The picture was provided by Deen Sharp, a Visiting Fellow at the London School of Economics and co-pi for Lebanon Unsettled project. Performative map of October 2019 Uprisings in Lebanon, produced by students at Lebanon Unsettled project workshop at USEK in July 2022.

Letter From the Editors

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Greetings from the editors of *MENA Politics*, the newsletter of the APSA Section on Middle East and North African Politics. This fall 2024 issue is our last one. For the next three years, this venerable publication will reside in the hands of three extraordinary peers—Diana Greenwald, Sebnem Gumuscu, and Samer Shehata. We are fortunate, as well, that our exceptional editorial assistant, Sussan Saikali-Wehbe, will stay on board to continue help producing the newsletter under the new leadership. We leave with complete satisfaction, having fulfilled our goals when we assumed this sectional duty in 2022: highlight the latest theoretical and empirical scholarship by Middle East political scientists, elevate the overall visibility of the *MENA Politics* section, and provide space for reflexive debates over contemporary issues that move too quickly for traditional journals but captivate our minds and hearts now.

It is this last objective that bears heavily upon us. It is difficult to remain focused on our traditional research and teaching duties as the latest war in Palestine has raged on for the past year, and now threatening to escalate into a regional conflagration that will wreak even more havoc upon communities and populations that will bear the cost of their leaders' choices. Nonetheless, we must continue, and in that regard, we proudly present the contents of this final newsletter issue of ours.

This issue opens with a remarkable essay by Rabab El Mahdi, which problematizes the framing of "regional" or "local" perspectives within Middle East political science. Over the past two decades, critical scholarly voices from the West have called for privileging the research and viewpoints of MENA academics based within, and belonging to, the region. Such local and regional perspectives are often presented as more authentic or indigenous. But, in reality, as she dissects by using the Arab Spring as an example, this binary—however well-intentioned—ignores lived realities. Local and regional scholars often reproduce the most uncritical Western intellectual tendencies, as in the post-Arab Spring literatures on democratization and contentious politics, which speaks more to the hegemonic sway of Anglophone disciplinary conventions than anything else. And in terms of positionality, some are as equally disconnected from the priorities of their own communities as Western scholars are from the broader region itself. The end result: MENA-based political scientists are treated more as token faces than equal participants. Her incisive reflections compel us to reconsider what is meant by prevailing Western calls for including more research agendas and scholarly

communities from over "there."

Our two symposia provide insights no less penchant. For our first symposium, we asked our colleagues who study gender politics in the MENA region to answer the following question: "How does examining democratic backsliding through a gender lens contribute to our understanding of its dynamics?" Their contributions show how the repression and strategic manipulation of women's rights reflect broader democratic declines and have broader implications for understanding democratic erosion and authoritarian entrenchment in the MENA region. With twelve contributors—yes, we wanted to end our editorial term with a slam—the symposium offers meaningful theoretical frameworks, robust methodological tools, and solid empirical data.

The second symposium reflects on university students' Gaza Solidarity Encampments of spring 2024 and situates them within broader historical and contemporary student protests. The contributions cover students' collective actions in the United States, Germany, Lebanon, and Israel. They show how students' actions create powerful spaces for resistance and critical inquiry. Despite pushbacks, their collective actions have energized efforts—within and outside academia— to resist repression, defend academic freedom, and challenge oppressive structures. The long-term effects of these actions continue to unfold.

Finally, the issue closes with a fascinating book review roundtable, which brings together three political scientists (Paola Rietti, Eric Lob, and Norma Claire Moruzzi) who review *How Islam Rules in Iran* by Mehran Kamrava (Cambridge University Press, 2024). The book provides a comprehensive analysis of how Islam has evolved in the post-revolutionary Iran as a framework of ruling. Following our format in our previous book review roundtables, we gave the author an opportunity to respond to the reviews. This is a timely book published at a critical time during which Iran elected a new president, Masoud Pezeshkian, while experiencing an escalating conflict with Israel. We hope our readers find the reviews and the author's response useful in shedding light on today's Iranian regime and the state-society relations.

As this is our last issue, we wish to thank the entire section (and the many thousands of readers beyond it!) for their support over these past few years. We are extremely excited to see the upcoming issues under the stewardship of the new editorial team. Please send them your suggestions and proposals for content accordingly: Diana Greenwald (dgreenwald@ccny.cuny.edu), Sebnem Gumuscu (sgumuscu@middlebury.edu), and Samer Shehata (shehata@ou.edu).

- Nermin Allam, Gamze Çavdar, and Sean Yom

Nermin Allam, Gamze Çavdar, Sean Yom, and Sussan Saikali-Wehbe at APSA 2024 in Philadelphia

Editorial Board Updates

We extend our thanks to four departing members of the Newsletter Editorial Board: Noora Lori, Daniel Tavana, Diana Greenwald, and Sebnem Gumuscu. Diana and Sebnem are ascending to become part of the new editorial team, and they—alongside Noora and Daniel—have provided tireless advice, support, and work in shaping the last few issues. We thank them for their service to the section and profession!

We are likewise thrilled to introduce four new Editorial Board members:

Sharan Grewal is an assistant professor of government at American University and a nonresident senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. He was previously assistant professor at William & Mary and a research fellow at Harvard's Middle East Initiative. His first book, *Soldiers of Democracy? Military Legacies and the Arab Spring* (Oxford University Press, 2023), explores the conditions under which militaries support or thwart democratization, and won the APSA MENA Best Book Award and the Robert Jervis Best International Security Book Award. Sharan's work has also been published in the *American Political Science Review* and the *American Journal of Political Science*, among other journals. He received a PhD in Politics from Princeton University in 2018.

Selin Bengi Gümrükçü is a Postdoctoral Associate at the Department of Political Science, Rutgers University. She received her PhD from University of Zurich in 2014 with a dissertation titled "Reconstructing a Cycle of Protest: Protest and Politics in Turkey, 1971-1985". She worked as a postdoc at the Center for European Studies (2020-2022) and a visiting scholar at the Department of Political Science (2018-2020) at Rutgers University, as Assistant Professor (2015-2016) at Izmir University, and as research assistant at Izmir University of Economics (2007-2014). During and after her PhD, she held visiting positions at Bielefeld University, Sciences Po Paris, University of Paris 8, and the European University Institute.

Her research and teaching fields of interest include social movements, political parties and democratization and authoritarianism, and far-right and political violence, and as of late, interplay of populism with protests and transnational dynamics of political parties. She has recently submitted her manuscript "Echoes of Protest: Protest and Politics in Turkey in the 1970s" to be published by Routledge. Her publications appeared in peer-reviewed journals such as *Terrorism and Political Violence, Turkish Studies, Southeast European* and *Black Sea Studies, Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, and in edited volumes.

Editorial Board Updates, continued

Amanda Rizkallah is an Associate Professor of International Studies at Pepperdine University. She holds a Ph.D. in Political Science from UCLA and was a pre-doctoral research fellow in the Middle East Initiative at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government. With a focus on the Middle East, her research examines the political legacies of war, identity politics and political party development in weak states, and the role of civil society in post-war contexts. Her research has been funded by the Belfer Center, the Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation, the Project on Middle East Political Science, and the Department of Education's Foreign Language and Area Studies fellowship program.

Rola El-Husseini Dean is an associate professor with the department of Political Science at Lund University (Sweden) where she has been working since September 2017. She received her PhD from the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris (France) and was a postdoctoral fellow at Yale University (USA) before holding several positions at American universities including Texas A&M University, CUNY Graduate Center, and George Washington University. Her areas of expertise include Middle Eastern politics, civil wars in MENA, political Islam (especially Shi'ism), and gender and politics. Her first book *Pax Syriana: Elite Politics in Post-war Lebanon* was published by Syracuse University Press in 2012. She is currently finalizing a book manuscript on women and politics in eight countries since the Arab Uprisings.

AMERICAN POLITICAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATION
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Letter from the Section Chair

If you were able to attend APSA 2024 in Philadelphia, then you know that we had a fabulous program, organized by conference co-chairs Allison Hartnett and Shamiran Mako. Our section events included 14 panels and roundtables, a poster session, and a very well-attended reception co-sponsored with the Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) and the APSA MENA Workshops Program. Thanks especially to Marc Lynch, Dana El-Issa, and Andrew Stinson.

Our colleagues at the APSA MENA Workshop Program are engaged in supporting political science research and networking among early-career scholars from across the MENA region. In the past year, that has included a very successful quantitative methods workshop in Doha, Qatar, in December 2023, and an equally successful qualitative methods training program in Tangier, Morocco, in May 2024. Please make sure to visit https://web.apsanet.org/mena/about-the-project/ for information on the many future opportunities available.

If you've attended APSA in recent years, then you will have noticed that our section panels tend to generate high attendance in small rooms. I have been, and will continue to be, in touch with APSA about giving us conference spaces that recognize and accommodate our high levels of participation. APSA, in short, needs to catch up with how large and active our section has become.

The next APSA meeting will be in Vancouver, Canada, during September 11-14, 2025. Our conference co-chairs are Janine Clark and Nermin Allam. Look for the call for papers later in this academic year, and mark down those dates to join us in Vancouver if you're able to do so. As always, we have concerns about visas, especially for our many members from the MENA region; it is a good idea to get visa applications in as early as possible.

I want to thank especially our outgoing executive committee members, Yael Zeira (Vice Chair) and Allison Hartnett (Member at-Large) for their years of service to our section. I will continue on for one more year, along with Zahra Babar (Treasurer) and Lama Mourad (Member at-Large). On behalf of the section, we welcome two incoming officers: Sarah El-Kazaz (Vice Chair) and Nermin Allam (Member at-Large).

Our annual award winners—for best book, article, dissertation, and APSA conference paper—are noted elsewhere in this newsletter. But I do want to reiterate here the section's hearty congratulations to all awardees, as well as all twelve of our awards committee members. Going through all the submitted materials requires a great deal of work and dedication. So thank you to all the following colleagues for their selfless efforts.

Our Challenges Have Gone From Bad to Worse

This has been a particularly harrowing year for all us. When I wrote a short note as incoming chair last year, I had no idea that the entire year would be dominated by the Israel-Hamas war starting in October 2023. Now, the situation is even worse, with staggering civilian death tolls and fears of broadening regional war.

News from the APSA MENA Section

Letter from the Section Chair, continued

For these reasons, I made a plea at the section chairs meeting at the recent APSA annual conference in Philadelphia. I explained to the assembled chairs, section leaders, and APSA officials that our section is undergoing stresses that few other sections faced—including profound levels of mental and emotional stress, as well as professional vulnerability and threats. I told them that our members are the leading experts on their respective campuses on all things Middle East, but often find themselves in positions where simply standing up, speaking out, or signing a petition risks the loss of a scholarship, interview, job offer, or an entire professional career. I maintained that this was untenable and unacceptable. I made clear that our members need more support, and that they need it now.

I do not know what will come of this, but I demanded that as a flagship political science association, APSA step up and at minimum publicly make a statement defending academic freedom in these intense and trying times. I will continue to push this, and will keep you updated on what, if anything, follows. With that in mind, and regarding other issues ranging from future APSA meetings to APSA MENA Workshops or other opportunities, please follow us on Bluesky through @apsamena.bsky.social and on APSA Connect (via APSAnet) for more sectional messages and updates.

In the meantime, colleagues and friends, I wish you good health and a good academic year, despite the horrors unfolding in the region we all love. We have almost 500 members in our section and, as you know, we are a very mutually-supportive group. So please: let us lean on each other, support one other, and do what we can on our campuses, communities, and our chosen professional field despite the many difficulties facing us. We can, at least, face them together.

Curtis Ryan
MENA Politics Section Chair

News from the APSA MENA Section

New Section Officers

The section gives tremendous thanks to two outgoing officers for their tremendous service—Yael Zeira, Vice-Chair, and Allison Spencer Hartnett, At-Large Officer! Our new incoming officers are:

Sarah El-Kazaz, Vice-Chair

Sarah El-Kazaz is Associate Professor in the politics department at SOAS, University of London and author of *Politics in the Crevices: Urban Design and the Making of Property Markets in Cairo and Istanbul* (Duke University Press, 2023). Her research interests include: critical political economy, urbanism, infrastructure and digital politics, and her new book project investigates the politics of digital infrastructures by following "Cloud" technologies across the Global South. Her work appears in peer-reviewed journals, including *Comparative Studies in Society* and *History and City and Society*. She previously taught at Oberlin College, and completed a PhD at Princeton University.

Nermin Allam, At-Large Officer

Nermin Allam is Associate Professor of Political Science at Rutgers University-Newark. She is a 2024-2025 Visiting Fellow at Kellogg Institute for International Studies, University of Notre Dame and a Nonresident Fellow, Middle East Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Her research focuses on gender politics and social movements in the Middle East and North Africa. Allam serves on the boards of the Arab Political Science Network and the Women of Color in Comparative Politics Network. Allam's work has appeared in *Mobilization, Politics & Gender*, *PS: Political Science & Politics*, and *Middle East Law and Governance* among other journals. She is the author of *Women and the Egyptian Revolution: Engagement and Activism during the 2011 Arab Uprisings* (Cambridge University Press, 2018). Prior to joining Rutgers, Allam held a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada postdoctoral fellowship at Princeton University.

News from the APSA MENA Section

Section Awards, 2023-24

Award for Best Book

Committee: David Patel (chair), Steven Brooke, and Kristin Fabbe
Winner: Sharan Grewal, *Soldiers of Democracy? Military Legacies and the Arab Spring* (Oxford University Press, 2023).

Militaries play key roles during democratic transitions and consolidation. In *Soldiers of Democracy? Military Legacies and the Arab Spring*, Sharan Grewal argues that how a military was treated under authoritarianism shapes how it will behave during transitions, including whether it will support inchoate democracy, a coup d'etat (as occurred in Egypt in 2013), or a power grab by new rulers (as in Tunisia recently). Grewal deftly combines original survey and interview with current and former military personnel in Egypt and Tunisia to show how these legacies of the past influenced the interests of individual soldiers and military institutions during transitions. *Soldiers of Democracy* contributes not just to our understanding of how and why nascent democracies broke down, but also to the varied implications of coup-proofing strategies and institutional legacies. The book is a model for how scholars can use the Arab Spring to both develop theory and empirically assess its broader generalizability.

Award for Best Article

Committee: Mohamed Saleh (chair), Tugba Bozcaga, and Ammar Shamaileh
Winner: Daniel Arnon, Richard McAlexander, and Michael A. Rubin, "Social Cohesion and Community Displacement in Armed Conflict," *International Security* 47, 3 (2023): 52-94.

In their outstanding article, "Social Cohesion and Community Displacement in Armed Conflict," Daniel Arnon, Richard McAlexander, and Michael A. Rubin argue that during episodes of armed conflict, communities with strong social cohesion as measured by high levels of trust and shared resources are more likely to preemptively evacuate to protect their respective community from violence compared to those communities without strong social cohesion, thereby shining new light on the variations in civilian agency during displacement processes. The article explores the case study of forced displacement of Palestinians during the 1948 war, using previously embargoed "Village Files," surveys of Arab Palestinian communities conducted in the early 1940s by the Haganah. The article reveals a positive correlation between social cohesion and preemptive evacuation, in addition to providing new empirical insights into the 1948 conflict and its aftermath. Members of the Awards Committee were impressed by the careful identification of concepts and attention to historical data, and also applaud the authors for publicly sharing the translated Village Files for other researchers to study.

News from the APSA MENA Section

Award for Best Paper Presented at APSA
Committee: Asli Cansunar (chair), Nadya El Hajj, and Nicola Pratt
Winner: Elizabeth K. Parker-Magyar, "Workplace Networks and Civil Society in Autocracies: Evidence from Jordan"

This excellent paper analyzes how workplace networks can improve civil society organizational capacity in authoritarian regimes. Examining the case of state workers in Jordan, and drawing on a wide range of sources and methods including interviews, surveys, and a comparison of activism across different public sectors, the author weaves together an impressive array of empirical material to convincingly support her theory. The paper is novel in its argument and builds on an impressive body of field work. Moreover, it contributes substantially to our understanding of how workplace grievances can be translated into collective action in pursuit of political aims, as well as politics in Jordan.

Honorable Mention: Rana B. Khoury, "Surviving International Aid: Local Organizations in Wartime Syria"

This paper provides a novel approach to study local organization in wartime, using the Syrian local organizations during the Syrian civil war as a case study. The paper contributes to the literature on the political economy of organizations, offering a rich examination of the tension between the goals and objectives of international funders and local organizations in Syria and how this influenced dynamics on the ground. It builds novel data on Syrian organizations, tracing their growth trends and cooperation over time. The paper contributes significantly to our understanding of the relationship between international and local humanitarian actors in civil wars.

News from the APSA MENA Section

Award for Best Dissertation

Committee: Shamiran Mako (chair), Daniel Tavana, and Michelle Weitzel

Co-Winner: Hessa Alnuami, "The Legitimation of the Arab Gulf States through British Colonial Racialisation of Arabs and South Asians," University of St. Andrews

This dissertation examines how British colonial rule produced racial constructions of Gulf Arab indigeneity and exclusionary national identities, affecting the treatment of migrant laborers across the Gulf. The research includes extensive archival work as well as the examination of text-books and novels in Arabic and English, to show how racial and social hierarchies in the Arab Gulf were constructed and validated through interaction with British colonial rule.

Co-Winner: Alice Baroni, "Imperfect Struggles: Jewish-Israeli Activists for Palestinian Rights and the Paradoxes of Solidarity from a Position of Power," Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies (Geneva)

This dissertation examines the dilemmas faced by Jewish-Israeli activists advocating for Palestinian rights. It involves extensive ethnographic field work and a political and sociological mapping of these activist struggles within an overall Zionist discourse in Israel. The work draws on feminist and decolonial theory as well as Gramscian theories of hegemony to develop a framework about "imperfect struggles," exploring how activists manage to navigate resistance to the policies of their own state.

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.

In May 2024, APSA held a qualitative methods workshop for early-career scholars from the MENA region in Tangier, Morocco. The three-day training, titled "Qualitative Methods for the Social Sciences: Causal Analysis," was held in partnership with the Tangier American Legation Museum (TALIM) and the Moroccan Institute for Policy Analysis (MIPA). The workshop convened 22 participants from Morocco and other MENA countries, providing intermediate-level training on applying methods of qualitative analysis in social science research. Led by Drs. Jason Brownlee (University of Texas at Austin), Matt Buehler (University of Tennessee), and Zaynab El Bernoussi (NYU-Abu Dhabi), the program aimed to enhance participants' foundational knowledge and skills in qualitative research methods and provide training on specific tools of causal analysis used in high-quality qualitative research.

The workshop marked the second methods training offered under APSA's MENA Program, following the launch of the MENA Methods Program Initiative in 2023. The Inaugural Program on Quantitative Methods was held at the Doha Institute of Graduate Studies in December 2023 in collaboration with the Arab Political Science Network (APSN).

In collaboration 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, APSA supported seven scholars from Algeria, Egypt, Qatar, and Iraq in attending the 2024 summer programs at these institutes. The call for applications for 2025 IQMR & ICPSR programs is now open for MENA scholars interested in methodology training in the US next summer.

The MENA Program continues to provide virtual mentoring and professional development support for graduate students and early-career scholars. Earlier this summer, six graduate students were paired with advanced-career scholars for one-on-one mentorship on their research projects through the MENA Mentorship Initiative. A call for applications for the winter MENA Mentoring cycle will be announced later this fall.

