elite Conflict, Colonization, and Demands for Power-Sharing: Evidence from Khedival Egypt.”

The committee received a number of excellent nominations for the Best Paper Presented award. We named Basileus Zeno’s “The Shifting Rhetorics of the Syrian Uprising: Politics of Sectarianization” as the 2022-2023 Best Paper Presented and recognized Allison Hartnett and Mohamed Saleh’s “Rural Intra-Elite Conflict, Colonization, and Demands for Power-Sharing: Evidence from Khedival Egypt” as the honorable mention.

Zeno’s winning paper addresses the puzzle of how narratives articulated during the Syrian uprising that began in 2011 shifted from calls for political reform to sectarian and militarized discourses. In doing so, the author challenges static and homogenizing treatments of sects and sectarian conflict to unpack how and when the conflict became sectarianized, and by whom. Zeno analyzes the iterative and interactive processes through which the sectarian-coded framing of the conflict promulgated by Syrian elites and supralocal actors on the ground, online, and through Arab satellite channels shaped local activists’ own forms of identification in response to escalating regime violence. The committee found Zeno’s interpretivist approach, which leverages a rich set of data collected through ethnographic observation, interviews, and content analysis of protest slogans and online mobilization, to be particularly well suited to study-

ing relational processes of boundary-making. We found the paper’s analysis of how, as Zeno writes, “sect” as a “residual sociality” becomes activated politically to be highly compelling and extremely well developed. The committee commends the author for the deep dive into the Syrian case, and believes paper makes an important contribution to wider studies of agency, identity, and violence on a topic of great societal importance for MENA and beyond.

Hartnett and Saleh, the honorable mention-winning authors, analyze the impact of colonialism on the rising power of the rural middle class in agrarian autocracies. By examining Egypt in both precolonial and colonial settings, the authors are first able to demonstrate how shifting economic conditions and resultant conflict over coerced labor increase both demands for power-sharing and political representation by the middle class. Second, they compellingly demonstrate how colonial rule disrupts progress made toward political representation, shifting power away from the middle class and back toward the landed elite so as to increase extraction while decreasing the possibility of unrest. By using this case, Hartnett and Saleh also make an important contribution to studies of democratization outside of Europe; analyzing

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# News from the APSA MENA Section

## 2022-2023 Award Best Paper Presented at APSA, continued

the rise of the middle class in an agrarian rather than an industrializing setting enriches understandings of demands for power-sharing under shifting economic conditions in the Global South. The committee particularly commends Harnett and Saleh for their novel data set, which includes precolonial Egyptian parliamentary minutes, labor force data from census and cotton production statistics, and demographic data on MP representation from 1824 to 1932 to cover precolonial and colonial periods.

## 2022-2023 Award for Best Dissertation

**Committee:** Ian Hartshorn, Neil Ketchley, and Jannis Grimm

**Winner:** Carolyn L. Barnett, “Perceived Norms and the Politics of Women’s Rights in Morocco,” Princeton University.

**Honorable Mention:** Ahmed Ezzeldin Abdalla Mohamed, “Religious Cycles of Policy Responsiveness: How Religious Seasons Regulate Public Opinion and Government Responsiveness in the Muslim World,” Columbia University.

**Honorable Mention:** Daniel L. Tavana, “The Origins of Opposition: Elections, Identity, and Order in the Middle East,” Princeton University.

The committee received a number of excellent nominations for the Best Dissertation award. We named Carolyn L. Barnett’s “Perceived Norms and the Politics of Women’s Rights in Morocco” as the winner and recognized Ahmed Ezzeldin Abdalla Mohamed’s “Religious Cycles of Policy Responsiveness: How Religious Seasons Regulate Public Opinion and Government Responsiveness in the Muslim World” and Daniel L. Tavana’s “The Origins of Opposition: Elections, Identity, and Order in the Middle East” as the

honorable mentions.

Dr. Barnett’s winning dissertation addresses how misperceptions on how conservative others are may hinder gender progress in Morocco. Dr. Barnett’s dissertation stood out for its rich empirical and theoretical contributions, as well as its potential to contribute to active policy debates. The project’s methodology builds and deepens its argument by stages, producing a project that is both convincing and comprehensive. Well written and

# News from the APSA MENA Section

## 2022-2023 Award for Best Dissertation, continued

persuasive, the project is sure to contribute to our understanding of attitudes and perceptions thereof, not only in the study of the country of Morocco but more broadly as well. Congratulations to Dr. Barnett for this excellent contribution.

Dr. Mohamed, the first honorable mention author of dissertation, addresses how and when the cycles of the religious year allow moments of contention and government responsiveness. Members of the committee noted the variety and rigor of data sources and analysis methods and praised the detailed attention to the contingency created by

religious holidays, leading to opportunities for both contention and cooptation. Congratulations to Dr. Mohamed.

Dr. Tavana's honorable mention dissertation traces the strategic interactions of candidates and voting apparatuses in Kuwait, building a theory of opposition success and defeat. Committee members praised the meticulous data collection, the contribution to broader debates in political science, and the theoretical contribution that skilfully combined institutional and behavioural components. Congratulations to Dr. Tavana.

# 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 the Middle East and North Africa. Through a series of workshops, departmental collaborations, research grants, and other opportunities, the program extends APSA's engagement with the international political science community and strengthens research networks linking American scholars with colleagues overseas. The goal of APSA's MENA Workshops, generously funded by Carnegie Corporation of New York through 2025, 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.*

APSA is pleased to announce the launch of an annual Methods Training Program for scholars in the MENA region. Unlike traditional trainings that conclude after a brief period of instruction, the program is designed to offer a sustained series of engagements, providing attendees with skill-building activities that are directly linked to research outputs. The training integrates various aspects of APSA's MENA programming into a series of virtual and in-person engagements that provide training in a specific research methodology while also offering research feedback and mentoring towards publication of participants' research manuscripts. The inaugural program this year, titled ["Quantitative Methods for the Social Sciences: Regression Analysis,"](#) is designed to provide early-career scholars with intermediate-level training on understanding and applying quantitative methods in their research.

Organized in partnership with the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies, the MENA Methods Program will commence with three introductory virtual sessions held over Zoom in November 2023 followed by a 3-day in-person workshop from December 7-9, 2023 at the Doha Institute. Drs. Abdelkarim Amengay (Doha Institute), Sarah Mansour (Cairo University), and Ammar Shamaileh (Doha Institute) will lead the training, which will include lectures, hands-on 'guided assignments' in a lab setting, group exercises

with peer-feedback, and access to datasets and supplementary resources, as well as networking and mentoring opportunities. While this year's program will focus on quantitative methods, additional methods trainings focusing on qualitative methods and hosted by different institutions in the region will follow in spring/summer 2024.

Following the Methods Training Workshop in December, APSA will hold its 10th annual MENA Research Development Workshop, scheduled for January 2024 in Cairo. The Research Proposal Development Workshop on ["Studying Political Behavior in the Middle East and North Africa"](#) will support up to 20 graduate students in developing their PhD dissertation proposals or refining research plans for projects within the field of political behavior. Organized in partnership with the American University in Cairo (AUC), the program will commence with a virtual session held over zoom in October 2023 followed by a 6-day in-person workshop from January 6-11, 2024 at AUC. Workshop co-leaders, Drs. Amr Adly (AUC), Nermin Allam (Rutgers University), Mazen Hassan (Cairo University), and Elizabeth Nugent (Princeton University), will support fellows in advancing their knowledge of the theoretical frameworks and writing skills necessary to develop research proposals that explore various dimensions of political behavior in the MENA region.

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## News from the APSA MENA Program (continued)

APSA continues to partner with the [Institute for Qualitative and Multi-Method Research](#) (IQMR) at Syracuse University and the [Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research](#) (ICPSR) at the University of Michigan to provide scholarships to MENA scholars to receive methodology training in the US. This summer, APSA supported ten PhD students and early-career scholars from the region to attend the 2023 IQMR and ICPSR summer programs. APSA will support eight scholars to attend the 2024 IQMR and ICPSR summer programs.

We continue to partner with political science and related departments at universities in the region to design tailored programming that supports local faculty and graduate students through our [Departmental Collaboration Initiative](#). In September, the MENA Program supported Zayed University in organizing an introductory two-day training workshop on quantitative text analysis for faculty members at the Department of International Affairs and Social Sciences (IASS). Dr. Luwei Ying (University of California, Los Angeles) introduced attendees to fundamentals of quantitative text analysis techniques within the framework of social sciences, while providing the skills necessary to apply the methods in their own research and design and implement a text analysis project from data collection to interpretation. Topics covered included text pre-processing, dictionary methods, supervised learning techniques, unsupervised learning, and causal inference with text data. Each method introduced was bolstered by real-world applications, providing a tangible context for understanding it. This is the third departmental collaboration with Zayed University; APSA supported faculty in organizing a two-day training on machine learning

as a data analysis tool for the social sciences in 2021 and another series of workshops for faculty and MA students on teaching research methods in 2018. Since 2017, APSA has supported eighteen projects at six different institutions in the MENA region.

And finally, we are pleased to share that eight MENA scholars have been paired with mentors this summer through the [MENA Mentorship Initiative](#). The program connects early-career scholars from countries in the Arab MENA region with advanced-career scholars for feedback and mentoring on project-specific activity over a period of three to six months.

We look forward to sharing program news, updates, and additional information on APSA's MENA Program website: <http://web.apsanet.org/mena/>. For questions, please e-mail us at [menaworkshop@apsanet.org](mailto:menaworkshop@apsanet.org).

APSA MENA Project Team  
American Political Science Association  
Andrew Stinson and Dana El-Issa

# News from the Arab Political Science Network

*The Arab Political Science Network is a collaborative scholarly initiative that seeks to support Arab political scientists.*

The Arab Political Science Network ([APSN](#)) had a busy spring and summer with several workshops and events that we are happy to share with you along with some of our upcoming events.

On April 11, we organized a webinar on Just Environmental Transitions in Arab Politics, in collaboration with the Arab Reform Initiative ([ARI](#)). The webinar looked at the debate over the politics of the environment and the politicization of climate action for economic gains. You can watch the video [here](#) and check our upcoming note from the discussion. In May 11, we organized, virtually, in collaboration with the Centre for Lebanese Studies ([CLS](#)) the first part of the [Book Manuscript Workshop](#), which brought together 14 post-doctoral students from the Arab world who are working on their first English book manuscript. The second part will take place in-person December 14-15 in Beirut, with up to 7 scholars receiving detailed feedback on their manuscripts.

The APSN annual [Research Development Workshop](#) took place in Beirut on May 26-27, in collaboration with the University of Birmingham. Engaging discussions were the hallmark of the workshop, where participants presented their draft papers and received extensive feedback from discussants and peers. The last session of the workshop focused on providing practical tips on the process of publishing in academic journals. Participants were also able to attend some of the sessions of the Arab Council of Social Science conference.

APSN was present at the International Studies Association (ISA) conference in Ifrane and the Annual American Political Science Association (APSA) meeting in Los Angeles. In Ifrane, we organized a roundtable on [The Ethics of Social Science Research in MENA](#) bringing together colleagues and researchers to reflect on the challenges and gaps impacting research ethics especially in stifling environments. In Los Angeles, we organized a roundtable on [New and Old Forms of Opposition to Entrenched Authoritarianism in MENA](#), where the panelists looked at old and renewed forms of contentious politics with a focus on Tunisia, Morocco, Jordan and Kuwait.

Finally, On October 9, APSN organized with ARI a webinar on Youth and/in Politics in Arab States. The discussion brought together three scholars with experience in the fields of youth politics, civil society, and labor to showcase recent research in those areas. The event also featured the Arabic translation of the 2019 POMEPS study on Youth Politics and reflect on what changed since then.

Looking Ahead, APSN will be at MESA in Montreal, co-organizing a [roundtable](#) with MESA's Global Academy on Saturday November 4. The event will feature four scholars from the region who will share recent research trends and their experiences navigating research challenges particularly in increasingly challenging research environments. It is also an opportunity to explore further collaboration between political science scholars in North America and MENA. Feel free to drop by if you are attending and

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# News from the Arab Political Science Network

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## (continued)

share with us your thoughts and experiences.

On November 21, APSN in collaboration with [CEDEJ](#) is organizing a webinar on the state of politics of infrastructure and urbanism in the region. This is the inaugural event of a project that will run between January and July 2024, and includes a monthly seminar series and concludes with an in-person workshop. More information will be announced soon.

Finally, be on the lookout for an essay collection from our [Teaching Research Methods](#) workshop. The collection will be published in the [ESMA journal](#) in English, and APSN will make it available in Arabic on its website.

We invite you to visit APSN's [YouTube](#) Channel that contains playlists featuring our previous webinars, as well as subtitled [research methods](#) and [professional development](#) videos. Additionally, you might be interested in checking recent episodes and book reviews from our partners [Ghayen](#) podcast and [Al-Salon](#) reviews. Both provide non-fiction and academic conversations and reviews in Arabic.

You can find more information on our website – [www.arabpsn.org](http://www.arabpsn.org) – and by following us on [Twitter](#) (aka X), [Facebook](#), [LinkedIn](#) and [YouTube](#).

Ahmed Morsy  
(on behalf of the APSN team)

# Responsible Social Inquiry in the Middle East and North Africa: For Each of Us and All of Us

*Lisa Anderson*



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Princeton University's oddly belated acknowledgement in October 2023 that doctoral candidate Elizabeth Tsurkov, who was kidnapped in Iraq more than six months earlier, was in the country for [research related to her dissertation](#) once again raised concerns about the responsibilities of researchers, their institutions and their colleagues in the conduct of research in communities under duress. These communities suffer duress whether from autocratic governments, armed militias, forced migration, extreme poverty or many of the other political, social and economic ills that plague our world, and especially our region of choice, the Middle East and North Africa.

Tsurkov's plight was complicated by the fact that it was not the first incident to raise alarms. In May 2018, Matthew Hedges, a PhD student at Durham University, who was in the United Arab Emirates for a two-week research trip, was arrested at Dubai International Airport and detained. Kylie Moore Gilbert, an Australian political scientist at Melbourne University, was imprisoned in Iran from September 2018 to November 2020. Homa Hoodfar, a Canadian-Iranian sociocultural anthropologist at Concordia University was detained in Iran in 2016.

French researcher Roland Marchal, a sociologist at Sciences Po, was also imprisoned in Iran from June 2019 to March 2020; his colleague, Fariba Adelkhah, an anthropologist, is still in detention there. Some researchers are killed, like Cambridge PhD student Giulio Regini murdered in Egypt in 2016, and some are captured, as Tsurkov appears to have been. Some are released with government pardons, others traded in hostage exchanges. Some foreign researchers are merely harassed by displeased governments, like Henri Barkey of Lehigh University, who fell afoul of the Turkish government.

And there are many, many more national researchers who have been detained, harassed, warned and discouraged. Only those very well-connected in American and European academic circles —like Abdulkhaleq Abdulla, a prominent political scientist at who was detained for ten days in 2017, allegedly for what the UAE government regarded as intemperate tweets or Maati Monjib, historian at Mohammed V University in Rabat, who was suspended without pay in March 2023 following years of harassment for his advocacy of free expression—get much international attention. To their credit, the [Committee on Academic Freedom of Middle East Studies](#)



[Association of North America](#) has vigorously advocated for the rights of our colleagues.

Yet the accumulation of such stories is disheartening, as the harassment and detentions themselves are intended to be. In much of the region, research and researchers are often regarded as, at best, tradable commodities; at worst, a significant danger to social peace and cohesion—or at least to regime stability.

So, what is a social science researcher to do?

In 2020, the REMENA project—formally, the [Special Commission on Research Ethics in the Middle East and North Africa](#)—was created to develop guidelines for the conduct of responsible, ethical and constructive social inquiry in the Middle East and North Africa. It has been working for several years to assess impediments to such research and to recommend measures to address them. This newsletter has published several brief notes about the project and its activities (See [Spring 2022 issue](#), [Fall 2022 issue](#), [Spring 2023](#)).

While the Commission is concerned with the security of researchers—about which more later, its purview is broader. After all, many of the obstacles to responsible and constructive research are not only attributable to interference by governments or concerns about researcher safety. The Commission spent more than two years in COVID-mandated on-line seminars and, more recently, convening in-person workshops, to consider various facets of research in and on the Middle East and North Africa, from funding to fieldwork, careers to collaboration. The Carnegie Corporation, which funded the initial efforts has generously provided an additional grant that will permit us to finalize and disseminate our report in 2025. It is therefore timely to consider some of our preliminary findings.

This article is not an official report of the Commission's deliberations but rather personal reflections on the extraordinary work of a disparate collection of colleagues—early career and senior scholars, based in universities, think tanks and consultancies in dozens of countries from New Zealand to Sweden, the United States to Turkey and across the Arab world, representing disciplines ranging from anthropology to statistics, including a healthy dose of political scientists! These social science researchers all care deeply about the quality, integrity and impact of their work and have been willing to share both their experiences, their concerns and satisfactions, in the furtherance of our collective endeavor. So perhaps the first observation ought to be: we are enormously fortunate to work with such wonderful colleagues!

As we deliberated, it became clear that the issues we confront exist at different epistemological levels or ranges of responsibility; it is useful to disaggregate these even though they do not necessarily nest neatly from lowest or narrowest to highest or broadest.

## Researchers themselves

In the first instance, as is highlighted in the cases with which this reflection began, we have a responsibility to ourselves. We cannot complete the projects to which we have committed ourselves if we cannot ensure our own health and safety. This may be obvious, but it is a non-trivial consideration for those of us who conduct research in which skepticism about the research enterprise runs deep. Often this is for good reason historically: much of the world's best anthropology, for example, was undertaken on behalf of the world's great imperial powers and much highly-regarded political science has been devoted to explaining and justifying US hegemony in the world.

The danger to researchers is heightened where violence—whether state-sponsored torture, militia-based combat or simply criminal gang violence—is widespread or where disease and trauma are endemic, as in many humanitarian crises and impoverished communities.

In this, unfortunately, we share our preoccupations with colleagues who work in other parts of the world as well. There has been surprisingly little systematic work about researcher safety and security, however, although among the recent exceptions are two excellent volumes on the Middle East and North Africa: *Political Science Research in the Middle East and North Africa: Methodological and Ethical Challenges*, edited by Janine A. Clark and Francesco Cavatorta (Oxford University Press, 2018) and *Safer Field Research in the Social Sciences: A Guide to Human and Digital Security in Hostile Environments*, edited by Jannis J. Grimm, Kevin Koehler, Ellen M. Lust, Ilyas Saliba, and Isabell Schierenbeck (SAGE Publications, 2020).

## Research institutions

If we have effectively discharged our responsibility to keep ourselves healthy and safe, we then need to consider our responsibilities to our institutional sponsors and supporters. To some extent, academic institutions—and more and more often, development organizations, funders, and even publishers—have mechanisms to protect themselves from claims that they have allowed, promoted, funded or published work that was conducted unscrupulously or irresponsibly. Institutional Review Boards (IRB), sometimes known in Europe as independent ethics committees (IEC) or research ethics committees (REC), are independent bodies, usually universi-

ty-based, that are tasked with safeguarding the rights, safety, and well-being of all human subjects.

As the language about “human subjects” (as opposed to more conventional terminology, like “people” or “persons”) suggests, these Boards grew out of concerns about abuses in bio-medical research in which human beings are sources of tissues and biodata. Today, however, they are routinely deployed to examine the use of surveys, randomized control experiments and other methods increasingly widespread in the social sciences. More and more professional associations and allied journals have also issued statements about the professional obligations of researchers, particularly having to do with data transparency. The American Political Science Review (APSR), for example, declares that,

*APSR takes seriously its role as a space for scholarly communication within the political science community. Such scholarly communication entails clear and transparent sharing of our research...This, in turn, requires clear and transparent communication about the procedures that we use to collect our evidence and to ensure that our research practices are ethical (American Political Science Review 2023).*

APSR then details the information that submissions for publication must include, from funding sources and “potential or perceived conflicts of interest” to data repositories and acknowledgement of research assistance “as appropriate.”

This commitment to foster ethical research is certainly to be applauded. Nonetheless, implementation of these kinds of institutional reviews typically reduces full-throated advocacy of ethical norms to compliance in the face of government regulation and self-

protection in the face of researcher misconduct. Institutions manage risk, not ethics, and researchers are increasingly “[responsibilized](#)” (Rychnovská 2016)—expected to understand, manage and ultimately be held accountable for any ethical or other perils associated with their research. Institutions, in other words, cannot be relied on to provide adequate ethical oversight. Nonetheless, we ourselves have to recognize our ethical responsibilities to these institutions as the facilitators of our work. Failure to clearly and honestly characterize our research processes, procedures, and purposes to IRBs or to publishers damages not only our colleagues who are university administrators or journal editors, but also the research enterprise as a whole.

## **Research enterprise: our participants and our colleagues**

As a research enterprise as a whole, we have responsibilities that go beyond our institutions. Most often, we think of these as obligations to our research participants—the “human subjects” that many of the institutional mechanisms were originally designed to protect. Our research should not harm those we study. Yet this is often difficult to do. Not only do the standards of transparency and confidentiality often collide, but economic incentives can also be misaligned; the benefits from the research may be unevenly distributed and unintended consequences left unaddressed.

Moreover, many parts of the research landscape in which we work are crowded with competing teams jostling for access to field sites and informants. The methods by which we conduct research and produce knowledge have been adopted and adapted by organizations that are not governed by the norms

of the academy. Sarah Parkinson’s recent article “(Dis)Courtesy Bias: “Methodological Cognates,” Data Validity, and Ethics in Violence-Adjacent Research,” provides ample evidence, for example, of the dilemmas of carrying out research among refugees who are also of interest to humanitarian aid groups, government welfare and security ministries, international development organizations and other “cognate” institutions (Parkinson 2022).

Yet, we academics cannot ignore the work these other groups do. After all, many of those conducting such research are the products of the very same disciplinary training as we university-based researchers: these are the “non-academic jobs” that PhDs are increasingly encouraged to seek. They are, in other words, a part of the larger research enterprise to which we all belong. Failing to acknowledge the impact of our work on others—whether our research participants, our field collaborators or the university-adjacent organizations working on similar questions—contributes to oversampling of particular populations. The oversampling of specific populations causes harm, it exhausts and disheartens the population under study, and ultimately disturbs and distorts our own research findings, as Parkinson shows, and in politically fraught circumstances, may risk putting our collaborators at risk.

In fact, today’s research enterprise is driven by the same attention economy as much of the rest of human activity. Some issues are the academic version of clickbait: hot topics, and sometimes methods—that are more likely to be approved, funded and published and so their authors are more likely to be invited to conferences, flown in for job talks, hired and promoted—than work that seems not to speak to the existing—already self-referential—literature or that draws on data from

unfamiliar or, worse still, exotic places. Yet it may be that, as responsible participants in a common research enterprise, as we foster research on issues of public moment, we also need to recognize and encourage research whose audiences are not defined by the academic equivalent of algorithms—H-index, or headline proxies like Google scholar alerts.

## Research communities and values

We must do this without putting colleagues at risk and this, in turn, requires that we recognize that we are part of intellectual communities and traditions of which we may not always be consciously aware. Despite our commitment to working in particular times and places—the modern Middle East and North Africa—we assume, largely without question, the conditions of our own social world as universal. Even the most imaginative and critical of us rarely ask whether the Western Enlightenment confidence in progress that shapes our very language is actually universal, adequately encompassing human experience and aspiration. After all, what is, the “development” in the Sustainable Development Goals but “progress” by another name? In survey research, for example, we routinely assume, to quote Suzanne Rudolf’s wonderful 2005 APSA presidential address, that the individual is “the unit of opinion” when we know from our firsthand experience that many survey answers are what we might now call “crowd-sourced” in families, neighborhoods and communities (Rudolf 2005). As Rudolf puts it, “the imperialism of categories entails an unself-conscious parochialism” which Louis Hartz characterized as the American “impulse to impose Locke everywhere” (Hartz 1991).

Rudolph readily concedes that both what she calls “empirical” research—that is, gov-

erned by universalist regularity and aspiring to causality—and interpretivist approaches are necessary for any social inquiry. But, as she points out, “simple facts do not speak for themselves.” This strongly suggests that those of us who specialize in social research anchored in a place—the Middle East and North Africa—have a responsibility to produce and advocate for the “situated knowledge—knowledge marked by place, time, and circumstance—[that] relies on the excavation of meaning.” Merely replicating surveys or experiments designed elsewhere or constructing cases for classifications originating elsewhere—regime type, anyone?—contributes neither to better understanding of the place nor to greater refinement of the instrument.

Finally, we must reflect on why, apart from the satisfaction of personal curiosity or the accomplishment of personal career aspirations, we conduct research at all. Failure to consider the intellectual and political context in which we work—the uses to which our findings and interpretations are put—makes them little more than technocratic tools in the hands of those who utilize them for their own purposes. Our purposes may be varied—to improve social service delivery, enhance government accountability, strengthen national power, promote democracy, counter violence, build state capacity, reform a security sector—but we have them, and we have an ethical responsibility to see that our means are consonant with our ends. The questions we ask, the methods we use, the collaborations we foster, the audiences we address are all shaped and ultimately justified by our purposes. Research can be many things; as Stacey Philbrick reports in her recent book, *Yemen in the Shadow of Transition: Pursuing Justice Amid War*, her Yemeni collaborators see research itself as working toward justice,



giving voice to the unheard and documenting the overlooked.

The Special Commission on Research Ethics in the Middle East and North Africa continues to work on interventions, large and small, designed to enhance opportunities for the conduct of responsible, ethical and constructive social inquiry in the Middle East and North Africa. Guidelines for funders, policies for journal editors, assessment tools for faculty advisors, standards for collaborations—all of this and more will be deliberated in the coming months.

We know that even the most careful researchers can lose their footing, inadvertently causing harm to themselves, their colleagues, their institutions or even the popular view of the research enterprise as a whole. Institutions can be inattentive, colleagues can be unaware, participants can be ill-informed. But we believe that the unfortunate stories with which this article began can be minimized by a collective effort to think systematically about the opportunities and challenges to fruitful research. If we are self-conscious about asking such questions as a community, developing and adopting protocols to ensure that we reflect on the consequences of our work, the better the outcomes are likely to be, for each of us and all of us. Continuing comments and suggestions are welcome; please reach out to us at [remena@columbia.edu](mailto:remena@columbia.edu).♦

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# Research Symposium: Judicial Politics

## Introduction

*Gamze Çavdar & Lihi Ben Shitrit*



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A key feature of democratic backsliding and authoritarian entrenchment is executives' attempts to curtail the independence of the judiciary. In the MENA region regimes have used various strategies in recent years, which have elicited an array of responses from judicial bodies as well as citizens. This symposium examines the topic of judicial politics in a few MENA cases, namely Egypt, Israel, and Lebanon. These cases vastly differ from each other in their domestic contexts: Cases have variable levels of independence for the judiciary, checks and balances—or the lack thereof—and the degree of mobilization and civil rights and liberties at citizens' disposal to channel their grievances, among others. The symposium brings together five articles that address various dimensions of the politics of executive-judiciary interaction in these MENA cases. Furthermore, the symposium pays close attention to the gender implications of the Israeli government's contentious judicial overhaul. The Netanyahu government's judicial overhaul, which led to widespread demonstrations all over the country since early 2023. The gender dimension of legal politics has been also examined, albeit

from a different angle, in the Lebanon case where an increasing level of feminization has had some impact on the rulings.

The constitutional principle of separation of powers is meant, at least in theory, to prevent excessive power from being concentrated in the hands of the government by providing checks and balances on executive power. Modern state systems show great variation when it comes to the specific institutional arrangements they have regarding the separation of powers. MENA is no exception. Despite the vast differences, however, what unites the cases under examination in this symposium is the unquestionable and intensifying desire of the executive branch to control the legal system, albeit with varying degrees of success.

The examination of these three cases helps us highlight some key findings regarding judicial politics: First, although they all share their deep desire to establish and maintain full control over the judiciary, success is not guaranteed even in highly authoritarian cases where the executive power seems unchal-

lenged. In other words, it would be a mistake to reduce the judiciary in authoritarian regimes to instruments of executive power. Mona El-Ghobashy discusses legal contestation in Egypt as a case in point: In some cases, courts themselves strike back against government actions. In others, citizens use the court system to challenge both the executive power and other actors with whom they have grievances, a process that El-Ghobashy calls “legal mobilization”.

Second, the degree of success for the executive branch in controlling the judiciary depends on several factors, two of which will be discussed here: These are counter-mobilization and the demographic composition of the courts.

The most recent example of counter-mobilization in response to the government’s attempts to curb the power of the judiciary came from Israel when millions of citizens took to the streets, since January 2023, to protest. The mass protests erupted in response to Israel’s 37th government’s comprehensive overhaul plan to curb the power of the judiciary. Alon Yaktar explains that the unprecedented level of mobilization occurred because of what most people perceived as an outrageous attempt coming from an ultra-right-wing coalition to curtail the institutional checks and balances by using a narrow parliamentary majority. Yaktar argues that this confrontation regarding the judiciary’s role “will determine whether Israel will face a full constitutional crisis, deepen its democratic backsliding, or evade both.” While the mass mobilization has sent the clear message to the government that its plans to control the judiciary would not go unchallenged, Yakter explains that the protest movement largely ignored the occupation and Palestinian rights—the elephant in the room.

The possibility of strong counter-mobilization emerging is further complicated in cases where institutional arrangements along sectarian lines exist, as in the case of Lebanon. As Lina Khatib explains, the sectarian distribution of seats in the presidential chambers of judiciary bodies is a major hurdle to reforming this system that benefits the leaders of the major sects, who would obviously lose in a secular system. Furthermore, these leaders consolidate their power in their communities by creating clientelist networks, which pose additional challenges against some possible, unified counter-mobilization.

Counter-mobilization, however, can also take place through more subtle and somewhat unexpected ways, that is through the demographic changes that the judiciary is going through in Lebanon, as Rola el-Husseini discusses. El-Husseini explains that the presence of women in the judiciaries “has disrupted and slowed down the sectarian regimes’ attempts to control the courts.” The astonishing increase in the number of female judges in Lebanon (expected to be more than half as of 2020) has had an impact on rulings regarding LGBTQ+ and women’s rights. However, the sectarian nature of the system where religious courts control personal status code, limits female judges’ impact as they are absent from religious courts in Lebanon.

A third and last point that this symposium highlights is the gendered aspects of judicial politics, a point raised by both Rola el-Husseini and Ruth Halperin-Kaddari, because authoritarianism and patriarchy are intimately connected. Halperin-Kaddari explains that Israel’s judicial overhaul has consequences for both the future of democracy and for women’s rights as these two cannot be separated. Halperin-Kaddari explains that two of the five parties of the governing coalition exclude

women from being candidates for parliament. These parties and their coalition partners have far-reaching gendered goals that they hope could be facilitated through weakening the judiciary.

At the time of writing this introduction, war has erupted between Israel and Hamas. An unprecedented and gruesome massacre of Israeli civilians by Hamas led to a devastating Israeli military operation in Gaza, which is still ongoing. It is too early to know how the war will unfold, let alone to predict the implications of it for Israeli domestic politics including the contentious judicial overhaul. We hope that this symposium sheds some light on the intricacies of judicial politics under democratic backsliding, which are likely to continue and even get more complicated in the months ahead. ♦

# Egyptians Go to Court: Legal Life in a Dynamic Polity

Mona El-Ghobashy



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For three-quarters of a century, Egyptians have gone to court to defend both group rights and individual liberties. Scholars have noted this legal mobilization across a range of courts: administrative courts, family law courts, civil courts, and the Supreme Constitutional Court (SCC) (Hill 1993; Rosberg 1995; Brown 1997; Moustafa 2007; Agrama 2012; Schaaf 2021; Oraby 2024). Take the administrative courts, *Majlis al-Dawla*. Despite their soporific name, these courts sit at the heart of governance, adjudicating citizen claims against government officials, from street-level functionaries to summit-level ministers. The highest officials—the president, the Coptic Patriarch, Shaykh al-Azhar—are not immune. Soon after its establishment in 1946, *Majlis al-Dawla* claimed the power to review not only executive regulations but the constitutionality of laws, making it a constitutional court *avant la lettre*.

When the Supreme Constitutional Court (SCC) was established in 1979, *Majlis al-Dawla* judges granted citizens' requests to petition it, enabling the constitutional litigation examined by Tamir Moustafa (2007). *Majlis al-Dawla* worked in tandem with the SCC and arguably beyond it. It issued verdicts that blocked key presidential foreign

policies, precipitating a loss of face for both Hosni Mubarak (sale of natural gas to Israel) and Abdel Fattah al-Sisi (handover of Red Sea islands to Saudi Arabia) in their relations with regional allies. In that sense, administrative law judges have borne out Nathan Brown's general conjecture: "a judiciary that can rein in executive authority by overly faithful (or overly liberal) implementation of the law can be inconvenient or worse" (1997: 242).

*Majlis al-Dawla* could not have acted without the energetic litigation of citizens bringing a staggering diversity of grievances. Workers in privatized state-owned enterprises contested their redundancies. Activist students challenged their expulsion from university. Parents objected to standardized school uniforms. Residents of the Nile's verdant islands contested their eviction to make way for regime cronies' high-rises. Married women barred from traveling without their husbands' permission sued to lift the restrictions. Evangelical Christians protested the closure of churches. Veterans demanded the right to board public transit gratis. Divorced Coptic Christians disputed Pope Shenouda's prohibition on remarriage.

By the 1990's, rights networks, cause lawyers,



and opposition activists had honed administrative litigation as an instrument to target unpopular domestic and foreign policies. Media coverage soared, enabled by judges' shrewd decision to allow television cameras into courtrooms. On days when a verdict was expected on what came to be known as a "public opinion case" (*Qadiyat Ra'i 'Aam*), courtrooms teemed with national and transnational satellite media and activists. If verdicts sided with plaintiffs, courtrooms erupted in cheers that turned into rallies on the courthouse steps and fodder for nightly talk shows. If verdicts favored the government, the same scrutiny and debate ensued, minus the celebratory rallies. This became such a familiar part of Egypt's politics that a leading broadsheet headlined its 2010 end-of-year review, "Majlis al-Dawla: the Hero that Ruled Egypt in 2010" (Basal 2010).

What is the significance of this legal contention? Does it constrain authoritarian power or is it an effect of that power? Are court rulings against the government a sign of judicial independence or a safety valve channeling grievances into tame legal disputes? Does litigation constitute resistance to the state or playing by its rules and thus reproducing the status quo?

## Two Traditions

The framing of these questions in dichotomous terms reflects two research traditions on authoritarian regimes that self-define as top-down and bottom-up. Top-down approaches begin with powerholders, assigning them prime mover status. In the first English-language monograph on *Majlis al-Dawla*, James Rosberg interpreted citizens' resort to the courts as an explicit presidential monitoring strategy to control the bureaucracy (1995, 5). Rosberg's study was

part of a new research agenda on judicial politics in authoritarian regimes that has since grown into a thriving sub-field, detailing the many ways that rulers instrumentalize law and courts to secure power (Moustafa 2018).

Bottom-up perspective developed in reaction to the single-minded focus on rulers. Steven Schaaf examines legal mobilization in Jordan, Palestine, and Egypt, arguing that it is an essentially oppositional act that aims to limit the exercise of authoritarian power (2021, 11). More broadly, this research tradition does not accept the reduction of courts to instruments of executive power. "Rather, courts more typically serve as dual-use institutions," Moustafa argues, "paradoxically opening new (albeit limited) avenues for activists to challenge the state" (2018, 433).

The two approaches capture core facets of legal politics in authoritarian regimes. Ruler-centric studies confront head-on the realities of power concentration in such regimes. Bottom-up research is attuned to a concurrent reality: the resort to courts by a wide range of claimants who cannot be considered dupes in any serious study of legal mobilization. However, both approaches feed an implausible rendition of authoritarian regimes where rulers are unfailingly strategic and ever-adaptable and citizens share a single motivation of resisting the state. What emerges is a conceptual separation into two categories—rulers and ruled—of what in fact are relations of reciprocal causation. As Adam Przeworski recently reflected in a critique of models of regime breakdown, "The dichotomous distinction between "from below" and "from above"...may be too sharp. In many breakdowns of authoritarian regimes, information about divisions within the elite incited popular mobilization, while popular mobilization generated divisions within the "elite" (2023, 981)

The point about breakdowns applies equally well to authoritarian politics when regime survival is not at stake. The politics of administrative litigation in Egypt challenge us to dispense with the dichotomous logic of state versus society, bringing into view the distinct and competing actors within these conceptual aggregates. Indeed, research on the state from the 1980s to the present has made the same plea: we must highlight in our research the internal divisions of states and their “penetration by conflicting and usually contradictory social forces” (Bright and Harding 1984, 4; Migdal 2001; Orloff and Morgan 2017, 18). Taking this seriously enables conceptions of authoritarian regimes with more verisimilitude than the monotonic, implausible schemes currently on offer (Przeworski 2023). Authoritarian regimes are not impregnable structures impervious to intense conflict, nor are they rickety facades teetering on the brink of collapse. The states that they control are too variegated to allow either total control or total dissolution. Law is a promising portal out of this mental straitjacket.

## Politics by Legal Means

What do we mean when we talk about law? Studies of law and courts in authoritarian regimes past and present have shed early assumptions that law is nothing more than a tool of rulers. A more expansive understanding sees law as a resource used by various interests, without denying the advantages commanded by the powerful (Moore 2001, 101). Michael McCann further unpacks law’s polysemy, reminding that it simultaneously refers to legal *institutions* (e.g. courts and administrative bureaucracies); legal *officials* or *elites* (judges, bureaucrats, lawyers); and legal *norms or discourses* that structure practices beyond official institutions (2016, xii). Tamir Moustafa offers a helpful image, observing

that those regimes that instrumentalize law and courts unwittingly “create a unique field of contention within the authoritarian state” (2018, 433).

The plural referents of ‘law,’ coupled with the image of a legal field, offer an alternative to the top-down/bottom-up dichotomy that researchers feel they must choose to get their projects going. Instead of the detailed but one-sided analyses that ensue from focusing on rulers versus ruled, the notion of a legal field prods us to think of interchange among multiple actors producing outcomes that no one actor intended. If we think of administrative litigation in Egypt as a field, rather than deciding in advance that it’s about “control” or “resistance,” at least seven collective actors come into view: the citizens whose litigation activates court action; the attorneys who translate citizens’ grievances into legal claims, and their counterparts defending the administration; the bureaucratic apparatus, headed by the presidency, whose writs are the objects of contention; the legislature, divided between loyalist members rubber-stamping government bills and opposition deputies championing judicial review; the *Majlis al-Dawla* judges who issue reasoned rulings both for and against the administration; the SCC judges who rule on cases referred to them by the former; and media outlets who distill (and sometimes distort) legal arguments and verdicts for broad public consumption.

Centering the inter-action rather than the doings of one dominant actor blocks the reductive impulse to attribute a single unambiguous meaning to every lawsuit. Not all litigation can be read as opposition “against the state.” In activating one segment of the state (judges) to annul the acts of another (ministers or president), litigants can just as

cogently be interpreted as appealing to the state, or more pertinently, creating loaded distinctions between “good” state actors and “bad” that are amplified by media and attain the status of common sense. Judges nourish this common sense, facilitating media access to courtrooms and rulings, thus building constituencies for their self-branding of *Majlis al-Dawla* as a “bastion of the defense of rights and liberties” (*Hisn al-Huquq wa-l Hurriyaat*). The unplanned, indeterminate effects of litigation are to be found in the making of a law-saturated public politics, a political culture steeped in the idiom and instruments of public law.

In a nutshell, reading the disposition of every lawsuit as an unambiguous win or loss for either side is misguided. Court verdicts have dual effects, simultaneously bolstering the status quo and its opponents, a point E.P. Thompson underscored in his locus classicus on the politics of law in 18th century England (1975, 265). When Egyptian governments are defeated in court, they frame this as proof of their respect for the rule of law and judicial independence. When opposition activists are defeated, they burnish their underdog status and pin their hopes on a different outcome from a different panel of judges. As for the tens of thousands of individual litigants who are not public figures, their manifold and changing motivations defy neat classification. But one thing is clear: it is not warranted to treat their litigation as a proxy for attitudes toward the government. What it means to support or oppose an authoritarian regime is so fraught with methodological and conceptual problems (Przeworski 2023, 979-80) that we should be wary of using litigation to make big claims about political preferences toward a regime in toto (Brown 1997, 243).

## The Many Faces of Law

Anyone who has reflected sociologically on law is familiar with law’s ambiguity and its political potential. Thomas Hobbes decried the “unnecessary processes” that ensued in tussles over the law’s meaning:

*For when I consider how short were the laws of ancient times; and how they grew by degrees still longer; methinks I see a contention between the penners, and pleaders of the law; the former seeking to circumscribe the latter; and the latter to evade their circumscriptions; and that the pleaders have got the victory. (Hobbes 2008, Part 2, ch. 30, 231).*

Hobbes feared that such contention undercut the sovereign state’s capacity to control its subjects’ mental and material worlds. Egypt’s pleaders of the law have turned legal ambiguity into their greatest resource, validating Hobbes’ conviction that control over meaning is foundational for rule. An expression I heard repeatedly from both judges and lawyers is *al-Qanun Hammal Awjuh*, “law holds many faces.” Administrative judges demonstrated willingness to issue rulings that contradicted the government’s interests and legal doctrines, amplifying rights spelled out in the constitution and advancing the most expansive interpretation of laws and regulations. When the government accused judges of engaging in politics, the latter demurred, insisting they were “judging only by the documents” (*Bi-nuhkum Bi-l waraq*). Judges issuing rights-restricting verdicts invoked the same phrase.

The malleability of administrative law lends itself to this thrust and parry. Rather than applying fixed principles or being bound by precedent, judges weigh the case at hand to

open-ended standards. In administrative law, “more of the man than the law determines the decisions made” (Black 1973, 142). What’s more, despite its image as “the hard-working, unglamorous cousin laboring in the shadow of constitutional law,” administrative law has an unacknowledged constitutional function (Ginsburg 2017, 60). Administrative courts are more accessible to a far broader range of citizens and act with more dispatch than constitutional courts, offering more access points to contest the bureaucracy.

All of these elements—the courts’ purview, citizens’ individual and group litigation, and the nature of administrative law—together have thrust these dry-sounding courts into the center of Egypt’s politics. Across the three most recent regimes—Hosni Mubarak’s 29-year-presidency, the revolutionary interregnum of 2011-2013, and the ongoing military presidency of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi—*Majlis al-Dawla* has weighed in on major economic and foreign policies and countless ‘small’ issues of bureaucratic malfeasance. They have not always supported plaintiffs. Numerous verdicts upheld conservative interpretations of public order and defended the doctrine of “acts of sovereignty” (*A’mal al-Siyada*) shielding the executive from judicial review. What they have done is entrench law as a medium of political exchange across regime changes.

## Back to Aristotle?

Political contention through public law and courts refreshes our understanding of the amalgams that are authoritarian regimes. The uprisings of 2011 and 2019 surfaced two simultaneous realities: such regimes are vulnerable to mass mobilization, and segments of the old elite can reinvent themselves to thwart wholesale change. Mass mobilization

and elite reinvention are co-constituted. Mobilization induces elite incoherence, and elites build mass constituencies to launch their comebacks. Revolution and counter-revolution generate and feed off one another. This dialectical framework is just as necessary outside junctures of regime upheaval, since authoritarian regimes are not inert. As with democracies, they have a politics that rumble on before and after peak moments of regime change.

The study of democracy is going through its own reckoning. The 2016 election of Donald Trump and the rise of other demagogues in “consolidated” democracies accelerated a torrent of research on democratic backsliding. Scholars of American politics in particular were forced to grapple with the “underlying fragility of American democracy that was there all along.” (Lieberman 2023, 77). Scholars of both authoritarian and democratic regimes are now contending with a similar conceptual problem: the discipline’s tendency to conceive of regimes as endpoints, or terminal states. Upon meeting certain thresholds or preconditions, a regime was judged democratic and thought to remain as such, give or take marginal alterations. Conversely, an autocratic ruling coalition was thought to instrumentalize or suppress all institutions, thus extending its tenure in power.

Regimes, democratic and authoritarian, are not achieved endpoints but unremitting endeavors. They require constant, vigilant upkeep. Governments rarely achieve uniform control over a polity, as recognized by the concepts of sub-national authoritarianism in democracies and democratic spaces in authoritarian systems (See also Moustafa 2018, 439-440). Perhaps this is a good moment to recall Aristotle: “Some people think that there’s just one kind of democracy and one

of oligarchy. But this is not true. So one must not overlook the varieties of each of the constitutions, how many they are and how many ways they can be combined” (1998, IV, 1289a, 102). Political scientists excel at typologizing democracies and autocracies, but they ought to heed Aristotle’s insight that all regimes are composites. ♦

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# Israel's Judicial Politics: At the Brink of a Constitutional Crisis

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Israel's judicial politics has long been characterized by deep tensions between the country's illiberal right-wing factions, dominant executive branch, and independent judiciary, particularly the Supreme Court in its role as the High Court of Justice (Hofnung and Wattad 2021; Mautner 2011). This conflict is expected: given Israel's unicameral legislature, weak parliamentary oversight, and unitary power structure (Friedberg and Hazan 2021; Lijphart 2012), the court system serves as the primary institutional check on executive power.

This tense status quo has taken a significant turn for the worse in the past year. Since its election in late 2022, Israel's current government—the most extreme right-winged in the country's history—has been actively trying to curb and control the courts. In January 2023, the government announced a judicial reform plan that includes a “Bypass Clause” immunizing legislation from judicial review, politicization of judge and legal counsel appointments, and elimination of the government's legal duty to make reasonable decisions (the “Reasonableness Standard”). These steps closely follow the democratic backsliding playbook, which aims to erode the institutional, electoral, and normative constraints on the government (Haggard and Kaufman 2021; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Scheppele

2018).

Although most components have yet to be enacted, the government's reform plan has led an unprecedented number of Israelis to the streets in what has become the largest and longest protest movement in the country's history (Shultziner 2023). Amid these protests, Israel's Supreme Court is currently deliberating its ability to limit the government's constitutional changes and protect its powers. The government, in turn, has refused to say whether it will abide by the court's ruling. Israel's judicial politics, therefore, are on the brink of a deep constitutional crisis. This paper will provide the historical background behind this looming crisis and discuss various implications.

## Israel's Constitutional Black Hole

The institutional roots of the current crisis date back to Israel's state-building period. Like many new states, Israel's first election in 1949 selected a Constituent Assembly tasked with drafting a constitution. However, these deliberations failed. In lieu of a constitution, the assembly passed the 1950 Harari Resolution, a compromise stating that the constitution would be written incrementally over time, chapter by chapter, by the regular legislature. These independent chapters, called

“Basic Laws,” will eventually establish the country’s constitution (Lerner 2011; Mahler 2021; S. Navot 2014).

This compromise, however, left a glaring institutional hole: it did not lay out the rules by which these laws would be written, i.e., a Basic Law about Basic Laws.<sup>1</sup> Hence, to date, Basic Laws can be legislated like any standard law, on any matter, by any coalition, with a simple plurality vote. Furthermore, since the formal status of Basic Laws was never codified, it remains unresolved whether and under which conditions they could be judicially reviewed.

For decades, this gap remained dormant. The first Basic Laws, passed between 1958 and 1988, mostly formalized Israel’s core institutions and branches. Moreover, the Supreme Court refrained from any judicial review until the late 1960s (Hofnung and Wattad 2021; Mahler 2021). However, starting in the 1990s, both conditions changed. First, the legislature broadened the content of Basic Laws to include certain human rights and, more recently, ad hoc constitutional tweaks to accommodate political crises. Second, the Supreme Court grew more activist and expanded its judicial review of regular legislation, particularly when violating the liberal rights written into the new Basic Laws (Barak 1992). Lacking a formal constitutional framework, both changes occurred from below and increased tensions within and between different political actors and branches (Hofnung and Wattad 2021; Mautner 2011; Meydani 2011).

The current reform marks a third significant break from the old status quo. For the first time, the government—using a narrow parliamentary majority—has exploited its ability

to enact Basic Laws to curtail the institutional checks on its power. In doing so, it has used the court’s rhetoric of (liberal) Basic Laws against it, claiming that such legislation is immune from judicial review in principle. As these lines are being written, the Supreme Court is debating whether it has the authority to review and disqualify Basic Laws, particularly when they undermine Israel’s democratic nature. Lacking clear constitutional guidelines, the outcome will depend on the judges’ discretion. The court’s pending ruling, and subsequent reactions by the government and protest movement, would determine whether Israel will face a full constitutional crisis, deepen its democratic backsliding, or evade both.

## Top-Down Push by Illiberal Forces

Considering this inherent constitutional gap, why did the crisis erupt only now? In reality, the pushback against the Supreme Court’s liberal activism has been brewing for some time (Mordechai and Roznai 2017; D. Navot and Peled 2009). Yet, the current crisis escalated due to a particular political constellation, a combination of an extremist coalition at the top, and a strong popular backlash against it from below. Let us consider each in turn.

Israel’s current government, sworn in with a slim majority after prolonged electoral instability, marks the most extreme right-wing coalition in the country’s history. Its structure overrepresents Israel’s two most notable illiberal projects: the national-religious settlement movement and the ultra-Orthodox autonomy (Gidron 2023). The former seeks to further advance the Jewish expropriation and annexation of the occupied territories without equal rights to the Palestinians (Hirsch-Hoe-

<sup>1</sup> Such a bill, tentatively named “Basic Law: The Legislation,” was discussed several times but has yet to be drafted or voted upon.

fler and Mudde 2020; Shelef 2010). The latter, meanwhile, aspires to legalize unequal sectoral privileges, including public benefits for Torah students, autonomous schools without state supervision, sweeping exemption from military service, and greater enforcement of religious practices in public life. Both goals are outside the popular mainstream and have deeply undemocratic components that cannot pass basic judicial review.

In the past, these projects progressed incrementally through political compromises with Israel's secular majority. The current coalition, by contrast, is a tighter right-wing alliance with Likud, Israel's strongest party in recent decades. On its face, Likud is historically more moderate, secular, and liberal. Moreover, strategically, it has tended to construct balanced coalitions where it could serve as the ideologically median party. However, this has changed in recent years. Likud members have grown more hawkish, nationalistic, and populist; they engage more heavily in clientelist practices, and have been charged with several criminal cases. Most notably, Benjamin Netanyahu, Likud's dominant leader, has been indicted for serious corruption and seeks to escape his ongoing trial. Other Likud politicians, too, have been butting heads with public legal counsels on political appointments and clientelist practices. Accordingly, the party has embarked on increasingly aggressive attacks against the law enforcement and legal systems. After winning the recent election, it allocated law-related ministries to extreme anti-system politicians and provided disproportional power and funds to the national-religious and ultra-Orthodox parties.

The current coalition, therefore, unites the

deep-seated illiberal ideologies of the settler and ultra-Orthodox parties with Likud's current corruption troubles and clientelist motivations (D. Navot and Goldshmidt 2023). Aided by poor coordination within the opposition, this bloc gained a slim but firm 53.3% parliamentary majority despite winning only 48.4% of the votes. These conditions have provided both the motivation and the opportunity for a forceful top-down assault against the country's judicial checks.

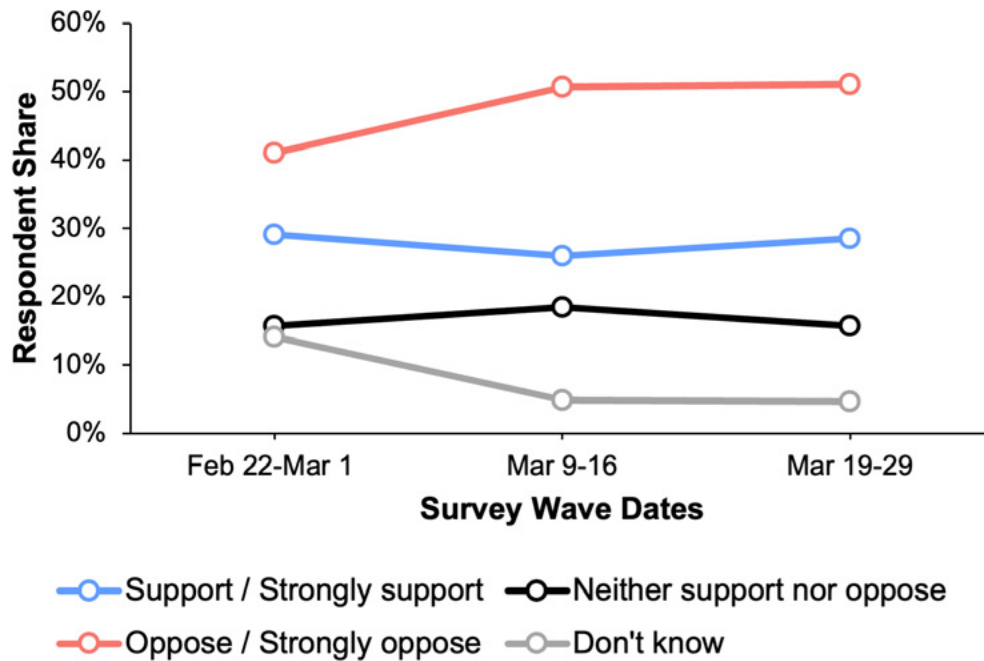
### Bottom-up Backlash

Nevertheless, the government's top-down push only tells half the story. The second part involves the unprecedented public resistance it has faced. Simply put, the suggested changes are extremely unpopular. Figure 1 shows support rates for the reform in a three-wave survey conducted by Tel Aviv University between February and March 2023.<sup>2</sup> The data exhibit a large and growing majority against the plan and less than 30% support in its favor. These numbers remain similar in later polls. For instance, a survey conducted in July 2023 by the Israel Democracy Institute (IDI), shows that only 25% of respondents prefer to proceed with the reform while 60% would rather give it up and focus on joint efforts to improve national unity.

Why aren't the numbers closer? The data reveal internal disagreement about the reform within the coalition's electorate. To see this, Figure 2 breaks the July IDI survey's answers by respondents' self-attested vote in the 2022 election. Most voters for national-religious (NR) and ultra-Orthodox (UO) parties, the farther ideological end of the coalition, remain committed to the reform. However, they represent less than 25% of the electorate.

<sup>2</sup> The survey polled a demographically representative sample of 601 respondents, divided into three representative waves with 198-202 respondents in each.