At the 2024 APSA Annual Meeting in Philadelphia in September, the MENA Program supported seven early-career Arab scholars to participate in a Research Development Group (RDG) focused on political behavior in the MENA region. The cohort, comprising six PhD candidates and one Master's student from Egypt, Iraq, Palestine, and Tunisia, are alumni of the 2023 APSA MENA Workshop. Led by Drs. Nermin Allam (Rutgers University) and Mazen Hassan (Cairo University), the

News from the APSA MENA Program (continued)

full-day seminar provided critical feedback on in-progress research projects, including PhD dissertations, proposals, and article-length manuscripts. The 2024 MENA RDG served as a scholarly follow-up for fellows who made significant progress on their projects nine months after the initial workshop in Cairo.

Looking ahead, this December APSA will hold its 11th Research Development Workshop in the region in partnership with the Center for the Gulf and Arabian Peninsula Studies at Kuwait University. This one-week in-person workshop, led by Drs. Hamad Al-bloshi (Kuwait University), Sarah Almutairi (Kuwait University), Lisa Blaydes (Stanford University), and Daniel L. Tavana (Penn State University), will examine the theme of identity politics in the MENA region and support early-career scholars in refining their manuscripts and positioning their research within broader academic debates.

APSA's MENA Program is now accepting proposals from political scientists interested in serving as co-leaders for the 2025 MENA Workshop program. The 6-day in-person research development workshop will be held in the MENA region during summer 2025.

Anyone interested in learning more about the MENA Program should visit the project website at http://web.apsanet.org/mena/ or e-mail menaworkshop@apsanet.org.

APSA MENA Project Team
American Political Science Association

News from the Arab Political Science Network

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

Greetings to all!

A year has passed without an end to the egregious and horrific war engulfing not only Palestine but also Lebanon, with broader implications beyond the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The Arab Political Science Network (APSN) remains committed to supporting, as much as we can, everyone within our communities—students, educators, researchers, and scholars—who are directly and indirectly affected by the ongoing daily assaults. Nothing we could say would fully capture the horrendous and tragic attacks. Nonetheless, we believe in and support academic freedoms in the region and beyond, while unequivocally condemning all dehumanizing language, bigotry, and silencing.

Despite the continued challenging time, APSN organized a series of successful online seminars on the Politics of Infrastructure in MENA in collaboration with CEDEJ. An Arabic-subtitled playlist with the research presentations is available for all interested. The project ended with an in-person workshop at the American University in Cairo on July 1-2, 2024, that brought together over 20 researchers to present and share experiences.

During July and August, APSN organized 6 online Introduction to R Trainings as part of our collaboration with Arabi Facts Hub to provide digital research methods and tools for academics and non-academics. The trainings will continue later in the fall with workshops on GIS, Text and Network Analysis, and Cyber Ethnography.

APSN's annual event at APSA Annual Meeting was a success, with over 30 attendees at our roundtable entitled, "Studying Political Behavior in the Middle East and North Africa: Like, Share, or Scroll Past?" The speakers engaged primarily with the efficacy and relevance of studying political behavior in the MENA region. They delved into the multi-faceted factors that shape political behavior in the region, including regime types, state formations, political currents, and societal and gender norms.

We also organized the first part of our annual research development workshop, which took place over Zoom with 14 graduate students from Arab countries. This year, the theme concerned (changing) regional foreign and security policies. The second part will take place in-person at the end of this coming November, and will be combined with our annual Teaching Workshop, which will focus on teaching war in the MENA. It will engage faculty members who are currently teaching undergraduate or graduate courses on war and/or its consequences from different disciplines. If you have any questions about any of our workshops or opportunities, please write to workshops@arabpsn.org.

News from the Arab Political Science Network
(continued)

Finally, we invite you to visit our YouTube Channel for our latest playlists featuring previous webinars and research methods videos. Additionally, you might be interested in checking recent episodes and book reviews from our partners *Ghayn* podcast and *Al-Salon*. Both provide non-fiction and academic conversations and reviews in Arabic.

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

Best to all!

Ahmed Morsy (on behalf of the APSN team)

Special Bulletin: Call for Papers

Siyasat Arabiya and *Middle East Law & Governance*

Siyasat Arabiya and *Middle East Law & Governance (MELG)* are pleased to announce a call for papers for dual special issues on quantitative methods in the political science of the Arab region. Over the course of two decades, there has been a dramatic rise in quantitative studies published in leading English-language political science journals. While journals published in the region have largely bucked this trend, there is reason to believe that there is a burgeoning interest in quantitative methods among scholars from the region. Of course, change is often costly, and the rise of quantitative research in the political science of the Arab region is no exception. The overarching aim of this special issue is to take stock of the contributions of quantitative research to our understanding of the politics of the region, highlight cutting-edge techniques being utilized by researchers, discuss the limitations of quantitative methods, and chart future avenues for development. The call is open to articles that utilize quantitative methods to further our understanding of the politics of the Arab region, review developments in quantitative methods, explore pedagogy in quantitative methods, present a recent advance in quantitative methods that scholars of the Arab region will find valuable, or critique quantitative methods as practiced by contemporary political scientists. Moreover, articles may explore any branch of quantitative empirical methods, as well as formal theory.

Interested scholars should send an email that includes the subject heading "Quantitative Methods in Political Science" and an abstract of no more than 250 words to Dr. Ammar Shamaileh ([ammar.shamaileh@dohainstitute.](mailto:ammar.shamaileh@dohainstitute.edu.qa) edu.qa) or *Siyasat Arabiya* ([siyasat.arabia@ dohainstitute.org](mailto:siyasat.arabia@dohainstitute.org)) by October 27, 2024. The submitted abstract should also include a paper title, and the names, affiliations and email addresses of all authors. The authors of selected abstracts will be notified by December 17, 2024. They will be required to submit their full papers for peer review by June 22, 2025.

All articles will undergo rigorous peer review, and only papers that successfully navigate the peer review process will be published. Articles chosen for publication that were submitted in Arabic will be published by *Siyasat Arabiya* and those submitted in English will be published by MELG. Upon agreement with both the journals and the authors of accepted manuscripts, some articles appearing in either *Siyasat Arabiya* or MELG will be translated and published in the other journal. Further details regarding the paper submission process will be provided to authors upon the acceptance of their abstracts. Inquiries regarding the special issue should be directed to Dr. Ammar Shamaileh via email at [ammar. shamaileh@dohainstitute.edu.qa](mailto:ammar.shamaileh@dohainstitute.edu.qa).

The Perils of "Regional Perspective"

Rabab El Mahdi

Rabab El Mahdi is an associate professor of political science at The American University in Cairo (AUC). She specializes in comparative political economy and contentious politics with a focus on Latin America and the Middle East. E-mail: relmahdi@aucegypt.edu.

This essay builds on an earlier article, in which I argued that the study of contentious politics in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has been constricted by research agendas and theoretical paradigms drawn primarily from the Global North (El Mahdi 2024). Prior to 2011, our discipline's research agenda focused on different manifestations of elite-led politics, such as democratic transitions, regime change, and political Islam, at the expense of attuning to other forms of informal and mass political phenomenon which transpired into the uprisings that swept the MENA. Once the uprisings known as the Arab Spring unfolded, most of the new literature tried to straitjacket the biggest and most unprecedented cycles of contention into pre-existing categories and typologies, such as frameworks of democratic regime transitions or social movements theory. Rather than taking the opportunity to understand these unravelling events, innovative and dynamic as they were, most scholars were quick to jump to conclusions, establish casualties, and to encase regional countries into a contentious politics literature predominantly informed by experiences of the global-North (see also Kurzman 2012a). I concluded that, as such, our discipline continues to forgo opportunities to contribute to a broader understanding of significant political phenomena in our region, as much as it misses the chance to open new theoretical frontiers.

Building off this argument, this essay underscores two related elements. First, the disconnect between the dynamic politics of the region and how they are interrogated by political science reflects broader disciplinary shortcomings. Mainstream political science work has systematically marginalized reflexive and critical approaches within both Western (specifically Anglophone) and regional (e.g., Middle East-based) scholarship. Second, construing this schism—between the politics of the region and how they are (re)presented and analyzed in orthodox political science scholarship—as one between "local" or "regional" versus "Western" perspectives tends to underestimate the ability of empire to universalize knowledge. This, in turn, encourages unwanted essentialization and tokenism of MENA scholars, and separates local spheres of research from Western academic circles through unequal power dynamics. Thus, juxtaposing a regional perspective against a Western one, which is increasingly echoed in conversations within our profession, miscalculates the far-reaching diffusion and hegemony of Euro-American paradigms in academia and elsewhere.

Do Regional Perspectives Reflect Local Priorities?

Many Western political scientists have long critiqued Euro-American-centric approaches to studying the MENA (e.g. Anderson 2006; Mitchell 2004; Wedeen 2016). These critiques—coupled with the conception of regional scholarship as an alternative site(s) in which these Euro-American-centric visions could be denaturalized, decentered, and provincialized—gave impetus to the idea of the "regional perspective" as an antidote to the Western one.[1] Notwithstanding its homogenizing tendency, this idea rests mainly on two interrelated assumptions: (1) Enough scholars in the region have their "own" research agendas which are different from their peers in the West; and (2) Regional scholarship is more reflexive and reflective of "local" priorities than its Western counterpart.

In their thorough survey of MENA-related articles in English-language political science journals over two decades, Cammett and Kendall (2021) make the distinction between the research priorities of regional scholars versus those of their Western counterparts. They conclude that "what is published on the Middle East in the most-cited journals in the profession may not always reflect the priorities of scholars and of citizens in the region" (Cammett and Kendall 2021, 455). Rather, "the highest-growth topics may reflect in part the priorities of Western researchers and agencies" (Cammett and Kendall 2021, 454). They concede their conclusions need further research, but their distinctions echo that geographic schism between two separate perspectives—that of the Western approach versus the local or regional agenda, the latter being portrayed as more authentic and indig-

enous to the Middle East.

The problem is that while this distinction is necessary to delineate the unequal power and resources that different academic communities possess, it does not necessarily mean these sides have truly different research programs. For example, within the literature on contentious politics in the Middle East that emerged following the 2011-12 Arab uprisings, the diversity of perspectives does not neatly correspond with geographic location. Many refreshingly critical perspectives have been championed by Western scholars based far outside the region, and who are not native speakers of any regional language (e.g. Lust 2013; Chalcraft 2016; Kurzman 2012b; Brown 2016).

Conversely, some of the most uncritical applications of Western-centric scholarly theories—such as studies that explained the Arab Spring through theories of democratic transitions or models of social revolutions, or which framed "the youth" as a unitary actor driven from Mannheim's (1952) theory of generations—pervaded academic debates within and among political scientists within the Middle East, who in turn spread such approaches through their editorial columns, media programs, and other public engagements in their respective countries. The late Alfred Stepan felt justified upon his first visit to the region amidst the uprisings to pontificate to Tunisians and Egyptians about their chances for a democracy (2011). But similarly, many of these countries' own elite—including locally-based political scientists—did something similar, for their pontifications were equally disconnected from the vantage point of local publics and ordinary people (see further Abo El-Gheit 2011).

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1 This thinking builds off Edward Said (1978, 1997). See, for example, Szanton (2004) and Miyoshi and Harootunian (2002).

Why Not?

Contrasting the regional versus Western perspectives in political science as diametric opposites, akin to a "thesis-antithesis" framework, misses a number of problems. It underestimates the impact of the Western academy as a colonial project shaping knowledge and its subjects, and which commands immense power to decide which ideas are valuable and worthy of diffusion throughout the world. This is a system where "the unspoken politics of theory… supposedly speaking on behalf of some universal and objective standard" determines "which scholarship could be regarded as theory, and which relegated to more subjective and parochial forms of knowledge" (Goh 2011, 2). The life trajectory of many Middle East-based academics is bound by not just the bodies of knowledge that Western circles hold dear, but also Western-based institutions and norms: graduate training, publishing opportunities, journal rankings, professional conferences, grant-seeking, and even the tenure and promotion systems of their universities. Even if the "local" scholar is not directly tied to this system, they are still immersed in Western paradigms, literatures, and networks reflecting its presence. In this way, the regional perspectives in the MENA championed by some Western critics as being more authentic or real are embedded in the very epistemology of Euro-American knowledge that gave rise to that Western criticism in the first place.

Another problem is that Middle East-based scholarship hardly constitutes a monolith of knowledge, distinguished more by what it is "not" (e.g., Western) than what it is. In reality, the diversity and criticality of scholarly perspectives from our region hinges on many more factors: the questions being asked, the methodologies being used, and the position-

ality of scholars themselves, in which geographic location is only one of many constituent parts. Gender, class, political affiliations, and other factors influence and differentiate social science scholarship in the MENA.

Thus, it is fallacy to assume that regional scholars—by virtue of being physically present in "the field" and possessing a comparative linguistic advantage—will automatically pursue research agendas that more closely reflect the priorities of fellow citizens, or more accurately interpret problems on the ground. Some political scientists in the MENA would find it difficult to navigate spaces or capture the subtleties of subtexts outside of their respective capital cities or even certain neighborhoods due to their gender or class. Others would miss any subtext altogether because of the methodology they choose to employ.

In a wider sense, while individual research agendas across the Middle East are (like elsewhere) subject to varying systems of academic incentives, they can resemble the Western academy in not easily accounting for, or valuing, relevance to local publics. Common imperatives conveyed to regional scholars include thinking about "gaps in the literature," the inherent novelty of their argument or research finding, and the strategic value of a particular publication to one's career—but not whether, for instance, their research pursues puzzles that resonate with the communities in which they work. The lack of academic freedom, scarcer funding opportunities, and many other limitations also play a role in circumscribing local research programs.

The Disciplinary Prism

Rather than focusing on demarcating Middle East perspectives to integrate into Western political science, it might be more useful to

address the core limitations of the discipline itself. In 2011, the APSA report *Political Science in the 21st Century* concluded that the discipline had been "ill equipped to develop explanations for the social, political, and economic processes that lead to groups' marginalization," and that this "limits the extent to which political science is relevant to broader social and political discourse" (APSA 2011, 1). The taskforce offered two explanations for such limitation: its analytical categories and its principal methods for study. More recently, the editors of the *American Political Science Review* (APSR), one of the flagship journals of the discipline, further acknowledged "concerns voiced by… political scientists who ask questions that our discipline often ignores and scholars who adopt approaches, epistemologies, and methods that fall outside what traditionally has been considered mainstream" (*APSR* 2023, 4). Whether from the MENA region or derived from Western institutions, reflexive work of all kinds regardless of origin will continue to be marginalized as long as the methodological and theoretical parameters defining what constitutes "good" (e.g., rigorous, scientific, reproducible, robust) research persist.

In two decades, the uptick in MENA-related articles published in the leading Western political science journals reflected a growing concern with "core disciplinary debates and its methods" (Cammett and Kendall 2021, 454). Thus, the problem is not only including MENA-based voices into the disciplinary apparatus of political science, but rather disentangling what being *local* means—and on what terms are they included. Truly critical views, approaches, and research from our region cannot overcome, let alone counterbalance, disciplinary limitations no matter how ground-breaking they may seem to be. Rather, they are relegated to being "localized

perspectives" only to be further peripheralized.

Without addressing disciplinary shortcomings, Middle East political science will continue along its current trajectory. It will bifurcate between a mainstream "doing business as usual" approach that hopes to fit into the defined boundaries and parameters of existing scholarship, or it will be heralded as marginalized critical scholarship used as a token of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) when needed. In the latter, Western scholars will continue citing regional work whenever they simply need to supplement their own theorization. Scholars from the region will continue to be invited to panels, committees, and even joint-research, as a symbol of inclusion but without being able to change course. ◆

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Research Symposium: Gender & Democratic Backsliding

Nermin Allam

Democratic backsliding continues to be a *hot* topic in political science, especially in light of the global rise in authoritarian tendencies and democratic erosions. At the most basic level, democratic backsliding refers to incremental changes that undermines the foundations of democracy. David Waldner and Ellen Lust (2018) rightly distinguish between democratic backsliding within democratic regimes and autocratic ones. In democratic regimes, democratic backsliding marks "a decline in the quality of democracy;" in autocratic regimes, "it is a decline in democratic qualities of governance"(Waldner and Lust 2018, 95).

In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, where regimes either radically or gradually weaken such democratic elements, scholars have extensively analyzed how autocracies suppress democratic reforms, mitigate their impacts, or entirely dismantle democratic advancements. However, gender remains a critical yet underexplored lens in the scholarship. A gender lens helps us better identify, measure, and assess the process of democratic backsliding. To help us understand democratic backsliding from a gender lens, we turned to our colleagues who study gender politics in the MENA region. We asked them to answer the following question: "How does examining democratic backsliding through a gender lens contribute to our understanding of its dynamics?"

Besides the academic impetus for dedicating a symposium to the topic, we also had personal impetus. As we, the outgoing editors of the newsletter, gathered to brainstorm ideas

for our final issue and stared at each other's Zoom boxes, it hit us: we have an editorial team with two scholars of gender politics, yet we have not produced a symposium on the topic. It does not reflect well on our *legacy*.

Do the academic and personal motivations for dedicating this symposium suggest that I am, perhaps ironically, engaging in *signaling*? I hope I am not. I hope I am not influenced by or staying true to *Mama Suzan*, the former first lady of Egypt who, like her counterparts in many MENA countries, championed gender equality policies in service of the regime's signaling agenda. This passing thought, however, further deepened my commitment to approaching the topic with humility, a serious acknowledgment of its complexity, and a renewed dedication to carefully unpack its intertwined dynamics. Collectively and individually, our contributors did just that.

Collectively, the contributions unpack the relationship between gender politics and democratic backsliding. They (a) explore how both the repression and superficial expansion of women's rights signal the erosion of democratic institutions, and (b) demonstrate how studying both has broader implications for understanding democratic erosion and authoritarian entrenchment in the MENA region.

The contributions emphasize that the repression of women's rights—and the rollback of gender reforms—serves as an early indicator of democratic backsliding, a reflection of the deeper structural issues within governance

and civil liberties, and a measure of the trajectory of authoritarian entrenchment.

Aili Mari Tripp shows how the decline in women's parliamentary representation in Algeria signifies a broader democratic stagnation within the political system. Yuree Noh further explores this theme across different cases in the MENA region, she demonstrates how authoritarian incumbents in Turkey, Algeria, and Iraq systematically undermine women's rights to gain conservative support while simultaneously eroding democratic norms and institutions. In Jordan, Marwa Shalaby illustrates that election manipulation signals the onset of both democratic and gender backsliding. Although gender quota mechanisms can alleviate some negative outcomes, the instability and manipulation of the electoral landscape, she holds, severely restrict women's access to power. This pattern of erosion extends to the overall state apparatus, as Rita Stephan demonstrates: the hollowing of state institutions leads to a corresponding decline in women's rights and other civic liberties. In Iran, Mona Tajali further elaborates on the connection between gender oppression and the broader health of governance by showing how intensified policing of women's bodies and restrictions on feminist activism signify deeper authoritarian entrenchment. The regime's violent crackdowns on movements like "Woman, Life, Freedom" illustrate how authoritarian regimes leverage gender repression as a tool to consolidate their power.

While a decline in women's rights clearly signals democratic backsliding, a less intuitive but equally telling indicator is when the expansion of women's rights is used by regimes to erode democratic institutions and consolidate autocratic rule. In such cases, state-led gender reforms may thus mark the onset

of a silent, obscured process of "autocratic genderwashing" (Bjarnegård and Zetterberg 2022), democratic containment, and/or democratic erosion. Regimes in the MENA region often manipulate women's rights and gender reforms to legitimize anti-democratic, right-wing movements, suppress political opposition, distract from human rights violations, and justify punitive governance.