Figure 1. General support for the government's reform plan, February-March 2023. Data: Tel Aviv University.



Likud voters, who account for a similar share, are deeply divided. Their ambivalence repeats consistently in other surveys, too. Furthermore, recent public polls predict that the current coalition would lose 10-12 seats if the elections were held today, most of which shift from Likud to center-right opposition parties.

Contrary to the fragmented positions of coalition voters, the data exhibit the staunch resistance of all opposition voters, who other

wise represent a diverse ideological mixture of liberal right, Zionist center and left, and Palestinian-Israeli positions. In the same July poll, 25% of respondents indicated that they participated in the protests, a figure akin to 2.4 million citizens and reflected well in the energy and numbers on the ground. These rates echo Chenoweth and Stephan's (2011) finding that sustained protests mobilizing at least 3.5% of the population tend to achieve their goals.

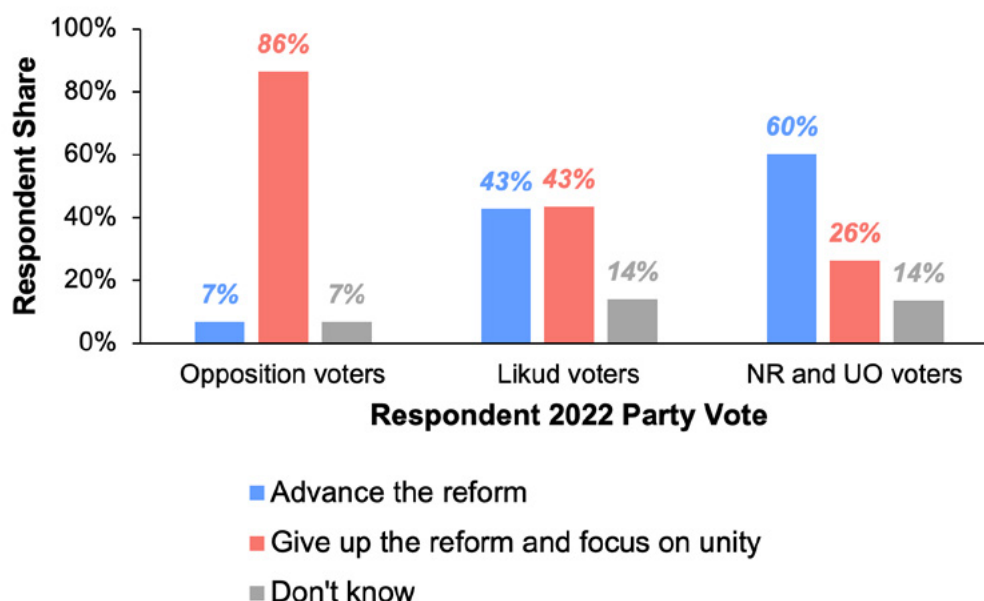


Figure 2. Preference to proceed or give up on the reform, July 2023. Data: The Israel Democracy Institute (IDI).



More broadly, the reform's poor numbers indicate how far the government strayed from the median Israeli voter. The coalition's electoral appeal stems from its hawkish-populist positions against the Palestinians (Levi and Agmon 2021), the primary partisan issue on which most Jewish Israelis vote (Shamir and Arian 1999; Yakter and Tessler 2023). On other domestic issues, however, survey data consistently show that most Israelis, including many Likud and some national-religious voters, are quite moderate and liberal. As the government continues to pursue its extremist policies in these domains, so do the protests maintain their vigor and scope. Their energy and numbers complicate the government's efforts and provide popular backing to the Supreme Court in the unfolding constitutional crisis.

### **Concluding Remarks: The Elephant in the Room**

Before closing, a few words are in order about the elephant in the room, Israel's longstanding occupation of the Palestinian territories. Paradoxically, this issue, which marks the largest failing of Israeli democracy, has been mostly absent from the public debate on the reform. Part of the reason may be the denial or willing ignorance of the occupation among many Jewish Israelis (Halperin et al. 2010). And yet, the occupation is closely linked to the crisis through the undemocratic and violent seeds it has sown in Israeli society and the settler movement's motivation to free itself of legal constraints.

Nevertheless, beyond the obvious risks that the reform carries for the Palestinians, the looming constitutional crisis may have additional, nontrivial implications for the occupation. Two are particularly noteworthy. First, the Supreme Court's historical decision to

review, and sometimes restrain Israeli actions in the territories has been a central cog in the occupation's maintenance (Hofnung 1996; Kretzmer 2002). More than once, this judicial oversight shielded Israel from international intervention and legal inquiries. Hence, ironically, weakening the court's powers may lead the international community to reevaluate its lenient approach to the occupation and intervene more forcefully.

Second, a similar reexamination might occur from within. The current protest has impressively mobilized Israel's typically dormant and fragmented liberal majority. As the present crisis prolongs, many hope that new partisan identities will solidify, defined by a strong commitment to democracy, liberalism, and individual rights. Such attitudes could establish a clearer ideological counterforce to the settlement and ultra-Orthodox projects. Already, more and more voices call to revisit the majority's silent acceptance and military protection of the settlements. Nevertheless, the occupation and Palestinian rights are still at the margins of this conversation. A full constitutional crisis, which links illiberalism and democratic backsliding with the occupation's expansion, may help unblur the artificial discursive divide between both sides of the 1967 line. ♦

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# The Vicious Circle of Judicial Politics in Lebanon

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Judicial politics is a contentious issue in Lebanon because the judiciary in the country is not independent. As Lebanon struggles with multiple crises, political and economic, systemic corruption is getting increasing attention from investigative journalists, civil society actors, and reform-oriented political figures and activists, who are all criticizing it as a major driver behind those crises. The Lebanese political system that enables corruption also curbs the independence of the judiciary in Lebanon. As such, understanding judicial politics in Lebanon cannot happen without situating this discussion within the broader context of the political system in Lebanon. This also means that reform of the judicial system in Lebanon cannot happen before the reform of the political system.

## The Political Status Quo

One focus of the Lebanese political system is to ensure representation for Lebanon's recognized religious sects by guaranteeing them quotas in the military, civil service, judiciary, and government, by allocating the top three head of state roles to the three main Christian and Muslim sects and implementing sectarian distribution of seats in the presidential

chambers of judiciary bodies. This system failed in preventing Lebanon from descending into civil war in 1975 but remains in place despite the 1989 Taif Agreement—the peace accord that ended the civil war—stipulating a constitutional change to replace sectarian representation in parliament with one where parliamentary candidates are elected based on merit (Mansour, Eaton, and Khatib 2023).

A major hurdle for reforming this system is that it benefits the leaders of Lebanon's major sects—benefits that they are likely to lose in a secular system. The current system casts members of parliament and cabinet ministers, as well as senior civil servants, as representatives of their sectarian communities first, relegating the national interest to a lower standing. For decades, political leaders and senior civil servants in Lebanon have been using their official positions to consolidate their authority in their communities by presenting themselves as community providers and protectors.

This landscape became fertile ground for systemic corruption. Those officials have often resorted to diverting state resources away from equitable distribution, instead using them to cultivate loyalty among their comm-

unities in a clientelist manner. They have also often siphoned off those resources for their own financial benefit. This has resulted in a significant overlap between the country's political elites and economic elites.

With this overlap, Lebanon's leaders came to resist any challenge to the status quo. Over the past decade, waves of public protests against corruption and against the political system have been met with a mixture of violent crackdowns by government and non-government entities and attempts at co-optation of protest movements by Lebanon's political leaders. Despite political differences among Lebanon's leaders, they come together when faced with a challenge to the status quo (Khatib 2022).

## The Politicized Judiciary

Systemic corruption in Lebanon's political system has a direct impact on the judiciary. The highest judicial authority in Lebanon is the High Council for the Judiciary (also known as the Supreme Judicial Council), which appoints judges. The High Council for the Judiciary is composed of ten members. Eight of those members are appointed by the executive authority in Lebanon. This gives the executive *de facto* control over decisions made by the High Council for the Judiciary. The judiciary is also under political pressure from the executive and the legislature who, through influence or coercion, have frequently pushed judges to release arrested suspects or dismiss legal cases.

This is all in contravention of the UN Basic Principles on the Independence of the Judiciary, which stipulate that "it is the duty of all

governmental and other institutions to respect and observe the independence of the judiciary" (principle 1) and that "judges shall decide matters before them impartially (...) without any restrictions, improper influences, inducements, pressures, threats or interferences, direct or indirect, from any quarter or for any reason" (principle 2) (cited in Garcia-Sayan and Khan 2021, 6-7).

It is also in contravention of the mandate of the UN Human Rights Committee, which says that States should establish "clear procedures and objective criteria for the appointment, remuneration, tenure, promotion, suspension and dismissal of the members of the judiciary and disciplinary sanctions taken against them".<sup>1</sup>

In 1997, the UN Human Rights Committee expressed "concern about the independence and impartiality" of Lebanon's judiciary. In its concluding observations, the Committee recommended that Lebanon "review, as a matter of urgency, the procedures governing the appointment of members of the judiciary, with a view to ensuring their full independence".<sup>2</sup> The recommendation was never acted on by the Lebanese State. Nor have there been concrete steps by the State to get Lebanon's judiciary to operate in line with international standards. Instead, there have been some cosmetic reforms that have maintained the politicization of the judiciary.

## Protection of the Status Quo

The politicization of the judiciary has manifested itself through cycles in which judicial bodies put the protection of political leaders above serving justice. Violence has been

1 Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 32, article 14: Right to equality before courts and tribunals and to a fair trial, UN Doc. CCPR/C/GC/32 (2007), para. 19.

2 Human Rights Committee, Concluding observations on Lebanon (second periodic report), UN Doc. CCPR/C/79/Add.78 (1997), para. 15.



directed at lawyers who speak out against corruption or are engaged in legal cases involving Lebanese officials. For example, in July 2020, lawyer Wassif Harakeh, whose public profile rose as he defended those involved in the anti-corruption protests that took place in Lebanon in 2019, survived an assassination attempt by a group of men who beat him up severely. A letter by UN Special Rapporteurs cited that the judge handling the case after the men were arrested ordered their release under political pressure, as they were security agents working for a government minister (Garcia-Sayan and Khan 2021).

The letter, written by the UN Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers and the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion expression, was addressed to the Lebanese presidency in August 2021 following several similar incidents of violence and intimidation against lawyers in Lebanon in 2020 and 2021, with some of these incidents connected to government figures or entities. The letter affirmed that the way the Lebanese judiciary dealt with those incidents contravened international standards, citing the UN Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers, which stipulate that lawyers have “the right to take part in public discussion of matters concerning the law, the administration of justice and the promotion and protection of human rights” (cited in Garcia-Sayan and Khan 2021, 7).

The letter fell on deaf ears. In April 2023, the lawyer Nizar Saghiyeh, a human rights defender and director of the NGO Legal Agenda, publicly battled the Beirut Bar Association (BBA) because he contested the BBA’s proposal to change its code of ethics so that it would curb the freedom of expression of law-

yers by stipulating that they seek prior BBA approval before speaking in public. Saghiyeh was summoned by the BBA even though the proposed change is in direct contravention of the UN Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers cited above (Safwan 2023).

## Judicial Derailment

Lebanon’s systemic corruption and politicized judiciary came to collide with the concurrent disasters of the Beirut port blast of August 2020 and the ongoing collapse of Lebanon’s financial sector. Both catastrophes resulted in a public outcry calling for accountability for those responsible. While some members of the judiciary have attempted to pursue justice, political leaders have used judicial means and loopholes to counter their efforts.

In 2020, the first judge to be appointed to lead the investigation into the port explosion, Fadi Sawan, accused then-caretaker Prime Minister Hassan Diab and three ministers of criminal negligence in connection with the case. The Lebanese Constitution stipulates that parliament should form a special court for the trial of prime ministers and ministers as under Lebanese law ministers and heads of state cannot be tried by any other court. Parliament never formed such a special court, rendering ministers and heads of state above the law (Abouzeid 2021). Diab and the three accused ministers used this stipulation to argue that Sawan’s accusation was politically motivated and not legally valid, and consequently refused to appear in court when Sawan summoned them. In February 2021, after two of the accused ministers filed a complaint against him, a court removed Sawan from the position of lead investigator, partly based on the court’s claim that damage to his house caused by the explosion compromised his impartiality (Hubbard 2021).

Judge Tarek Bitar, who replaced Sawan as lead investigator, has faced similar legal hurdles. His investigation was halted in late 2021 due to a series of lawsuits by MPs and former ministers accused in the case. Another hurdle came in April 2022 when Finance Minister Youssef Khalil refused to sign a decree to appoint judges to the Court of Cassation's plenary assembly to replace those who had retired by arguing that the sectarian distribution of the assembly was incorrect because, in addition to having five Christian members and five Muslim members, its president is Christian—even though this formula has been in practice since the Taif Agreement. The Court of Cassation is the legal body responsible for ruling on the lawsuits against Bitar. Its paralysis led to the freezing of the lawsuits and consequently the port investigation itself (Assaf 2022).

In January 2023, Bitar decided to use his legal interpretation of the law to resume the investigation and promptly proceeded to charge several high-level security officials as well as the Public Prosecutor Ghassan Oueidat. Oueidat responded by releasing all suspects who had been arrested in connection with the case and by charging Bitar with “rebellious against the judiciary and usurping power” (Shebaya 2023).

A similar fate faced the judge who was investigating the then-Governor of the Central Bank of Lebanon, Riad Salameh, and other senior officials on corruption allegations connected to the financial crisis. The judge, Ghada Aoun, was removed from office in May 2023 after the judiciary's disciplinary council accused her of bias.

## Judicial Reform and Political Reform

Lebanon continues to spin in a vicious circle of judicial feuds that are tightly connected to the systemic corruption permeating the State due to the prevailing political status quo. This is a major hurdle for judicial reform. In 2018, a draft law on the independence of the judiciary was presented in parliament. Like other draft laws that Lebanon's political leaders pushed to the side, the draft law was referred to a parliamentary committee for review and remains under review today (Kaiss 2023). Lebanese political leaders have frequently used parliamentary committees in this manner to block reform passively (Khatib 2021).

The same year, three judges formed the Lebanese Judges' Association despite resistance from the High Council for the Judiciary. The Association's membership grew to around a fifth of Lebanon's 550 judges and its main goal is calling for all members of the High Council for the Judiciary to be elected by peer judges (Abouzeid 2021). On March 28, 2023, nine members of parliament presented two draft laws on the independence of the judiciary and on protecting the judiciary from political interference (Kaiss 2023). However, with Lebanon's political system remaining one based on sectarian representation, and where political leaders continue to profiteer from the status quo and turn a deaf ear even to judicial pleas from the UN, it is difficult to imagine judicial reform happening without political reform taking place first. ♦

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# Gender Politics of the Judicial Overhaul in Israel

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## Preface

Liberal democracies and gender equality are under attack in the U.S.A, Turkey, Poland, Hungary, and numerous other countries in the global north.<sup>1</sup> Many feminists agree that the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action, which has long been viewed as the benchmark for women's rights, would not stand a chance of being adopted now. Since a new fundamentalist ultra-right government came to power at the end of 2022, women in Israel are also facing the greatest threat to their position and rights since the State of Israel was established in 1948.

## The Interests Behind The Judicial Overhaul

After five consecutive elections in less than four years, Israel's 37th Government was sworn in at the end of 2022. On January 4, 2023, Israel's new Minister of Justice, Yariv

Levin, introduced a comprehensive overhaul plan for Israel's judiciary, the components of which are detailed elsewhere in this Newsletter. Currently they are all directed at the judiciary (courts and attorney general), mainly the Supreme Court, to grant the government unconstrained power. However, this is only a means to reach its final goals. As this is a coalition government, the goals of its components may differ, but they all share the need to weaken the judiciary.

The Prime-Minister, who is on trial on charges of fraud and bribery, wants to replace the Attorney General with his own appointee who will revoke the charges and close the file. For that, he must ensure that the Supreme Court is unable to intervene in the removal of the present AG from her office and in the appointment of her successor.

Of the five parties in the governing coalition,

<sup>1</sup> Women's situation in non-democratic countries is far worse to begin with, and since this article focuses on recent developments in Israel, which starts off as a democracy, the points of comparison will be liberal democracies.

the two ultra-Orthodox parties effectively exclude women from being candidates for parliament, despite a 2019 Supreme Court ruling that they had to accept women as members of their political parties. Their more pressing need is to ensure that the Court is unable to strike down pending legislation guaranteeing members of their communities exemption from military service that is compulsory for all residents of Israel. But the most dangerous faction for women is the Knesset faction that passes under the title of “Religious Zionism” belonging to the political messianic Jewish supremacist far-right, which believes in “the greater land of Israel”, denies that the Palestinians have any rights in the land, and aims to annex the occupied West Bank. They are not prepared to take the chance that the Supreme Court will obstruct their plans by ruling that they are incompatible with international law (Kretzmer 2023). In the name of so-called “family values” they also want to relegate the place of women to the home.

Clearly, then, these parties all want an ineffective Court, so that they can pursue each of their ultimate goals. This is also the case when it comes to attacks on the rights and status of women; these attacks are not merely by-products of the main judicial overhaul plan, but, as I detail below, they in fact lie at the core of the larger design (Tirosh 2020). The overall goal is to reconstitute Israel as an illiberal theocracy, instead of the liberal democracy that, notwithstanding its fifty-six years long occupation of the West Bank it purports to be. This will obviously have catastrophic effects on women.

### **Attacks on Women's Rights From a Comparative Perspective**

Viewed from a gendered perspective, the endgame of the Israeli case stands out among

the other backsliding democracies and curbing of women's rights. The Israeli case also differs at its starting point: there has never been formal gender equality in Israel. Women's exclusion and sex segregation have always been tolerated in many areas based on religious beliefs.

Although guaranteed equal rights in the 1948 declaration of independence, women in Israel never enjoyed full gender equality, neither *de facto* nor *de jure*. Recent scholarship has dealt with debunking the myth of women's equality in pre-State Israel and during the nation's early years. To a large extent the equality myth has been replaced by the “no-problem problem” philosophy, the ongoing denial of the reality of women's inferior status and of gender discrimination (Rhode 1991; Halperin-Kaddari 2012).

The recent assault on women's rights fits well into the context of growing rates of gender-based violence against women, ongoing feminization of poverty, undiminished gender pay gaps and a highly gender-segregated labor market, the shamefully low presence of women in public office, and, above all, discriminatory religious marriage and divorce laws. Women in Israel are the only women in the global north who are still exposed to formal legal discrimination in the most personal and critical sphere of private life: marriage and divorce. They are also the only women in the global north who are completely barred from fulfilling official judicial roles in national judicial bodies, namely the rabbinical courts, that have exclusive jurisdiction in matters of marriage and divorce of Jews. Thus, while women in Israel appear to have gained formal equality with the successful culmination of the suffrage movement, they are still exposed to formal discrimination and are not fully equal citizens, either formally or



substantively.

This was the case even prior to the judicial overhaul plan. As such, one wonders why Israeli women have not rebelled before. Of the many explanations offered, the dismissal and denial mechanism rooted in the no-problem problem seems most convincing. Overall, gender equality and women's rights have undergone a process of depoliticization. Many of Israel's historical women's organizations and activists gradually left the political sphere and moved to service-providing and social roles, whereas those who remained generally became involved in left-wing politics and the peace movement.<sup>2</sup> Even the temporary rise in women's protests during COVID in response to the frightening increase in femicides held for just a brief moment.

All this has completely changed now. Women's mobilization is undoubtedly one of the most salient developments since the government unveiled its plan. Women occupy a place of honor within the current protest movement, and the handmaids' march has become one of its prominent symbols. What caused this change?

As with so many other complex matters, a combination of factors have merged to shake women's body politic. The new government's proposed legislation based on the coalition agreements, together with moves detailed below it has already undertaken on the civil-service front, added to noticeable changes in the public sphere that has become openly more sexist, more exclusionary of women, and more violent against women, have all had a pivotal effect on feminist activists and on women in general.

When viewed together, especially when one looks at the composition of the Cabinet, many women in Israel, certainly not just feminists, have reached the conclusion that this government might lead to elimination of women from leadership positions and from the public sphere altogether. As put succinctly by Prof. Gila Stopler,<sup>3</sup> "the Israeli government has declared war against women on behalf of the representatives of extreme patriarchal Judaism", or as summarized more moderately by the Law Professors' Forum, "the conclusion ... is that the totality of actions, commitments, and legislative changes on the part of the government and the coalition severely violate the rights of all women in Israel and reverse the situation of women's rights in Israel in the gravest manner since the establishment of the State." (Law Professors' Forum for Democracy 2023).

## Overview of What has Already Taken Place

### *Women's Presence in Public Life*

On the formal front, women's representation in the Knesset (Israeli Parliament) sharply declined following decades of gradual increase; an even sharper decline in women's presence within the Cabinet; and the total absence of women as directors-general of government ministries, that is part of a process to replace women in leadership positions within the public service by the Banks' Comptroller, the Head of Israel's (mostly Jewish Orthodox)

<sup>2</sup> Civil marriage is also relevant in this context. However, many became reluctant to enter this minefield for fear of civil war and destroying the nation's unity.

<sup>3</sup> <https://evolve.reconstructingjudaism.org/author/gila-stopler/>

men.<sup>4</sup> A remarkable feature of Israel's economic scene in the past decade had been the high rate of women in leadership positions: at one point the Governor of the Bank of Israel, Securities Authority, as well as the heads of two of Israel's biggest banks were all women. None of this remains. Today, there are only two women amongst the twelve leadership positions in Israel's economy. In a global gender gap report issued by the World Economic Forum in June that ranks 146 countries, Israel dropped to the 83rd place, from 60th place last year. Although the report ranked Israel first in terms of women's education, the country's ranking for women's political empowerment slipped to 96th, just below Pakistan, from 61st last year (World Economic Forum 2023). Added to this is the Civil Service Commissioner's instruction to stop using the inclusive male/female language in formal civil service job opening ads - in direct violation of the Equal Employment Opportunities Law.

### *Proposed Legislative Measures to Curtail Women's Rights*

The elements of Minister Levin's plan delineated above form the core of the judicial overhaul. They were at the center of the so-called negotiations that took place under the auspices of the President, and they form what the government portrays as striving to adopt "a broad consensus." But these elements are only part of the picture. What fuels the protest movement are the additional 224 private member's bills that have been tabled, all of which are part and parcel of the regime over-

haul. Even after weeding out repetitious bills, the picture that emerges offers a frightening framework that systematically encroaches on civil liberties and human rights. Legislative measures that specifically target or impact women loom high on the list.

Some have already passed the preliminary reading in the Knesset: expanding the jurisdiction of the all-male rabbinical courts to include economic aspects of a divorce and allowing them to act as arbitrators in civil matters such as labor or contract disputes provided the parties have consented<sup>6</sup> and dismantling the Authority for the Advancement of the Status of Women and replacing it with a new body controlled by the Minister for the Advancement of Women.

Other bills are in the earlier stages of legislation. They include an amendment to the Prohibition of Discrimination in Provision of Products and Services that would allow refusal to sell products or provide services on religious grounds (including to women, LGBTQ individuals, etc.); and a bill to allow gender segregation in cultural events, professional trainings and academic studies.

Further, the government has committed NOT to join the Istanbul Convention - the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence - that is regarded as the most important and effective tool for countries to deal with these phenomena and constitutes the internationally accepted standard in this

<sup>4</sup> The present government marks a historic setback in the representation of women. The coalition has an absolute male majority, with only nine women out of the coalition's 64 members of the Knesset (14%). In the Knesset, the percentage of women stands at only 24%, 29 women out of a total of 120 Knesset members. Only four women serve as committee chairs, out of a total of 25 committees. Only three women serve as Ministers (out of 36). Only one woman serves as a General Director of a Government Ministry, out of thirty-two.

<sup>6</sup> If passed, this law will reverse a 2006 Supreme Court ruling that curbed the powers of the rabbinical courts to arbitrate civil matters. Given that many of the settings (such as marital property disputes) will involve unequal bargaining powers, it is doubtful whether consent in such circumstances can be given freely.

domain.

### *Beyond the Formal Sphere*

Those who lead the handmaids' march base their fears not only on the government's formal actions, but also on the ways they are impacting Israel's public space, which is becoming less and less welcoming for women. Sex segregation and women's exclusion, which seeped into many non-religious areas in the past decade, is spreading to include public transportation, after-school programs and cultural events in towns with large non-orthodox Jewish populations. Bus drivers have refused to allow women wearing crop tops or workout clothes to board and ultra-Orthodox men in a religious town blocked a public bus because the driver was a woman (Roni C. Rabin 2023). It is too early to present data on the scope of violence against women, but there is a clear increase in femicide cases.

No less relevant are the opinions expressed by many ministers with respect to women's rights and gender roles, leaving no doubt that they view women only as reproducers of (Jewish) babies. Ironically, they find themselves against three powerful women, who from three different positions act to block the government's plan: Chief Justice Esther Hayout, President of the Supreme Court; Attorney General Gali Bahrav-Miara; and Prof. Shikma Bresler, one of the prominent leaders of the protest movement. Many of the pronouncements of the ministers addressing these three women cannot be described as anything but pure misogyny.

### **The Supreme Courts Role in Advancing and Protecting Women's Rights**

The government is operating in a pincer

movement, engaging in discriminatory practices and promoting segregation and exclusionary policies, while weakening the institutions that could potentially protect women from discrimination and promote gender equality. First and foremost, is the Supreme Court that, historically, has defended women's rights in Israel. It is well accepted that besides family law, Israel's law on the books is relatively adequate from a gender equality perspective, thanks mainly to major legislative advancements in the nineties (Halperin-Kaddari 2005). However, the gap between *de facto* and *de jure* discrimination was not closed, many lacunae in the laws remained, and above all - the right to equality was not included in the Basic Law: Human Dignity and Liberty. The Supreme Court stepped in to fill the gaps. In a long list of landmark cases it made it easier to sue over unequal pay (HCJ 1758/11 Orit Goren v. Home Center); overturned the army's ban on female fighter pilots (HCJ Alice Miller v. Minister of Defense); ruled that mandatory sex segregation on public transportation is illegal (HCJ 746Q07 Naomi Ragen v. Ministry of Transport); mandated equal retirement age for women and men (HCJ 104/87 Dr. Naomi Nevo v. National Labour Court); required inclusion of women in religious municipal councils and in various governmental committees (HCJ 153/87 Leah Shakdiel v. Minister of Religious Affairs); prohibited exclusion of women from a private radio broadcasting station (LCA 6897/14 Radio Kol BaRama v. Koleh – Religious Women's Forum); and even overturned many rabbinical courts' decisions denying property rights of women (HCJFH 8537/18 Pelonit v. The Great Rabbinical Court of Jerusalem).

In light of this impressive record, women's concerns over the weakening of the Supreme Court are warranted. At the same time, it

must be admitted that a closer look at the grounds on which the Court based its holdings reveals that the current reform might not impede its ability to continue exercising its review powers as it has done up to now. From a positivist legal perspective, the Court could have delivered these decisions even if the judicial overhaul had occurred. The reason is that in most cases the Court relied on the prohibition of discrimination as a ground for intervention when scrutinizing executive acts, rather than resorting to the 'unreasonableness' standard of review that has been abolished. Intervention in rabbinical courts' decisions has always been based on those courts exceeding their jurisdiction.

Nevertheless, the formal legal changes cannot be considered in isolation. As opponents of the government's plan consistently argue, each of the proposals must be viewed in the context of the overall plan, and that context is certainly not limited to formal legal changes. The judiciary, including Supreme Court justices, are not immune to possible chilling effects of the non-legal social and political processes detailed herein. Moreover, the next battle will likely be the Committee for the Selection of Judges. If the government succeeds in achieving control over the Committee, fears over the possible reversal of gains made by the Supreme Court may well be realized.♦

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# Lebanon: Feminization of the Judiciary and Diminished Powers of the Courts

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## Introduction

This short piece will examine the presence of women in the judiciary of a small Arab state, once defined as a liberal polity, but increasingly becoming more authoritarian, namely Lebanon. Surprisingly, Lebanon's judiciary has become quite feminized, especially after the end of the civil war in 1990. However, the mounting authoritarianism in the country has meant that the tension between a feminized—and sometimes feminist-judiciary and a conservative patriarchal state has become high. It has led to occasional novel or feminist interpretations of the law especially when it comes to gender or LGBTQ+ issues. Indeed, the increasing presence of women in the judiciary has disrupted and slowed down the sectarian regime's (Mikdashi, 2022) attempts to control the courts.

## An Organically Feminine Judiciary

The low number of women in the legislative and executive branches makes the increasingly large presence of women in the Lebanese judiciary look like a puzzling contradiction. While the intersection of sectarianism, patriarchy, and an increasingly semi-authoritarian system impeded women's access to the political sphere, the Lebanese judiciary

is quite feminized.

In politics, women face systemic/institutional hurdles due to the power-sharing system in place and the role the *zu'ama* (sing. *Za'im* or political leader) plays in this system. They also face structural barriers such as sexism/misogyny and violence (or the threat of violence) whether physical, psychological, or semiotic (Krook 2020). Contrary to other Arab states which have implemented different approaches to state feminism, Lebanon has not adopted any gender equality policies. The weakness of the state and the fact that power is dispersed among different centers of power (political leaders and religious figures who play an important role in politics) explains the inability to embrace state feminism. Hence, the percentage of women in the Lebanese parliament has never risen above 4%. Nevertheless, the number of female legislators has been slowly rising in the last two election cycles, along with the number of women running for office.

In the executive branch, where women have been only included after the end of the civil war, the number of female ministers has usually hovered around 2 to 3 in Lebanese governments after 2004. Until 2019, when a female minister of finance was appointed,



women ministers did not hold any of the sovereign ministries (for example finance, defense, or interior).

Despite the marginalization of women in Lebanese politics, women are very present in the judiciary, as female judges represented approximately 48% of judges in 2017 (UN-ESCWA 2019). This number was expected to cross the 50% threshold by 2020<sup>1</sup> as most retiring judges were male, and those entering the profession were female. This increase in the number of female judges has occurred over about four decades as women were only represented in the judiciary at 2.51% in 1980 and 15% in 1993.

The reason for the upsurge in the number of women in the judiciary is twofold: the end of the civil war in 1990 had seen low numbers of judges because of resignations during the war, and the field had become less attractive to males due to limited wages compared to other legal professions (UN-ESCWA 2019). The Lebanese authorities tried to mitigate against this feminization of the judiciary by increasing salaries in 1994 and 2011, to make the field more appealing to men but this was not very successful.

The large number of women in the judiciary is therefore explained by the limited appeal of the profession to male lawyers, and the stability and social standing of the profession. The fact that entry into the judiciary is based on an examination in which women excel through determination and hard work is also an important factor. Clientelism does not play a role in entry into this branch of government but clientelism and sectarianism influence which female judges get promoted to what positions. Their sectarian affiliation

and links with the Za'im of their sect affects their prospects.

Despite their large numbers in the judiciary, women remain in weaker positions as their presence in the judiciary does not automatically guarantee gender equality in judicial institutions. Women are still excluded from certain senior and "sensitive" judicial positions. For example, the Supreme Judicial Council has had only one woman out of ten members since 2006 (UN-ESCWA 2019), while women make up about half of the judges eligible for appointment to the Council. Women are also underrepresented in fields such as military justice (which they only entered in 2010) and criminal justice where observers have suspected an institutional bias in favor of male judges.

Female judges have also been unable to ascend to religious courts which have jurisdiction over personal status issues (divorce and child custody are especially important) and thus have a significant impact on the lives of all Lebanese, both male and female. In addition, female judges tend to be concentrated in Beirut rather than rural areas, as they comprised 51 percent of judges in Beirut and 56.5 percent in neighboring Mount Lebanon following the 2017 appointments (UN-ESCWA 2019).

However, in a positive sign and as a reflection of women's increased numbers in the judiciary, in addition to then PM Hassan Diab's desire to have a 30% female cabinet, the government formed in January 2020 included the first female minister of justice, Marie-Claude Najem. Nevertheless, one should not read too much into that appointment as she is closely associated with the Free Patriotic Movement

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<sup>1</sup> We do not know if the percentage has crossed the 50% threshold as there has been no study of the judiciary in post-polycrisis Lebanon.

(El-Hage 2020). Najem resigned from the government after the explosion that partially destroyed Beirut in August 2020, and her replacement in the cabinet formed in 2021 was a retired male judge.

The Lebanese judiciary has been completely undermined by its inability to indict or prosecute any politician or client of a *Za'im* -- as the obstructed investigation into the August 2020 Beirut port explosion demonstrates (Legal Agenda, Aug. 2023.) No one has been held accountable for the third largest non-nuclear explosion in history that has destroyed half the city and killed over 200 people. In other words, the weakness of the Lebanese state institutions and their penetration by sectarian elites have also meant sectarian control of the judiciary. This control of the judiciary has been clear in the case of the so-called activist judge, Ghada Aoun who was fired in May 2023 (Legal Agenda, June 2023). Aoun, a symbol of independent judges during the period of Syrian tutelage (1990-2005) has tried in recent years to confront major political figures through her investigations of major corruption cases. Her dismissal by the elite cartel currently in power is therefore not surprising.

The existence of female judges has had an impact on rulings regarding gender issues, especially LGBTQ+ and women's rights. In recent years, femicides have become more frequent and more publicized (Davies 2023) as they were transformed from a private to a public issue (Eddé 2018.) NGOs such as ABAAD and Kafa have played an important role in sensitizing public opinion to these crimes. The dramatic increase in the number of women killed by their partners in recent years has not been accompanied by legal re-

forms as male/female inequality is structural in the Lebanese system and is regulated by religious personal status laws. Responses in recent years to gender-based violence remain inefficient. There is a law on the books that criminalizes violence against women (Law No. 293/2014) but it defines domestic violence quite narrowly (Kafa, 2014.)<sup>2</sup> In addition, implementation and enforcement of the law are sporadic (Human Rights Watch 2014) at best and suffer from interference by sectarian leaders. This means that it is up to the (often female) judges to make sure that the intersection of patriarchy and sectarianism does not hamper their ability to interpret the law and grant the deceased women justice.

The case of Rola Yacoub is notorious in this regard. Thirty-three-year-old Yacoub was killed in front of her 5 minor daughters by her husband in July 2013, but it took the justice system almost nine years to pronounce him guilty in March 2022. Because of political pressure put on the forensic pathologist and then the male judges, he was found "innocent" of the charge and released in 2018 (Annahar 2022.) However, on appeal demanded by the victim's mother and supported by the NGOs ABAAD and Kafa, the female judge found him guilty of killing his former wife (al-Ammar, 2022.) Nevertheless, the perpetrator was only sentenced to 5 years.

As femicides exploded in Lebanon due to lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic (UN-Women 2020), the role of female judges in dealing with the issue of gender-based violence became more crucial than ever. However, because of the sectarian nature of the Lebanese state where religious courts control personal status code, they cannot play a preventive role by helping women get a divorce

2 The law has been deemed problematic by many observers as it does not criminalize marital rape. Note that the law is a watered-down version of a draft proposed by Kafa.

or custody of their children. Female judges are absent from religious courts, and their role is limited to the civil and criminal courts.

## Conclusion

Lebanon experienced a feminization of its judiciaries in the twenty-first century. However, the judiciary is not truly independent, and its power is diminished as real power is in the hands of the sectarian elite. Therefore, its feminization is not costly to the regime especially as the profession has decreasing appeal for male lawyers who do not see it as lucrative enough. Women's representation is largely the outcome of reduced status for judicial positions because the most important issue for the sectarian leaders is not to legitimate the state via state feminism. The voices of female and progressive judges are heard through liberal and feminist opinions on issues related to women and LGBTQ+ issues. However, the impact of their judgments is constrained by the nature of the sectarian system itself. ♦

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# Research Symposium: Left-Wing Politics

## Introduction

*Francesco Cavatorta & Gamze Çavdar*



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Although the MENA is today largely associated with Islamism – in all its forms – and with “religious politics”, the region has a long history of strong left-wing progressive activism. As several of the contributors to this symposium show, examples abound. The Iranian left contributed to the country’s modernization and to the 1979 revolution as discussed by Siavush Randjbar-Daemi. In Turkey, leftist mobilization during the 1960s and the 1970s set the stage for the successful struggles of civil and labor activists, as Sevgi Adak notes. Across North Africa, leftist movements and parties participated in the anti-colonial struggle, a point addressed by Idriss Jebari. Gilbert Achcar discusses how communist parties thrived in the 1950s, especially in Iraq, Syria, and Egypt, until Arab nationalists violently suppressed them or were able to co-opt them. South Yemen was the first Arab state to adopt a Marxist-Leninist ideology. Albeit weakened, left-wing activism also continues to exist in today’s MENA. We broadly define “left-wing” as those movements critical of capitalism, including socialism, anarchism, communism, Marxism, and labor movements. We also consider the term left-wing appropriate to use for another broad range of movements, such as LGBTQI+ movements, feminist movements, and environmental and global justice movements.

For quite some time after independence, the left, in most cases, was the stronger opposition to increasingly authoritarian regimes. Until the late 1970s, the latter were indeed much more preoccupied with left-wing activism than Islamism. Although weakened over time thanks to a mix of repression and co-optation, left-wing politics had the opportunity to be revived following the 2011 uprisings, which were quite clearly about issues the left had always thrived on and fought for. However, the resurrection of the left did not occur and Islamists became the beneficiaries of the uprising in the short term, and authoritarian rulers in the long term. What explains the current predicament which is often summarized as “no left is left”? This symposium highlights a few reasons, which are by no means exclusive.

First, anti-communist measures by post-colonial regimes and the rise of nationalist and religious movements undermined their strength, as both Gilbert Achcar and Idriss Jebari discuss below. For instance, Sadat empowered Islamist currents to counterbalance the opposition to his economic and foreign policies in the 1970s. This policy of “Islamist incorporation”, which Hesham Sallam explains, gave Islamists a window of opportunity to thrive. Similarly, the Turkish-Islamic

synthesis that the 1980 coup junta regime promoted was in a way to remind the country that its cultural roots were in Islam and political trends had become too “leftist” to the military’s taste. The military regime then went on to literally “liquidate” the left by closing labor unions, left-wing publishing houses, and student organizations, arresting and executing left-wing leaders, and even firing left-wing university professors. Although to different degrees, similar repressive trends can be found in the rest of the region. Monarchies had been traditionally inimical to left-wing activism and had used “tradition” to counter its rise. Radical republics as well though, as they became increasingly authoritarian, had very little time for leftist opposition and began to cozy up to Islamists on university campuses and schools to prevent the growth of leftist parties and movements, a point raised by Idriss Jebari. These anti-left measures eventually created a vacuum, which Islamists, having become increasingly autonomous from the regime, later filled as explained by Hesham Sallam.

Second, as explained by Sune Haugbolle, the collapse of the Soviet Union and neoliberal challenge left left-wing groups without a clear ideological map and unable to defy neoliberalism effectively. This also appears quite clearly in the case of Israel, with significant negative consequences for the peace process, as Avraham Shilon convincingly shows. The inability to think clearly about a progressive democratic agenda that would tackle existing injustices and sufferings has been exacerbated due to the implementation of neoliberal policies. This does not mean that there has not been left-wing-inspired mobilization. The region – even well before the 2011 uprisings – had seen several episodes of mobilization against the implementation of neo-liberal policies and programs, but they were very

often localized and short-lived and did not lead to meaningful – impactful – electoral or policy success. This remains the case today and while there is an argument to be made about the necessity to go beyond electoral results to measure the effective influence of leftist parties and movements, as explained by Khalil Dahbi, it should be recognized that neo-liberalism seems to have succeeded.

Third, recent protest movements in Iran (2009), Turkey (2013), and the Arab Spring (2010-2012) have demonstrated once again the significance of having an organization and the difficulty of regime change in their absence. All these protest movements were impressively successful at mobilizing millions of people and keeping them on the streets, becoming the venue through which traditional leftist themes – notably economic redistribution and social equality – became central. However, as we have also seen, the time seemed to be on the side of the regimes, as the protestors would eventually shrink in size and power: Protestors either give up in the face of the regime’s assaults, would go home to take care of their families and children, or return to work to sustain their lives. Therefore, we have been reminded again that long-term activism requires organizations and professionals who could completely devote their time and attention to their cause, and work to build formal and informal networks on a full-time basis. In the absence of such organizations as labor unions, student organizations, and professional civil society organizations, exerting long-term pressure on the regime was not sustainable. Although none of these protest movements were organized by the left, they nonetheless presented great opportunities to thrive. So far, however, it seems that the left has been unable to fill this “organization and professional gap”, as it seems to be focusing on establishing and



maintaining political parties. As Khalil Dahbi discusses through the Moroccan example, these parties operate a difficult balancing act and at times play crucial roles. Although they might be building alliances and becoming key actors at certain junctures, under the authoritarian regimes (which applies to all MENA countries at this moment) risk being coopted and inadvertently legitimize the existing regimes' electoral games, a point raised by Idriss Jebari.

and thought-provoking symposium that we hope you enjoy reading as much as we enjoyed putting it together. ♦

Fifth, and not unlike the rest of the world since the 1990s, the MENA region has suffered from poverty of the imagination, as its intellectual discussions are often squeezed within the parameters of identity politics and have ignored class as an analytical tool. It is not that identity does not matter- it certainly does—it is that identity politics has been made in a vacuum often at the expense of socio-economic issues. Left-wing politics was often at its strongest when it was able to 'martyr', albeit not always coherently and clearly, the struggle for socio-economic equality with the struggle for rights. The key to this was the emphasis on internationalism, solidarity, and progress. While in practice identity might have taken the backseat to class, it was still present. In contemporary left-wing activism, in the MENA as elsewhere, identity seems to have taken precedence, but with "class" nowhere in sight. In this respect too, the MENA is not exceptional or wildly different from other parts of the world.

This symposium brings together eight experts who discuss various aspects of left-wing politics in the MENA region. Each contributor answers a different question raised by the co-organizers of the symposium. We also interviewed Gilbert Achcar and we asked him several questions about the state of left in the MENA. The outcome is an intellectually rich

# The Arab Left Until the Present

Idriss Jebari



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Few political actors in MENA politics offer such a diversity of forms as the Arab Left. Its existence across the 20th and 21st centuries has encompassed categories of actors ranging from workers' trade unions to LGBTQ+ rights and environmental activists (Hilal & Hermann 2014). Attempts to read the movement's history under a single framework have not yet succeeded, apart from a broad consensus that the Arab Left has experienced glory days in the past, and has failed to live up to expectations in the present – often commonly read as a “rise and fall” (Franzen 2017; Hanssen 2015). For this short piece, we take the Arab Left to mean the constellation of movements and actors who are loosely connected by progressive principles of social justice and economic equality, anti-imperialism, a counter-hegemonic posture toward political regime(s), and their histories of marginalization and repression in the 20th and 21st centuries.

Rather than revisit these different typologies, this short piece proposes to identify in the Arab Left's history a general evolution from a discourse and a practice of economic justice toward one of rights and inclusion. This means, summarily, that class struggle has been replaced by calls for democratization. I make this argument by identifying four key moments in the historical typology of Arab

politics and situating them through an impressionistic account of how the Arab Left articulated its key message of mobilization along the way: from the workers and the national question in the early 20th century, encompassing Arab socialism in the 1950 and 1960s and the New Arab Left in the next decade, and concluding with the Left's co-optation in façade democracies and the Arab Spring.

## Workers and the National Question in the early 20th century

The 1919 Revolution in Egypt offers a good starting point in the history of the Left to illustrate the importance of economic questions relating to disaffected workers and peasants. This event represents a turning point for the Communist Parties to open their ranks to Arabs, after being originally dominated by foreign workers, particularly in the Palestine mandate and Egypt. During the inter-war years, the region saw the spectacular growth of communist parties thanks to Moscow's guidance, all while these countries were under European colonial rule. The increasing nationalization of these Communist Parties was achieved by opening up membership from Arab workers to white-collar middle classes. In Iraq or Algeria, Communist parties became highly disciplined, coordinated with

Comintern, and worked toward workers issues across the board, and the national question (Franzen 2011; Le-Foll Luciani 2018).

The national turn of the Arab communist movements posed a significant risk to their advocacy for labor rights. Their alliance with the nationalist bourgeoisie, such as the Egyptian Wafd, did succeed in securing independence from the British colonial authorities, but it forced the communists to tone down their economic and social demands during the inter-war years (Lockman Beinin 1987). As these parties grew, they deployed strike actions in mining basins, factories, and urban spaces to further the aims of national independence, especially in North Africa (Lawrence 2013). While the alliance proved a winning combination for Arab political independence, it relegated their socio-economic struggle to the backburner.

The 1948 Palestinian Nakba illustrates the pitfalls of the overarching nature of the national struggle. The disaster for Palestinians and Arabs has overshadowed the issues faced by Palestinian workers and peasants, who constituted a significant proportion of refugee camps in neighboring Arab countries. Furthermore, Arab communist parties soon found themselves embarking on Cold War politics. After the Soviet Union recognized the creation of the Israeli state, Arab communists were seen as enemies, surveilled, and banned (Franzen, 2017, 559-61). The issues of workers and peasants were now up to the newly independent states to address, with a diminished Arab Left, fragmented in the margins, underground, or negotiating its inclusion in the state in exchange for the moderation of their political positions.

## **Social Justice and Arab Socialism**

In 1961, Nasser announced the nationalization of the banking and insurance sectors in Egypt. Five years after the nationalization of the Suez Canal, this decision confirmed the country's ideological turn to the left. The wider Arab region embraced the ideology of Arab socialism: openly, as in Algeria, Syria, and Egypt, or to a lesser extent, in conservative Arab states such as Morocco and Jordan, through the principles of state economic planning and social justice. This was also the period when Nasser's Egypt stood at the forefront of the anti-imperialist and non-Aligned movement while pursuing dreams of pan-Arab unification such as the short-lived United Arab Republic (1958-61) with Baathist Syria.

Overall, the Arab Socialist state did advance progressive principles by overseeing the improvement of living standards and extending welfare programs across society (Eibl 2020). On the other hand, Arab socialism was an inconsistent ideology that rejected the principle of workers' self-management and the very idea of class struggle based on its incompatibility with cultural elements within Islam and Arab culture. Arab socialist leaders justified their reforms in the spirit of unity and social justice instead (Ismael 1976 81). For example, the Baath in Syria (from 1952 after its merger with the Arab Socialist party, or the Arab National Movement (Ismael 1976, 20-3)), sought to produce ideological platforms that embraced some elements of Marxist thought while taking out others. Meanwhile, Arab Socialist states banned the right of existence of autonomous communist parties, and launched repression toward those who refused to align, with purges in 1954 and 1962 in Egypt, 1956 in Tunisia, 1962 in Algeria, and throughout the 1960s in Iraq (Feliu & Brichs 2019).

In 1971, Algerian leader Houari Boumediene announced the nationalization of his country's hydrocarbon resources and the redistribution of its profits into state development programs. His activism on the world stage as the voice of the Global South is often seen as the culmination of the Arab Left along with the image of a fairer and developing country. However, this image often departs from an erroneous association of the Arab Left with state developmentalism and social justice. The idea of class struggle and free participation of the masses was removed, while the state became increasingly authoritarian, thus undermining the leftist credentials of Arab socialism. Meanwhile, this ideology was being challenged by new voices coming from the ground up and reinventing the Arab Left.

## **The Social Revolution and the Guerilla**

In June 1967, Israel defeated the armies of several Arab neighbors during the six-day war and made significant territorial gains, including the West Bank. The 1967 Arab defeat set the Palestinian national struggle even further back. It is often seen as the first event marking the “fall” of the Arab Left, especially the demise of Arab socialist regimes. Instead, a new historiography has evidenced how this event has catalyzed the reinvention of a “New Arab Left” (NAL) with a new conception of the struggle, the social revolution, and its relationship with power.

First, the Palestinians decided to embrace direct action under the guerilla model to pursue goals of national liberation and have emerged as a vanguard for the Arab progressive camp to inspire other armed liberation movements (Baumgarten, 2005; Takriti 2013). Second, across the Arab region, universities and students spearheaded

the reinvention of the Arab Left, rejecting the dogmatism of party politics and often embracing new Marxist orientations, such as Maoism (Bardawil 2020). Third, radical intellectuals and cultural groups took part in this reinvention of the Arab Left by theorizing emancipation under new terms: liberation from traditional norms, especially gender roles, and calling on the right to participate in political affairs (Gervasio 2020; Jebari 2022). They joined up with a group of dissident cultural actors that ranged from the Souffles/Anfas generation in Morocco to the theatre of Saadallah Wannous in Lebanon, among others, who radicalized culture as a means for social revolution. The New Arab Left, like other New Lefts, saw the emergence of youth politics, radical politics, and cultural battles for social emancipation (Di Capua 2018).

These groups of the New Arab Left accelerated the demise of traditional parties of the Left by proposing an alternative to the most radical segments of society, who were disillusioned with their nationalist and bourgeois tendencies. Tellingly, political scientist Tareq Ismael dismissed the NAL in 1976 as “parasitic groups of opportunists” who embraced romantic views of the struggle rather than the slow and consistent work of educating the masses within formal party structures (Ismael, 1976, 109, 123). This era of the Arab Left is also prone to nostalgia and resembles a golden age of transnationally connected revolutionaries, as related by Laure Guirguis (2020). On this evidence alone, there might be some credence that the New Arab Left's focus on social emancipation and cultural change was carried out at the expense of a discourse of economic equality, class struggle, and inclusion of the working masses – thus causing a split with its prior tradition of activism and mobilization.

In 1979, Imam Khomeini and his supporters achieved an Islamic-inspired revolution in Iran. This event reverberated across the Arab region. By promising and achieving radical political change (which the traditional Left failed to deliver), it captured the support of the masses and accelerated the fall of the Arab Left. In the 1980s, Salafi parties grew in popularity and influence across the region, all while neoliberal reforms were disassembling the Arab socialist model of the state provider of welfarism. In the wake of Egyptian President Sadat's Infitah policy in 1976, other Arab states adopted structural adjustment plans and welfare cuts. More importantly, the Arab Left's fragmentation and its move away from a discourse of economic rights and inclusion illustrates a movement that was losing its core ideological message and with it, its political strength.

### **Seeking inclusion: the Arab Left between Authoritarianism and Democratization**

In 1991, protests spread across the Arab region against the Gulf War, the US-led military coalition against Iraq, and the decision by several Arab leaders to allow US troops to be stationed on their territory. These protests resembled and overlapped with anti-austerity riots that took place across the region, including in 1977 in Egypt, 1984 in Tunis and Casablanca, in 1988 in Algiers, and in 1989 and 1992 in Jordan. Faced with domestic political pressure and a changing international context after the Cold War, most of these Arab regimes announced liberalization measures that included multiparty elections. These changing conditions should have favored the Arab Left and allowed them to gain a degree of political power on a platform of anti-imperialism and economic justice as the main political opposition.

Instead, the Arab Left fought to be included in the political systems by participating in national elections. They effectively reinforced authoritarian rule by creating façade democracies or liberalized autocracies (Brownlee, 2007; Brumberg, 2002). In exchange for abandoning its revolutionary aspirations, several figures and parties of the Arab Left entered into legislative institutions from the late 1980s to the 1990s. Parties of the Left evolved from "representative parties to clientelist organizations, tributaries to communitarian or tribal considerations with little real political power" (Catusse and Karam, 2013, 11-2). We can identify four main features in the transformation of the Arab left in this period: the Arab left was coopted into the political system as the regime's "loyal opposition"; they embraced a discourse of democratization and human rights reform; they shifted their activities and pressures for change toward civil society and human rights organizations; and they positioned themselves in opposition to the Islamist movement (Buehler, 2018). From the Moroccan Socialist party to the Tagammu in Egypt, and the Jordan Democratic Popular Unity Party, these refurbished parties failed to leverage painful economic cuts and discontent with authoritarian rule (Sallam 2022). Alongside the Arab Left's demise as an electoral force, it was reinvented as an agent of civil society and grassroots mobilization, such was the case in Lebanon with its mobilization for family law reform or the importance of newspaper / media in NGOs or newspapers such as al-Akhbar, albeit without "any corresponding political action" (Haugbølle, 2013, 431).

This allows us to bring up a fifth feature of the Arab Left today: the absence of a compelling ideological platform on the economy and society. As Jamil Hilal noted in "Mapping the Arab Left", their reinvention as a "force of

mobilization” in favour of a “civil and democratic state” means it is more difficult to reconcile this movement with its past engagement toward the economic struggle (2014 10). In the ensuing pages of this important report, the authors recognize how this incompatibility challenges the existence of a single, core identity for the Arab Left (Hilal and Hermann 2014, 10-2).

There is a risk of seeing the Arab Left as merely a secular alternative to the Islamists in Arab politics (Ottaway and Hamzawy 2007), while its lack of a clear ideology for the left explains its political weakness in comparison. For Ellen Lust, the Arab Left struggled in elections because they “lacked ideological foundation and mass support [...] unable to provide political leadership or make effective political demands” (2001, 545-50). However, none of the forces of the Arab Left appear to have come up with an alternative to their region’s forced integration as a periphery into a neoliberal and globalized chain of production. There are, however, some growing realizations of the need to make the economy a cornerstone of the Arab Left again, as illustrated by Tunisian writer and political figure Aziz Krichen and his recent essay on rentier and semi-feudal nature of his country’s economic system (2021).

## **Conclusion: The Arab Left Beyond the Arab Spring**

The Arab Spring in 2011 seemed to promise a revolutionary scenario that would, once again, allow the Arab Left to fulfil its political potential. Attention was turned to youth activism among civil society organization, the masses and their protests welfare cuts, and the political demands of the 2011 uprisings (for regime change in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Morocco, Bahrein and Yemen), and

once again during the second wave of 2019 (against corruption and nepotism in Sudan, Algeria, Iraq, and Lebanon). Hopes gave way to disillusionment for the Arab left, as illustrated by Gilbert Achcar who called on his movement to overcome past divisions and live up to the people’s will (Achcar, 2016, 21-22). All evidence points to the Arab left having missed another opportunity for its revival. A cursory look at the different figures, movements, and parties of the Left in the Arab region is indicative of its continued division and marginality.