For example, Madawi Al-Rasheed demonstrates in her contribution on Saudi Arabia that women's rights are not advanced for genuine equality or political reform in the kingdom but are manipulated as tools of statecraft to divide opposition and reinforce the monarchy's control. Crown Prince Mohamed Bin Salman has instrumentalized gender reforms to create a facade of progress through expanding women's rights while intensifying crackdowns on independent feminist voices. In Egypt, al-Sisi's selective reforms, such as addressing sexual-based violence while avoiding changes to personal status laws, illustrate how gender reforms are used to reinforce his regime's carceral logic and security narrative. Personal status laws remain unchanged because they uphold traditional power structures that the regime relies on for support. Meanwhile, the regime's approach to sexual-based violence reforms aligns with increased surveillance, policing, and punitive measures rather than genuine social or political reforms.

Beyond state-led manipulation, Hind Ahmed Zaki highlights how feminists themselves can sometimes become entangled in this process. In Tunisia, she demonstrates that feminist legal campaigns, while achieving notable gains for women's rights, unintentionally reconfigured state sovereignty. By appealing to the state's punitive and interventionist policies during moments of political upheaval, femi-

nist movements contributed to consolidating state authority. It allowed the regime to maintain control and provide impunity to police forces in the aftermath of Tunisia's democratic transition.

So, given that regimes manipulate women's rights, is it acceptable for political actors to ignore women's issues while pushing for or protecting democratic reforms, norms, and institutions? Absolutely not—no, please no. I get triggering flashbacks remembering when audiences selectively latch onto specific aspects of what is otherwise a larger, nuanced argument about gender politics, using them to support the fallacy of 'let's put women's rights on the back burner.' While a decline in women's rights is a clear indicator of democratic backsliding, the manipulative expansion of these rights by authoritarian regimes represents a nuanced indicator of deteriorating democratic institutions. Analyzing the complex relationship between gender and democratic erosion enables us to explain, measure, and infer broader trends and patterns of democratic decline. Such an analysis sharpens our methodological tools, refines our analytical lens, and qualifies our empirical findings in the following meaningful ways.

First, examining democratic backsliding through a gender lens demonstrates the ways in which democratic backsliding is intertwined with various structural forces, such as class dynamics, social inequalities, and international militarism. In her introductory piece for the symposium, Valentine M. Moghadam emphasizes the importance of integrating a gender lens with class analysis to trace how these structural forces collectively drive democratic backsliding. Together they contribute to an environment where hegemonic masculinity and pervasive chauvinism not only

prevail in the socio-political sphere but also serve as fundamental factors undermining democratic principles in domestic and international politics.

Second, in measuring democratic backsliding, Gamze Çavdar proposes a reconceptualization of democracy that places gender equality at its core. She advocates for the use of comparative and/or small-N studies to examine multiple indicators of democratic backsliding, including socio-economic changes, the repression of women's organizations, and shifts in gender discourses. This approach offers several methodological advantages: it effectively measures variations in the degrees of democratic backsliding both within and across countries, illuminates not only patterns but also the mechanisms underlying democratic backsliding, and centers the human experiences and stories of those resisting such decline.

Third, a gender lens helps us qualify our findings and analyses. It highlights variations in the strategies used by autocratic regimes to stifle democratic reforms, mitigate their effects, or entirely dismantle democratic advancements. The authors in this symposium identify techniques ranging from electoral manipulation (see Marwa Shalaby; Alexandra Domike Blackman in this symposium) and political repression (see Madawi al-Rasheed; Mona Tajali; Summer Forester; Rita Stephan in this symposium) to state cooptation (see Yuree Noh; Hind Ahmed Zaki in this symposium) and deliberate openings and closures (see Aili Mari Tripp; Carolyn Barnett in this symposium) in response to domestic and international political currents. Applying a gender lens to democratic backsliding also uncovers how different institutions and issues are targeted differently by authoritarian regimes. In her analysis of Jordan, Summer

Forester highlights that family laws and independent feminist spaces—but not the state-sponsored Jordanian National Commission of Women (JNCW)—were particularly vulnerable to democratic erosion given their relationship with antidemocratic developments.

Finally, studying democratic backsliding through a gender lens helps us qualify and evaluate democratic reforms on the ground. Rather than uncritically approaching gender advancements as indicators of democratic reforms, researchers should (a) investigate how these reforms are negotiated and (b) trace their broader impacts. A critical analysis of gender reforms and their outcomes allows researchers to assess whether these changes are genuine or superficial, and consequently identify the broader democratic—or autocratic—impulses at play. If reforms are strictly top-down and divorced from civil society, they may not lead to meaningful democratic shifts, and they may signal a risk of democratic backsliding. For example, Carolyn Barnett argues that advances in women's rights in Morocco are used by the regime to "backslide forward." She contends that the top-down approach adopted by the regime in reforming the Mudawana may paradoxically reinforce the misconception that popular support for gender equality is weak, positions the regime as the "savior" of women, and undermines officials' willingness to enforce laws—as it implies that the advancements clash with societal norms. Relatedly, if reforms do not lead to broader democratic shifts, they may also signal democratic backsliding. For example, Alexandra Domike Blackman demonstrates that, in Tunisia, while women may achieve prominent roles in anti-democratic movements, their overall political representation often declines. Rather than narrowly focusing on a single aspect of women's political representation, tracing their broader impacts offers a more accurate assessment of the health of democratic institutions.

We believe this symposium raises and answers important questions for studying gender politics and democratic backsliding. The short and accessible format of the entries is meant to provide researchers with a concise set of meaningful theoretical frameworks, robust methodological tools, and solid empirical data.

And just like that, as the outgoing co-editor of the APSA MENA newsletter, I feel we have done justice to our legacy! ◆

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On a Gender Lens and Democratic Backsliding

Valentine M. Moghadam

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How does a gender lens help us understand or explain democratic backsliding? It does so in several ways, but not exclusively. Class also plays a significant role, as it intertwines with gender revealing the structural forces behind both democratic backsliding and the rise of right-wing populism. In this regard, I offer four points for reflection.

First, we have come to understand gender as a social relationship of inequality (historically between women and men, but now understood to include a broader spectrum of gender identities) that influences access to economic and political power. Historically, political power has been dominated by men, who distribute political and economic resources among loyalists in the broad male population. This has been the case in democracies as well, at least until relatively recently in modern history, when first-wave feminist movements fought for women's suffrage and later for parliamentary quotas to increase women's political representation. Such quotas had earlier been established in Bolshevik Russia and later spread across Communist states.

Second, the social relations of gender have always been mediated by class. It is rare to find working-class representatives in positions of power, especially since the onset of the neo-liberal model of capitalism in the late 20th century and the weakening of trade unions. In the USA in particular, the pursuit of political office relies on raising vast amounts of money, much of which comes from donors within the capitalist class. It is no accident that more such funding goes to male candidates than to female candidates, which is why the U.S. has considerably less women's parliamentary representation than elsewhere, whether compared to its peers in the Global North or many countries in the Global South. As of July 2024, the US is ranked 72 for women's parliamentary representation by the Interparliamentary Union, below Vietnam, Cuba, and Armenia and most Western democracies.

Third, we have come to expect that gender matters in domestic and international politics. Feminist scholarship has analyzed the ways in which certain forms of "hegemonic masculinity" are implicated in authoritarianism and militarism, especially in the absence of robust women's political representation. Yet, despite increases in women's political power, recent years have seen a rise in right-wing populism, authoritarian politics, and increases in military spending–all occurring in what were supposed to be strong democracies. US democracy has always been flawed, but its decades-long reliance on high military

spending and vast arms sales to "partners and allies" contribute to a fraught international environment and heightened democratic backsliding. In the Global South, India is a case in point, with its turn toward Hindu chauvinism.

Israel's democracy has long been backsliding due to various governments' inability or unwillingness to play a more constructive and peaceful regional role or to adequately integrate its Arab (Christian and Muslim) citizenry. In the past, Israeli feminists embarked on a very promising National Action Plan for implementation of the UN's Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security, but had to abandon the project (Moghadam 2023). The Jewish chauvinism of the Netanyahu regime has accelerated democratic backsliding. In Turkey, a central aspect of democratic backsliding has been the instrumentalization of women's rights to mobilize conservative women in support of the ruling party's increasingly authoritarian and patriarchal agenda (Arat 2022). Religious/ethnic/national chauvinism and militarism are gendered phenomena, reflective of egregious hyper-masculinity and destructive of the promises of democracy and equality, not to mention regional and world peace.

Fourth, it appears that the women in positions of political power neither prevent nor stop democratic backsliding, and some contribute to it as leaders of right-wing populist parties (Moghadam and Kaftan 2019; The Economist 2023). Outside of the Middle East, Argentina, Nicaragua, and Ethiopia have very high percentages of women's parliamentary representation, yet they all have experienced democratic backsliding–and in Ethiopia's case, a tragic civil conflict. Argentina's new president is almost belligerent in his embrace of neoliberal capitalism, which will doubtless-ly come at the expense of low-income women and men.

What appears to matter is not so much the numbers or percentages of women in political power, but their capacity to mobilize support–in political society as well as in civil society–for a robust social democracy. Where we might find such mobilizations is a key question for research. ◆

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Canary in the Coal Mine: Gender Equality in Democratic Backsliding

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Scholarly attention on democratic backsliding has exploded over the last two decades (Bermeo 2016; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). Some scholars have argued that democratic backsliding is taking place at least in some countries while others have claimed that the global democracy average has declined over the last decade (Mechkova and Lührmann 2017). No scholarly consensus exists around the definition of democratic backsliding, its indicators, explanations, or measurements. The term could refer to various processes in different regime types, including democracies, hybrid regimes and autocracies (Waldner and Lust 2018; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019).

A significant characteristic of this general body of literature on democratic backsliding is its complete lack of attention to gender. And yet, both democratization and democratic backsliding are highly gendered processes: Decades of research have shown that the democratization process is male-dominated and—without intervention—will sideline women's rights and interests (Waylen 1994). Similarly, during democratic backsliding, women's rights tend to become *the canary in the coal mine*—one of the first things to be undermined by autocrats signaling an

early warning (Chenoweth and Marks 2022). Therefore, for Political Science, a discipline that claims to be concerned with the questions of who gets what, when and how, the disregard of gendered aspects of democratic backsliding is utterly mind-blowing.

The goal of this short essay is to argue that gender as an analytical tool goes into the heart of democratic backsliding and studying the process from a gender lens will significantly enhance our understanding.

There are at least two reasons behind this argument. Firstly, applying a gender lens is significant for establishing the conceptual relationship between democratic backsliding and gender. This shift requires reconceptualizing the process in a way that shifts our understanding of democracy from an exclusive focus on the electoral process and its institutions as the main domains of democracy, such as those concerning participation, competition and civil rights and liberties, to the question of equality and social justice. This is a much-needed conceptual shift that has previously been addressed by scholars (Fraser 2020). This means that we understand democracy not only as a system we observe and measure, but also as one we imagine and build. However, most standard measures of

democracy continue to focus primarily on elections, often treating gender as either completely irrelevant or merely as a component of civil rights and liberties necessary for "free, fair and competitive elections".

Secondly, applying a gender lens is also significant for demonstrating the magnitude and complexity of political processes that take place at a given time. An extension of the *transitology* paradigm, democratic backsliding locates regimes on a continuum between full authoritarianism on the one side and consolidated democracies, on the other. This understanding, among others, reduces multiple processes to a single, aggregate variable used to calculate the democracy score. The problem is not only that a lot is "lost in translation" in the name of producing this parsimonious and seemingly objective democracy score, but also it requires ignoring many other dynamics that are taking place simultaneously, at a slower pace, and at times in opposite directions (Ahmed and Cappocia 2014; Çavdar and Yaşar 2014). These narrow analyses also require that "our analytical focus should be directed at those corporate actors (parties and other political organizations, the military, religious establishments) that actually fight the fights over institutional reforms, rather than the social classes or groups that are sometimes cast as directly driving regime change" (Ahmed and Cappocia 2014, 8). Non-quantifiable indicators, such as women's movements that resist authoritarianism (Moghadam 2020), political history, institutional legacies, traditions, critical junctures, are inevitably ignored in such analyses.

Therefore, an 'add women and stir' approach, which keeps the current conceptualizing of democracy centered around elections and maybe add a new gender variable to the aggregate democracy score, is not the way to go.

It may be interesting to see the global trends of a single variable—like the reelection rates for incumbent parties—but, such an analysis would add little to no insight to our understanding of the process of democratic backsliding even with the new gender variable. Furthermore, the general score will remain not applicable to individual cases.

Instead, scholars should focus on the question of how to reconceptualize democracy in a fundamentally different way and identify new indicators of democratic backsliding that places gender equality at the center of the analysis through comparative or small-N studies. Scholars should also consider a time series analysis to test the hypothesis as to whether gender equality can be treated as *the canary in the coal mine* for democratic backsliding—whether it is the girl in the blue bra in Egypt (Allam 2018), the constitutional overhaul in Israel (Elad-Strenger 2024), or the cancellation of Istanbul Convention in Turkey (Çavdar 2024). In doing so, multiple indicators should be considered including—but not limited to—*if, when, how, why*, as well as *the degree* of changes concerning women's socio-economic status, discourses against gender equality, criticism of and repression towards women's organizations, the mockery of feminism, religious/nationalist references of idealized women and family, and the erosion of universal references for gender equality. ◆

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The Role of Women's Rights in Authoritarian Entrenchment and Democratic Backsliding

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In recent years, both democratic and authoritarian incumbents have increasingly instrumentalized women's rights to consolidate their power. Applying a gender lens provides critical insights into how both co-optation and suppression of women's rights contribute to authoritarian entrenchment *and* democratic erosion in various global contexts, including in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

Authoritarian regimes frequently utilize women's rights reforms as a strategic tool to obscure their undemocratic practices. Under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Saudi Arabia exemplifies this approach by implementing high-profile reforms such as lifting the ban on women driving and easing male guardianship requirements. These measures have portrayed Saudi Arabia as a reform-oriented nation to the international community. However, this image of progress masks a troubling reality, as Saudi women continue to face systemic discrimination and restrictions (Al-Rasheed 2021; Allam 2024). Activists advocating for more substantive reforms have faced harassment, arrest, and detention. By leveraging its publicized initiatives and reforms, the Saudi government has managed to preserve its authoritarian control and deflect attention away from its ongoing human rights abuses.

Similarly, in Algeria, gender-based reforms were initially celebrated as a sign of democratic progress, with electoral gender quotas receiving praise from prominent international actors. However, after President Bouteflika was removed from power, these quotas were significantly rolled back, reducing women's representation in parliament from 26% to just 8% in 2021 (Marwane 2021). This reversal underscores how gender reforms in non-democratic contexts can be vulnerable to rollback, revealing the superficial nature of such reforms when they are not supported by broader democratic values and widespread public backing (Noh 2024; Noh, Grewal, and Kilavuz 2024).

In, more or less, democratic contexts, leaders have also manipulated women's rights policies to strengthen their rule while eroding democratic norms. Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Hungary's Viktor Orbán, and Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro have all adopted policies that undermine women's rights to galvanize conservative support (e.g., Çavdar 2024). These leaders have restricted reproductive rights and framed their actions as defending traditional family values, all while simultaneously

attacking feminist movements and reducing support for gender equality initiatives (Çavdar and Yaşar 2019). This suppression of women's rights has consistently been accompanied by broader democratic backsliding, such as threatening judicial independence, curbing press freedom, and suppressing dissent.

In Iraq, recent developments further illustrate how the manipulation of women's rights can reflect broader authoritarian tendencies and democratic erosion. Despite significant gains in women's activism and political representation, particularly during the 2019-2020 Tashreen protests and the 2021 federal elections, recent political maneuvers have threatened these advances. Conservative Islamist groups have resisted reforms and sought to decentralize the personal status law, likely legalizing child marriage and eroding women's rights—all while intensifying sectarian identity (Alshamary 2024). This politicization of women's rights, framed as a rejection of foreign or anti-Islamic values, highlights how gender reforms can be exploited to consolidate power and resist democratic changes in Iraq.

The examples provided underscore the importance of (i) understanding the instrumentalization of women and (ii) applying a gender lens to examine authoritarian consolidation and democratic backsliding. By examining how authoritarian regimes exploit gender reforms to project a superficial image of progress while simultaneously undermining democratic institutions and norms, we gain deeper insight into how autocrats maintain their dominance. In more democratic contexts, the suppression of women's rights can serve as an early warning of broader democratic decline, signaling deeper structural issues in governance and civil liberties.◆

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Women Confronting Algerian Politics: *Plus ça change*

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Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose (the more things change, the more they stay the same) captures the moment Algeria finds itself in. Many had hoped for fundamental change after the massive and peaceful Hirak movement that rocked the country from 2019 to 2021. The Hirak resulted in the ouster of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, whose rule was plagued by corruption and ineptitude, in no small part because he was ineffective as a leader, unable to speak due to a stroke in 2013. This moment was marked by democratic hopes and aspirations; however, it was soon followed by a period of democratic stagnation, as women's political representation declined in the aftermath of the movement.

Little has changed as the country has continued under the leadership of Abdelmajid Tebboune, who has ruled the country since 2019 and has tried to distance himself from Bouteflika's policies, which included his adoption of a gender quota. In September 2024, Tebboune won 84.3% of the vote in an election with a 46.1% turnout (AP News 2019). Fraud has plagued elections, and electoral processes are opaque. The government suppresses street protests and the media, while the military continues to exert undue influence over society. A tightly-knit circle of elite in the military and the dominant party National Liberation Front (FLN) govern the country. However, the setbacks were considerable for women in politics, even though the new 2020 constitution promised to work to promote women's political rights by "increasing their chances of access to representation in elected assemblies." The 2020 constitution even added a new provision to "protect women from all forms of violence" (Constitute Project 2020).

Extensive literature has examined the consequences of adopting gender quotas, however, there has not been much reflection on why quotas are dropped or weakened, as was the case in Algeria, where in 2012, women held 31.6% of the parliamentary seats, the highest in the Arab world (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2012). Women's representation dropped to 8% after changes in the electoral laws in 2021 (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2012). The country then moved to a proportional representation system with a gender parity requirement. This new open-list system allowed voters to select individual candidates rather than a closed list drawn up by the party. In a society where — according to

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the most recent Arab Barometer's VII wave — 76.4% of the population believe that men make better political leaders than women. The drop in women's representation was thus pre-ordained (Arab Barometer 2024). Most importantly, Article 317 of the new 2021 election law does not sanction parties for failing to meet the parity requirement on their list. Effectively, it undermined the structural support for women in politics.

Several countries like France, Italy, Egypt, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Poland adopted quotas and then like Algeria, withdrew or weakened them for a variety of reasons. However, most countries reintroduced them in another form later on. Many of the other countries in Central and East Europe had soft gender quotas prior to the decline in communism in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Some of these countries adopted formal quotas later.

Even with the quota, Algerian women remained reluctant to run for office and found it difficult to influence parliamentary or intra-party debates. They were often perceived by the public as inexperienced or unqualified and were sometimes referred to in derogatory ways as "the coiffeur [hairdresser] parliament" (Marwane 2021). There remains a large task ahead of educating the public and of providing women legislators with the tools to combat such perceptions.

While there are political setbacks, women have continued to make gains in other sectors in Algeria. The World Economic Forum noted that Algeria is one of the economies that has seen some of the largest increases in women's economic empowerment in recent years, particularly in technical and professional roles. Although, female employment rates overall are still low, women have also made gains as entrepreneurs and as traders.

Over 66.4% of university students are women, many in the STEM fields (Ghanem 2022). Algeria has the highest proportion of women engineering graduates in the world, comprising 48.5% of all graduates (Ghanem 2022). Thus, while there may be a backlash in the political arena, women are making gains in other sectors, pointing to the unevenness of women's rights in authoritarian contexts.