In the process of this historical overview, I have highlighted the Arab Left’s lack of recognizable identity and ideological project, especially on the economic front. For Iraqi sociologist Faleh A. Jabar, the conceptual world of Marxists collapsed in 1991 with the Soviet Union, the “classical formulae [that] had explained the past, the present and the future, defined stages of development in the idiom of socioeconomic formations and pure class struggle, fixed the various roles of social classes at every stage and provided the organizational instruments needed to effect change” (Jabar 1997, 9). This illustrates the shift that occurred from a discourse of class struggle to a pursuit of democratization and human right causes. Caught in the steamroll of neoliberal and “globalized authoritarianism” that deploys social welfarism in a targeted manner (Bogaert 2018), the Arab Left appears to run out of ideas on the economic front. What remains are clashes of personality, nostalgic remembrance over their golden age, and a sense of powerlessness that manifests itself through periodic bouts of social anger (Bustani 2014). ♦



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# The Future(ism) of the Left in the Middle East

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## Introduction

The future is a central battleground for politics, not least today in a time of rapid technological change and impending climate catastrophe, shrinking temporal horizons, and growing skepticism about, or even “the end of,” the future (Bridle 2018). In the Middle East, climate breakdown is compounded by economic crises, wars, and popular uprisings. What kind of future visions can left-wing, socialist (in the widest possible sense) movements offer? This article reflects on ideological competition over future imaginaries in the Middle East between the Left and neoliberal autocracy (Wedeen 2017) and places it in a historical context of the past century. No one in Middle East politics has been more prone to thinking about the future than the Left. Whereas conservative and Islamist movements focus on preserving or reviving traditional structures, the Left has, from the first Communist and socialist parties in the early part of the 20th century to today’s broad spectrum of parties and social movements, presented radically new utopias, scenarios, and future visions (Guirguis 2020). The first generation of Marxists in the 1920s promoted rapid modernization that embraced technology and progress to reshape society in a more equal way. *Taqadumiyya* - progressivism -

emerged in the mid-20th century as an umbrella-ideology that blended anti-imperial revolution with state centralization and a sprinkle of Soviet visions of a ‘New Man’ who would conquer the natural environment and bring social justice through secular means (DiCapua 2018). Arab progressives founded popular movements in the 1950s and 1960s, during the heyday of Arab Socialism, and produced the ideological and organizational platform for Ba’thist, Nasserist and socialist regimes in Algeria, Tunisia, Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen. Those governments grew increasingly authoritarian. For the democratic Left, the Islamic Left, the liberal Left, and any other subfamily of the Left that found itself in opposition, in prison, or in exile in the 1970s and 1980s, the progressives of yesterday increasingly appeared as the conservatives of today (Haugbolle and Sing 2016).

## Opposition, critique, and defeat

As a result, renewal for the Left had to come from reformism and critique, since the Left in power came to represent static and backwards-looking politics for large parts of the Middle East’s populations, and certainly for the oppositional Left. This bifurcation between a Left in power and a Left in opposition has deeper roots than the 1980s. From

the late 1960s, many young Marxists and Arab nationalists joined student politics and revolutionary movements. The intellectual and cultural Left, who identified with socialist ideals but not necessarily with any political movement, devised alternative visions of society in opposition to what they came to see as the old Left. In Iran, New Left *groupuscules* were instrumental for the revolution that brought down the Shah in 1979, but all Middle Eastern states had a lively Marxist scene that inspired protests and opposition. Some of them migrated to civil society activism and human rights activism in the 1980s and 1990s, after the revolutionary moment of the 'long 1960s' had run its course, while others remained 'free-floating intellectuals'. From their shrinking space in the Leftist press, they could observe the rise of a new class of business-oriented Arab leaders, who balanced crony capitalism with populist slogans that often resonated with the old Left's ideals of social justice and independence but were, in fact, a thin veneer over policies that entrenched wealth disparity and strategic and economic reliance on Western powers (Hansen 2020). These policies gradually gutted out the social contract established by post-colonial regimes.

As the structural economic backdrop to societal and political transformations globally since the 1970s, neoliberalism is the basic condition for thinking politics today. As Pierre Bourdieu put it, neoliberalism is at its core a conservative revolution that shrinks the state in certain areas – notably social security and welfare provision – but expands it in other areas like military and policing (Grass and Bourdieu 2000: 5). As a conservative revolution that “seeks to return to the past but dresses itself up as progressive” (Grass and Bourdieu 2000: 8), this ideology was perfectly suited to reorganize authoritar-

ian regimes run by the progressives of yesterday, even in self-styled socialist states – in practice “neoliberal autocracies” – like Bashar al-Assad's Syria (Wedeen 2019). It was equally well suited to align the monarchies and rentier states of the region with a globally endorsed vision that aligned with the ‘Washington Consensus’ for societal development and future direction. And just as Bourdieu pointed out, those who would fight this regression in the 1990s – on the Left – were portrayed by the neoliberal ‘modernizers’ as “archaic” (Grass and Bourdieu 2000: 10).

This was the status quo at least up to the outbreak of the Arab Uprisings in 2011: a Left that was divided between, on one side, nominally leftist regimes and their supporters, including loyalist Communist parties in Lebanon, Syria, Morocco, and Iraq. And on the other side, a frustrated and fragmented landscape of small and middle-size parties with socialist agendas, as well as a livelier undercurrent of youth-based social movements, some of them aligned with the anti-globalization agenda. Some, like the Democratic Left Movement in Lebanon (founded in 2005), adhered to democratic liberalism, while others, like Tunisia's Socialist Left Party (PSG, founded in 2006) veered towards reformed Marxism. Neither small, middle-sized, social movement-based, Marxist, liberal, Islamist or any other Left parties, however, managed to unite a leftist front or mobilize broadly enough to challenge the ruling regimes before 2011 (Kalfat 2014).

## **The Arab Spring and Revival of the Left**

The deep frustration of living in states marked by the double bind of authoritarian stagnation and neoliberal transformation pushed populations to participate in pro-

tests and revolutionary movements, from the Green Movement in Iran in 2009 to the Gezi protests in Turkey in 2013 and the successive waves of uprisings in Arab countries since 2011. The protests were not directly devised, neither ideologically nor organizationally, by the Left, but their demands overlapped with many left-wing agendas, including a critique of neoliberalism (Armbrust 2011). They did so because the economic roots of the protests aligned with the core of leftist politics, namely wealth redistribution, an active role of the state, and social justice. This made 2011 a real window of opportunity for the Left, and many countries in the region saw new socialist coalitions spring up. Moreover, the popular demands resonated beyond the region in similar movements in Spain, Greece, and other countries, where resentment with neoliberalism resulted in a revitalization of socialist politics to the point that parties like Podemos and Syriza suddenly vied for government power.

This revitalization of the Left of the early 2010s created optimism for a revival of the Left globally and in the region. In hindsight, the revival created many new movements and cultural, intellectual, and scholarly initiatives, and brought out a historical resonance with the Left of the 1970s that had been simmering (Aouragh 2017). But in terms of electoral political success, the revival largely bypassed the Middle East. Despite the emergence of hundreds of new socialist movements in practically all Arab countries, none of them have transformed their presence on the street into formal political power. The most obvious reason for that is a regional order that is still characterized by limited democratic avenues for participation, an order safeguarded by the successful counterrevolution led by Saudi Arabia since 2011 (Agha and Malley 2011). However, even in countries like Tunisia,

Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, and Lebanon where leftist parties can meaningfully contest in elections, they have – with a few exceptions like Tunisia's 2011-2014 president and former political prisoner Moncef Marzouki and Egypt's 2012 presidential candidate Hamdeen Sabahi – failed to mount a challenge to ruling regimes. Revealingly, neither Marzouki nor Sabahi was strictly socialist nor young. Some of the leaders and movements with clearer leftist credentials have been relegated to a kind of performative radicalism, gesturing at revolutionary intentions without the social or economic platform to compete. Many have been coopted, and just as many have been suppressed and, again, incarcerated, killed, or forced to migrate (Resta 2017).

### **Contesting Neoliberal Futurism**

This history of successive defeats and frustrations have shrunk the space of imagination on the Left. At the same time, the uprisings since 2010 introduced the potential for new political imaginaries that could overlap with a renewal of the Left. The greatest challenge is to devise a politics that speaks to the conditions of living in an exhausted political, ideological, and social landscape. Utopia, as the anthropologist Samuli Schielke (2017) has shown, is not so much a Hegelian telos for ordinary people in the age of neoliberalism, but a flimsy range of options for personal betterment in a globalizing world that has deprived people of the certainties of a smaller and slower world. The combination of frustration and rapid social change that comes with cultural globalization has generated a 'politics of everyday life' in the Middle East dominated by hopes for perfection in all aspects of personal life, as observed by Asef Bayat (2009) just prior to the uprisings.

These hopes—for religious purity, romantic

love, consumption, marriage, migration, or a better life abroad—are utopian on an *individual* level, but also contain the potential for politicization, which is exactly what happened in 2011. Each of the slogans chanted in the squares of Cairo, Damascus, Sanaa, and Tunis related to hopes for a future reorganization of the social and political realm. As Schielke observes, lower-middle-class Egyptians had their private utopias, which in turn structured available ideologies of betterment. The turn to scripture in Salafism and piety is a symptom of the loss of God's certain presence in daily life; the push for migration is a result of the devaluation of life choices that once sufficed to make someone respectable; the search for moral perfection and a pious self has to do with the shattering of comfortable moral ambiguity in a world where the path to survival and success is paved with immorality and corruption; and the pursuit of perfection in love and marriage are symptoms of a transformation of family life and livelihood in a way that makes family arrangements obsolete and inevitable at the same time (Schielke 2017: 56-89). All these embodied experiences created the basis for ideological orientation—grand schemes for the future. These registers must be factored when we consider how the Left might reconquer the imaginary space of the future.

Today, neoliberal ideas and actors occupy much of that space. The financial muscle of Saudi, Emirati and Qatari futurists currently populate Arab media with phantasmagorical visions of flying cars, sustainable megacities like NEOM, and digital economies that very soon will have reshaped the region (Frangos 2017). In other countries, like Egypt, Syria and Iraq, the state funds megaprojects and partners with contractors promising 'the good life' in new modern developments and gated communities. Backed by investment

funds, state and private actors present visions of a new order that combines artificial intelligence with green transition but is based on integrated 'smart' technology that allows for extensive surveillance and securitization of the public and private space. The heavily branded futurism these projects espouse is based around urban construction projects much like those of the 1950s. They are however fundamentally different from, for example, Nasser's regeneration of Cairo in the 1950s (Sims 2010: 45-90). In contrast to such modernist visions of the future that relied on a clear teleology of progress where the future was "known" and would be shaped by mass education of engineers, doctors, and teachers, neoliberal futurism involves a pronounced uncertainty (Bryant and Knight, 2019: 45-65). Political theorists link insecurity (and securitization) to the emergence of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff 2019) and digital authoritarianism – the use of digital information technology by authoritarian regimes to surveil, repress, and govern – in the past decade. Gulf regimes have been frontrunners in this respect, using their comparative advantage in the digital economy to enhance and integrate surveillance capitalism (Owen 2022).

To counter this powerful capitalist fantasy, the Left in the Middle East could return to its humanist roots and provide clear-sighted economic and social analysis of the overlapping crises facing ordinary people in the region. Success could depend on the ability of established parties to give space to the dynamism of youth movements, and to allow those movements to articulate the true concerns of the millions of citizens who have been marginalized in the neoliberal revolution. In Lebanon, half of the population goes to bed hungry. In Syria, 90 percent of the population lives under the poverty line. Rapid decline in living standards, with half of the



population in many countries experiencing limited or no access to clean water, electricity, and health care, is effectively creating a divide between the protected and the outcast *homo sacer* (Frangie 2023). Neoliberal autocracy is furthering class divides, offering protective measures for the upper and middle class, and leaving the rest of the population exposed. To theorize their plight and their possibilities in a different social and economic organization that would redistribute wealth, create jobs, reduce the privileges of the elite, and restore the role of the judiciary is one important task. Another is to communicate such visions in ways that avoid the trappings of the last half century. ♦

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# The Egyptian Left and the Legacies of Abdel-Nasser and Sadat

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“Bread, Freedom, and Social Justice,” was chanted by millions of Egyptians during the 18-day uprising that ended thirty years of Hosni Mubarak’s rule, inaugurating an extraordinary era of open political participation and competition. As social and economic rights played a dominant role in animating waves of popular mobilization before, during, and after the uprising (Beinin and El-Hamawzy 2008, Joya 2020, Bishara 2018), many expected this new chapter to serve as prime time for leftist politics echoing demands for distributive justice.

Yet once the dust settled and elections were held, Islamist parties found success and continued doing so until the July 3, 2013, military coup, which ended Egypt’s brief experiment with (relatively) free competitive politics. In the lead-up to the coup, the contours of elite-led politics were largely dominated by conflicts over the religious identity of the state and chronic gridlock between Egypt’s largest Islamist group, the Muslim Brotherhood, and its secular rivals. Meanwhile, the left was nowhere to be found near organized national politics, notwithstanding the prevalence of leftist contentious politics.<sup>1</sup> Self-professed leftist groups either fared poorly in successive national votes or were

simply engulfed by anti-Islamist coalitions formed to oppose the Muslim Brotherhood. In fact, after July 3, numerous leftist leaders backed the military’s repression of the Brotherhood in the name of resisting the alleged threat the group posed to civil liberties and religious pluralism.

For some, the tragedy of the left during those years was rooted in the failure of the protest movements that led to the January 25 Uprising. These youth movements, the story goes, were effective in mobilizing protests and large-scale occupations around socio-economic grievances and popular anger at state corruption. But when the time came for them to organize as political parties, devise platforms, and prepare for elections, they were incompetent, indifferent, or unequipped to match the prowess of their Islamist rivals, or what is often dubbed as “the Islamist advantage” (Cammatt and Luong 2014, Brooke 2019).

The problem with this narrative is its inattention to history. It reduces the left’s weaknesses to the short-term actions or missteps of various political actors during the 2011-2013 context, thereby taking at face value the

1 For an excellent discussion of the relevance of leftist movements outside of the sphere of electoral politics in the context of Morocco, see Dahbi (2023).

political field inherited from prior authoritarian eras. The question is always about what Islamists did right in elections, what the leftists did wrong, or why the electorate voted the way it did. It is never about what got us, in the first place, to a political field tilted in favor of Islamists and against the left.<sup>2</sup>

## The Case for an Historical Approach

Padded with a host of asymmetries between Islamist and leftist currents, this political field did not emerge on January 25, 2011, but took shape over decades preceding the events in question. An understanding of the field and its origins gives us insight into historical processes and junctures that structured the configuration of politics on the eve of Mubarak's downfall. It puts on the backburner analyses of 2011-12 election data, be it voter preferences or candidates' choices and strategies. Instead, this approach centers on the issue of why a strong leftist political organization had never emerged in Egypt in the prior decades, whereas a strong Islamist one managed to survive the test of time under Mubarak's rule until 2011 when it assumed an opportune position. On a deeper level, studying the weakness of the left after 2011 is an invitation to take seriously historical institutionalism and path-dependence (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007). Such an endeavor is possible only if we are prepared to study the evolution of politics through the lens of slow-moving processes that unfold over long periods of time (Piereson 2004).

Central to understanding why the cards were stacked in favor of Islamists and against the

left are two historical interventions. One pertains to the Anwar Al-Sadat's policies toward the Islamist movement in the 1970s, and the other entails Gamal Abdel-Nasser's policies toward the communist movement in the 1960s. The two interventions, as I argue in *Classless Politics*, are central elements in the story of how asymmetries of power developed across the leftist-Islamist divide in the subsequent decades (Sallam 2022).

## Islamist Currents and the Autonomous Path of Institutional Development

In response to growing opposition to his economic and foreign policies in the 1970s,<sup>3</sup> Sadat tacitly empowered Islamist currents, especially at public universities where leftist student activism had been a thorn in his side for years. These policies are usefully captured by the analytical construct "Islamist incorporation," which denotes the opening of political space toward Islamist currents to sideline and contain the regime's leftist opponents. In the long run, Sadat's Islamist incorporation policies set Islamist and leftist currents on divergent paths of institutional development, molding, from that point on, the evolution of their organizations especially concerning their autonomy from the state.

Thanks to the open political environment the Muslim Brotherhood enjoyed for much of the 1970s, due to Islamist incorporation policies, the group was able to reconstitute itself after decades of repression under Abdel-Nasser's rule. Specifically, Sadat's lax attitude toward Islamist student associations at universities for years allowed the Brotherhood's aging

<sup>2</sup> On the importance of historical perspectives in assessing the development of leftist currents, see Resta (2018) and Sallam (2017).

<sup>3</sup> For much of this decade, Sadat sought to open the Egyptian economy to Western investments and technology transfer under the rubric of *infitah*, while shifting Cairo's alliances toward the Western bloc and away from the Soviet Union.

leadership to recruit large sectors of the student movement into its ranks. It was within that partnership that the Brotherhood's return to politics was made possible after a long absence (Al-Arian 2014). Significantly, the Brotherhood was able to reconstitute itself while maintaining its organizational autonomy from the state, despite Sadat's attempts to keep the Brotherhood and Islamist student associations under the control of his political apparatus. Sadat's failure to do so was of great consequence. It enabled the Brotherhood's development as an autonomous political organization in the following decades—an advantage other major opposition parties, most relevantly leftist ones, were deprived of.

## **The Left and the Dependent Path of Institutional Development**

As for the left, the path of institutional development was markedly different. In the 1970s, there was certainly a strong leftist current on university campuses, much like the Islamist student movement that Brotherhood leaders succeeded in coopting and deploying in rebuilding their organization. Yet, unlike the latter scenario, the energies of leftist activism during that period were never channeled into a permanent political organization. There was simply no credible and organized leftist political force prepared to unify the dispersed opposition to Sadat's economic and foreign policies and aggregate them into a coherent organization akin to that of the Brotherhood. The two largest communist parties that existed before the 1970s had dissolved themselves under pressure from Abdel-Nasser in 1965. Afterward, many of their leaders and activists joined the Arab Socialist Union (ASU)'s Vanguard Organization. The decision to capitulate to Abdel-Nasser and self-dissolve was momentous for many reasons, not the least of which was that it forced the left to enter the

era of infitah in a state of organizational and ideological fragmentation.

Indeed, even with the loss of those communist parties, there were other contenders who could have stepped in and lent leadership to unify the scattered leftist opposition. Among them were the underground communist groups that became active under Sadat and tried to make inroads into the student and labor movements. Despite their energies and dynamism, these groups were largely contained if not crushed by the security apparatus, which, per the priorities of Islamist incorporation policies, was more focused on communist activism than on the Islamist movement for much of the 1970s.

Other contenders included the leftist opposition that participated in formal politics through the Al-Tagammu Party, later the de facto address of the left. Much like the underground left, Al-Tagammu suffered considerable repression under Sadat, especially after the 1977 Bread Uprising, which prompted successive clampdowns against leftist activism. The clampdowns would intensify in the lead-up to and aftermath of Sadat's peace treaty with Israel in 1979. In any case, Al-Tagammu never lived up to its potential, as it continued to operate under a highly unfavorable legal and political framework. This framework compromised Al-Tagammu's autonomy, reinforced its dependence on the state, and exposed it to a variety of regime interventions. All these factors, in the long run, weakened the party and pushed its once-promising experiment into complete irrelevance.

In short, the respective policies Abdel-Nasser and Sadat foreclosed the possibility of an autonomous path for the left. Abdel-Nasser pressured independent communist parties to

self-dissolve, coopting large swaths of them into the state apparatus. In ways, Abdel-Nasser was able to get out of the communists what Sadat was never able to get out of the Muslim Brotherhood: their autonomy. Thus, on the eve of infitah, the left was in a state of division and disarray, hardly equipped to replicate the Brotherhood's experience in reviving its political and organizational presence. As for leftist forces licensed to participate in politics since the mid-1970s, their path was highly dependent on the state and vulnerable to debilitating interferences by Sadat and (later) Mubarak.

### **Divergent Paths, Asymmetrical Political Field**

This brief historical overview underscores the contrast between the left's (dependent) path of institutional development versus the (autonomous) path Islamist currents were able to forge due to Islamist incorporation policies during the formative period of the 1970s. This divergence, as *Classless Politics* explains, is central to understanding the origins of more recent power asymmetries between Islamist and leftist currents, not to mention the effects of these discrepancies on post-2011 electoral politics. This is not by any means an argument for structural determinism, as if individual agency and contingency played no role in shaping the left's political fortunes in post-Mubarak Egypt; they certainly did (El-Ghobashy 2020). The argument is that the political field inherited from the previous authoritarian eras stacked the cards in favor of certain outcomes (albeit without determining them)—outcomes that imposed on the left a host of uphill battles after 2011. That said, there was more to the left's post-2011 blues than just inheriting an unfavorable political field.

### **After Islamist Incorporation: Islamist-Leftist Contention and the Rise of the Cultural Left**

Sadat's Islamist incorporation policies not only contributed to the imbalances of power across the Islamist-leftist divide. They also helped shape the priorities and discourse of leftist currents in Egypt after Sadat's assassination in 1981—another legacy that left its mark on post-2011 politics.

After the Muslim Brotherhood emerged as an important political actor during the 1980s, having reaped the benefits of Islamist incorporation policies of the prior decade, the focus of national political debates began shifting more decisively toward the religious identity of the state. As these ideational conflicts became front and center, class-informed politics was deprioritized, not only in the political stage, but also in the agendas and platforms of many opposition actors, including leftist ones.<sup>4</sup>

This was the context for the rise of, what I call, Egypt's "cultural left." The latter term denotes a strand of the left more concerned with resisting the so-called Islamist threat than with resisting the transgressions of state-led economic reforms against longstanding social and economic rights. This development created common ground between large swaths of the left and the ruling party, even as the latter continued to pursue economic policies antithetical to the left's fundamental mission as an advocate for distributive justice.

Nowhere was the cultural left more pronounced than in the Al-Tagammu Party, which around the early 1990s, formed an alliance with the Mubarak regime in the name of

<sup>4</sup> This trend would pick up pace with the fall of the Soviet Union.



countering Islamist movements. Ironically, this alliance, which would survive until Mubarak's 2011 downfall, came into maturity right when the state was pursuing far-reaching economic liberalization reforms previously opposed by Al-Tagammu.

This would not be the last time leftist parties like Al-Tagammu eschewed economic agendas in favor of “culture wars;” the same pattern continued even after Mubarak's ouster. For example, in 2011, Al-Tagammu formed an anti-Muslim Brotherhood electoral coalition with the Free Egyptians Party, sponsored by business mogul Naguib Sawiris. That the “socialists” were teaming up with capital holders evidenced the persistence of a cultural left willing to set aside redistributive agendas for the sake of fighting the culture wars against Islamist currents.

During the 1990s, a similar anti-Islamist consensus facilitated the cooptation of many leftist intellectuals by the Mubarak regime. Such figures ended up taking on various roles inside the Ministry of Culture and its subsidiary bodies, contributing to the regime's efforts to counter Islamist intellectual influences. In one of the most memorable political quotes from the Mubarak era, longtime Minister of Culture Farouk Hosni boasted that he “got the intellectuals to enter the barn of the Ministry of Culture.” Hosni's not-so-subtle reference to his taming of leftist writers once critical of the regime spoke to just how central of a role the left played in leading Mubarak's culture wars against Islamist currents in the 1990s and 2000s. Thus, it was not surprising that in 2012 and 2013, the Ministry of Culture was at the center of President Mohamed Morsi's standoffs with the bureaucracy. Aware that this was exactly where the Mubarak regime hid its anti-Islamist leftist intellectual machine, Morsi was determined

to purge “Hosni's barn” of its longstanding elements in what ended up turning into a heated political standoff.

Much could be written about how culture wars between leftist intellectuals and their Islamist counterparts throughout the 1990s made the left cling to its nationalist credentials more tightly. While the influence of nationalism inside the Egyptian left has had a long history (Beinin 1990, Gervasio 2020), the experience of Islamist-leftist contention during the Mubarak era arguably reinforced and developed it further. In the context of this polarization, the 1990s witnessed the rise of leftist critiques of the Islamist movement as an anti-nationalist and un-Egyptian force beholden to outside Pan-Islamic interests incongruent with Egypt's “authentic identity” and national interests. Interestingly, that same critique was front-and-center in the wake of the July 2013 coup, especially among older generations of leftist intellectuals. That is to say, the history of the cultural left is essential to understanding the discursive attacks some leftists waged against the Islamist movement after 2013, not to mention their swift embrace of military-centric nationalism following the coup. ♦

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# The Iranian Left and its Historical Trajectory

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## Introduction

The Iranian Left has retained an important role in Iranian public life for over a century. However, it has not exercised power and authority, except for two brief regional administrations, where it was able to implement significant progressive policies. It was also ridden with frequent and severe disagreements over its attitude towards inimical Iranian regimes which, as seen below, thoroughly repressed the Left and remained anxious about its influence and capacity for mobilization. Yet, the Left's more tangible legacy is its undeniable contribution to the onset of modernity in Iran. From contact theatre to graphic design, architecture and medicine to the humanities and cinema, men and women of various Leftist inclinations have made seminal contributions (See Matin-Asgari, 2018). These contributions include a study that focuses on the intellectual sphere and (Randjbar-Daemi and Michael, 2021) of the professional and political lives of prominent figures.

## From Inception to Allied Invasion

For decades after its inception on the oil-fields of Baku (Chaqueri, 1992), the Iranian social-democratic movement, and later communist movement, operated in a conspir-

atorial manner. The arrival in May 1920 of Bolshevik troops on the Iranian shores of the Caspian Sea led to the establishment of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Iran (SSRI) in the Gilan province until September 1921. Iran was also high on the agenda of the Congress of the Peoples of the East in Baku in September 1920. Lenin, however, cautioned against applying the Russian model directly to the country, due to its lack of an established proletariat.

The SSRI was a short-lived but consequential experiment in autonomous Marxist rule that was upended by the Soviet desire to strike a deal with the new strongman of Iran, Reza Khan (Chaqueri, 1995). In 1931, Reza Shah encouraged the approval of a bill that outlawed any promotion of *eshteraki*, or socialistic ideology, in the country. The Iranian Communist Party, along with a circle of intellectuals and blue-collar workers who clustered around the seminal figure of Taqi Arani, fell afoul of this legislation. The same law would be deployed by successive administrations, including the first cabinet after the Revolution of 1979, to keep Marxist movements in legal limbo or ban them outright.

Arani is widely considered to be the initial purveyor of modern scientific socialism in

Iran. A polymath who returned from his studies in Weimar-era Berlin as a committed communist, Arani's approach consisted of deploying basic sciences as a pathway towards materialism, mostly through his *Donya* journal. Together with his circle, who became collectively known as the "53", he was arrested in 1938 and succumbed to untreated typhus in jail in 1940 (Jalali, 2018). Arani's legacy has loomed large over the Iranian Left.

## The Tudeh Heyday

Felled by both the Reza Shah-era internal repression and the Stalinist purges, the Iranian Communist Party was a spent force by 1941. Its legacy was furthered by the Tudeh Party of Iran, which remains the foremost formation of the Iranian Left. Formed by remnants of the ICP and the Group of 53 sometime after the Allied invasion, the Tudeh started out as an anti-fascist, broadly social-democratic organisation but progressively gravitated towards the Soviet Union. The Tudeh's first congress in 1944 approved a progressive reformist program that was later replicated in part by the Shah in his White Revolution. It called for the extension of suffrage to women and focused on the emerging proletariat and pitiful conditions of the peasantry.

In its 1940s heyday, the Tudeh had branches in virtually every Iranian city or town, frequently attracting entire ranks of the local modernist intelligentsia. The Tudeh also attempted to organise Iran's working class, particularly in the refinery city of Abadan (Atabaki, 2018), and sought to make inroads in the majority peasant component of the population. The attempt brought about a valiant effort but was ultimately unsuccessful (Randjbar-Daemi, 2020).

The Tudeh's fortunes ebbed in late 1945 when

a veteran of the SSRI, Jafar Pishevari, created an autonomous administration in the northern Azerbaijan region under the control of the Ferqeh-ye Demokrat (Azerbaijan Democratic Party). The rise and fall of Ferqeh's 12-month rule was a product of Stalin's desire to create leverage in his dealings with Tehran over a northern oil concession.

In its year in power, the Ferqeh implemented a unique and daring agenda. Pishevari enabled female suffrage for the elections of Azerbaijan's parliament, thereby marking the first time in Iranian history that women were allowed to vote. The Azerbaijan government also enacted the first land reform program in modern Iran (See (Atabaki, 2000) and (Khandagh, 1984) for an extensive discussion).

The fallout from the collapse of the Ferqeh administration and the Tudeh's awkward posturing during the same led to the first of many major splits within the Iranian Left. A long initial declaration signed in January 1948 by twelve senior Tudeh figures, led by two former members of the "53", Khalil Maleki and Anvar Khomeini, confirmed their exit from the party due to the pro-Moscow faction's stifling of internal dissent and debate. Similar factors would fuel subsequent splits in other formations. Maleki would go on to form a small but tenacious anti-Soviet formation, the Third Force, between 1952-53, and the subsequent Socialist League in the 1960s (Katouzian, 2018).

By the time Mohammad Mossadegh took power in 1951, the Tudeh operated underground as a consequence of being dubiously accused of connivance in an attempted murder of the Shah in February 1949. It subsequently re-emerged through a Central Committee which was partly clandestine and partly in exile in Moscow and through

a range of overt publications and lively front organisations. These catered to everything from peasant issues, world peace, to illiteracy, whilst remaining committed to themes such as female suffrage and gender equality, which were pursued half-heartedly by the government. The Tudeh maintained a caustic view towards Mossadegh and oil nationalisation, frequently accusing him and his National Front formation of appeasement towards the United States and Great Britain. The party also caused the consternation of the intelligence and diplomatic communities in both countries due to its ability to frequently send large, orderly crowds into the streets of Tehran and other major cities to rally on its behalf.

By the time of the August 1953 coup d'état organised against Mossadegh, the Tudeh had cautiously veered towards supporting the embattled prime minister and publicly warned of attempts to unseat him, including one attempt on August 16. It was unable, however, to prevent a second successful attempt to overthrow Mossadegh on August 19, a circumstance which was often brandished by its detractors in later decades. The party went through extensive self-criticism in the wake of the repression which followed the coup, resulting in the disbanding of its clandestine military officers' organisation, the forced or genuine repentance of many of its cadres (Abrahamian, 1999), and exile.

## The Eclipse of Tudeh Hegemony

The Tudeh lost its hegemonic position over the Iranian Left by the mid-1960s, mainly due to the Sino-Soviet split and the challenges of the global 1968 moment to its increasingly stolid and dated approach. By that time, a new Left was emerging from the bosom of burgeoning student expatriate communities

and the disenchantment of a younger generation of post-coup activists with regard to the Tudeh and the National Front's inability to stem the drift towards authoritarianism in Iran, which became pronounced by 1964. At this time, seasoned Leftist intellectuals such as Jalal Al-e Ahmad engaged in new critiques of Iran's encounter with the West (Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, 2021), while the Tudeh and the Socialist League finally found common ground with the emerging clerical oppositionist, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, over his firm opposition to the extension of diplomatic immunity to American contractors in Iran (Randjbar-Daemi, 2022). Khomeini never sought, however, to develop a dialogue with the Left.

From their new base in East Germany, the Tudeh leaders had to observe the severe depletion of their ranks amongst the growing Iranian émigré communities in Western Europe. As much as 90% of its operation in Western Europe was seized by a group of cadres who eventually gravitated towards Maoism. Inside Iran, a group of young Marxist students and professionals decided to embrace the theory and praxis of armed struggle through the new Fada'i-ye Khalq Organisation (Vahabzadeh, 2010), (Rahnama, 2021), (Vahabzadeh, 2022b). Its main inspirations also included former Tudeh and National Front members such as Bijan Jazani. (Mohajer and Vahabi, 2023). The Fada'i vision was fiercely contested by the Tudeh, mainly through its theoretical journal, *Donya*, where the concept of armed struggle was termed a "strategy of defeat", a Blanquist deviation, and far from the norms of Marxism-Leninism. The Tudeh and the Fada'is never reconciled before the Revolution of 1979, despite a third of the cadres from the latter joining the former three years earlier (Taqizadeh, 2022). Other elements of the Left established links

with radical movements across the Middle East (Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, 2018).

The Left's remaining influence inside Iran between 1964-79 was mostly confined to the cultural and intellectual realms (Vahabzadeh, 2022a). Tudeh and the Socialist League veterans were at the forefront of the *Kanun-e Nevisandegan-e Iran* (Writers' Association of Iran), which persistently decried official censorship. They also convened the famous Ten Nights at the Goethe Institut in Tehran in October of that year.

## The Revolution and its Aftermath

The Iranian Left's systemic participation in the revolutionary upheaval of 1978-79 was limited by the extent of state repression, which persisted until the last days of the Pahlavi monarchy. By 1976, the Fadais were mainly concerned with preventing the extinction of their operations and spent 1978 producing declarations and engaging peripherally with the revolutionary movement (Randjbar-Daemi, 2023). Together with the Tudeh and Maoist formations, which eventually gathered under the "Third Line" umbrella, they survived Savak repression to repatriate and emerge into the open in the final period of the Pahlavi monarchy.

The first public meeting of the Iranian Left since 1953, a gathering on 8 February 1979 at the campus of the University of Tehran to commemorate the anniversary of the 1971 attack on the Siyahkal gendarmerie post, which in effect started the season of urban armed struggle and a rally two days later, attracted thousands and was a testimony to the popular affection for the ideals and the sacrifice of dozens of men and women associated with the Fadais such as Masoud Ahmadzadeh, Hamid Ashraf, Bijan Jazani, Marziyeh Ah-

madi-Oskui (on the latter, see (Shamshiri, 2023)) who had perished during the enduring struggle of the previous decade. The fall of the Pahlavi dynasty brought temporary respite in the state-driven repression of the Left. From a surviving nucleus of a couple dozen cadres, the Fadais quickly developed a nationwide structure that resulted in a female candidate, Roghiyeh Daneshgari, obtaining nearly 170,000 votes in the first parliamentary elections of Spring 1980, more than the other candidates of the secular Left groups. The Left, however, was unable to resolve the vexing issue of its approach towards an increasingly inimical Islamic Republic or find common ground during major junctures such as the early repudiation of women's rights in March 1979, grassroots left-wing movements in Kurdistan and Turkmen Sahra, the censorship of the press by August 1979, or the approval of the new constitution and the presidency of Abolhassan Bani-Sadr. While the Tudeh engaged in providing blanket support for the "Khat-e Imam", a stance pursued by Khomeini's closest followers, the Fadais endured a bitter split on the issue which resulted in the creation of two antagonistic flanks, the Majority and the Minority, by summer 1980, with a wing loyal to the veteran Fadaei Ashraf Dehghani having left earlier (Behrooz, 1990). Such acrimony was accentuated by developments in Kurdistan where the local leftist Kurdistan Democratic Party and Kumeleh had revolted against the central authorities amid infighting and alternating support from national leftist formations.

The Left's presence on the public scene was curtailed by the state authorities after Bani-Sadr's impeachment and removal from office in June 1981, which also led to the eclipse of other formations such as the Maoist Randjbaran Party and the Peykar Organisation. Only the Tudeh and the Majority Fadais,



which initially backed the regime against the rest of the Left, remained on the scene. They too were hounded out by the suppression of their operations and the mass incarceration and forced recantation of their leaders and members from mid-1983. Nearly all Leftist formations suffered severe human loss during the mass execution of political prisoners in the summer of 1988 (Mohajer, 2020).

## Conclusion

For the past four decades, survivors of the various formations have valiantly sought to keep the spirit and essence of their struggle alive, often through dated norms and linguistic conventions alien to most of Iranian society that does not have living memory of the era in which they were openly active inside the country.

It is difficult to contemplate a belated rise to power of the historic formations of the Iranian Left. Their checkered legacy continues to be widely debated and discussed. Traces of it can be found in the current struggles for social justice and gender equality such as the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement or in the continuous wave of industrial action and nationwide protests of recent years. Both have featured at their heart a new, inquisitive generation which is unencumbered by the bitter divisions of the previous decades. ♦

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# The Left in Turkey: Survival and Resistance under Authoritarianism

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What is the future of the left in Turkey? Any answer to this question will have to begin by reckoning with the failure of the opposition, including the left, in the last general and presidential elections held in May 2023. 21 years into its rule, the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP), and its leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, secured yet another victory in arguably one of the most critical elections in the history of the country. This was a victory that was hard to explain at first sight. Turkey has been experiencing a terrible economic crisis, with inflation at 85% at the end of 2022 and the Turkish lira hitting record lows.<sup>1</sup> The country had also faced a devastating earthquake just three months earlier, which revealed, beyond doubt, the extent of the decay and corruption in public services in the state's inadequate response, and the human and environmental costs of AKP's economic policies. There were thus the conditions for mobilizing a strong opposition, especially a leftist one, which was also potentially best suited to appeal to the vast majority of the society facing a severe cost of living crisis.

The inability of the left to cultivate such a mobilization cannot be understood without taking into consideration the type of authoritarian regime the AKP has established. Although the AKP's authoritarianism had already been in the making since at least its third electoral victory in 2011, and the transition to an "exceptional state" after the failed coup attempt in 2016 (Oğuz 2016), regime change was sealed in 2018. Erdoğan managed to introduce a super presidential system with no check and balance mechanisms in place, a parliament stripped of its power, and the last traces of the rule of law erased (Yılmaz 2020). This is a system that leaves a limited space for the opposition to maneuver, and certainly a slim one, if any, for the left.

Pointing to the presidential system as the main obstacle to Turkey's return to democracy, the largest opposition block, called the "Nation Alliance" - an unlikely alliance of five right-wing parties with a center-left one led by the presidential candidate Kemal

<sup>1</sup> 85.51% was the official figure revealed by the Turkish Statistical Institute in November 2022. There is, however, widespread distrust in official figures, and other surveys, such as the one conducted by the Istanbul Chamber of Commerce, calculated a much higher rate of 109% (Sönmez 2022).

Kılıçdaroğlu<sup>2</sup> - put reinstituting the parliamentary system at the top of their electoral agenda. Their inability to win against the so-called “People’s Alliance”, the AKP’s coalition with the ultra-nationalists and Islamists, inadvertently helped confirm the presidential system and made it even harder to reverse it in the near future.<sup>3</sup> The last elections, then, can be seen as the beginning of a new era where authoritarianism not only is consolidated but will also be emboldened ideologically. There have been signs in the few months following the elections that the Islamist and Turkish nationalist currents, which were already at work to delegitimize and suppress the opposition and reshape state institutions, are being weaponized to directly target groups and individual citizens, making freedom of association and assembly practically nonexistent. It is therefore an enormous challenge for the left to go beyond surviving this authoritarian repression and build a strategy to counter the feeling of hopelessness and political apathy becoming prevalent in society.

In many ways, the left in Turkey is ill-prepared for such a challenge. It has not only been very fragmented ideologically and organizationally, but also electorally and is politically weak.<sup>4</sup> It has long lost its hegemony over the politics of the streets, which was so evident in the 1960s and 70s. In addition to an unprecedented student mobilization

within universities, which eventually turned into a revolutionary movement towards the end of the 60s (Lüküslü 2015; Pekesen 2020), this was also a period when Turkey witnessed a dramatic expansion of organized labor. The legal changes that made such an expansion possible, such as the 1963 Union Act, which recognized the right to strike for the first time, were indeed the results of an already growing working-class activism and political identity. This could also be traced to the formation of the Labor Party of Turkey in 1961—the first socialist party to enter the Turkish parliament (Mello 2007). The militancy of the labor movement intensified with the foundation of the Confederation of Revolutionary Labor Unions in 1967, which organized the strikes, workplace occupations, and rallies that marked the Turkey of the 1970s. With the increasing radicalization of the left after the military intervention in 1971, as well as the deepening of political polarization, violence between leftist and far-right militants intensified. The far-right functioned effectively as paramilitary structures helped by the state, not just clashing with the left but also targeting ethnic and religious minorities associated with it, such as the Alevis and the Kurds (Gourisse 2023).

The military coup of 12 September 1980 came in such circumstances. Although the coup was legitimized by the need to put an end to political violence, and thus to also sup-

2 It is a long debate as to whether the People’s Republican Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, CHP), the founding party of the republic and the main opposition party in the last two decades, can even be seen on the left. Although the party’s adoption of Kemalism, the founding ideology of Turkey named after Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, hinders its positioning as a center left party akin to the social democratic parties in Europe and elsewhere, the CHP has aligned itself with the left of the center since the mid-1960s (Emre 2014).

3 Erdoğan’s alliance with two far right parties was expanded right before the 2023 elections to incorporate two more parties: HUDAPAR (Free Cause Party) and New Welfare Party. The HUDAPAR, an Islamist party with links to the armed group Hezbollah in the Kurdish region, increased the radical tone of the alliance’s Islamism.

4 Publications on the history of the left in Turkey are unfortunately scarce in English. For a comprehensive volume in Turkish, see Gültekingil 2007.

press the far-right groups, its main target was the left. The rupture that the coup and the subsequent military regime created in Turkish politics and society cannot be overstated. It was so fundamental that the left in Turkey is still trying to recover from that trauma, four decades on. In addition to the brutal suppression of all leftist parties, organizations, and trade unions,<sup>5</sup> the coup paved the way for Turkey's transition to neoliberalism. This transition was complemented with, and sustained by, a systematic policy of curtailing unionization of the working classes and a realignment of the state along a new official ideology, the "Turkish-Islamic Synthesis". There is thus a degree of continuity between AKP's neoconservative authoritarianism and the neoliberal, "Turkish-Islamic" state form it inherited. Indeed, the very rise of the AKP cannot be explained without understanding the entanglement between neoliberalism and Turkish Islamism in the post-1980 period (Şen 2010; Özden, Akça, and Bekmen 2017). Given the regime the AKP was able to establish, one can also say that this entanglement has worked relatively smoothly in deradicalizing organized labor, weakening the left, and mobilizing the voters, especially the urban poor, through populist social policies and a nationalist-neoconservative rhetoric constantly portraying the state and the nation under threat.<sup>6</sup>

This "success" has not gone without challenge, however. There have been opportunities and glimmers of hope for the social opposition in general and the left in partic-

ular. It seems that these opportunities, some of which were quite transformative, can also be the foundation on which the left can shape a more promising future for itself. The labor movement, for example, although unable to reach its pre-1980 strength, has continued to resist neoliberal restructuring, and organized several waves of strikes and protests against privatization and precarious employment conditions (Doğan 2010; Yaman and Topal 2019). The new social movements, which emerged in the post-1980 period, have also proved incredibly resilient. The Kurdish and the feminist movements have been arguably the most resourceful and impactful against AKP's authoritarianism in the last decade and they continue to go into the streets and thus keep social opposition alive despite state repression, which is especially brutal for the Kurds (Kandiyoti 2019; Gunes 2020). In addition, Turkey had its own "spring" in 2013, when the AKP's plan to demolish the Gezi Park in Taksim, Istanbul, and build a shopping mall in its place, inflamed a country-wide uprising. The Gezi Uprising not only politicized millions but brought together, for the first time, different activist groups, from anti-capitalist Muslims to environmentalists and the LGBTQ. It also had a spillover impact on labor activism, creating a transformative momentum for the opposition (Ercan and Oğuz 2015). In other words, there has been social mobilization and resistance, against all odds. The ability of the left to build on and (re)ignite those instances of resistance, which has proved very weak so far, is going to be the determining factor for its strength in the

5 The 1980 military coup resulted in the arrest of 650 thousand people. There were 517 death sentences, of which 50 were executed. In addition to hundreds of suspicious deaths, it was documented that 171 people were killed during torture, 1 million and 683 thousand people were blacklisted, 30 thousand lost their jobs, 14 thousand expatriated, and 30 thousand had to leave the country as political refugees. While these are total figures, a great majority of them were leftist activists. See 2 volumes report of the parliamentary commission at <https://acikerisim.tbmm.gov.tr/handle/11543/2782?locale-attribute=en>. Accessed 8 September 2023.

6 The failed coup attempt of 15 July 2016 provided Erdoğan the opportunity to reinforce this theme of the "survival of the state" and legitimize further suppression of the opposition (Esen and Gümüşçü 2017).

coming years.

Leftist parties tried to cultivate that ability before the last elections by establishing a third block, an alternative to the mainstream opposition, under the name “Labor and Freedom Alliance”. Alliances have partly become a necessity for electoral success because of the changes the AKP introduced in the election system. Given the left’s historical failure to unite, it was substantial progress for the six left-wing parties to be able to join forces. Two of these parties, the Peoples’ Democratic Party (Halkların Demokratik Partisi, HDP), itself an alliance of Kurdish and socialist parties, and the Labor Party of Turkey (Türkiye İşçi Partisi, TİP), were already represented in the parliament and had been the main voices of leftist opposition to the AKP regime. The significance of the left alliance was its role in introducing a labor perspective in the opposition and proposing a radical democratic alternative to the National Alliance’s limited vision of democratization, as well as its alarmingly nationalist and anti-immigrant election campaign. Yet, the left alliance did not gather the support that the initial enthusiasm optimistically forecasted, even though the TİP managed to get almost a million votes and maintain its 4 MPs in the parliament. For its part, the HDP, having had to enter the election under another party’s banner because of the closure case it is facing,<sup>7</sup> won 61 seats and kept its position as the third largest party in the parliament.<sup>8</sup> The leftist block was unable to turn into a true alliance after a crack emerged between the HDP and the TİP, demonstrating, once again, that the

left in Turkey has its own “Kurdish issue” to overcome before it can build a broad-based resistance that offers a truly democratic, egalitarian alternative to the society (Yeğen 2007).

Such a broad-based resistance also requires a political framework that goes beyond electoral strategies and alliances. Especially in AKP-type authoritarian regimes where elections are far from fair and increasingly turned into mechanisms of bolstering the regime’s legitimacy, the expansion of social opposition seems to depend on the ability to cultivate alternative practices, such as neighborhood forums, local environmentalist mobilizations, and issue-based campaigns. To be able to link those pockets of opposition under an over-arching agenda and speak to broader segments of the population, the left perhaps also needs be much bolder in (re)embracing the notions underlying the republican ethos.<sup>9</sup> For example, the left’s inability to respond to the widespread discontent about the AKP’s systematic policies of desecularization and religious social engineering, especially acute in education and in regulations and discourses around gender, family and sexuality (Kandiyoti and Emanet 2017; Adak 2021), requires a critical reflection. Mobilizing against such policies cannot be seen as a deviation from the “real” agenda of the left; it is vital for millions of people in the country—the Alevis, women, the LGBTQ and the non-Muslims. Nor does it mean a reconciliation between Kemalism and the left. It is about time for the left to get over its “Kemalism complex” and claim the ambition for a secular, democratic republic for all, without falling into the trap of romanticizing a mythical, good “old”

<sup>7</sup> The HDP, whose hundreds of members, including former co-presidents, Figen Yüksekdağ and Selahattin Demirtaş, and several democratically elected mayors, are in jail, faces a closure case at the Constitutional Court. Party closure was also used repeatedly against the HDP’s predecessors.

<sup>8</sup> This is despite a decline in the party’s votes compared to the previous general elections, from 11.7% to 8.82%.

<sup>9</sup> For a recent and stimulating discussion on the possibilities of such a vision for the left, see Saraçoğlu 2023.



Turkey against Erdoğan's "new" one. ♦

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# When Left-Wing Becomes Neoliberal

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The photos of Yitzhak Rabin, Yasser Arafat, and Shimon Peres shaking hands and signing the “Oslo Accord” on the White House lawn on September 13, 1993, will forever be recorded in the chronicles of the modern Middle East. Back then it looked like the Israelis and the Palestinians were closer than ever to making peace. The historical importance of the agreement was in its mutual recognition and their joint adoption of the idea of partitioning the land. It was done by the respective leaders of the Left-Wing Zionist movement - Prime Minister Rabin and Foreign Minister Peres, both from the Labor party - and the leaders of the Palestinian national movement. Eventually, the peace process failed and marked the beginning of the decline of the left-wing in Israel over the last two decades.

In this short essay, I will try to project the case of marginalization of the Israeli left-wing at the hands of right-wing religious nationalism and in the face of neoliberalism. The inability of the left to resist these two factors, and its failure to develop an alternative captivating narrative for the people, made it irrelevant in current Israel.

One major reason for the failure of the peace process, followed by the decline of the left-wing, was the adoption of the “Neoliberal peace” paradigm, which assumes that as

the regimes and economies become more advanced, secular, and free, they will also become more averse to war (Menocal and Kilpatrick 2005, 768).

The Palestinian Autonomy - established following the “Oslo Accords” - was designed not only to provide the foundation for a state but also to serve as a secular political alternative, with a free market economy, countering the threat posed since the 1980s by the growing strength of Hamas. At the same time, supporters of the Oslo Accords sought to influence the nature of Israeli society, to present an alternative to those on the right who proposed a blend of nationalism and religion, and instead shape Israel as a secular and neoliberal society.

Advocates of the “neoliberal peace” theory view adherence to religious principles and values as archaic and instead offer an optimistic promise of economic cooperation that would raise the standard of living of the two peoples and ensure a reality of peace. This worldview is anchored in the notion of “progress,” as it developed in Western philosophy since the Enlightenment; this notion of progress sees human society advancing in a linear path toward a better future, largely thanks to science and rationalism (Although the European Union proved that such a project can

actually work, we need to remember that most of these societies shared the same religion).

But there can be a clash between the idea of progress and alternative ways of conceptualizing life and history. For example, the alternative of “what was will be” (as in *Ecclesiastes*), which sees history moving in circles; or even a view of history as a process of decline. Both were saliently expressed in the confrontation between President Bill Clinton, a devotee of the idea of neoliberal peace, who shared his outlook with Ehud Barak (then the Left-Wing Israeli prime minister who succeeded Rabin and Peres in 1999) and Palestinian Chairman Yasser Arafat during the 2000 Camp David summit.

The confrontation on July 24, 2000, is an instructive example of how different and opposing patterns of historical perceptions – which can be defined as Western versus Eastern, liberal versus conservative, or secular versus traditional – played a key role in the failure of the effort to achieve a final status agreement.

“Why didn’t you accept my proposals?” Clinton asked Arafat in anger, after justifying Barak’s refusal to give up Israeli sovereignty on the Temple Mount. Clinton continued:

*Barak offered solutions and concessions, and you refuse to present anything. The discussion is about policy, not religion. You couldn’t have dreamt of sovereignty over the Muslim and Christian quarters and authority over the Haram [al-Sharif], all in the framework of a sovereign state...You missed an opportunity in ’47 when you opposed the partition [...] and now again!?![...] You’ll be the reason the Haram will remain under full Israeli sovereignty. Barak made a lot of concessions – you didn’t budge...*

Clinton tried to persuade Arafat to agree to the idea of receiving residual responsibility (and not full sovereignty) over the Temple Mount, under the ostensibly logical assumption that Arafat would accept an offer that gave him more than he currently had in hand. But Arafat responded from a different perspective:

*I’m the leader of the Palestinian people and I represent the Arabs, Muslims, and Christians, in all matters concerning the Haram and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. I will not betray their faith in me. Even if you offer me a state, and Haifa and Jaffa – without full sovereignty on the Haram, it won’t happen! [...] I’d rather die than agree to Israeli sovereignty over the Haram. I won’t be recorded in Arab and Muslim history as a traitor. As I promised my people – We’ll liberate Jerusalem! If not now, perhaps in another thousand years (Yossi Beilin, Akram Haniyah’s Camp David diary 2000).*

This confrontation exposed the gaping differences in their perceptions of the dimension of time, the significance of their place in history, and the complex relations between religion and nationalism. While Clinton highlighted the immediate benefits for the Palestinians, Arafat emphasized that he was ready to wait another millennium. While Clinton treated Arafat like the leader of a secular organization, who rationally weighs the pros and cons of any choice, Arafat insisted that without full sovereignty over the site held sacred by Muslims, an agreement would not happen. For Arafat, the Palestinian interests cannot be separated from the Muslim attachment to the holy places. That explains the paradox of his rejection of Israel’s proposal: Arafat felt more comfortable leaving the Temple Mount under full Israeli sovereignty and staking his claim to it, than gaining partial sovereignty because

he did not want to be remembered as the first Muslim leader to accord *de jure* recognition of the Jews' claim to the Temple Mount.

In Arafat's worldview, the mythological, theological, and rational dwell together.

However, the Left-Wing leaders failed to understand the objection of traditional Palestinians and Israelis to a peace that does not address these issues.

To understand the significance of the religious dimension in a peace process, even when conducted by secularists, I adopt a more complex approach to the relations between religion and secularity. This approach challenges the "secularization thesis", prevalent in academia in the West until the 1960s. According to this thesis, the world of religion and its concepts have been declining since the beginning of the modern era, while secular life is developing and spreading (Casanova, 2004). However, in the 21st century, it is clear that the dichotomy between the religious and secular worlds is blurred, and critics of the secularization thesis point to religious phenomena, old and new, that are flourishing in the modern era, while utilizing advanced technological elements to promote them (Eisenstadt, 2008, 21-35). For example, the idea of "Islamic State" is both a religious phenomenon that looks toward the ancient Islamic past and a modern and secular phenomenon in its use of technology and ambition to change the Middle East through the power of human action. In fact, Israel itself is a secularization of a religious notion.

My intention here is not simply to reject the paradigm that distinguishes between religion and secularity, or religion and nationalism.

Rejection of this paradigm is nothing new.

Nationalism is often described as a secularized and new alternative to the religious ethos of the ancient world.

I intend to argue (as Talal Assad explained in his book *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*) that the religious world, from the outset, was not a coalesced and uniform phenomenon; it also included secular elements such as arguments and confrontations with God, as exemplified in the stories of the biblical patriarchs. This anthropomorphic approach essentially denies the unique transcendental dimension of God that is central to classic religious faith. Therefore, there is no precise division between the secular era and the religious era. On the other hand, secularity itself does not necessarily stand in contradiction to the religious world. The liberal-secular notion of equality draws from the monotheistic idea of a single God for all humanity (Mendes-Flohr 2010, 55). In fact, secularity is "nurtured by the theological and conducts dialogues of various sorts with it" (Fischer 2016, 23).

However, it is evident that the leaders of the peace process on the Western side did not fully understand this complexity (even though religion plays a very prominent role in both the U.S. and Israel whether politically or socially). Their view saw the religious world as an outdated phenomenon and religious leaders from both sides were not invited to participate in the negotiations.

Proponents of the "Neoliberal peace" paradigm believe it is enough to achieve reconciliation between rival national movements through mutual economic benefits.