The decline in the percentage of women in Algeria's parliament reflects the democratic stagnation in Algeria's political order. It is driven by changes in electoral laws, inadequate enforcement of gender parity, shifts in the voting system, and enduring patriarchal attitudes. Addressing this issue requires robust legal reforms to ensure genuine enforcement of gender parity and societal efforts to challenge and change the cultural norms that hinder women's political participation. It also requires a vibrant civil society and women's movement that could press for reforms to promote women's political inclusion. As long as the regime has a stranglehold on popular participation, it will be difficult to bring about change. ◆

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Backsliding Forward? Morocco's New Mudawana Reforms

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Over the past year, Moroccans have watched as state officials have, at the king's behest, discussed and proposed potential revisions to the country's *Mudawanat al-Usra*, or Family Code, often referred to simply as the Mudawana. You may be forgiven for having déjà vu: two decades ago, Morocco was in the news for the same thing.

The 2004 Mudawana reform was a watershed for women's rights in Morocco. While the reform was pushed through by King Mohammed VI just a few years after he ascended the throne, it represented the culmination of more than a decade of mobilization by civil society activists who demanded change. That reform substantially improved women's autonomy and legal standing across several domains, but it also had numerous flaws, which women's rights advocates have been mobilizing to address ever since. These flaws include loopholes undermining the minimum age of marriage (nominally set at 18), challenges limiting divorced women's right to alimony, support, and custody, and the lack of reform to the country's inheritance laws. The new proposed reform tackles several of these issues. At the same time, the first Mudawana reform was contested by Islamist opposition movements, and critics of the reform allege it opened the door to a crisis of divorce and declining family values in Morocco.

Hanane Darhour (2020) has argued that Morocco's gender quotas for political office have helped legitimize the "de-democratization" of Moroccan political space underway over the past decade. The new Mudawana reform operates similarly. On the one hand, the proposed reforms would represent important gains for women. On the other hand, they will no doubt attract positive international attention to the Moroccan regime for its progressiveness, even as broader political liberties and spaces for democratic contestation in Morocco have continued to decline in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the victory of palace-linked parties in the 2021 elections. A recent wave of research on women's rights in authoritarian regimes has shown that steps to advance women's rights and political representation often help regimes appease both critics and allies while improving their image among foreign publics (see e.g. Bush et al. 2024, Bjarnegård and Zetterberg 2022, Terman and Byun 2022). Revising the Mudawana now may also be one way the regime seeks to demonstrate its dominance over the Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD) after the party lost most of its parliamentary seats in 2021. Such a strategy, Tripp (2019) argues, underlined the 2004 reforms, which the regime used to demonstrate

its power over Islamist opposition groups.

Beyond legitimizing de-democratization, this dynamic of reform in Morocco may have another unintended consequence. Elsewhere (Barnett 2023), I argue that Morocco's earlier reforms demonstrate one way that the politics of women's rights may exacerbate conservative lag, or the tendency for people to think that society remains more conservative than it is. I argue that the increased salience of vocal conservative minorities during periods of contested women's rights reforms can feed into conservative lag as the virulent opposition of a few may garner disproportionate attention. In the case of Morocco, the regime positioning itself as the "savior" of women may also have reinforced perceptions that only an autocratic hand can advance gender equality in the face of an intractably conservative public. I further argue that such perceptions have consequences: for example, a narrative that laws are out of sync with social norms may undermine officials' willingness to enforce the laws on the books.

With the new Mudawana reforms, the advance of women's rights in Morocco may once again paradoxically reinforce perceptions that support for gender equality is weaker than it is. For example, both former PJD prime ministers have made headlines in recent months decrying the potential reforms, with Abdelilah Benkirane even threatening to mobilize a new million-person march (Rahhou 2024).

Even as the new Mudawana reforms would be step forward for women on paper, they are also a step back in two broad senses: (1) reaffirming the power and centrality of the monarchy to politics in Morocco in general and to women's rights specifically; and (2) recentering public discourse around the conserva

tive opposition against which these reforms advance—potentially undermining prospects for the law's implementation. ◆

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Gendering the Study of State Authority in the MENA Region: The Case of Tunisia

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In the context of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) where authoritarian regimes remain the norm, the question of the relationship between democratic backsliding and gender equality is far from straightforward. Important scholarly work by feminist political scientists who work on the MENA region has demonstrated the various ways in which gender relations, at large, were politicized—whether as part of broader nationalist projects of state modernization (Charrad 2000; Brand 1998) or as part of autocratic regimes' bid to seek domestic legitimacy, weaken their Islamic opponents, and increase their international legitimacy (Tripp 2019; Bush 2011). Yet, and as most of the literature shows, democracy and gender equality do not necessarily always go hand in hand. On one hand, dictators wishing to appear democratic often adopt cosmetic gender-equality measures. Such top-down policies can be utilized by active women's rights movements to push states to adopt more rights, as Tripp (2019) shows using cases from the Maghreb. On the other hand, internal political contestation between incumbent authoritarian regimes and their opponents during democratic transitions can surprisingly result in the opening of political spaces for organized action on women's rights. This happened in the case of Tunisia during the political transition between 2011 and 2017, where an active women's rights movement successfully managed to recast pre-transition legacies of state feminism in two feminist campaigns (Charrad and Zarrugh 2013). The campaigns culminated in a constitutional gender parity clause in the 2014 constitution, and a comprehensive legal code to combat all forms of violence against women in 2017.

But beyond outcome-based empirical research, how could employing a gender lens help us understand democratic backsliding in the MENA region? In my opinion, rather than focusing solely on gender outcomes, it may be more useful to theoretically rethink state power and sovereignty in gendered terms. This requires careful process tracing through a historical analysis of the often-overlooked ways in which contestations around gender contribute to the reconfiguration of state domestic sovereignty and authority, which in turn leads to democratic backsliding or the persistence of authoritarianism. Such analysis necessitates investigating how debates around gender relations reinforce the state's domestic power whereby authoritarian regimes use the agenda of women's rights to consolidate their rule.

Tunisia represents a good case to explore these dynamics. On the one hand, Tunisia is the only state that emerged as a functioning democracy following the Arab Spring, up until President Kais Said's constitutional coup of 2021, making it a good case to empirically investigate how and why democratic backsliding happens in general. Furthermore, state-sponsored feminism continued to play a major political role in the period following the revolution as women's rights were seen as the pinnacle of the state's modernization project. Feminist scholarly literature on Tunisia have demonstrated the various contradictions inherent in top-down state-sponsored feminist projects, including but not limited to, their effects on women's rights movements, and on ordinary women alike (Marzouki 1993; Brand 1998). The centrality of Tunisia's 1956 Personal Status Code (PSC) in the legal and constitutional history of post-colonial Tunisia points to the close links between women's rights and the legitimacy of the political regime. These links made it much easier for women's rights activists to exploit the historical legacy of state feminism when they sought more rights following the 2011 Jasmine Revolution.

But state-sponsored feminism in Tunisia had a much darker side. Over the long durée, state-sponsored feminism became implicated in producing local notions and practices of state sovereignty. Despite the success of the two above mentioned feminist campaigns in 2014 and 2017 and the movement's popular demands for security reforms and accountability, feminist claims contributed to the strengthening of the state's executive power. In post-revolutionary Tunisia, feminist legal campaigns for rights achieved substantial legal gains for women. However, they also, unintentionally, reconfigured state sovereignty by perpetuating the Tunisian state's prerog-ative powers over its citizens through appealing to the logic of a protective, punitive, and interventionist state. Feminist activists sought to reconcile two competing goals: reforming the police state and curbing its power—through popular demands for justice against individual security and police officers—and protecting women—which required more state and police intervention. While such a law-centered approach to gender justice enabled feminists to achieve significant formal gains for women, it also resulted in them playing a central, albeit unintended, role in reconsolidating state authority and granting impunity to police and security agents following the democratic transition.

Analyzing state domestic sovereignty through a feminist lens helps us explain democratic backsliding in new inductive ways. On one hand, it shows how gender relations and women's rights can become a central focus for states trying to strengthen their control and legitimacy after major political changes, like the Arab uprisings. On the other hand, by appealing to the state's punitive and interventionist policies, feminists could inadvertently contribute to making gender issues a means for the state to consolidate its power and stability during times of political upheaval. ◆

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Democratic Backsliding in Tunisia

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Using the case of Tunisia, I look at a single aspect of democratic backsliding: its relationship with women's political representation. At the level of political leadership, the Tunisia case highlights that women can play prominent and symbolically important roles in anti-democratic movements and in episodes of democratic backsliding. But when we turn to female representation more broadly, the Tunisia case shows how declines in female representation can presage democratic backsliding and how democratic backsliding can further undermine women's political representation.

On July 25, 2021, Tunisia's president, Kais Saied, invoked the emergency clause of the constitution, suspending the parliament and dismissing the country's prime minister, Hichem Mechichi. In late September 2021, two months after his power grab, Saied appointed Najla Bouden as the prime minister, Tunisia's first female prime minister (AlJazeera 2021). Some viewed this as an attempt to "pinkwash" Saied's power grab, using a female leader to counter the perceptions of the move as authoritarian (Ben-Shitrit et al. 2021a, Ben-Shitrit et al. 2021b). This aligns with existing research demonstrating that autocracies adopt pro-women policies or increase women's political representation in order to increase international and domestic legitimacy (Tripp 2019, Bjarnegård and Zetterberg 2022).

Despite female representation at one of the highest levels of Tunisian politics following Saied's power grab, there is evidence from the country of a negative association between democratic backsliding and women's representation. Figure 1 shows Tunisia's V-Dem score and female representation from 2000 until 2023. Focusing on the period from 2019 to 2023, two patterns warrant further exploration: (1) a decline in women's political representation foreshadowed Saied's *autogolpe* and (2) women's political representation continued to decline after the autocratic power grab. These patterns suggest a relationship between democratic backsliding and reduced opportunities for women's political participation that merits further investigation.

During the 2011 elections for the National Constituent Assembly held in the aftermath of the popular revolution that brought down Tunisia's Ben Ali regime, women won 59 seats out of 217, thanks to a vertical parity requirement stipulated in the country's new electoral law (The Carter Center 2011, Cherif 2014). The number of female deputies elected increased during the 2014 parliamentary elections when women won 68 out of 217 seats (The Carter Center 2014, Clark et al. 2024).
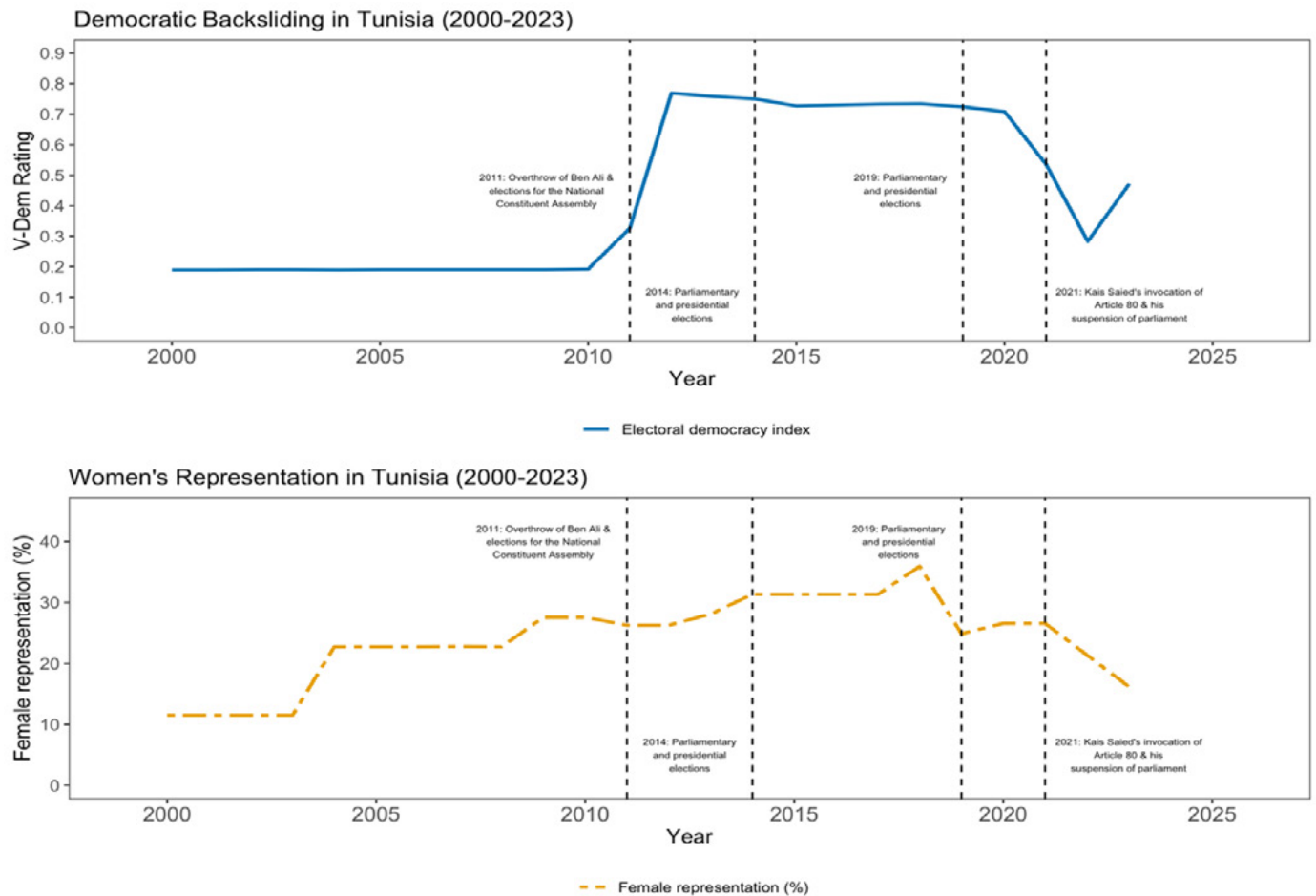
Figure 1: Democratic Backsliding and women's representation in Tunisia, 2000-2023

During the 2019 elections, however, women's political representation decreased significantly, with women winning only 49 of the 217 seats (The Carter Center 2019). This decline in women's political representation was in part the result of growing alienation from the country's main political parties, a trend that contributed to Saied's power grab in 2021. In 2014, only four parties had more than 10 representatives in parliament, while in 2019, seven parties had more than 10 representatives and the major parties were in decline (IPU 2024). This alienation from the main political parties meant that fewer candidates from any one electoral list in a particular constituency won a seat, and, since women were rarely the heads of the electoral list, this fractionalization had a particularly adverse effect on women's representation.[1]

Following the 2021 autogolpe, President Saied pushed through a new constitution and new electoral laws, stipulating a majoritarian electoral system rather than proportional representation. The first elections held under this new system in December 2022 and January 2023 witnessed a further decline in female political representation. The percentage of female MPs dropped from 22.6 percent in 2019 to 16.2 percent in 2023 (IPU 2024). This underlines how strategies aimed at executive aggrandizement – common in cases of democratic backsliding – can contribute to a decline in women's political representation. Moreover, cases of democratic backsliding like Tunisia also include a substantial crackdown on civil society, including women's organizations, which often mobilize for female

1 If we calculate political representation fractionalization (the probability that two randomly drawn MPs from the elected parliament belong to two different parties), it is roughly .73 in 2014 and .87 in 2019. This reinforces the idea that the parliament is more fractionalized in 2019. The relationship between weak party institutionalization and low female representation is discussed in Wylie (2018) and Belschner (2022).

political candidates during elections.

The Tunisian case highlights the complex relationship between democratic backsliding and female representation. While women may attain prominent roles in anti-democratic movements and episodes of democratic backsliding, broader female representation often suffers. The case of women's representation and democratic backsliding in Tunisia demonstrates that the erosion of one often leads to the decline of the other. ◆

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Electoral Manipulation and Women's Rights in Autocracies

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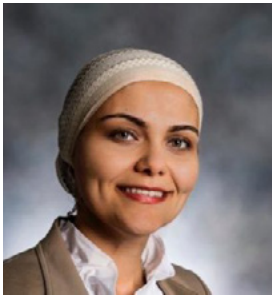
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Recent work has brought to light the alarming rise of a "wave of patriarchal authoritarianism" and called attention to its adverse effects on women's hard-earned gains (Chenoweth and Marks 2022). This issue is further complicated, given the increased levels of democratic backsliding across the globe (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). Notwithstanding the ongoing debate about whether democratic backsliding is a reality or a perception that is partly driven by a feedback loop between the coding experts and the media (Little and Meng 2024, Willick 2023), my work on gender politics in the Middle East and North Africa autocracies provides evidence that the effects of democratic backsliding are highly gendered.

Bermeo (2016, 6) argues that "forms of democratic backsliding are legitimated through the very institutions that democracy promoters have prioritized" and views strategic election manipulation[1] as a form of backsliding. I identify a similar trend in Jordan, whereby autocrats' election manipulation has gendered effects that have curtailed women's equitable access to political power. The monarchy in Jordan promulgated the political

parties' law in 1992, granting individuals the right to form parties and field candidates for elections. However, the regime also enforced the single non-transferable vote (SNTV) (aka the one-man, one-vote) law of 1993 aimed at limiting the role of the Islamists after their overwhelming victory in 1989. Thus, the electoral arena was transformed for more than two decades by engineering an electoral landscape that continued to favor tribal and pro-regime figures while further weakening the influence of political parties and other marginalized, less organized groups-mainly women. During this period, only one woman could win a legislative seat until the introduction of gender quotas in 2003.[2]

The SNTV system remained untouched until the introduction of the election law changes of June 2012, which stipulated one additional national closed-list district with 27 extra seats open for party candidates. For the first time, women were able to win *three* non-reserved seats from the newly added national list— in addition to the 15 reserved seats. In 2016, the electoral law changed again, and SNTV was replaced with an open-list PR system (Esber and Hussainy 2017). It also reduced the

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1 According to Bermeo (2016. 13), strategic manipulation denotes a range of actions aimed at tilting the electoral playing field in favor of the incumbent.

2 In 2003, six out of 110 seats were reserved for women. The seats increased to twelve and fifteen in 2010 and 2013, respectively (Shalaby, Forthcoming).

number of seats in Parliament from 150 to 130, and the number of electoral districts decreased from 45 to 23, but the number of reserved seats for women (15 seats) remained unchanged. Remarkably, women could win five non-reserved seats in 2016 (in addition to the reserved seats). In the 2020 elections, elites manipulated the system to limit women's gains beyond the reserved quota seats. Ma'ayeh and Sweis (2021, 4) argued that "several male candidates in the 2020 elections were reluctant to include politically astute females in their lists, fearing they would win through direct competition, as few did in 2016." As a result, women were unable to win any non-reserved seats in 2020.

The case of Jordan shows us how, while gender quota mechanisms can remedy some of the gendered effects of backsliding, the instability and manipulation of the electoral landscape may have detrimental effects on women's equitable access to political power.

Finally, it is important to remind ourselves that the strategies adopted by autocratic regimes to stifle reforms are ever-changing and constantly in flux. Autocrats employ techniques ranging from electoral manipulation, cooptation, and offering controlled openings (and closures) in response to contemporaneous events and external and domestic demands and threats. Importantly, autocrats are also facing rising domestic pressures. In addition to the increase of women in politics over the past few decades, there have been remarkable achievements in health and education outcomes for women. Women are also entering the workforce in increasing numbers. Despite the long-standing political stagnation and absence of political reforms/democratization, a massive societal transformation is occurring. It will be interesting to see how these societal forces can counter

incumbents' backsliding efforts. ◆

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Democratic Backsliding and its Differential Effects on Gender Justice Efforts: Lessons from Jordan

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Gender and politics scholars have demonstrated how movements and institutions aimed at improving the status of women are among the first targets of both authoritarian and democratic backsliders (Chenoweth and Marks 2022; Weldon 2024). And given the close relationship between democracy and feminism (Forester, et al. 2022), it is not surprising to see assaults on democracy and women's rights happening in tandem. Nonetheless, like other political phenomena, we should not expect democratic erosion to have a universal effect across different outcomes – variation explains variation.