There is a thread here connecting all of the proposals the Zionist movement offered the Palestinians to foster coexistence. From the

time of Herzl, who believed that the economic and technological benefits the Jews would bring to Palestine would induce the Arabs to accept the Jews in Palestine, to the “economic peace” plans of Benjamin Netanyahu (Netanyahu 93, 240), the Zionist perception of peace has not substantially changed.

Several studies have found a correlation between the ability to resolve conflict and economic benefits, but “Economic growth or cooperation between states reduced the probability of them waging war against each other, but do not indicate that these economic factors can lead to the signing of a peace accord between them” (Feldman 2009, 17). Moreover, in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, economic growth during the years of “Oslo” has led many Palestinians to adopt a less favorable view of Israel and its peace proposals. It is important to note, for example, that before the second intifada, the PA enjoyed a high rate of economic growth, about 9%. But this growth did not prevent the intifada because growth often also widens disparities in a society, which in turn stirs turmoil; and a more comfortable life is not necessarily a formula for conflict resolution, as long as questions of justice and morality remain unresolved. Furthermore, a rise in the standard of living and levels of education can provide more free time for focusing on national aspirations and ways to achieve them.

Indeed, subjects concerning morality, religion, or historical justice were left out of the peace talks. Oslo was done like a real estate deal. The Israelis and the Palestinians avoid discussing the issue of refugees, holy places, or narratives.

The Palestinians would undoubtedly have a better future in a state of their own instead of remaining under Israeli occupation; but

without recognition of their narrative, their sense of injustice would continue to simmer, preventing true and complete reconciliation (Khoury 2016, 476).

Yossi Beilin – the Architect of the Oslo Accords – is the foremost representative of the view that sees Neoliberalism and the rule of law as crucial over other issues, even when it comes to establishing peace accords. He was therefore horrified in one of his meetings, during the days of the Barak government, when Arafat’s advisor Muhammad Dahlan proposed that Israel grant clemency to Aryeh Deri [the leader of the Mizrahi ultra-Orthodox Shas party], who was then serving a prison sentence on corruption charges (Beilin, 2001, 147). Dahlan argued that the peace process needed the support of the Mizrahi religious camp, and Deri could supply the goods. Beilin rejected the proposal. In Beilin’s eyes, Dahlan was proposing that Israel violate the rule of law instead of focusing on reforming the system in the PA.

But what Dahlan proposed was more profound than mere contempt for the rule of law. He sought to bolster the peace process with elements from different cultures, including some that are not included in the liberal one, like Mizrahi-traditionalist Jews from the lower strata of the society. The question is how far could liberals go to accommodate the culture of “the other” when it is incongruent with their own enlightened values.

My claim is that the demise of the left-wing in Israel, following the collapse of the peace process, is rooted in its difficulty in relating to the religious and non-liberal segments of both Israeli and Palestinian society, although they are major “components” of the conflict.

The problem with Neoliberal peace lies in the



notion that national identities and myths, anchored in ancient narratives that include a connection to land and holy sites, can easily be converted in a “progressive” approach that sees all of us as consumers and producers seeking material gains.

The supporters of the neoliberal version of the peace process, most of whom tend to be from a higher socio-economic background, perceive themselves as enlightened and those who have reservations about their approach - the Palestinians who insist on sovereignty over the holy places, or the right-wing Israelis who refuse to relinquish the settlements - are looked upon as backward. But in the eyes of those “extremists”, they are more enlightened because their worldview is anchored in principles of justice and of commitment to their familial, communal, and religious-national past.

The Oslo process was conducted by the leaders of the Labor Party, but in the Israeli case, as in many others, the party abandoned its social values in favor of a neoliberal outlook. The “left” in Israel is a homogeneous group consisting of representatives of the Israeli elite, most of them secular Ashkenazim (European Jews). As long as the left-wing in Israel refuses to include different groups with different ideas and cultures and jettisons its social justice values - it will significantly contribute to right-wing populism.

By that, we can sum up with an interesting claim: the adoption of neoliberalism by the left-wing eventually reduced support for peace and leftist camp alike. The inability of the left to resist neoliberalism eventually enhanced the political power of right-wing religious nationalism. The Left’s failure to develop an alternative captivating narrative made it more marginalized over time. This is

evident in the fact that in over two decades, there has been no left-wing government in Israel and it is hard to foresee one in the near future. ♦

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# The Unorthodox Relevance of Morocco's Radical Left

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Radical left-wing parties are often not considered significant enough to warrant scholarly attention in studies of MENA politics. Because of their small size, underwhelming electoral performance, or lack of participation in elections, they do not fit conventional notions of party relevance.<sup>1</sup> This understanding of relevance, while fitting several liberal democratic settings, is generally ill-suited to the study of political parties in authoritarian regimes. The concept's emphasis on electoral politics and executive alliances, when applied to an authoritarian case, leads to the exclusion of a range of opposition actors that hold more pessimistic views about the prospects of achieving democratization solely through the urns or face hurdles in doing so.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, this conception obscures the other non-electoral strategies that opposition actors, radical or otherwise, can adopt to weigh in on the political field. While this short contribution focuses on the Moroccan case, its argument can shed some light on similar dynamics taking place across the region, where legal radical leftist oppositions adopt similar strategies.

Despite the changes brought about by the

2011 constitution, which tied the position of head of government to electoral results and reduced blatant electoral fraud in comparison to earlier periods, the electoral game in Morocco remains unbalanced for several reasons. This includes a skewed electoral map, which generates fragmented results that make alliances with co-opted or administrative parties inevitable and coherent opposition governments difficult to imagine, and the various administrative difficulties often faced by opposition candidates. Faced with this reality, leftist parties in Morocco have had to adopt different and changing strategies to try and weigh in on the political field in pursuit of goals that cannot be attained solely through elections.

While the argument for a more contextually sensitive conception of relevance is applicable across the ideological spectrum,<sup>3</sup> this contribution will focus primarily on highlighting how such a conception can lead to a more precise understanding of radical leftist politics in the region and its consequential impact, which may not be adequately reflected by its minimal or non-existent electoral accomplishments. The article will examine the case of Morocco, specifically highlighting instances of leftist political parties, both

1 For Sartori (1976), political parties are considered relevant if they hold blackmail or coalition potential.

2 While pessimistic, these views are backed by the literature (Gandhi and Lust 2009).

3 See Dahbi (2023) for a more detailed discussion of the concept.

electoral and non-electoral, and their employment of boycotts and opposition coalition-building strategies throughout the country's recent political history.

## **Leftist Opposition Coalitions and Boycotts Before 2011:**

Refusal to participate in elections, coupled with boycott campaigns, is a key strategy that opposition parties have relied on in authoritarian contexts. Morocco is no exception, and that approach has been deployed at different times in the country's history by opposition parties (leftist or otherwise). The degree of success is variable depending on what criteria are used for its assessment, but over the long run, electoral boycotts have allowed opposition parties to negotiate from a better position with the palace and to achieve some significant successes. By conditioning their participation in the official political field with reformist demands, especially at times of incumbent weakness, they signal their willingness to negotiate, and even bolster the incumbent's legitimacy, through their participation in exchange for concessions.

The leftist *Union Socialiste des Forces Populaires* (USFP) party effectively deployed this approach in its negotiations with Hassan II. Boycotts were coupled with a strategic orientation towards the building of broad opposition coalitions. The long negotiations

between the *Koutla*, a coalition of opposition parties,<sup>4</sup> and the palace in the 1970s and 1990s illustrate the successful use of both boycotts and threats of boycott to secure a relative opening of the political space, culminating with the USFP-led "*Alternance*" government of Abderrahmane Youssoufi in 1998. While the long-term success of the experience can be debated, the relative opening of the Moroccan political field that followed in its wake is indisputable. As such it can be viewed as a success.

Today, Morocco's radical leftist parties are adopting a similar approach, albeit on a smaller scale that is more appropriate for their recent entry into the political arena. There are currently four radical leftist parties in the country, a number that is set to decrease as two of them are in the process of merging into a single party. Since their emergence, these parties have worked towards the creation of a wide opposition front to oppose the Makhzen and push forward their democratization agenda. These efforts have not led to a fully-fledged and enduring alliance, but their results are far from underwhelming, particularly when one looks beyond electoralist standards. In fact, a survey of their relatively brief history highlights a notable trend towards consolidation, despite some more recent setbacks.<sup>5</sup>

Most of the radical left parties have, since

4 In addition to the conservative Istiqlal Party, the four other member parties of the second Koutla were leftist. In addition to the USFP, they included the Parti du Progrès et du Socialisme (former Moroccan Communist Party), the Organisation de l'Action Democratique et Populaire (OADP), and the Union Nationale des Forces Populaires (UNFP). The first iteration of the Koutla was limited to the UNFP (before the 1975 split that produced the USFP) and the Istiqlal. See Mohamed Bouaziz (1998) for more details on the history of the Koutla and its negotiations with the palace.

5 The Federation de la Gauche Democratique (FGD) recently collapsed prior to the 2021 elections, following the withdrawal of the Parti Socialiste Unifie (PSU) from it. However, the remaining member parties (the Parti de l'Avant-garde Democratique et Socialiste, and the Congres National Ittihadi) along with some dissenting PSU factions that joined them (the Fidelity to Democracy faction, formerly part of the USFP), moved on to fuse their parties into a single organization in 2022, the Alliance de la Federation de la Gauche (AFG).

their creation, been engaged in a process of coalition building as a way of forming an opposition bloc. The *Organisation de l'Action Démocratique et Populaire* (OADP) joined the *Koutla* soon after its creation, leaving it to remain in opposition when its partners agreed to form the “*Alternance*” government. In 2002, the OADP allied with several newly formed independent radical leftist movements, which became the *Gauche Socialiste Unifiée* (GSU).

This was followed by the formation of the so-called G5 in 2004, an opposition group consisting of four radical left parties, including the Marxists of *Annahj Addimocrati* (hereafter, *Annahj*), along with the “Fidelity to Democracy” group which had separated from the USFP. The latter soon merged with the GSU, with the party changing its name to *Parti Socialiste Unifié* (PSU). This marked the end of the G5, as divergences on key issues and electoral participation proved to be insurmountable. However, it also marked the emergence of what came to be known as the “Democratic Left”, with the creation of a radical leftist electoral alliance in 2007, the *Alliance de la Gauche Démocratique*, where member parties coordinated their candidacies to maximize their electoral gains. The Alliance evolved into the *Fédération de la Gauche Démocratique* (FGD) in 2014, running joint electoral lists and aiming for a future fusion of its components into a single party.

Though it was not part of the process that followed the G5, the creation and trajectory of the non-electoralist *Annahj* displays a similar concern with opposition coalition building. The party, which considers itself the continuation of the Moroccan Marxist Leninist Movement (MMLM) of the 1970s (Bouaziz 1993), was created to reassemble Marxist

actors and groups, both those that survived the repression of the MMLM and the newer ones. Following its contentious legalization by the authorities, it moved on to establishing and developing its connections with other radical leftist parties. The aforementioned G5 experience was the peak of that process, as the other parties decided to follow an electoralist strategy that could not include the boycott-promoting *Annahj*. Despite this setback, radical leftist actors maintained a collaborative relationship, often coming together in various settings in support of oppositional aims (Jaabouk 2019).

Coalition building was not limited to the political party field. Radical leftist parties forged and upheld robust ties with labor unions and civil society organizations. Most notably, the *Congrès National Ittihadî* (CNI), a founding member of the FGD, has strong connections to the *Confédération Démocratique du Travail* (CDT), a prominent national labor union. The CDT also includes members from other radical leftist parties, such as *Annahj*. The latter also has a significant presence within the Union Marocaine du Travail (UMT), which is the largest and historic union in Morocco. A comparable situation can be observed regarding civil society. The case of the *Association Marocaine des Droits Humains* (AMDH) is illustrative of the influence held by radical leftist actors in that sector. Arguably the most prominent human rights organization in Morocco, with a wide international reach and significant amplification power (Hivert and Marchetti 2015), the AMDH's leadership is dominated by radical left actors, with a majority of its leadership affiliated with *Annahj*. Other important links with civil society include associations such as the *Association pour la Taxation des Transactions financières et pour l'Action Citoyenne* (AT-TAC) and *Transparency Maroc*, both of

which provide access to various international support networks and legitimacy for the Moroccan radical left. International connections are also strengthened by the sections that radical left parties have created in various Western capitals to mobilize the diaspora, especially in Europe, where they have organized several protests in solidarity with political struggles in Morocco.<sup>8</sup> Finally, radical left parties have also sought to build alliances with some Islamist opposition organizations. Most notably, they have cooperated with *Al Adl Wa al Ihssan* (AWI), the largest opposition organization in the country.<sup>9</sup> Although cooperation with AWI has been fraught with tensions with the PSU, its relations with the Marxists of *Annahj* have deepened over the years and developed into strong ties.<sup>10</sup>

### **The Radical Left in the February 20th Movement:**

The emergence of the February 20th Movement (M20F) in 2011 was a critical juncture that demonstrated the importance of the links between Moroccan radical leftist parties and organizations and their ability to mobilize and support a large-scale protest movement in urban centers across the country when the opportunity arose. In addition to the parties' official statements of support and their amplification of the movement's demands in the media, radical left activists

affiliated with these parties also played a central role at the grassroots level. Members of the various radical left parties used their organizational experience and resources to facilitate the movement's general assemblies and the coordination of its demonstrations by holding key positions in many of its committees. These roles also included cooperation with non-leftist actors involved in the protest movement, including a variety of Islamist actors.<sup>11</sup> The AMDH, along with *Annahj*, was a key node linking the radical left to the Islamists.<sup>12</sup>

As they provided support to the protest movement, the Alliance parties reversed their position on electoral participation, calling for a boycott of the 2011 constitutional referendum and the subsequent parliamentary elections.<sup>13</sup> Despite the radical left's opposition to the constitutional drafting process, the new constitution did make concessions to the demands of the protest movement, including some long-standing reformist demands that had been raised by the leftist opposition parties before 2011.<sup>14</sup> While these concessions did not rise fully to the level of the demands, they did (regardless of their sincerity) represent an attempt to address them. Beyond the constitutional changes, the M20F succeeded in reinvigorating social protest movements across Morocco,<sup>15</sup> with numerous contentious episodes leading to mass mobilization

8 Particularly in France, Belgium, Spain, and the Netherlands. Protests and other awareness-raising activities were organized by the international sections of the PSU and *Annahj*.

9 Membership in AWI, while not officially disclosed, is estimated to reach over 100,000 members.

10 See Alfonso Casani (2020) for more on the alliance between AWI and *Annahj*.

11 Aside from AWI, there were two left-Islamist political parties (*Hizb al Oumma* and *Al Badil al Hadari*).

12 For more on the key role of the AMDH, see Bennani- Chraïbi et al. (2012) and Sammy Zeyad Badran (2022).

13 While the PSU and the PADS boycotted the 2012 legislative elections, the CNI participated.

14 Such as the clarification of the roles of constitutional institutions, particularly that of the monarch as head of state and his religious role as "commander of the faithful". Also, on the sociocultural level, the recognition of Amazigh culture and language, and a clearer acknowledgement of women's equal status.

15 Most prominently the Rif Hirak since 2016. See Bennani- Chraïbi (2019) for more on the M20F connections.

in the years following its decline, most notably the *Hirak* in Jerada and the Rif.

## Conclusion

The political dynamics of elections in authoritarian contexts, here exemplified by the case of Morocco, challenge conventional metrics of political relevance that are often anchored in electoral outcomes. This study underscores that the relevance of radical leftist parties in Morocco cannot be measured solely by their electoral footprint. Instead, their strategic deployment of boycotts, coalition-building, and alliances with diverse entities, ranging from labor unions to human rights organizations, paints a picture of resilience and adaptability in an authoritarian context. The 2011 contentious episode, and the F20M, stand as a testament to the latent power of these strategies.

Despite divergent electoral trajectories, Morocco's radical left parties played a pivotal role in catalyzing a nationwide movement at that critical juncture, leveraging their organizational strengths and cross-sectoral connections. In redefining political relevance, it is imperative for scholars to recognize the multifaceted strategies that opposition parties employ in authoritarian contexts. Morocco's radical left parties serve as a reminder that political relevance is not only about electoral triumphs, but also about the ability to mobilize, adapt, and build alliances in an authoritarian setting. With authoritarianism once again on the rise in the region, a nuanced understanding of party relevance becomes indispensable. ♦

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# Interview with Gilbert Achcar

by Gamze Çavdar & Francesco Cavatorta



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*GC & FC: In academia and policy-making circles, when one thinks of the MENA politics, faith-based movements rather than left-wing movements come to mind. Do you think this is a more recent phenomenon, and, if so, what has caused this?*

GILBERT ACHCAR: This phenomenon is not “recent” in the sense that Islamic movements have had the upper hand in MENA’s contentious politics since the 1970s, particularly since the end of that decade which saw the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in fighting the “mujahedeen”. The next decade saw a protracted war between Iraq and Iran in which both sides engaged in religious one-upmanship. But you are quite right to pose the question in historical terms instead of assuming that Islamic movements have always dominated the regional political scene, as people tend to believe nowadays – especially if they are not old enough, like I am, to have known the pre-1970 period at first hand.

The fact is that the years following the end of World War Two and the first Palestine War of 1948 have seen a powerful surge of left-wing movements, dominated by Arab nationalist forces increasingly shifting to the left in their competition with the Arab Communist movement. The latter ended up tail-ending the former in the 1960s, when key nationalist forces completed their “socialist” mutation.

Anyone who is not aware of this history would be quite surprised in reading today a collection like that of the French Marxist Maxime Rodinson’s essays on *Marxism and the Muslim World* republished eight years ago (Rodinson 2015). That is why, in my foreword to that book, I felt the need to explain to the readers what the pre-1970 period looked like in MENA. For an illustration, I quoted from a 1956 book by the anti-Communist American historian Walter Laqueur in which he lamented the fact that

*the Arab countries are now more likely than most others in the world to provide a favourable breeding-ground for Communism. ... Islam has gradually ceased to be a serious competitor of Communism in the struggle for the soul of the present and potential elites in the countries of the Middle East (Laqueur 1956, 6).*

Indeed, the Communist parties themselves were thriving in the 1950s. By the end of the decade, they had become very powerful in Iraq and Syria in particular – capable to mobilize huge mass demonstrations in support of the 1958 Republican Iraqi nationalist coup of Abdul-Karim Qasim in Iraq. Their Arab nationalist rivals coalesced around the rising star of Egypt’s president Gamal Abdel-Nasser who had become the region’s hero after his nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956 and

his resistance to the Tripartite Aggression by Britain, France and Israel that followed in a failed attempt to reverse Nasser's move. The Arab nationalists violently suppressed the Communists in the late 1950s, but they soon shifted their discourse and governmental action to the left, to the point that Nasser's regime became perceived in the West in the 1960s as a Middle Eastern counterpart of Cuba.

Cairo became the capital of left-wing Arab and African national liberation movements in that historical period, supporting anticolonial armed struggles in Algeria, South Yemen and Sub-Saharan Africa, while Egyptian troops intervened in North Yemen in support of republican forces fighting against the Saudi-backed Imamate. The culmination of this leftward shift will be the adoption of Marxism-Leninism as ideological reference by whole sections of the Arab nationalist movement, up to the mutation of the post-British Arab nationalist rule in South Yemen into what became the first and only Arab state led by a party professing Marxism-Leninism. This state remained in place until the USSR started crumbling; it was then absorbed by its northern neighbour in 1990. Most people refer to the unification of Germany in that same year as an outcome of the end of the Cold War; few are aware that the unification of Yemen was another such outcome.

So how and why did MENA shift from left-wing hegemony to dominance by Islamic movements, especially fundamentalist ones? I would say that the first reason is the Left's failure: the Arab nationalist movement had reached its limits as crudely manifested by the defeat of both Egypt and Syria in the Six-Day War of June 1967. The year 1970 saw the demise of three spearheads of the regional Left: the Palestinian armed

struggle movement was crushed in Jordan, Nasser died and was succeeded by Anwar al-Sadat who steered Egypt into pro-Western deNasserization (economic liberalization along with dismantlement of nationalizations and social gains), and the left-wing fraction of the Arab nationalist Baath party ruling Syria was overthrown by Hafez El-Assad. The regional Left entered a protracted period of decline, which would be accelerated by the demise of the USSR in 1991.

Add to this the fact that Islamic fundamentalism had been built up over the 1950s and 60s as an antidote to the nationalist and Communist left, by the Saudi kingdom with Washington's support. This policy started backfiring when the post-1979 Iranian regime gave a strong impulsion to the anti-Western dimension of Islamic fundamentalism. Thus, contentious politics got rapidly dominated by Islamic forces in pro-Western countries too, including the Saudi kingdom itself. Saudi-Pakistani-US support to the Afghan mujahideen against the Soviet occupation of their country led to the emergence of Al-Qaida in the 1990s as a fiercely anti-Western terrorist network. The dreadful Islamic State group was but one of its later offshoots, initially enabled by the US occupation of Iraq.

*GC & FC: Both globally and regionally, the Left isn't doing well. Should one see this as a wave that will come and go on its own or a human-made cycle that can only be reversed by left-wing activism?*

GILBERT ACHCAR: There are no automatic cycles in politics. In order to get the upper hand again in MENA, the Left must undergo a thorough metamorphosis. For now, most of what one may subsume under the category of the Left are old groups, very much rooted in the past century and its political traditions,

discordant with the new generation. This is why young people have tended to compensate for the lack of organised political forces that they could identify with by creating their own networks, using the great possibilities offered by the new information and communication technologies.

We have seen such networks emerge in the 2011 Arab Spring. One country where they initially led the movement is Syria, where older political forces had been physically wiped out inside the country by the Assad regime (they eventually got back in control of the anti-regime struggle by way of an Istanbul-based leadership). A more recent case, and much more advanced experience, is that of the Resistance Committees in Sudan: a horizontal network of young people's committees of several hundred members each, which played a key role in the initial uprising that started in Sudan in December 2018. They became the main organizer of the resistance to the Sudanese military in later years.

The young people in the region are open and receptive to left-wing ideas and values which they get exposed to through the internet. However, for this potential to find a concrete translation in the movement, it needs to be embodied in organisational forms. Short of that, there is a high risk of political apathy prevailing among young people, leading them to look for individual solutions, particularly migration. Or else, they can be misled into believing that a populist would-be dictator, such as the current Tunisian president Kais Saied, embodies their progressive aspirations. The Sudanese Resistance Committees could have become a powerful inspiration to the young at the regional level. Unfortunately, Sudan has sunk for now in a very peculiar form of counter-revolutionary degeneration, consisting of a bloody war between two fractions

of the ruling military.

But "the future lasts a long time", as the famous quote that I used in concluding my book (Achcar 2013) on the Arab uprisings says. A long-term revolutionary process – which is how I characterized in that book what started in MENA in 2011 – is a learning curve. One can see, for instance, how the second regional revolutionary shockwave of 2019 learned the lesson from what happened in Egypt in 2011–13. The popular movement in Algeria or Sudan did not fall in the trap of hailing the military after they removed the regime's figurehead in each of the two countries, unlike what the popular movement did in Egypt – not only once, but twice in 2011 and 2013.

The other very significant development is that the Islamic movements that had got the upper hand in 2011 – especially the most important of them all: the regional network of the Muslim Brotherhood, backed by Qatar and Turkey, which was dominant among anti-regime forces in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, and Syria – miserably failed. Two or three years later, they had sharply receded. The 2019 revolutionary wave was free of Islamic fundamentalist forces and even straightforwardly opposed to them: in Sudan, such forces had been a pillar of Omar al-Bashir's regime; in Algeria, they had collaborated with the military regime; and both Iraq and Lebanon are states dominated by Iran-backed Islamic fundamentalist paramilitary forces.

This political shift brought back to the fore left-wing and liberal forces and facilitated a surging participation of women: in 2019, in Sudan as well as in Algeria, Lebanon and even Iraq, they played a very prominent role.

Add to this the spectacular movement of women against Iran's clerical regime that was triggered in September 2022, and quickly became the most important surge in feminist struggle in MENA's modern history to date. Feminists had been involved in a leading role in Tunisia in 2011, but that was more the exception than the rule. There were a few prominent female figures in the 2011 uprisings, even in Yemen, but women's role remained overall marginalized. This role must be regarded as a key criterion in judging the political maturation of a left-wing trend in future uprisings, for there can be no true Left if not plainly feminist.

The region's political evolution will also be very much influenced by what happens at the global level, and particularly in Europe with which MENA has strong ties for both historical and geographic reasons. Thus, the fate of the Left in France could greatly impact the politicization of the young in MENA, especially in the Maghrib. I would therefore say that whereas there is overall hardly any ground for optimism, given how daunting the task is of bringing down such cruel regimes as those that prevail in MENA, there is however reasonable ground for hope. I distinguish between hope and optimism: the latter is the belief that the best-case scenario will happen whereas the former is the belief that there is still a progressive potential that could materialize if new left forces manage to find a way to organize and exert political leadership. I can see no better proof of the persistence of this potential than the new upsurge of mass protests that burst out in several Syrian regions under Assad regime domination in mid-August 2023, as if resuming from where the popular uprising was interrupted in the autumn of 2011 by the unfolding civil war. The same slogans resurfaced, including the ubiquitous slogan of the regional uprisings:

“The people want to overthrow the regime”. If in a country as devastated as Syria, the popular movement still has the energy to surge again, then hope is definitely allowed for the whole region.

*GC & FC: What should the left do to reverse the present low point of activism especially under the neoliberal threat?*

GILBERT ACHCAR: It would be presumptuous for me to pretend that I have a recipe for the renewal of left-wing activity in the region. What I can tell you in response to your question is what the experience of the past few years have shown to be related to the emergence of a new left-wing leadership of the popular movement. As I already mentioned, Sudan has provided the most advanced regional case of left-wing vanguard role in organising the people's struggle for democracy and social rights. The movement there has been characterized by its high prevention against vertical centralist leadership forms and its insistence on horizontal decision-making, using social media for concertation, as well as on pluralism (more than one statement have often been issued by different regional subgroups on the same national topic).

This is an important indication of the kind of Left that is needed in the 21st century, necessarily very different from that of the previous century. Horizontality, equality, intersectionality, and democracy are crucial values for the new generations – very much neglected in practice, if not in theory too, by the previous ones. Building a new left-wing movement will require a combination of this modern spirit, embodied in networking as a form of organisation, with some degree of centralisation involving the representation of different subgroups, with permanent revocability and

changeability of their representatives.

Beyond organizational forms, the key issue in my view has been the inability of the Arab Left to be truly consistent with its proclaimed general principles and values – especially those section of the Left that claim to be Marxist. Political opportunism and cowardly adaptation to “public opinion” have too often been the rule, leading to downplay, if not outrightly repudiate, basic democratic stances such as gender equality and/or secularism. To be successful, a left-wing movement must be consistent in its defence of democracy – not adapt its stance according to whether those who are targeted share its views or not. It should above all follow a path truly independent of all reactionary forces – not support one camp against the other alternatively, as happened in Egypt where left-wing forces allied with the Muslim Brotherhood against the military in 2011 only to reverse their stance two years later, instead of clearing their own independent path equally opposed to both sides and dedicated to the consistent fight for democracy and social rights.