As scholars of public policy have long argued, different types of issues involve different sorts of politics (Hall 1993; Lowi 1964). Gender and politics scholars have refined this approach, demonstrating the theoretical and empirical value of disaggregating women's rights to understand why advancements are made in some areas and not others (Gelb and Palley 1982; Htun and Weldon 2018). Thus, rather than starting from an *a priori* assumption that *all* women's rights and institutions will be affected by democratic backsliding in the same way and at the same time, there is a need to distinguish between different kinds of women's rights and gender justice efforts to better understand their relationship to anti-democratic developments.

In my own research, I have started investigating how antidemocratic shifts have differential effects on gender equality machinery (GEMs) – the formal, state sponsored institutions aimed at elevating the status of women, sometimes referred to as "state feminism" – and autonomous feminist movements in Jordan. On the surface, both GEMs and feminist movements tackle gender inequality, but their relationships with the state are decidedly different. GEMs in Jordan are a form of governmental non-governmental organizations and, as such, they are connected to the government and represent the state's official efforts for advancing the status of women. In contrast, autonomous feminist movements, by definition, are movements that are independent from the state (and male-dominated organizations) (see Forester, et al. 2022).

Like other Middle Eastern states, the Jordanian regime has used its GEMs, like the Jordanian National Commission of Women (JNCW), instrumentally, to signal its democratic commitments and credentials to the international community through gender equality efforts (see Tripp 2019; Forester 2024a). Meanwhile, and in line with indications of "deliberalization" in Jordan (Lucas

2003), civil society space continues to shrink (Abu Rish 2017; Sander 2023; Schwedler 2022). In practice, this means that feminist advocates and policy practitioners have censored themselves, pursued less radical campaigns, and generally "toned down [their] work" (Forester 2024b, 12; see also Sander 2023). Jordan is thus supporting some institutions that promote women's rights while simultaneously undermining the capacity of the broader women's movement to engage in contentious forms of protest and political engagement. This suggests that, even though GEMs *can* be vectors of democracy (Forester and Mazur 2024; McBride and Mazur 2013), GEMs can also be used in service of the state.

For instance, in conjunction with the National Council for Family Affairs, the JNCW advocated for Jordan's violence against women law, the Family Protection Act. After adopting the law, the regime received praise from the international community for supporting women's human rights. Meanwhile, however, the state restricted the actions of independent feminist organizations that were advocating for the reform of Personal Status Laws. This prompts new questions: how closely can GEMs work with autonomous feminist organizations that have faced greater backlash from the state? How far can GEMs go in advocating for taboo or contentious issues before they too become targets of the state? And thinking comparatively, why do some backsliders target both GEMs and broader feminist movements in tandem while others do not? While Htun and Weldon (2018) show that *policy* domains like violence against women and family law are animated by different logics of gender justice, I am suggesting here that we also need to precisely articulate how state sponsored gender equality institutions and initiatives interact with autonomous feminism and the struggle to

deepen democracy and enliven civil society.

What does this discussion of GEMs and feminist movements teach us about the value of using a gender lens to understand democratic backsliding? I contend that analytically tracing how a state engages with GEMs and autonomous feminist mobilization can reveal patterns of democratic repression in authoritarian regimes and illiberal democracies. It suggests that we should similarly disaggregate "civil rights" in our analyses to understand which rights, at which moment, and in which context are threatened by the democratic rollbacks.◆

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Lebanon Did Not Suffer Backsliding: It was Left Behind

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As world values progress, Lebanese laws and politics continue to oppress women intentionally. A country governed by the consensus of sectarianism, corruption, and nepotism, Lebanon is bifurcated between repression and progress. Its former status at the forefront of progress in the Middle East in civic rights is backsliding. Its abysmal record of women's political rights is slightly improving, but social rights are nonexistent. Economic and intellectual rights have deteriorated with the financial crisis, the exodus of intellectuals, and the fatigue of the international community.

Since its independence, Lebanon enjoyed freedom of speech, religion, assembly, and expression. Lebanese journalism, fashion, and literary contributions are recognized regionally and globally (About Habib et al. 2024). Backlash in civic rights was marked in May 2023 when a woman was harassed at a public beach for wearing a one-piece swimsuit (Jamal 2023). Though the incident sparked a protest for women's right to wear what they want in public spaces, counter-demonstrations, and online backlash reminded everyone that civic rights have become subject to rising conservative norms.

Social rights are still absent in Lebanon. Resistant to change, the "Sextarian" system (Mikdashi 2022) is designed to deprive women of their right to divorce, inherit, and pass citizenship to, or have custody of, their children (Brady 2020). Child marriage, domestic violence, and exploitation of agricultural and migrant workers are still pervasive problems despite the recent passage of a domestic violence law (though without an implementation mechanism) (El-Husseini 2023; El Rahi and Antar 2023). In a nutshell, Lebanon harms rather than protects its women, and that reality has not changed.

The ongoing financial and economic crises magnified the country's pre-existing vulnerabilities. Today, Lebanon ranks 142 out of 143 countries on the happiness index (Country Economy 2024), 23/179 most fragile (Fund for Peace 2024), 31/180 most corrupt (Transparency International 2023), and 134/163 least peaceful (Institute for Economics and Peace 2024). Its global gender gap index rank remains unchanged at 133rd out of 146 nations (World Economic Forum 2024). The Lebanese failed state has abandoned its responsibility to govern or provide basic services, and international organizations have shifted their focus from democracy and

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human rights to stability and security.

Lebanon's changing demographics are depleting the country's social and intellectual capital who have traditionally fought for progress. Over a quarter million people left Lebanon between 2017 and 2021. Since 2022, a mass exodus of educated citizens included 40 percent of doctors and 10,000 teachers, while 40 percent of the population is considering emigrating (Saleh 2022). Women and refugees, who represent 52 percent and 25 percent of the 5.8 million Lebanese population, are marginalized from the labor force. Only 27 percent of women work, and less than half the refugees are eligible to and actually work (Gender Data Portal, IOM). The backlash in Lebanon is not a reaction to progress but an unfortunate outcome of Lebanon's economic freefall and perplexing demographic and social realities.

On a positive note, women's political representation that has always been minimal, is slightly progressing. Today, seven women serve in Parliament, two were nominated for president, and five held key ministries (Labor, Information, the Displaced, Justice, and most importantly, Defense) in the Mikati Third Cabinet. Because of changing public views, women have been able to crack the political representation ceiling and fight for elbow room. Attitudes towards gender equality in the private and public spheres are progressing more. Favorable views of men's control over the family have decreased from 46% in 2016 to 34% in 2022, and support for men as better political leaders has changed from 54% in 2007 to 36% in 2022 (Arab Barometer 2007, 2016, 2022). Moreover, gender advocacy is more inclusive of queer theory and sexual diversity. Institutions like ABAAD and KAFA, the Asfari Institute, and the Arab Institute for Women expose attacks on the LGBTQI community, sexual harassment, and exploitation of migrant workers.

Thought leaders who left are not looking behind. The international community has abandoned this country, which has failed on every scale. Meanwhile, women's rights are left to the mercy of sectarian powerholders and to the coopted population that is fighting for crumbs. Lebanon is simply left behind.◆

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The Puzzle of Gender and Authoritarianism in Saudi Arabia

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The puzzle of empowering women while repression continues is not unique to Saudi Arabia. Dictatorship is not only about torture and prison cells. It invariably also deploys soft power. The Saudi state uses women to consolidate authoritarian rule, demonstrate piety or secular modernity. The Saudi state demonstrates how women's rights are instrumentalized to create a façade of democratic progress while masking deeper autocratic entrenchment.

Since 2017, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) has adopted the playbook of a previous generation of autocratic presidents and monarchs, like Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Kemal Ataturk, and Habib Bourguiba, all of whom championed the emancipation of women. He lifted the ban on women driving, expanded women's employment, and loosened the guardianship rules, all of which had previously crippled women's emancipation. At the same time, he put dissidents in prison, including women who campaigned for gender reforms, and even pursued critics abroad, murdering journalist, Jamal Khashoggi, in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in 2018. On the surface, the contradiction appears puzzling: violently suppressing democracy while implementing policies that expand women's rights and empowerment.

Observers of Saudi politics oscilate between those who see the crown prince as a ruthless autocrat and those who praise him as a great reformer. This polarised image conceals a complex reality, namely the relationship between autocracy and gender. MBS is simply using gender reform and the emancipation of women as a platform to achieve several objectives.

Like many other countries, Saudi Arabia has experienced the rise of Islamists, whose exclusive gender policies were enforced and supported by the state for several decades. The state-controlled Wahhabi clerics kept women locked in patriarchal structures since the foundaiton of the state in 1932. While many Saudi women willingly endorsed Wahhabism, in recent times many amongst them felt that this state-sponsored religious ideology went too far in restricting their choices. Since the 1990s, the state began to worry about the rise of militant Islamism. One way to divide the constituency and turn it against militant Islamism was to launch a gender war between men and women. Women were depicted as not only the victims but also the 'warriors' who should be enlisted to fight the Islamist gender agenda on behalf of the state and its security agencies. The state became an opportunistic rather than an honest arbiter between women and the clerics, thus sending

the message that without the state, the clerics and the Islamists would spread even more restrictions and repression against women. The Saudi absolute monarchy became a champion of women's causes against Islamist terror, while at the same time repressing any impulse towards democracy. The crown prince simply used women as a weapon against the Islamists.

While previous kings, above all King Faisal (d.1975) had enforced religious nationalism that narrated the nation in stricly Wahhabi language, the crown prince adopted popular nationalism. The first emphasized the piety of the nation and insisted on the invisiblity of women. The second reversed the situation as the visibility of women became the symbol of a modern Saudi nation. To project an image of an open and modern society, the crown prince allowed women to penetrate what used to be all-male public spaces.

The new Saudi nationalism continues to be xenophobic but also endorses neoliberal feminism, in which women need to be visible, beautiful and fully immersed in consumerism. The crown prince ushered a new era of 'Saudi women influencers', assisted by an army of foreign participants whose on-line promotion of Saudi tourism heritage sites is accompanied by images of women dressed in flowing kaftans and swim wear. The impulse to diversify the oil-based economy requires not only foreign investment but also free access to women-friendly tourism. Saudi women have to be seen as part of global trends in fashion and consumption. They also need to be employed in economic sectors that attract foreign capital. As a result, women benefit while promoting the national narrative about modernity.

As the Saudi leadership promotes the emancipation of women, it is unclear whether this will gradually lead to greater democratic governance. On the contrary, empowering women has contributed to the consolidation of authoritarianism in Saudi Arabia. ◆

Navigating Backlash: Iran's 'Woman, Life, Freedom' Protests and its Aftermath

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Feminist scholars and advocates have long asserted that women's rights and gender equality are fundamental prerequisites for democratic governance. The close correlation between women's rights and democracy is becoming increasingly evident, as the erosion of women's rights often signals early and unmistakable signs of democratic backsliding and the rise of authoritarianism worldwide (Allam 2019; Arat 2022; Chenoweth and Marks 2022). A gendered analysis of state institutions, policymaking, and elections provides crucial insights into the historical fluctuations in women's rights and, by extension, the overall quality of democracy (Tajali 2022). An overview of sexist repression in Iran highlights the depth of autocratic entrenchment, as evidenced by increasing gender-based repression and violence. These assaults on women's fundamental rights are not new but are deeply entrenched in the ideologies of Islamic fundamentalism, which have institutionalized patriarchal dominance and systemic gender discrimination (Hoodfar and Sadr 2010; Paidar 1995; Tajali 2024b). This analysis also exposes the contentious relationship between authoritarian elites and feminist advocates, who refuse to remain passive in the face of such attacks.

Feminist movements that resist systemic gender discrimination pose a significant threat to the Iranian regime, resulting in violent crackdowns on women's rights advocates. A recent example is the regime's harsh response to the non-violent "Woman, Life, Freedom" protests triggered by the killing of 22-year-old Kurdish-Iranian Mahsa Jina Amini in September 2022, while in police custody for allegedly violating Iran's conservative hijab laws. To reassert control, the conservative-dominated Iranian parliament passed a controversial Hijab and Chastity bill in September 2023. This bill introduces harsher penalties for improper veiling, utilizing enhanced surveillance and artificial intelligence to identify those who defy the mandatory hijab laws. While the bill awaits approval from the unelected Guardian Council, Iranian authorities initiated the "Noor (Light) Operation" in April 2024, enforcing the bill's provisions with violent crackdowns on improperly veiled women and girls.

The heightened policing of women's bodies in recent years have been accompanied by a severe crackdown on feminist and women's rights activism nationwide, with particular focus on ethnic minority women advocates. In a troubling trend, women protestors and political prisoners are being sentenced to death amid a rise in political executions since the 2022 protests (Sharifi and Alavi 2024).

Meanwhile, for months, the Iranian regime failed to acknowledge or identify the perpetuators behind the mass poisonings of several all-female high schools and college dormitories across the country from late 2022 until early 2023. Initially, key state authorities dismissed the students' symptoms as mere hysteria and stress. While the Taliban-like attacks were unprecedented for Iran, their targeting of female-only schools highlighted the gendered intent of the attacks, likely aiming to retaliate against young women and girls who were at the frontline of the "Woman, Life, Freedom" protests.

Although it intensified after the 2022 protests, Iran's patriarchal backlash has been solidified through overwhelming conservative control over key state institutions in recent years. This control has had profound gendered repercussions, in line with more regional and global gender backlash. A notable example has been the complete turnaround from Iran's once applauded policies on family planning and contraception during the late 1980s and 1990s (Hoodfar 1996), with the 2021 passage of the Youthful Population and Protection of the Family law. Similar to other pronatalist turns witnessed across the region and the globe, this law greatly restricts women's access to abortion and contraception as well as other previous state funded services in support of sexual and reproductive health, with the aim to address Iran's low fertility rates. The laws' restrictions carry special risks for more disadvantaged and rural social groups who previously relied heavily on state support (Asadisarvestani and Sobotka 2023).

Women and feminist advocates of Iran have not been silent against systemic attacks on women's rights and gender equality. Today, they not only represent a formidable pro-democratic force in the country, but through decades of mobilization and strategic engagement with ruling elites, these advocates have adeptly identified and exposed the systemic gender discrimination embedded in the theocracy. They reject any insincere or cynical attempts at reform that merely offer an illusion of change while maintaining Iran's deeply rooted patriarchal authoritarianism.

For instance, in summer 2024, many women's rights advocates publicly campaigned for the boycott of the presidential elections, which they viewed as inherently undemocratic and illegitimate (Tajali 2024c). By abstaining from the electoral process, women challenge the regime's claims of legitimacy and electoral integrity, while also highlighting their demands for radical democratic change. Women's demands for radical change extends beyond merely increasing the number of women in decision-making roles, as many fear co-optation of women policy makers in inherently theocratic and undemocratic structures.

Women's ongoing resistance is also evident in their courageous acts of civil disobedience, particularly defying mandatory hijab laws by appearing unveiled in public despite state's threats. Women's defiance, which has emboldened as part of the recent women-led protests, has led to a growing number of men supporting women's fundamental demands for bodily autonomy, recognizing that these struggles are integral to broader ideals of democracy, freedom, and equality (Tajali 2024a).

A gendered analysis of state institutions not only reveals the extent of authoritarian backlash but also guides strategic feminist resistance against seemingly gender-neutral structures. This approach exposes the depth of

depth of authoritarian entrenchment and underscores the role of feminist resistance in safeguarding democratic values. ◆

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Research Symposium: Student Encampments
Introduction: Genocidal Patriotism

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When the *New York Times* editorial board declared that Kamala Harris is "the only patriotic choice for president" (New York Times 2024), I recalled a recent protest supporting Palestinian liberation. The protest was on public property, but close to a row of fraternity houses. The fraternity brothers responded to the chants from the small crowd of students, faculty, and community members by setting up speakers in their front lawn and blasting music to drown them out. The song of choice: the United States' national anthem, sung repeatedly by patriotic brothers with hands over hearts. They expressed their patriotism by opposing those calling for an end to Israel's genocidal war on Palestine.

Patriotism is typically associated with love and defense of one's country, not with love and defense of another country. In 2024, U.S. patriotism has come to mean, among other things, defense of Israel no matter what. Support must be total and unconditional. One can criticize the United States and call it a racist, sexist, transphobic, militarist, carceral, settler-colonial state, but criticism of Israel is not allowed. The truth underpinning the association of U.S. patriotism with defense of Israel as it massacres Palestinian civilians is that Israel is using weapons supplied largely by the U.S. and acting with U.S. approval. The

genocide is overseen by the United States. It is held in place by U.S. aircraft carrier support groups in the Red Sea and targeting intelligence provided by officers in the U.S. Air Force (Petti and Klippenstein 2024). U.S. President Joe Biden identifies as a Zionist (Reuters 2023). Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu received 58 standing ovations when he spoke before a joint session of the U.S. Congress on July 24, 2024 (NPR 2024). At that time, the Israeli military with full U.S. backing had killed over 39,000 Palestinians in Gaza (WAFA News Agency 2024).

In his speech before Congress, Netanyahu criticized demonstrators gathered outside the Capitol, saying they were funded by Iran. He mocked campus protesters who chant "from the river to the sea," saying,

Many don't have a clue what river and what sea they're talking about. They not only get an F in geography, they get an F in history. They call Israel a colonialist state. Don't they know that the Land of Israel is where Abraham, Isaac and Jacob prayed, where Isaiah and Jeremiah preached and where David and Solomon ruled? (Times of Israel 2023).

In an odd move for the leader of a foreign government, Netanyahu praised patriotic

"fraternity brothers at the University of North Carolina who protected the American flag, protected the American flag against these anti-Israel protesters" (Times of Israel 2023).

Netanyahu's remarks reiterated his condemnation of the wave of protests and encampments that spread across U.S. university campuses a few months earlier. In April 2024, he denounced the protests as horrific and unconscionable, products of antisemitic mobs calling for the annihilation of Israel and attacking Jewish faculty and students in ways reminiscent of German universities in the 1930s. Decrying the shameful response of university presidents and praising local, state, and federal officials, Netanyahu insisted that more had to be done and not simply because "they want to kill Jews where ever they are, that's bad enough" but because they say "death to America" (NBC News 2023).

Taken literally, Netanyahu's remarks are simply false. The campus protests universally called for a ceasefire. Many combined these calls with their long-standing advocacy of divestment from and boycotting of companies profiting from Israel's occupation of Palestinian territory. Nearly all the encampments were diverse, inclusive, and ecumenical. Students invited one another to participate in their religious and cultural traditions. They learned from and protected each other, creating the safe spaces that the neoliberal university promised but consistently failed to provide. The protests and encampments didn't express a desire to kill. They aimed to protect life, including Palestinian life.

Netanyahu's words are not meant to be taken literally. His interventions in the heated culture wars on U.S. university campuses are intended to reinforce the identification of U.S. interests with Israeli interests. In his

view, attacks on Israel are attacks on America, and defending Israel equates to defending America. The two are as one and the same. The culture war achievement here is that patriotic U.S. citizens, often and aspirationally white, now have a minoritized identity. They, too, are victims entitled to special protections. Because anti-zionism has been defined as antisemitism, Zionism is treated as more than a political position or ideology in a larger battle of ideas. It is an identity, the criticism of which is potentially discriminatory. White Anglo-Saxon Protestant fraternity brothers can claim that Jewish defenders of Palestine are subjecting them to antisemitic bigotry and harassment, making them unsafe. They are as much in need of a safe space as any raced or sexed minority.

From what is Israel protecting the U.S.? Netanyahu's words suggest that support for Israel is a defense against anti-Americanism, against those who would criticize the U.S., who would call it a racist, sexist, transphobic, militarist, carceral, settler-colonial state, who would disrupt the serenity of campus life with political demonstrations, who would burn flags. Support for Israel provides those patriots offended by such speech and action with a way to fight back, on the very terrain of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion that they find so egregious. Antony Lerman writes: "Israel now symbolizes the fate of the West, however the West might be defined – which today can be as much about the values a country objects to as about values it shares with others" (Lerman 2022, 206). Lerman is discussing how Israel came to be more European than the Europeans, an ethno-nationalist bulwark against Arabs and Muslims. The opposition to pro-Palestinian demonstrations on U.S. university campuses shows how Israel has become more U.S. than the U.S., emblematic of the will to defend a stronghold against

those who would use inclusion and tolerance to undermine it.

The strategy has been effective. University administrations have jettisoned fundamental features of higher education: critical inquiry, free expression, and political engagement. Some institutions appear to be targeting particular students, such as the Black British Muslim Cornell graduate student Momodou Taal (Nathanson 2024). Cornell suspended Taal for participating in a protest against weapons contractors at a campus job fair. The university informed him that since his F-1 visa would be revoked, he should prepare for deportation.

Given the neoliberal institutional shifts toward reliance on contingent faculty, the price for telling the truth and speaking out against occupation and genocide is largely borne by those without the security of tenure. But tenure itself offers no guarantee; it is only as good as one's lawyer, if one can afford it or can find one among the already overwhelmed number of lawyers working pro-bono to defend the defenders of Palestine. Even administrators aren't safe: from the university presidents fired or force to resign (U Penn, Harvard, Columbia) to the deans making critical remarks in private text messages (Columbia).

Some might attribute academia's McCarthyite atmosphere to the Department of Education Office of Civil Rights' amped up use of Title VI prohibitions against discrimination based on religion and shared ancestry. But its 'Dear Colleague letter' from May 2024 emphasized that nothing in its instructions should be construed as authorizing the restriction of First Amendment rights. Others might blame overzealous college presidents pressured by influential donors. This line of argument

risks being accused of employing an antisemitic trope, despite the fact that billionaire donors deeply committed to Jewish philanthropy have publicly condemned university presidents for tolerating demonstrations of solidarity with Palestine and urged others to withhold donations (Jerusalem Post 2024; Gross 2024; Harvard Crimson 2023).

While there is no single cause, faculty themselves bear some responsibility for acquiescing to the decades of silencing their colleagues teaching and researching Palestine have endured. Tenured faculty looked the other way when contingent faculty were surveilled and harassed for Palestinian content. They failed to defend the academic freedom of Palestinian and Israeli scholars telling the truth about the Nakba, occupation, and apartheid or join them in supporting the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement. Strangely and unconscionably, some faculty actively undercut students protesting genocide, criticizing their slogans for lack of nuance, as if they were ignorant of the slogan form. Naively and misguidedly, some of us embraced the myth that education requires being immunized from conflict and shielded from the outside world, as if learning was easy and the university was not a porous institution within a divided world.

This past spring, many of us were heartened by the demonstrations of faculty in solidarity with their students, especially by those who put their bodies on the line. Yet, this fall too, many of us are censoring ourselves, accepting the draconian anti-protest policies implemented over the summer. We hope for a return to normalcy, unaware that this is it – unless we fight for something else.◆

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Encampments and the Unshackling of Study

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In a year of genocidal horrors in Palestine and confusion in the United States about how to resist, the student encampments of Spring 2024 – beautiful, messy, flawed, and experimental – have become a testament to the possibility of confronting intransigent power by refusing its terms: refusing to leave, refusing to be diverted from core demands to divest from war, and refusing weaponized debates over safety and antisemitism. While it is still too early to fully assess the impact of these encampments, they have already changed the political terrain in noticeable ways.

Restrictions on the study of Zionism have been built over decades through a variety of means, among them attacks on Arab and anti-Zionist faculty (Campbell 1985; Asare 2024), cancellation of classes (Campion 2017), and campaigns to subject antiracist curricula to hostile "stakeholder" approval (Gelman 2023). The effort by conservative, Israel-focused donors to build Zionist knowledge into university infrastructure by investing in conservative forms of Jewish and Israel studies is detailed in Hil Aked's worthy book *Friends of Israel* (Verso, 2023). In the past year, the timeline of this infrastructure-building has accelerated. At least a dozen campuses with strong anti-Zionist teaching and student organizing have seen the proliferation of task forces and centers on antisemitism, much of whose work so far has been to reinforce the repressive International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's (IHRA) definition of antisemitism (AAUP 2022) and mischaracterizations of anti-genocide protest (Bernstein 2024).

The encampments have been a counterforce, bringing thousands of students into the study of Zionism in the context of colonialism and resistance. This study has included research on universities' investments in weapons and surveillance industries, as well as their financial structures, which students undertook in the course of demanding divestment. Students found that universities – already understood as major capital actors in the sphere of real estate – drive hundreds of billions of dollars in endowment investments. A report from the Anti-Defamation League's financial arm JLens, aiming to counter divestment campaigns, announced that 10-year profits from such investments at just five universities amount to $33.2 billion (JLens 2024). Student researchers at MIT found that direct research projects with the Israeli military were producing dystopian horrors, including robotic swarms tracking moving targets, quantum computing for particle-level surveillance and enhanced weapons precision, and military AI systems like that currently targeting Gazans en masse ("Scientists Against Genocide En-

campment at MIT" 2024; Iraqi 2024).

The encampments' interventions in study also stemmed from their wide-ranging community education programming. They gathered under the umbrella of National Students for Justice in Palestine's call for a borderless "Popular University for Gaza," where scholars and organizers engaged in collective study of anticolonial resistance, regional history and movements, social and political theory, psychology, capital, militarism, the university itself, and their interconnections with Zionism and Palestine (National Students for Justice in Palestine 2024). Questions that are now dangerous to undertake in the formal space of the university – interrogations of the notion of "terror" and violence, among others – were discussable, and discussed.

This liberated education reached far past campus gatherings, traveling through social media and the new genre of "encampment essay,"—writing by students and other participants from and about these spaces. Even though one-off classes do not permit much detail or depth, and social media sharing even less, encampment programming marked out overlapping areas of study. These areas included anticolonial texts, and transnational context that defied long-standing pressures to study Zionism only as a force confined to the borders of Israel, specific to Jewishness, and from the standpoint of its advocates. I saw this broadening of scope among my own public policy students, on a campus where students were closely watching encampments elsewhere. Encampment framings animated my students' study, leading them to explore how state interests in repression and expansionism permeate U.S. political culture, and how Zionist institutions are interconnected with these commitments.

As targets attacked by officials, NGOs, and media, the encampments provided a public laboratory in which Zionism presented itself for study. We may never know the full extent of the interventions of conservative donors and institutions like the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and the Academic Engagement Network (AEN) in lining up university administrations behind violent repression of political speech on campus, denunciation of their own faculty, and spurious claim that the encampments made Jewish or Zionist students "unsafe." But even in mainstream media, the news cycle regularly tossed up examples that made it clear such repression was cultivated by major political forces, rather than a natural administrative response to protest and teaching. For example, a leaked WhatsApp chat revealed that a dozen Zionist billionaires quietly pressured NYC Mayor Eric Adams to deploy militarized police against students—shortly before Adams did just that (Natanson and Felton 2024). Two groups of Congressmembers gave press conferences charging that Columbia was dangerously antisemitic – in front of an encampment preparing to hold Passover services (Solender 2024; Solomon 2024). Such transparent moves to activate repression and generate disinformation may only have been instructive to those paying attention, but the encampments were sites of rapt political attention extending well beyond the organized left.

One result of this massive collective pushback against hegemonic Zionist narratives and knowledge production – a major achievement of the encampments – is the mainstreaming of discussion about Zionism as a power structure and anti-Zionism as its opposition. This is evident in the body of writing that circulated from and about the encampments, particularly in student news-

papers and social media, but also reaching as far as the New York Times (Rosman 2024).

It was evident in the anti-Zionist rap anthem "Hind's Hall," released by Macklemore in May 2024. For me, this shift has been tangible in conversation with family and neighbors: openly naming Zionism as the animating force behind the genocide, and as an unfolding narrative in right-wing U.S. politics, is newly permissible. Of course, this victory does not belong only to the encampments. It has also been the logical conclusion of Israeli leaders', fighters', and civilians' relentless public affirmations that they are pursuing genocide in order to realize Zionism, and by Palestinians' documentation of their efforts to survive it. But it was the encampments that made the operations of Zionist politics visible in the U.S. and educated a wide range of observers on how to interpret them.

The knowledge generated by the encampments is now under severe attack. For example, NYU, Columbia, and Barnard have banned the use of the word "Zionist" in ways that identify it as an objectionable political ideology and invite weaponized claims that it is a coded substitute for anti-Jewish bias. The University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign has made "Zionist" a protected identity, taking up a call from lawfare organizations like the Brandeis Center and advocates like the ADL, Hillel, and the American Jewish Committee. These same groups have lodged a mountain of Title VI complaints and lawsuits alleging that criticism of Zionism amounts to discrimination against Jewish students on many campuses. Additionally, Congress is considering multiple bills that would codify the IHRA definition in federal law and penalize violators.

Meanwhile, movement groups are claiming

and defending the space made by the encampments to think and talk, both structurally and analytically, about Zionism. Scholars can defend this space in the same way, by simply and forthrightly articulating the terms of our study. Student organizing has created a precious opening for critical thought, a shift from comprehending repression to resisting it, as well as a space enabling academic study that escapes the constraints of a captured university. Following their lead, we can and must refuse the terms imposed by the powers enacting genocide. ◆

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Building Solidarity with Palestine through Labor Organizing: The UAW Strike at the UC

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The University of California Santa Cruz (UCSC) campus has been a hotspot of labor organizing in higher education since a wildcat strike in 2019 to end "rent burden" among graduate workers, a demand later taken up in a systemwide contract strike in 2022, which *Politico* called the "largest walkout in US education" (Jones 2022). When pro-Palestinian encampments sprouted across the country last spring, grad student workers at UCSC moved to heed the call from the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions for strikes on May Day (May 1) and Nakba Day (May 15). An unsanctioned walkout on May Day at UCSC coincided with vigilante and police attacks on the encampment at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), laying the ground for United Auto Workers 4811 (UAW 4811), the local representing nearly 50k academic workers at University of California (UC), to lodge unfair labor practice charges and announce a strike authorization vote. By May 20, workers at UCSC were the first to hit the picket line, joined by several other UC campuses in subsequent weeks. The strike demanded amnesty, divestment, and transitional funding for researchers to leave projects funded by the Department of Defense and related agencies.

This strike is a highpoint in the recent wave of labor union support for a ceasefire in Palestine, including high-level statements from the official leadership of the United Auto Workers, United Electrical, and the American Postal Workers Union. For those of us active in union organizing at UCSC, where an encampment was also established on May 1st, our initiatives to build worker support for divestment from Israel could be taken up on a wider basis and with far greater urgency in the strike against administrative inroads against rights of protest and dissent, and in the context of the student movement.

Those who study social movements, especially in the Middle East and since 2011, have long grappled with the relationship between apparently spontaneous popular uprising and the slower rhythms and rigors of labor organizing and action. The sequence of resistance initiated in Palestine in 1936 included, famously, a general strike that remained an important historical reference for the 2021 Karameh strike—to say nothing of the massive strikes and refusals of the First Intifada. Moreover, scholars have bristled against mainstream depictions of the 2011 uprisings as spontaneously emerging from a vacuum, with origins in social media, pointing out

that workers' collective actions in the region peaked after 2004, especially in Tunisia and Egypt (Beinin 2020).

In the U.S., the union movement—if not workers themselves—has for a long time largely acceded to a framework that narrowly scripts what counts as a "labor issue." This made the decision of UAW 4811 to authorize a "stand up" strike on UC campuses (explicitly modeled on the UAW's Big Three auto strike of 2023) especially noteworthy. While UC administrators called it a "dangerous and far-reaching precedent" (University of California 2024), partisans of the labor movement analyzed it in terms of the history of "political strikes" in the United States (Frank 2024). Yet at the same time, how the boss disciplines worker dissent, invests the money, and the future application of our research are also fundamentally "labor issues."

The nature of strikes and strike strategy in the university, a live question in the U.S. and abroad, forces considerations of how different workers relate to one another, especially in the supercharged context of the Palestine solidarity movement. At UCSC, where the strike started and went longest, the major form of leverage was understood to lie in the non-submission of final grades, the closest thing to a synchronous "choke point" in the labor process of higher ed workers. The amount of missing grades was therefore constantly mapped at UCSC, but because only grads were officially and directly on strike (lecturers and senate faculty in UC are either in another union or unrepresented), this strategy depended on a baseline of coordination and solidarity among instructional workers. As only one layer of the instructional workforce in most courses, grad workers cannot alone ensure the withholding of grading labor and grade submission. Groups of

lecturers (organized in UC-AFT) and senate faculty at UCSC—the only faculty association in UC with collective bargaining rights—assiduously sought pledges from their membership not to pick up struck labor (i.e. not completing grading themselves) and, in certain cases, to assert their rights not to cross the picket line (therefore striking their own teaching and administrative responsibilities). The legal structure of the strike permitted different levels of "protected" solidarity among these two sets of workers, depending on their contracts, to say nothing of their widely differential job security.

Cross-unit organizing was therefore fundamental to the possibility of success in this strike, just as it always sets limits on the ability of any one group of workers to achieve their aims in the university. This brought challenges but also some significant wins. Unionization among faculty has been slower than among graduate students, and the relationship between graduate workers and faculty members is often conditioned by structures of mentorship where the role of 'student' takes precedence over that of 'comrade.' Organizing faculty has also meant inviting colleagues to think about forms of power that can be built outside the deteriorating structures of shared governance, or in ways that focus on non-binding senate resolutions and statements rather than the withholding of labor. It speaks volumes, for example, that the Academic Senate at UCLA rejected the censure of their chancellor after the attack on the pro-Palestinian encampment in May, while faculty organizers effectively mobilized to secure solidarity pledges with the strike.

Yet despite these challenges, the developing solidarity between UAW 4811 and Santa Cruz Faculty Association (SCFA) proved pivotal to the strength of the Palestine strike this past

spring, It remained critical even as a temporary restraining order was issued against strike activity after the UC went "jurisdiction shopping" in Orange County, having twice failed to secure injunctions from the Public Employment Relations Board. This legal maneuvering, California's version of red-state lawfare, prompted different sets of workers at UCSC to push their unity beyond the familiar and comfortable limits of labor law. Since 2019, grad worker organizing on campus has spurred faculty to clarify our individual and collective rights under Higher Education Employer-Employee Relations Act (HEERA), which the SCFA repeatedly upheld in the face of multiple attempts by administration to intimidate instructors (Taft 2023). At a broad level, the successive experiences of strikes at UCSC and UAW's insistence that Palestine was a labor issue—in terms of university investments and funding, worker control over research, and the capacity to express dissent at work—helped faculty sharpen their vision in advocating for a more truly public university.

Having conversations with colleagues about these issues at the individual level, but also through departments, gave faculty a better sense of their own power and helped encourage collaboration across units and across campuses. In the most recent strike last spring, impressive numbers of faculty and lecturers refused to accede to the administration's demands to snitch on striking workers or to make up for missed labor, even after the official conclusion of the strike. While far from complete or perfect, this represents a noteworthy advance since the wildcat strike in 2019, and moreover points towards future directions here and elsewhere. More recently, on 19 September 2024, the Council of University of California Faculty Associations filed an Unfair Labor Practice complaint

(ULP) with California's Public Employment Relations Board. The 581 document details the myriad ways in which the UC has suppressed pro-Palestinian speech and protest (The Council of UC Faculty Associations, 2024). Such a step undoubtedly represents a milestone, but our recent experience tells us that it will need to have the force of concerted labor action behind it to shift administrative policy. Who can any longer doubt the willingness of university administrations to break laws, flout precedents, and discipline and repress students and workers when Palestine is in the mix?

The Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions' call for global action, including the explicit call to American unions, can be seen as building off the 2004 Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement. The urgency of watching genocide in Palestine unfold in real time, as well a generational shift among pro-Palestinian activists in the United States, has created new social bases for mobilization. As we enter a new academic year, it seems clear that the student movement will continue to demand an end to U.S. complicity. At the same time, the surge of labor organizing in higher education shows no sign of dissipating. The strides already taken in the union movement in higher education open possibilities unavailable to previous internationalist campus struggles, such as that against Apartheid in South Africa (Left in the Bay 2024). In this way, the student and worker movement has become *extremely* proximate on campus, sharing largely the same demands and facing identical administrative intransigence—a nexus of rare immediacy in the long historical interaction of student and worker struggles.

The recent strike at UC, then, contains glimpses of the possibilities of linking of aca-

demic workers in concerted action in solidarity with the Palestinian struggle, as well as with the student movement for a free Palestine, which must become a shared goal. It is also possible to imagine links in other sectors of the labor movement, where K-12 is only the most obvious example. The strike, however, also reveals limitations that will need to be overcome, of which the consolidation of senate faculty, precarious lecturers, and grad workers behind shared demands looms most urgently. Our experience at UCSC over the past half decade suggests that this is not a trivial problem, nor that an immediate fix is likely. While efforts at political education and statements and acts of support are important, our recent experience tells us that it does not produce strike readiness alone, especially across job titles. We consider that we have made our greatest progress in between the tides of strikes and mobilization, in spaces for deliberate reflection and strategizing before the next surge. Such discussion, although time consuming and apparently low-stakes when things are calm, has cultivated shared instincts and impulses among small groups of organizers whose coherence and sense of purpose can prove telling later on, when events are most intense. Both of us would be more than willing to meet with any colleagues or comrades on university campuses elsewhere. ◆

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Conflict over the Conflict: The Restriction of Palestine Solidarity and Academic Freedom in Germany

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Universities in Germany have historically been sites where broader political struggles are shaped. These institutions are not just places of learning; they are arenas where societal tensions are debated and challenged. It is therefore not surprising that global solidarity protests for Gaza have also emerged on campuses globally. Within the context of Germany, these protests diffused into the local repertoire towards the end of November 2023. Minor vigils and rallies had taken place at higher education institutions and arts colleges. However, it was not until the occupation of a lecture hall of Freie Universität Berlin that protesters in solidarity with the besieged population of Gaza realized the full potential of universities as key arenas of contention. As the student protests moved into focus, they initiated a new media cycle centered on the transnational diffusion of the war in Israel/Palestine onto German campuses which reached its peak with the establishment of several protest camps in May 2024

(Figure 1). At the same time, controversies sparked by attempts to police and contain the campus protests that fundamentally linked the mobilization efforts in solidarity with Palestinians to the topic of academic freedom, thus opening up an additional and entirely new arena of contestation.