*GC & FC: We also wonder about the implications of all this on you personally. How do you process all this as a left-wing academic?*

GILBERT ACHCAR: Well, I have been very much involved in the regional discussion ever since the 2011 Arab Spring. My contribution has been essentially intellectual – or theoretical-political, if you prefer – in providing analyses of the revolutionary process triggered by Mohamed Bouazizi’s self-immolation in Tunisia in December 2010 and of the developments that have been occurring in various MENA countries since then. I am very glad that the Arabic edition of my 2013 book *The People Want* has been widely read – and continues to be so – all over the Ara-

bic-speaking countries (Achcar 2013). It is certainly one of the best-known works on the topic in the region. This is much more important in my eyes than being shunned by part of the mainstream Western academia, such as a recent collective work on theory and research on MENA since 2011 where none of my books gets even mentioned.

I published a sequel to *The People Want* (Achcar 2016) and have written many articles since the regional upheaval started in 2011. Since the autumn of 2016, I have been writing a weekly column – published in print and online – in the well-known Arabic daily, Al-Quds al-Arabi. This has become a key tribune for my ongoing intervention in the regional political debate.

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# Roundtable: The Politics and Ethics of Researching Conflict

*Organized by Rana B. Khoury and Sean Yom*



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## Introduction

For this newsletter's roundtable, we convened a distinguished group of scholars to ponder the politics and ethics of researching conflict in the Middle East. The participants are authors of recent books on civil war, forced displacement, transitional justice, ethnic conflict, and militant organizations. These regional specialists apply a range of epistemological and methodological approaches to the study of conflict. In doing so, they advance important research questions, and provide creative and rigorous answers to them.

Rather than ask the contributors to write short reviews or essays on one another's books, we instead hosted a one-hour discussion on Zoom. We wished to foster an organic and interactive dialogue—that is, to capture the essence of a roundtable: individuals in conversation, even if virtually. We transcribed the recorded discussion, editing only for clarity, and proudly present it here. We are thrilled with the dialogic nature of the final product. The participants build on one another's insights, and collectively create a rich resource about the politics, methods, and ethics of conflict research in the Middle East and beyond.

The collection of books discussed holds something for everyone. Some take a long-run approach to the study of conflict. Anne Irfan and Stacey Philbrick Yadav trace how decades of developments shaped refugee governance and transitional justice in cases of intractable conflict, in the context of Palestinian refugee camps and contemporary Yemen, respectively. Some adopt multiple methods to answer their questions. Kevin Mazur and Jonah Schulhofer-Wohl mix quantitative data with qualitative analyses in pursuit of greater internal or external validity to explain the

genesis of the Syrian civil war and the dynamics of the Lebanese civil war, respectively. The authors also draw upon a wide variety of data and ethnographic sources; for instance, Sarah Parkinson introduces the notion of ethnohistory, and like others carefully considers archival data as well as interviews with the participants of past conflicts.

All five of these authors shared valuable lessons learned in the process of executing these projects. From navigating overabundances of information to addressing silences in archives, and from appreciating intimate emotional remembering to recognizing the assertions of agency given in interviews, their books reveal the richness of the material gained through field-based research. They consider what kinds of accounts are valued in the academy, and the analytic costs of excluding locally produced knowledge. They are refreshingly honest about the unavoidable tradeoffs we make when conducting research, including the temporal and spatial boundaries that we place on our projects.

The conversation concludes with advice for early career researchers. We hope that the ideas raised by our roundtable participants can inform ongoing research on conflict in a region beset by strife and violence—yet bustling also with resilience and resourcefulness.

-Rana B. Khoury and Sean Yom

## Rana B. Khoury

We are so excited to have this conversation about conducting research in conflict, and conflict-adjacent spaces. We are going to pay special attention to methods, data collection, and analysis, as well as the ethics involved with all these issues. Let's jump right in.

I've sought to bring your books together across a few shared axes. I'll start with Anne and Jonah, who both study historical political events by using archives, memoirs, and secondary sources that feature testimonies of individuals for their projects. In Anne's case, on refugee governance; and in Jonas's case, on civil war quagmire. Here's my question: how did you cast the net for historical data? What decisions get made in terms of what to use and what to set aside? And are there ethical challenges in using data created by parties that committed atrocities during war?

## Anne Irfan

Thank you, Rana and Sean, for the invitation—especially as an honorary political scientist! Speaking specifically to research on Palestinian refugees, I cast the net pretty wide. I am working with not only a marginalized population, but also a stateless and highly dispersed population who, for obvious reasons, do not have any kind of comprehensive “state” archive (although, there are efforts underway by Palestinians in occupied Palestine and beyond to pull together archival projects). On top of that, decades of conflict have created further challenges and ruptures in terms of archival collection.

So, my approach was to cast a very broad net, which is perhaps the opposite of what you might prefer in some other situations. It meant traveling to lots of different places, to

look at state archives, institutional archives, and personal archives as well. I wanted to essentially draw in whatever was relevant, not only in terms of what might explicitly answer my core research question, but also what might help provide relevant contextual information—for example, about what was happening in a particular host state at a particular time, and which might have shaped a refugee camp there. I think there are a lot of slightly convoluted approaches you have to take when doing research around a stateless population.

I'll say one more thing before passing it on to Jonah. Your question about ethics is interesting. There's an important question about the ethics of using data created by parties who may have committed atrocities, so I would be interested to hear other people's views on this. I am generally in favor of it, in that I think it's often parties who have committed the atrocities that have the most valuable data about those atrocities. The obvious example here in my field is accessing Zionist sources from during the 1948 Nakba, which demonstrate that there was ethnic cleansing. I was not able to access any Israeli archives during my research because I was denied access to Israel, but I would have certainly wanted to use them if I could.

## Jonah Schulhofer-Wohl

What Anne has described is fascinating. I'll comment on a different aspect—the use of (secondary) sources. In my book, I dealt with the Lebanese civil war, constructing a narrative history of key periods. Another part of the book also has a historical component, comparing Chad between the 1960s and 1990s and Yemen in 1994, which I'm sure Stacey can tell you a lot more about.

For Lebanon, the challenge was the proliferation of sources on the war. The material on it is vast. That's not only due to the passage of time, a lot was produced contemporaneously *during* the war. Beyond secondary sources there were participants' memoirs, newspaper reporting, and government archives. And the international dimension of civil wars means that multiple countries often hold relevant archival material. The archival record can be multi-sited and multi-lingual. Even within a single country, multiple bureaucracies produce documents, each with its own logic and particular audiences.

I found that a good starting point was to read widely to arrive at my own understanding of the events. And only after doing so to look into specific analytic questions. Historical research can hinge on deciding, for yourself: Which questions are important? What material is relevant to answering them? What story needs to be investigated?

On ethics, I think about this in the opposite way. Is it ethical *not* to look at material generated by participants in the conflict? If I hadn't read the accounts of different militias, if I hadn't interviewed former combatants, if I hadn't engaged with the people who actually fought the war, I would have been left with a very skewed understanding. There are still ethical considerations. How can we make sure to contextualize the information that participants provide? Should we accept what participants say as factual or neutral data, including what will inevitably be distinct, even competing versions of the events? If we do this uncritically, it's problematic. We have to work to understand that material and then place it in context.

## Sean Yom

All these answers are so provocative. I wanted to quickly interject that for many conflicts in the region, the problem of there being too much data starkly contrasts to situations where there is little or no reliable data, as in wars that aggressors try to erase from the written record—like the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait or Black September in Jordan. Or, as others are writing in the Zoom chatbox now, Hama in Syria during 1982. Sometimes, we find ourselves bouncing around between the odd memoir or lone narrative, trying to construct something out of nothing.

## Rana B. Khoury

Thanks for that interjection, Sean. Keeping with this historical-political approach, let's stay with Jonah but also turn to Sarah. You both conducted interview-based research. I'd like to hear a little about what surprised or stood out as you sifted through these personal accounts, and which would have been hard to access from only written or secondary sources. I also wonder about the ethics of talking to people about their participation in past conflicts, and whether, for example, there is as much concern about re-traumatization as in places where conflict is ongoing.

## Sarah Parkinson

I want to start by reframing the treatment of personal accounts. I call what I do "ethnohistory." If participant observation is contemporaneous, what I was doing in the context of my work was both participant observation and associated ethnographic methods, with the explicit goal of talking to people about the past, and in that way composing accounts and representations of the past they remember. So that means understanding not just the

archival materials but whatever else people are generating as data or evidentiary material, like music or film. And I think this reflects a bigger point. When we start engaging in fieldwork, there can be this illusion that stories and accounts of the past are just sitting there—complete, right, and true. The reality is they're fragmented. They're incomplete. It's not that people's memories are inaccurate, but the participants in conflict remember things in different ways and at different times.

This is where thinking about ethnographic interventions, or interviewing protocols and intersubjective relationships, becomes so important. We are bringing very sensitive things to the surface. Re-traumatization comes to play when working in conflict and engaging participants from that conflict. There is also another issue: going to the field and assuming that anyone who has engaged in, or experienced conflict, is traumatized. That's pathologizing. We need to distinguish between doing trauma-sensitive work and being trauma-informed, rather than making the blanket assumption that everyone who has experienced trauma will be affected by it in the same way. Here, I think methods classes and other resources in our discipline need to make graduate students and scholars more aware of these issues about ethics and respect. It is not methodologically sound to work with human participants in these settings without at least a basic understanding of how people's histories and personal experiences interact with your project.

Finally, it's important to recognize what you don't see as well. In Lebanon (where I coincidentally met Jonah for the first time), I was working on Palestinian organizations during the civil war. I started to see gaps in newspaper coverage, and realized I could also see which reporters back then were covering

which beats, which made me want to find some of the reporters. Those newspaper offices themselves are full of hidden information, like boxes of photographs that were never published because of sensitivities from that time. To me, recognizing where the holes are, meaning the "missing" data, means being aware of your particular epistemological perspective, and how that shapes the politics of censoring information.

The last point that I want to raise when working ethnographically are issues of honesty and confidentiality. I remember interviewing different groups of women about what they were doing in the 1980s. It became clear that one person to whom I was directed, a very high-ranking person, was not actually present during the events in question. So, one of my other interlocutors became upset that I would interview that woman. She asked why I would even speak to that person, who may have been lying to me and falsely representing other women. To this day, my interlocutor is still angry that this person spoke to me. I think it's important to consider what happens when a researcher enters local systems of relationships, which are unique spaces, and faces the task of de-escalating tense situations when clearly someone is not telling the truth—and others know about it, because it's no secret about the people we are meeting with.

To me, this shows the necessity of thinking *relationally* with different types of data and evidentiary materials, especially for research designs that involve the extended intimate presence of a researcher in communities.

## **Jonah Schulhofer-Wohl**

I think of interviews as being part of a field research process that goes beyond the questions we pose to respondents and their corre-

sponding answers. We put ourselves into interaction with people socially. We go into their homes, offices, and other spaces. And in the course of these interactions, we find out a lot that, may not necessarily answer our research questions but can provide clues about larger process, situations, and actors we're researching. When I was interviewing former militia commanders in Lebanon, some showed me personal photographs from during the war – snapshots of themselves, their comrades in arms, sometimes their families. Those pictures affected me. They made me stop to really consider the nature of people's lives during conflict. I ended up doing a side project of photographic research. This emphasized for me the range of possible sources out there that is worth exploring, and which we can't get at from behind a desk or in a library.

Interviews can help uncover new information in other ways. There were occasions when I'd learn from somebody that something different had happened than what other sources recorded. I also learned a great deal from what respondents were *not* saying in response to my questions. Interviews that you conduct personally have a distinct, useful dynamic when it comes to this type of information. When you look at a secondary source, an archival document, or even an interview that someone else did and you don't see a particular topic covered, or you're not able to put together information about a certain question, you don't necessarily know why that's the case. But you gain information about this in your own interviews. You observe when someone doesn't answer a question, and how hard they resist doing so. These "non-response" answers may not reveal the information we want directly, but they can help us reach new conclusions. For me, they were a different form of evidence that I could

piece together with other information in order to form a fuller picture of militias' decision-making. A final thing is this: through the interviews, I learned a lot about what war meant to people. Spending time with participants in the war helped me understand the personal significance of this period for their lives—what it meant for them to be part of a cause, to decide to bear arms, to fight, and to live through the violence. I couldn't have gotten the same gut-level understanding from reading about the war. It's different when you see somebody's eyes light up as they describe specific incidents, their daily routine, their friends and other people they knew in the militia.

***"Spending time with participants in the war helped me understand the personal significance of this period for their lives—what it meant for them to be part of a cause, to decide to bear arms, to fight, and to live through the violence."  
- Schulhofer-Wohl***

On re-traumatization, I'm interested in how the formal approach we take can sometimes miss the bigger picture. My university's Institutional Review Board required me to inform each respondent before beginning an interview that speaking about the war could traumatize them, and to provide information about resources that could help them deal with that. But the simple fact of saying this sometimes upset people. It wasn't because of what they were going to talk about. They were bothered by the very idea that somehow they might be traumatized by the interview. That didn't make sense to them.

So, might trying to avoid traumatizing people sometimes be problematic? Why? There's a

great book by Karl Marlantes, *What It Is Like to Go to War*. Marlantes, a Vietnam veteran, writes about the individual experience of violence and killing in war. And he explains that in order for combatants to deal with the trauma of war, they need to be able to place their actions and experiences within a larger picture of meaning, social meaning, about the events and their participation in them. In some of my interviews, I observed that the prospect of *not* talking about trauma could be traumatic. Allowing people to talk about their experiences can be a way for them to meaningfully interact with fellow human beings about the past.

I certainly won't claim that this is cathartic for everyone. But for some people it was important. And in the Lebanese political context, there was sometimes more of a bond between combatants across all sides, than between them and people who didn't participate. Combatants couldn't necessarily talk about their experiences, even with their own families. They were left with this part of their life being shut down.

### **Rana B. Khoury**

Thank you both so much for these rich answers. The idea that our research practices can sometimes have these pathological effects reminds me of when I was doing fieldwork and reassuring my interviewees about confidentiality and anonymity. I remember Syrian activists saying: "No. Write my name down. I *want* to have credit for what I have done." They exercised agency by participating in these in these important events, and again for telling others about it.

For the next question, I want to turn to Stacey, Kevin, and Anne. While Stacey and Anne both explain processes that unfolded over

multiple decades (the Yemeni and Palestinian conflicts, respectively), Kevin zooms in on that first year of the Syrian uprising. So, I wanted to ask: how did you all create the temporal boundaries of your chosen case study? How do you decide where to start and where to end, and what is gained from taking more long-run views versus short-run case studies?

### **Stacey Philbrick Yadav**

I would say that I was primarily guided by my interlocutors. I wasn't at all sure that I was going to write this book, or even that I would write what I found as a book, *per se*. I was trying to make sense of something puzzling. By 2019, deep into an internationalized civil war, people were still talking a lot about the National Dialogue Conference that occurred in 2013 and I couldn't understand why. I had an understanding of it as, at best, an ineffectual exercise. But I learned from interlocutors about the role of the NDC as both an instrument for advancing justice claims, but also an object of justice claims in its own right. By this, I mean that the Transitional Justice Committee (one of the working groups at the NDC) was politically paralyzed for months by when to "start the clock." It turns out this was an enormously divisive issue: when do we start taking seriously the abuses of the past, and which abuses were long enough ago that they don't matter anymore for the purposes of justice?

So, I became empirically interested in that struggle, but I also had to answer the question of when to start the clock in my own analysis. I chose 1990. It seemed like the unity regime, which brought together North and South Yemen, was a sensible starting point. Many people I spoke to also converged on 1990 as a significant date. There were some passing discussions of earlier grievances, such

as from the 1970s, but the 1990 unification emerged as a starting point for most conversations with interlocutors, so that's how I temporally frame the book.

## **Kevin Mazur**

I like how Stacey puts it. There are times that just matter more. In the Syrian case, my book took a different approach in focusing on the start of the war but through the local level of analysis. It would have been very time intensive to cover every subnational area for even a small period of time, so to some extent there were practical considerations for choosing a narrow time period. But there were also theoretical considerations that only appeared once I went into the project. We often go into the field trying to provide the effects of some independent variable, but that approach is not the one that gives us insight into the real dynamics of the events we are investigating.

When I started my research, I wanted to say something about ethnicity. I knew it somehow played a role in how the Syrian revolution began, but the literature didn't fully explain why. Because the terrain of conflict and ethnicity is so vast, I followed the canonical view in the literature that the dynamics of contention differ vastly based on timing—before the incumbent loses control of vast swathes of territory, versus during conflict when violence is widespread, the state has lost control over some areas. So, this made me limit my claims to just one period, the beginning of the revolution.

Of course, the pre-revolutionary time period and the different stages of the war that came after 2011 are indispensable to get a full picture of understand the conflict. Short-run analysis means I may spend less time on the longer view of historical events. But at

the same time, such active periods are heavily structured by the years and techniques of governance that precede them. For me, I don't think you can do any short-run work without also having a broader appreciation of how bigger historical forces, like political economy and networks, play out over time. This is why I devote an entire chapter in my book to understanding how localities were related to the national state in the decades before the Syrian uprising.

That all said, constructing a longer historical view can be very difficult when dealing with local histories. They are just hard to find in Syria, and probably many other cases in the region. If you wanted to do any robust work on local politics, you would need to trace out how these communities change over time. Quantitative data on this topic are hard to find because regimes like the Syrian one try to eliminate them. I would really like, for example, to be able to go back well before 2011, because I found very interesting data in the 2004 census. But when we look at the 1980 census, there's just not a lot there.

## **Anne Irfan**

I see this issue from a slightly different angle. My research was explicitly temporal. I was interested in how notions of time and space intersect in Palestinian refugee camps. The camps are often treated as being outside both time and space—they're seen as temporary structures, and in fact they are not even marked on many maps. When they do intersect with some kind of temporal or spatial marker, it's in a very narrow sense. For inst-



ance, the 1948 camps or 1967 camps. Or, we see Palestinian refugee camps tied to specific events that define a year, like the Shatila camp in Lebanon and the 1982 massacres. I wanted to depart from this, and so rejected taking a very micro approach that focused on any single year. My goal was to historicize the camps, to treat them as interconnected with longer historical processes. For that reason,

***"[Methods] are not just tools of analysis. They also tell you a great deal about the subject you're researching." - Irfan***

1948 was an obvious starting point. As for the ending point, I went up to 1982. That choice was informed by what I read and saw. There is a

lot of discourse connecting the camps to the Intifada that began in 1987 within Palestine, but I wanted to return to the backstory of what had previously been transpiring in these communities—not just in occupied Palestine, but across the region. The year 1982 felt like a logical endpoint, because the PLO was routed from Lebanon, which marks another big event that influenced the politics of the diaspora.

There is a final point that connects to our broader theme. In the Palestinian camps, we see a complicated situation in which there are multiple conflicts. We're not just talking about a single war, but instead many episodes of violence, and each leaves a powerful legacy. We can start with 1948, but there have been so many conflicts involving Palestine or Palestinians since then. This puts into question whether every "conflict" should be seen as a singular event, or rather as a series of events. The Palestinian camps are spaces where a structurally marginalized population becomes entangled, over and over again, in different conflicts in a chronic manner.

## Sean Yom

Thanks to you all for these thoughtful answers! As we keep wrestling with issues of time and context, let me offer a final question. It's about methods, keeping in mind that many readers of this roundtable are PhD students and other researchers who are just embarking on conflict research. What struck me about your five books is its broad, elegant range of different methodologies. For instance, Kevin and Jonah—you both mix qualitative and quantitative techniques, but on a remarkably different scale, since Kevin's work is a subnational analysis of Syria and Jonah's book takes a cross-national approach to civil war. Stacey, Ann, and Sarah's respective books utilize close-range approaches that leverage history or ethnography.

All of your books read brilliantly. You all need to accept that you are role models for a new generation of scholars entering your field! What advice can you give in terms of how to critically think about methodological choices?

## Stacey Philbrick Yadav

Let me first go back to the earlier question about the tradeoffs of every approach. A very important theme to me, and this intersects with Sarah's work, is the need to render accounts that are recognizable to our interlocutors. They don't have to agree with how we see conflict or interpret the past, but they have to be able to recognize the portrait we've put together. For me, this links to a much deeper issue, which is how to epistemologically broaden our approach to knowledge production—and what *counts* as knowledge production.

For my work, I was trying to keep up with

everything going on with the war in Yemen. But the overwhelming majority of material about the war is actually produced outside of the academy. There's just not much peer-reviewed academic scholarship on the contemporary conflict in Yemen. There are some manuscripts I've read that analyze the period before the current conflict, or try to deductively impose an explanatory model on current conflict dynamics. But, what has helped me understand the most are papers and reports written by Yemeni civil society organizations, think tanks, and other sources that are not as state-centric. As academics, we tend to disregard this kind of work, but that that means we may also be marginalizing Yemeni knowledge producers. I saw this especially when doing participatory action research with Yemeni and international peacebuilding organizations. Talking with my Yemeni research collaborators brought me to the idea that knowledge production is an essential form of narration and sense-making. It's a space where Yemeni researchers

***"Local knowledge needs to be read and engaged critically, not marginalized by the academy." - Yadav*** are expanding their agency by writing about the conflict, and they see themselves as doing justice work by surfacing topics, groups, or kind of impact that we might otherwise not see reflected in the "literature on Yemen."

So, I think my advice is that all this material counts. Local knowledge needs to be read and engaged critically, not marginalized by the academy.

## Anne Irfan

Firstly, I would absolutely echo what Stacey just said. It's valuable advice in general, but

I think particularly comes into play when we work in fragmented landscapes within conflict settings. Taking an epistemologically broad attitude is valuable.

Another piece of advice I'd give is to be reflective about your methods. They are not just tools of analysis. They also tell you a great deal about the subject you're researching. For instance, accessing archives relevant to Palestinian refugees as a researcher can involve its own politics—and that tells us a lot about power, knowledge production, voice, positionality, representation. These are all things that manifest through the dynamics of data preservation in the history of Palestinian refugee camps. And, all these issues map directly onto the content of refugee lives themselves. I know there are already discussions about this, but the problem is they often end with only a tokenizing nod to amplifying silenced voices.

But, there's potential to go much deeper than this. We need to have conversations about what political actors choose to preserve, and how the researcher's own interests feed into their approaches. To give one minor example, my archival research ranged from going to a huge United Nations archive in New York to entering a room in a Palestinian refugee camp that a local man had set up in an *ad hoc* fashion. The differences between how outsiders may see the validity of such data from these two very different places tells us a lot about how the academy operates. And remember that even UNRWA does not have a main archivist at its primary archival site, which perhaps signals something else about the politics of preserving the past.

## Sarah Parkinson

I want to tie into something Jonah mentioned earlier, and also amplify something Stacey mentioned about producing accounts that are recognizable. Jonah talked about grasping the sheer importance of certain episodes and memories in people's lives. What I remembered about my interviews and ethnographic work in Lebanon was how *nostalgic* some people have become for wartime, not because of the violence but because it brought people together through work and crisis. That remembrance also came with its own brand of remembrance—the jokes that former com-

***"If you have to ride a tank up to the front lines of war, you don't really understand war." - Parkinson***

batants remember from basic training, the songs they sang, the quips about the Lebanese military, and all this other

colorful material that does not come through in the standard 600-page historical study of the Lebanese civil war.

So given that, what I want to impart the most is the importance of being creative when you are immersed within, and researching, a local population. It means "de-sensationalizing" what we commonly imagine as conflict. Conflict is usually framed with certain images in mind, like young male combatants and constant violence. It's what I call the "dudes with guns" syndrome. But all of our work goes much deeper than this, and if we limit ourselves to just studying certain aspects of conflict then we're committing data truncation. If you have to ride a tank up to the front lines of war, you don't really understand war.

Fortunately, we have some creative, fascinating works coming out now—I'm thinking of Omar Sirri's ethnography of checkpoints in

Iraq, and plenty of others that are creative in how they rethink space and people. And this speaks to an ethnographic sensibility (which is Ellen Pader's term that Erica Simmons and Nicholas Rush Smith have built upon). It means reflecting on people's experiences of conflict, how they might intersect, and also gaining different perspectives as a researcher. If we're working in a country where many researchers are present, based in different centers and institutions, we need to seriously think about how our interactions with people are more than replicating a bunch of interviews or surveys. We need to consider moments of participant observation that capture new experiences.

## Kevin Mazur

I want to make a couple observations. First is an immediate observation about the value of fieldwork. I think my experiences match those of the others here, in that I wanted to engage with people on the ground on their own terms. That's something that Ph.D. students in the discipline are often not trained to do. They see interviews as a critical "make-or-break" moment, and when they don't go well, some try to fill the gap with other data or studies that rely on secondary literature. But this can be unproductive, and it relates back to the bigger point earlier. We should try to learn about a particular event or process, even if does not necessarily slot into what academic trends dictate—because sometimes it is simply important to do it.

I also want to touch on what quantitative work does and what goes behind it. Let me first say that my book does not present any multivariable regression tables. They are relegated to an appendix, and the main text features only descriptive statistics. The true value of quantitative analysis was allowing me

to look at statistical patterns and ask: “Why are these trends happening in this-or-that city

***“We should try to learn about a particular event or process, even if it does not necessarily slot into what academic trends dictate—because sometimes it is simply important to do it.” - Mazur***

at a certain time, and why do they then disappear?” That forced me to realize I needed to ask people about these events, and also read more literature to fully understand it. So, the quantitative

part guided where I would focus my attention in conducting qualitative research.

### **Jonah Schulhofer-Wohl**

There’s a common approach here. In our books, we try to be clear about our research questions, and how our methods speak to them. I tried to do this in my book. Each part plays a distinct role in helping build an answer to the research question, and does so using different methods. We can take research on conflict further when we understand the limitations of our methods, the specific advantages of them, and make sure that, in light of both, the methods we’ve selected fit the question we’re trying to answer.

But there’s a key element beyond methods: discovery. What real-world puzzle does our research tackle? And can the information gathered—whether through ethnographic methods, archival research, interviews, or creating datasets for statistical analysis—truly inform us about what we’re interested in explaining? We should think more about how our projects help us learn about the world, as human beings, and not treat methods as a goal in and of themselves. What has a project helped us figure out? Why do we think we

learned something from it? Or why do we think we didn’t learn something from it? Asking these questions can help us move our research forward.

### **Stacey Philbrick Yadav**

I also want to suggest that generalizability isn’t the only goal of social science. I know that can be a hard point to sell with graduate students, and I understand why professional incentives align in the direction of generalizable claims. But validity is also important, and being able to explain something new is, itself, a worthwhile enterprise. In relation to what Jonah has just said: it’s possible that a researcher wants to explain something very novel and important regarding an issue or population that nobody has engaged before—to address a “silence” in the literature, in other words. We should encourage that as well.

### **Sean Yom**

Thank you for these insightful interventions. To draw these threads together, all of you emphasize how the research process is both human and humanizing. That’s a critical admission when dealing with potentially traumatic topics, and when entering field sites that may be marred by profound sensitivities. Perhaps we would all advocate to the next generation of scholars that they should never forget that humanity, even as we remain pressured by the usual strategic incentives and professional demands of political science. At the very least, we also need to insert more of our reflexivity into our conversations. And that’s a very satisfying takeaway from this discussion. ♦



# MENA POLITICS

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## MISSION STATEMENT

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

MENA Politics is the official newsletter of the APSA-MENA section. It is a biannual publication devoted to publishing new research findings, hosting productive debates, and highlighting noteworthy developments among the scholarly community. It is managed by the chief editors with the joint confidence of the editorial board and the APSA-MENA section.

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