Student protests on German university campuses were not only driven by the suffering in Gaza but have also responded to the lack of vocal academic engagement. The reluctance of professors and academic leaders to speak out about the humanitarian and political dimensions of a war that leading experts in the field have characterized as genocidal (Bartov 2024; Segal and Daniele 2024; Goldman 2024) has amplified student frustration, contributing to a growing sense of alienation and mistrust between students and faculty. The reasons for this alienation are not endemic to universities. The broader public discourse surrounding the Gaza war has become in-
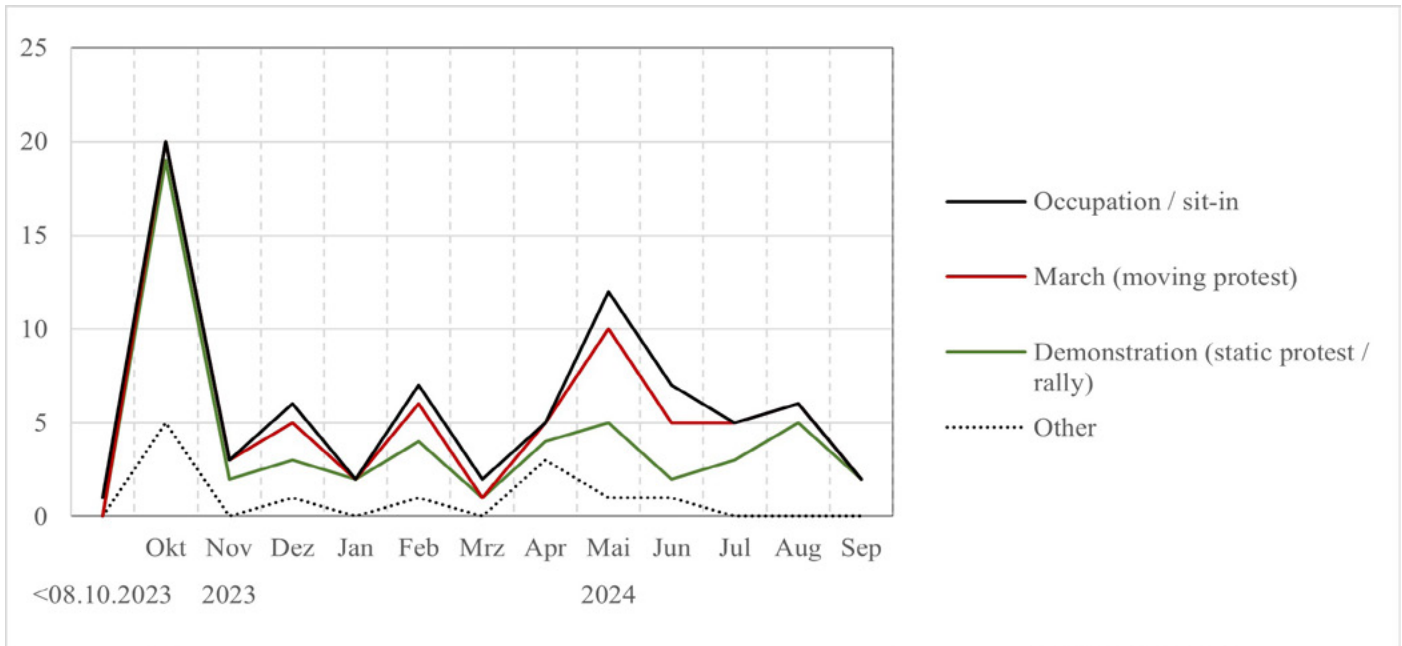
Figure 1. Reported protest events in solidarity with Palestine in Berlin, 7 October 2023 - 15 September 2024, authors' original event catalogue, coding source: Rundfunk Berlin Brandenburg (RBB, https://www.rbb24.de/).

creasingly polarized, with criticism of Israel frequently equated with antisemitism. This conflation has created a tense atmosphere on campuses, where expressing solidarity with Palestinians or critiquing Israeli government actions risks being labeled as antisemitic (see Younes and Al-Taher 2024). Fear of professional or personal repercussions from such labels has discouraged many academics from engaging in open discussions about the conflict. This lack of "academic integrity" (Grimm 2024), in turn, fueled student unrest, as many feel that the intellectual community, traditionally seen as a space for critical debate and emancipatory ideas, was failing to fulfill its role at a critical moment.

The higher education institutions in Berlin, and especially Freie Universität Berlin (FUB) became the epicenter of contentious politics. FUB has traditionally played a pivotal role in student protest. Established in 1948 as a response to political oppression in the Soviet-controlled universities of Berlin's Eastern sector, FUB cultivated a tradition of critical thought and social engagement. In 1966, one of its lecture halls also became the site of Ger-

many's first student sit-in. This occupation marked a turning point in German student activism and set the stage for the 1968 protests for democratic reforms and against the Vietnam War. When "Students for Palestine" occupied a lecture hall at FUB in November 2023, they tapped into this legacy of contentious campus activity and anti-war activism. By demanding a ceasefire in Gaza, an engagement with Israel's human rights violations within the context of the university, and the rejection of the IHRA-definition of antisemitism, they also followed their historical model of linking domestic and external grievances through protest. Likewise, university management initially kept with the tradition of tolerating peaceful protest, which included panel talks, workshops, and live music. However, political pressure and animosities between protesters and counter-protesters soon led the presidency to reverse course and to order the eviction of the protesters.

The decision to call the police on campus became a trigger event for an entire episode of contention. On the one hand, footage of police forces inside the university buildings

went viral sparking global criticism and catalyzing the formation of the "Student Coalition Berlin" as an organizing mechanism between activists from Berlin's different campuses. On the other hand, it also laid path dependencies for the ways how the administrations were to deal with student protests. Amid its decision to evict, the FUB management also filed criminal charges for trespassing against the student protesters, thus creating new grievances for subsequent student mobilizations. In addition, the Berlin Senate moved to reinstate disciplinary regulations at Berlin universities, supported by presidencies of FUB, Humboldt University Berlin (HUB), and Universität der Künste (UdK). These punitive measures included the forced exmatriculation of students which had been abolished in 2021 due to questions over its constitutionality.

The backlash to these repressive developments materialized most visibly in the shape of heightened contentious activity on campus in the summer semester of 2024. On May 7, activists gathered in an open courtyard at FUB and set up tents. No access to a FUB building was required to get to the courtyard and all classrooms remained accessible. Still, within an hour, the university administration ordered the eviction of the camp in coordination with the Berlin Senate, thus rejecting all student attempts to negotiate the terms of their encampment. Upon the request of the FUB management, police forces cleared the area, resorting to excessive force against the peaceful protesters, including batons and pepper spray. Over 70 people were arrested, and over 150 criminal investigations and investigations into administrative offenses were filed (*Der Tagesspiegel Online* 2024). Merely two weeks later, HUB witnessed similar

events on May 25, 2024. Students who had occupied the social science faculty building and renamed it the "Jabalia Institute" were forcibly removed from campus by police units in spite of prior agreement with the university management that the protests would be temporarily tolerated. In a press statement, HUB president Julia von Blumenthal indicated that the eviction had been directly ordered by the Mayor of Berlin (Würzer 2024).

The repression of protest on campus paired with the unprecedented intervention by state politicians into higher education autonomy became a critical juncture for the protest cycle, opening up the topic of academic freedom as a new additional field of contestation. This became most visible when almost 400 lecturers from Berlin universities publicly opposed how the protests had been handled by university management.[1] Their statement in defense of students' right to protest sparked a massive backlash in the shape of an unprecedented defamation campaign to frame the campus protests as antisemitic and those defending them as supportive of violence and hatred against Jews. In a direct reference to the terminology commonly used to refer to the National Socialists and their responsibility for the Shoah, the German tabloid "Bild-Zeitung" went on to brand those who had co-signed the letter as "perpetrators" (UniversiTäter) on 10 May 2023, paired with portraits that were reminiscent of the infamous mugshots of the "Academics for Peace" published by Turkish media in 2016 (Baser, Akgönül, and Öztürk 2017). This analogy was only reinforced by the German Minister of Education and Research who publicly questioned the loyalty of signatories to the German constitution, effectively placing them in a relation of equilalence with extremists and

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1 https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfVy2D5Xy_DMiaMx2TsE7YediR6qifxoLDP1zIjKzEl9t1LWw/viewform.

alleged supporters of Hamas. These accusations triggered a wave of threats and hate mail against the signatories of the letter and demonstrated the extent to which politicians were willing to go in their efforts to control the narrative surrounding secondary events linked to Gaza. Amid prominent calls to place "extremists" at German universities under government surveillance (Kain et al. 2024), in mid-June, investigative journalists exposed how leading officials within the Federal Ministry of Education and Research had explored the option to retract public funding from the signatories of the letter and to press charges against them for incitement of hatred (Monroy 2024).

Implications

Investigating Germany as a national context in which responses to October 7 have been particularly polarized offers additional insights into the ways transregional patterns of solidarity are concurrently shaped by the primary conflict in Israel and Palestine and more localized discursive and political dynamics, contentious legacies and community relations. The sketched-out developments offer insights into the parameters within which universities can function as arenas for negotiating social values in the context of international conflicts. As politicized spaces, universities have often proven strategically important sites for activism due to their visibility, accessibility, and high concentration of social and cultural capital. Protesters in solidarity with Gaza are now resorting to the very same tactics that others successfully adopted before them. Most recently, the climate movement was able to generate huge positive resonance through collective action on campus, including classroom occupations and protest camps. In fact, the climate coalition "End Fossil: Occupy!" had occupied a lecture

room at Humboldt University Berlin merely a year before the Palestine protests. Yet, the response of authorities to these protests differed significantly, highlighting the function of universities as micro-arenas within larger arenas of conflict (Jasper 2015). Within the context of a "moral panic" (Della Porta 2024) that has taken hold of German society in the aftermath of October 7th, universities overwhelmingly addressed the protests in solidarity with Palestine through carceral logics. As student protesters and those defending them were publicly vilified, university administrations fed into these securitizing narratives by depicting their activities as disruptive, irresponsible, or even violent. This portrayal effectively shifted public attention away from the protesters' messages – namely the focus on the violence in Gaza – to debates about the legitimacy of protest and the limits of academic freedom. More significantly, however, these narratives also lay path dependencies by normalizing police intervention, disciplinary actions and restrictions as the go to mechanism in dealing with dissent on campus.

The Berlin case thus offers an illustrative case to study the consequences of securitization of campus politics and state intervention into university autonomy, as well as the implications of external pressures on academic freedom and free speech. As universities are discursively branded as spaces of antisemitism and exclusion, they become elements of a broader culture war in which students and scholars represent potential security threats requiring attention and control. As Younes and Al-Taher note: "Within such 'tropes,' the interpellations of Hamas and Antisemitism move effortlessly between racialized student bodies in Berlin and an actual Palestinian armed resistance in the Middle East" (Younes and Al-Taher 2024, 8). At the same time, the escalating secondary conflict (Stern and

Strossen 2020) on campus has also served as a catalyst for resistance and prompted unprecedented organizing efforts within academia, a sector notorious for its individualism and low unionization rate.

Both scholars and institutions have shown signs of pushback against political interference and infringements of academic freedom. Their resistance reflects growing awareness of the need to protect the integrity of higher education against authoritarian trends. A key outcome in this respect has been the formation of solidarity networks between academics and civil society. Bridging different sectors, these alliances provide more sustainable mobilizing structures that are likely to outlast the campus protests. Student activists too have shown remarkable resilience to repression. The ways how universities have handled peaceful protest camps, however, has affected their contentious repertoires. Moderate forms

of activism, such as political rallies, the occupation of lecture halls, or die-ins in university cafeterias, are increasingly replaced by more disruptive direct actions. This shift ultimately illustrates how the policing of nonviolent and moderate forms of contention, in a backfire effect (Lindekilde 2014) can feed confrontation and radical tactics that may prove even harder to address.

Finally, the process by which the controversy over protest in solidarity with Palestine branched out into a broader debate on the limits of academic freedom can serve as a starting point for an in-depth exploration of the intersections between academia, activism, and state power. The case of Germany illustrates how universities are transformed from spaces of free intellectual exchange into political battlegrounds that are forcing institutions to take sides and undermine their traditional role as sites for critical thinking. Ironically,

Figure 2. Promotional ad by the city of Berlin close to the epicentre of mobilization in solidarity with Palestine at Hermannplatz. The ad reads "Four of the best universities in Germany, five if you count the streets." Picture by Lilian Mauthofer.

Berlin's newest promotional slogan, "Four of the best universities in Germany, five if you count the streets," captures this dynamic (Figure 2). Seeking to highlight Berlin's academic excellence, the slogan inadvertently points to the fact that the streets surrounding universities are often as significant as the institutions themselves in shaping political and social discourse. The very idea that Berlin's "fifth university" is found in the streets underscores the deep connection between intellectual spaces and public activism – a connection that is under critical threat. ◆

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The Urbanization of Revolt: The Case of the October 2019 Uprisings in Lebanon

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The recent student encampments in the United States, Europe, and across the Middle East over the conflict in Gaza have renewed interest in understanding student activism and its broader political impacts. This entry examines the October 2019 uprising in Lebanon, highlighting the critical role students played in mobilizing against corruption and economic mismanagement. By exploring the Lebanese case, the article also highlights how student activism has shaped political resistance, particularly in urban and peri-urban spaces that have been underexplored in the literature. This entry is drawn from the Lebanon Unsettled Project that invited Lebanese students to reflect on the 2019 uprisings and its aftermath.

The October 2019 Uprising in Lebanon as an Urbanized Revolt

Political scientists have long studied contentious politics and social movements. Since the Arab uprisings in 2011, the study of protest has emerged as a significant sub-field within Middle East Political Science. This work has enriched the broader scholarship on topics such as the political role of routine protests and "non-events," the influence of religion, ethnic identity and social media, and the implications of protest outcomes beyond immediate success and failure (for a comprehensive overview see, Allam et al. 2022). My personal contribution to this scholarship, through the co-edited volume *Beyond the Square: Urbanism and the Arab Uprisings*, expands the spatial perspective from public squares to the broader urban contexts where these uprisings occur. As with many uprisings across the Arab region, urbanization has profoundly influenced the frequency, spatial distribution, content and outcomes of uprisings worldwide. The Arab region has witnessed both rapid urbanization and unprecedented social upheaval, yet the link between these phenomena remains underexplored by scholars. The importance of Tahrir Square in Egypt and other metropolitan public squares during the Arab uprisings spurred only a minor, but significant, literature on the role of public space to protest.

The significance of considering spaces beyond the square in moments of protest was powerfully articulated once again in the October 2019 protest in Lebanon. I argue that this revolt marked Lebanon's first fully urbanized uprising. The October 2019 protests were unprecedented in its geographic scale, three-month duration and the sheer number of protesters. Many scholars and activists describe the revolt as being geographically decentralized. Prior to October 2019, protest

in contemporary Lebanon has been largely city-based – and more precisely Beirut-based and centric – events. Nejmeh Square and Martys' Square in downtown Beirut near the seat of government power have long been the loci of revolt in the country. Although these metropolitan spaces continued to serve as the epicentre of the October 2019 protests, this movement also exhibited a remarkable (hierarchical) geographical diffusion.

In the north, protests erupted in Halba (Akkar) and Zgharta, Batroun and Lebanon's second largest city Tripoli, earning the moniker of 'Bride of the Revolution'. Smaller scale protests erupted in the town of Mount Lebanon – in the south, Saida and Nabatieh, and in the Bekka, Baalback and Zahle. In addition to unprecedented, synchronised protests erupting in these towns and cities alongside the capital, novel spaces of protest emerged that accentuated the fully urbanized nature of this revolt.

Role of Roadblocks in the 2019 Uprising

A key factor in the geographical diffusion of the protest was the use of roadblocks by protesters. Barricades, which involve the blocking of roads, have long been used as a tool of revolt. While Eric Hazan ([2013] 2015) argued that barricades had largely disappeared as a principal method of protest in the twentieth century, this tactic, along with other forms of spatial disruption, has seen a resurgence in the twenty first century. During the October 2019 uprising, barricades were set up with remarkable speed and geographical breadth. In an interview with the activist Nizar Hassan, he recalled that "by midnight on 17 October most vital highways and roads were blocked. In urban areas, even internal streets were blocked, usually by local working

-class men and women burning dumpsters… in the middle of the streets." Protesters moved quickly to block not only the streets and main traffic arteries in and around Beirut but also, through spontaneous uncoordinated – yet critically simultaneous – actions, to halt traffic on major roads across the country.

The blocking of the major highways ground the country to a halt, effectively creating an unofficial general strike. Sociologist Rima Majed argues that what made October 2019 a revolutionary moment was this unofficial mass strike (see also, Karam and Majed 2022). In the absence of labor movements that have been suppressed, defeated, and co-opted by the postwar ruling class, road closures became a means to undertake a mass strike. Notably, the linear barricade itself did not become a focal point for protesters. Instead, large crowds gathered in the centre of highways, transforming spaces typically reserved for cars into public areas for pedestrians. In Beirut, the Ring Bridge – part of Beirut's major ring road – quickly became a central site in the uprisings. This urban space, usually dominated by vehicles, was transformed by student-led demonstrators who reimagined this area as an outdoor apartment – adding their sofas, fridges and chairs. An online advert was even posted on the website Airbnb offering the opportunity to book a night in what was commonly known as the apartment of the people.

Similar practices occurred in highways throughout the country. Most notably along the highways in Jel el-Dib and Zouq but also main roads in and out of major urban centres such as Tripoli, Batroun and Byblos. A local autonomy was established through the national practice of blocking highways in which not only demands were made but prevailing cultural values challenged, spatial

forms transformed and new social meanings for urban space explored. As one participant in the revolt on the highway in Jel el-Dib described,

The revolt made us see our city in a different way...who would have expected us to be laughing, crying, screaming in the middle of the highway, no one. This is what made it very special because we were appropriating the spaces and being ourselves for a short period of time.

The highway was not only blocked but its function was transformed from a space of mobility to a place of public revolt, play and debate.

The October 2019 Uprising as a Revolt against Neoliberal Urbanization

Several scholars have argued that the October 2019 revolt was a reaction against the neoliberal system that was established by Rafi Hariri following the end of the Civil War. Hariri's neoliberal project resulted in the production of a particular urban state space in Lebanon. It solidified Beirut as the political and economic hub of the country, prioritizing investments in real estate and large-scale urban construction projects as the primary drivers of economic growth, often at the expense of industry, manufacturing and agriculture. The result was the rapid urbanisation of the country, nearly 90 percent of the population now live in urban areas. As a result, rural ways of living and spaces have largely been absorbed into larger urban units. This extended urbanization has intensified the importance of collective consumption through urban services, a dynamic observed globally by scholars like Manuel Castells (1983) and Henri Lefebvre (1996). However, the provision of public

goods, though essential, is often unprofitable for private capital, making urban issues a central focus of political conflict.

While a WhatsApp tax may have been the spark for the protest, the demonstrators made clear that this was a revolt against the entire political class and the collapse in basic living standards. In the October 2019 uprisings, protesters focused many of the demands on specifically urban issues. The uprising was notably both city-based and related to the entire urban fabric, including public services, real estate, the provision of urban goods and services (such as electricity, water and transport) and access to urban (public) space. Lebanese youth, and students in particular, played a central role in both leading many of the actions, like blocking roads and creating encampments, and in shaping the demands of the protest. The uprising brought together Lebanese youth in a manner and scale that had not been witnessed before. Several student groups abandoned traditional political parties and independent student groups grew and new spaces of movement-building were created (Chehayeb and Majzoub 2021).

Like other regions worldwide, Lebanon's expanding young urban middle class has grown increasingly angered with corruption, repressive regimes, and the shrinking provision of public goods, sparking widespread protests. Urbanization has made the state more integral to people's everyday lives, especially through the provision of basic urban services. Subsequently, the absence of the state provisioned services is felt more acutely by the population. This frustration is encapsulated in the common lament: "Where is the state?"—not as a call for the existence of government, but as a critique of the absence of a functioning state in the context of its increasingly pervasive presence.

Conclusion

Urbanization continues to rapidly expand across the region and will continue to be a major structuring force of contentious politics throughout the Arab region. The October 2019 uprisings in Lebanon underscore the critical need for political science to deepen its exploration of the intersection between urbanization and contentious politics. The case of Lebanon demonstrates how urbanization has not only altered the landscape of protest but also intensified the public's reliance on – and subsequent discontent with – the state, particularly when basic urban services fail. The transformation of highways – often led by students - into sites of public debate and revolt, the widespread diffusion of protest, and the profound reaction against neoliberal urbanization all point to the urgent need for scholars to examine how urbanization shapes, and is shaped by, political and student movements. Understanding this intersection will be crucial for addressing the future challenges that arise as urban centres continue to grow and as the demands of urban populations become increasingly central to political conflicts.◆

Students making the performative map at Lebanon Unsettled project* workshop at USEK in July 2022. Image provided by the author. Click on the image to watch a video on the project.

* The Lebanon Unsettled project is an academic collaboration between the London School of Economics and the Holy Spirit University of Kaslik (USEK) in Lebanon. The initiative deepens the socio-spatial analyses of the 2019 protests by focusing on protests outside the central public spaces of the metropolis Beirut. The project seeks to highlight alternative voices, geographies and histories of this moment. After significant delays due to a hostile host institution (USEK), COVID-19, Lebanon's economic collapse and the Beirut port explosion, a workshop with USEK students was finally held in July 2022. During the week-long workshop, participants engaged in both individual and collective performative mappings of the revolt. These mappings explored key socio-spatial elements of the protest, such as the transformation of the highways into space of leisure and play, the frequent use of terms like *harj wa marej* (uproar) and iconic images of the revolt like "the fist" and the Dunkin' Donuts and Sea Sweet stores that becomes symbols of the movement.

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The Pervasiveness of Zionist Ideology within International Academia

Shahrazad Odeh

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Since October 7th, Israeli universities have aligned themselves with Zionist values over the principle of academic freedom, choosing to prioritize their contribution to the country's ongoing war efforts. In doing so, they have suspended academic operations, shifted focus towards aiding national objectives, and actively recruited students for roles beyond academia (Odeh 2024).

This shift is manifested in various university actions, such as encouraging medical students to work in hospitals, offering them the chance to count their efforts towards civil or military service (Ghert-Zand 2023). Similarly, fashion schools have been co-opted into the war effort by mobilizing students to design and produce clothes with special pockets tailored to carry weapons (Stienberg 2023). This militarization of academic spaces extends beyond practical support for the war, as universities have also used their platforms to solicit students for Israel's hasbara (propaganda) efforts, encouraging them to spy on Palestinian students and report any "problematic" statements or behaviours (Odeh 2024). This collective reorientation has had significant ramifications for Palestinian students, many of whom have faced arrest or suspension, with some faculty members complicit in singling out individuals for actions as innocuous as sharing Qur'anic verses, expressing a humanizing image of Gazans or participating in symbolic acts of cultural resistance (Arab Students of Bezalel Academy 2024).

This shift from academic freedom to nationalist participation is emblematic of a larger trend within Israeli academia, which has effectively become an arm of the state's political and military apparatus (Wind 2024). Palestinian students have been targeted en masse, often at the behest of their own professors and peers, reinforcing a climate of surveillance and repression. The arrests of hundreds of Palestinian students in the early months of the war—many of whom were detained for expressions of identity or dissent—reflect a systematic effort to suppress opposition and silence voices of resistance (Adalah 2023). These actions stand in stark contrast to the liberties afforded to Israeli students, some of whom have been permitted to carry weapons on campus or even harass their Palestinian counterparts, and even violently attack them in their dorm rooms and university premises — with impunity (Farah 2023). The discrepancy in treatment underscores the extent to which Israeli universities are privileging Zionist interests and undermining the very tenets of academic freedom.

Not only are Palestinian students being arrested and silenced, but the repression has extended to academic staff, including those of significant standing. The case of Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, a renowned Palestinian scholar at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, is a stark example of how academic freedom has been compromised in the name of Zionist interests (Odeh 2024). Despite her international acclaim, Shalhoub-Kevorkian has faced relentless attempts by her academic institute to discredit her work and silence her voice. With the onset of the war, the Hebrew University took increasingly severe measures to curtail her academic freedom, engaging in public campaigns to undermine her credibility, while taking procedural actions within the university to end her employment. This campaign against her culminated in her arrest and prosecution in April 2024 (Odeh 2024; Noy 2024), a move that sent a clear message to Palestinian academics: dissent will not be tolerated.

Shalhoub-Kevorkian's case highlights the precarious position of Palestinian academics within Israeli universities, where even tenured professors can be subjected to state-sanctioned repression. The complicity of her colleagues—many of whom had worked alongside her for years—demonstrates the pervasiveness of Zionist ideology within Israeli academia. Those who might have supported her were either silenced or unable to mount an effective defense, further illustrating the extent to which academic spaces in Israel are being transformed into platforms for Zionist nationalism only. The university's decision to force her out is a clear indication that there is little room for academic freedom that challenges the prevailing political order.

Yet even as they participate in the repression of Palestinian voices, Israeli universities continue to market themselves as diverse and inclusive institutions. Palestinian students, often photographed and featured in university brochures, are used to project an image of multiculturalism and inclusivity (Odeh 2024). However, this image is a façade, masking the deeper reality of exclusion and oppression. The attack on Shalhoub-Kevorkian and the broader repression of Palestinian students expose the contradiction at the heart of Israeli academia: while it purports to uphold the values of free expression and academic inquiry, it simultaneously functions as a key player in the Zionist agenda (Wind 2024).

For Palestinian students and scholars, this means there is no escaping the Zionist framework that dictates the terms of their existence within these institutions. The persecution of Shalhoub-Kevorkian and other Palestinian students and academics is part of a broader effort to assert Zionist dominance within academia and to send a clear message: there is no place for radical Palestinian thought within these institutions (Wind 2024).

The repression of Palestinian voices within Israeli universities mirrors the suppression of pro-Palestinian movements on campuses worldwide. In the wake of the war, universities across the United States, the United Kingdom, and other countries have cracked down on pro-Palestinian activism, arresting thousands of students and staff for their participation in protests and encampments. In the United States alone, over 3,000 students have been arrested for resisting pro-Israel policies on campus (The New York Times 2024), similar arrests have occurred in the UK concluding the last academic year with about 1000 arrests of pro-Palestinian activists on UK campuses (Nagesh and McSorley 2024). Universities have also taken legal action against their own students, filing lawsuits to

suppress protests and encampments.

Similar to their Israeli counterparts, western universities continue to market themselves as diverse and inclusive institutions even as they participate in the repression of pro-Palestinian voices. They continue to profit from the knowledge produced by indigenous voices and scholars of critical theory—those who faced the toughest crackdown and punishment. They publish books and fund projects that purport to address issues such as colonialism, state violence, and inequality. However, these institutions' willingness to repress pro-Palestinian voices underscores the disconnect between their theoretical commitments and their actual practices. They capitalize on the intellectual contributions of marginalized voices while simultaneously silencing those who challenge the status quo.

The contradiction between theory and practice within universities—especially western academia—has become particularly stark in the context of the expanding genocide in Gaza. They design courses to raise awareness on the ongoing state violence in Israel but remain silent when their Palestinian alumni and students in Gaza face arrest, violence, and death.

In this context, Palestinian students and scholars are left with little recourse. Despite the solidarity of many of their peers, they find themselves without an academic home—excluded from spaces that purport to welcome them, punished for asserting their right to exist, and silenced for expressing dissent. This systemic exclusion demonstrates that, within western academia, there is no space for Palestinian voices to thrive, as the institutions designed to foster free inquiry and debate have instead become tools of repression and control.

In conclusion, both Israeli and Western academia serve as key instruments in upholding broader political and ideological frameworks of power and control. Israeli universities have become extensions of the state's Zionist objectives, sacrificing academic freedom in favour of nationalist agendas that target Palestinian students and scholars. This parallels the suppression occurring within Western universities, where Palestinian narratives are similarly marginalized. At first glance, the silencing of these voices may seem like a malfunction in systems that ostensibly champion freedom of speech, diversity, and human rights (Berlant 2016). However, this suppression is not an anomaly but a feature of the system itself. The marginalization of Palestinian perspectives in Western academia reflects the broader dynamics of Western sovereignty and domination, aligning with Noura Erekat's analysis in Justice for Some, which demonstrates how international legal systems are designed to maintain power imbalances favouring Western interests (Erakat 2019). While Western academia presents itself as a space for diversity and inclusion, it actively silences pro-Palestinian activism, exposing a profound hypocrisy between its stated values and actual practices. These institutions, whether in Israel or the West, are far from neutral; they are deeply implicated in sustaining hegemonic structures that suppress dissent and uphold systemic inequalities, ultimately reinforcing Western dominance. ◆

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Book Roundtable

How Islam Rules in Iran

by Mehran Kamrava

This roundtable features a single work, *How Islam Rules in Iran*, a recent and timely book that examines the evolution of Islam as a ruling framework in the post-revolutionary Iran. The author, Mehran Kamrava, undertakes an ambitious task of examining the institutional structure of the clerical establishment before addressing the question of Iranian Shia jurisprudence. Here, Dr. Kamrava engages in various interpretations and debates concerning *fiqh* and *Velayat-e Faqih*, religious reformism, ijtihad and Islamic democracy and how specific traditional interpretation of the concepts have shaped the country while the reformist interpretations were suppressed in the meantime. Kamrava also engages in detailed analyses of the reformist interpretations by Hasan Yousefi Eshkevari, Mohsen Kadivar and Mohammad Mojtahed Shabestari. In doing so, Kamrava addresses the shortcomings of the hermeneutics movement and why the movement was unable to reform the republic from within.
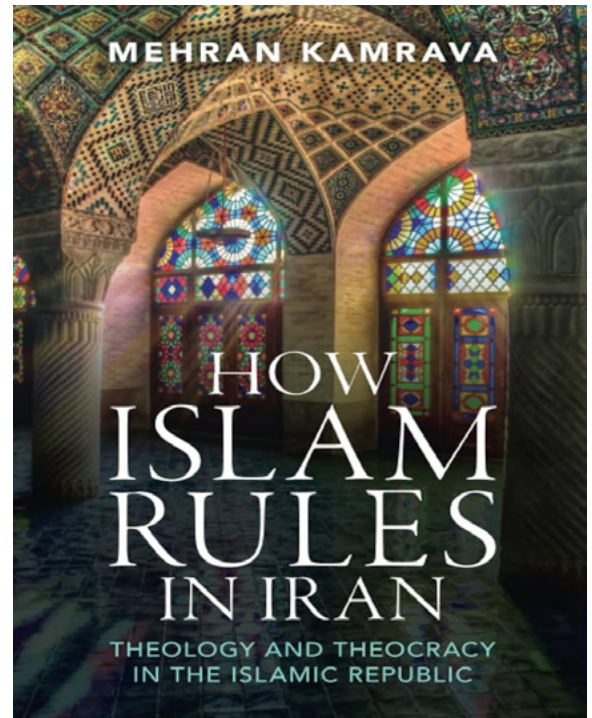
The roundtable features reviews of the book by three scholars, namely Paola Rivetti, Eric Lob and Norma Claire Moruzzi. Each reviewer provides thoughtful comments and criticism of the book. As we did in our past book review roundtables, we shared the reviews with the author to respond. We are grateful to all three reviewers and Dr. Kamrava for their thought-provoking exchanges.

How Islam Rules in Iran came out at a critical time when the war in Gaza is expanding to other regional countries and the tension between Israel and Iran is escalating. Iran also held presidential elections in 2014 and elected Masoud Pezeshkian as the new president. We hope that our readers find *How Islam Rules in Iran* and its three reviews useful to understand the institutional structure of the clerical establishment as well as some internal dynamics in Iran.

- Gamze Çavdar

Paola Rivetti, Dublin City University

Paola Rivetti is associate professor of politics and IR at Dublin City University. She is associate editor at the Journal of Iranian Studies *and* Partecipazione e conflitto. *She is a member of the council of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies.*

With this book, *How Islam Rules Iran*, Kamrava positions himself as a fundamental scholar of contemporary Iranian political thought, having published important books in the past and continuing to refine his systemic analysis of Iranian intellectuality. In fact, one of the most relevant contributions of this book is its approach to Iranian intellectuals as a social category embedded in material conditions and power relations, which influence – if not determine – their epistemological approach to religious exegesis and politics. Kamrava shows how to overcome a scholarship interested in progressive thinkers only by treating them as organic intellectuals, who build up on past genealogical lines of intellectuality and who are divided in generations (see chapters 5-7); and by locating them in larger landscapes of intellectual production where conservative thinkers, too, operate. In this sense, Kamrava successfully shows that there is a strong intellectual dimension to institutions in Iran, and that the Islamic Republic is not simply "authoritarian", as those authoritarian regime structures are the result of intellectual engagements and decades-long debates. A good example of this is chapter 8: a rare example of rigorous analysis dedicated to Ali Khamenei's intellectual production and its implications for the government and governance system of Iran. More of this kind of work is needed for scholars and social scientists to deepen their understanding of Iranian politics and state institutions at large.

Reading Kamrava's book at the time of the second anniversary of the outbreak of the Woman Life Freedom uprising also prompts the question of how social movements and intellectual production interact. While reading the book, I could not stop asking myself "how does the knowledge offered in this book further our understanding of the WLF movement and social movements in general?". In fact, many of the ideas of the progressive intellectuals examined in this book have inspired pro-democracy protesters, while those of conservative thinkers justify and support their repression. Kamrava does not elaborate on the connection between (what might look like) abstract intellectuality and material social processes, and neither does he reflect on how diffused political discontent coalesce into a social movement. However, we know that connection exists thanks to the very real exchanges that take place in the everyday life of ordinary people, like the participants to my research have often emphasised, in the form of critical intellectuals being university professors and, as such, conveying their ideas to students or "whisper networks" among high-school girls who share women's magazines conveying feminist ideas built on progressive interpretations of Islamic jurisprudence.[1] The lack of

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1 See Rivetti, P. (2020). *Political Participation in Iran from Khatami to the Green Movement*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

a solid production in the social history of intellectual change in Iran— one which shows how the epistemic revolutions in the world of religious intellectuality relate to the "everyday stories" of ordinary people—is one of the reasons why we know little about how social movements and intellectual production interact. Along with strengthening knowledge in this field, scholars of the future also should foreground the work of women intellectuals, whose theoretical elaboration is clearly missing and overlooked in the scholarship about Iranian intellectuals.

Such blind spots hinder developments in another area: the analysis of liberatory and emancipatory religious and/or secular political thought; one that foregrounds anti-carceral, intersectional analyses that go beyond a liberal and procedural understanding of rights and democracy. Looking at the intellectual production of overlooked scholars who may sit at the margins of academia and "acceptable" intellectual networks, may reveal original theorisation about topics which are less spoken about, such as structural racism or inequality under neoliberal capitalism in Iran. The lack of radical and de-colonial analyses among progressive thinkers in Iran is something that social scientists of Iran are starting to notice. This is a fertile area for researchers because there is only little published work, as of yet. The influence of the Iranian state and its post-colonial posture is an important factor influencing and determining the liberal-looking attitude of Iranian thinkers who are critical of the Islamic Republic, and who struggle to engage topics such as racism or anti-capitalism, as they are weaponised in an anti-Western and anti-liberal function. These are layers of analysis that the scholars of contemporary Iran have yet to fully unpack. One possible venue for engagement in this type of investigation is diasporic intellectual and political production. As a result of the repression of the WLF movement, many progressive activists and students have left Iran for destinations where Egyptian, Syrian, Tunisian, Sudanese, Libyan, Palestinian, Lebanese, Turkish, and Kurdish progressive activists, students, and thinkers already reside because of the repression they've endure in the past decades. How are diasporic encounters influencing the intellectual production of Iranian activists? And if there are no mutual influence and exchange, why is that? It is from such encounters that a "radical" transformation of progressive Iranian political thought might develop.

In conclusion, Kamrava's *How Islam Rules Iran* is a must-read for social scientists who are interested in a solid investigation of how religion and politics are imbricated in Iran, but also for those who are interested in imagining Iranian intellectuality and its relation to Islam beyond the state and the confines of justifying the existence of – or the need to reform – the Islamic Republic.

Eric Lob, Florida International University

Eric Lob is an associate professor of politics and international relations at Florida International University. His research focuses on the intersection of politics and development in Iran. 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 Board of Trustees member of the American Institute of Iranian Studies.*

In his book *How Islam Rules Iran*, Mehran Kamrava presents a cogent and accessible account of state-religion relations and religious and intellectual trends and developments in the Islamic Republic of Iran before, during, and after the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Kamrava bases his account on previously untapped, primary sources in Persian, that he collected inside and outside of Iran. By examining the Islamic Republic's ideological origins and dimensions, Kamrava supplements his recently published books on its consolidation and resilience from the realist and materialist perspective of structure, agency, power, and institutionalism (Kamrava 2022, 2023). In his book and in a constructivist fashion, Kamrava traces the three phases of the Islamic Republic's ideological evolution and trajectory from the pre-revolutionary period to the present day. The first phase took place before and during the revolution, between the 1960s and early 1980s, when Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1979-89) and his circle of revolutionary clerics consolidated power. During this period, there existed an interpretative opening that included Khomeini's innovative and foundational concept of the "guardianship of the jurisconsult" (*velayat-e faqih*). The latter deviated from the quietist tradition of Shiism by declaring that a supreme leader should rule over the state and community in accordance with Islamic law.

The second phase occurred during the reformist presidency of Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005) from the late 1990s to the early 2000s. These years constituted another hermeneutical opening among clerical and lay thinkers who contested the late Khomeini's central concept. Within an Islamic interpretative and intellectual framework, and as also described by Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi (2019) in his renowned book on the reformist movement, these thinkers challenged the religiopolitical status quo by (re-)introducing ideas involving authority, legitimacy, sovereignty, and democracy. Ultimately, they were censored and coerced by conservatives and hardliners led by Khomeini's successor, Ali Khamenei (1989-present). While being subjected to conservative repression and Western pressure, the reformists failed to convert their ideological constructs into tangible policies, causing societal disillusionment and political defeat.

Under Khamenei's leadership and after the Green Movement uprising of 2009, the third and final phase consisted of his political and ideological consolidation, which Kamrava calls "Khameneism." Compared with Khomeinism, as conceptualized by Ervand Abrahamian (1993) in his seminal book by the same title, Khameneism may lack the same level of Third World political populism that manifested itself in Iran's hardline president,

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-13). That said, Kamrava contends that it contains comparable degrees of conservatism, authoritarianism, paranoia, and intolerance. Kamrava concludes by contemplating the Islamic Republic's future and questioning whether Khameneism will outlive its maker, as the supreme leader grows older and as the succession issue looms large. Despite the Islamic Republic's disdain for the dynastic succession of its monarchical predecessor, and the inexistence of such a practice in the Shia clerical establishment, it would not be unexpected if Khameneism endured due to the institutionalization of the supreme leader's position and office – a process and outcome that Kamrava highlights in this book and his previous one on Iran (2023).

Broadening the analytical lens beyond Iran's idiosyncratic brand of Shia theology and jurisprudence, alongside its unique blend of religion and republicanism, which Kamrava details in his book, the Islamic Republic is indeed sui generis by possessing clerical leadership. At the same time, it remains unexceptional from a religious and revolutionary standpoint. Religiously, the Islamic Republic is both a cause and consequence of Muslim religious scholars (*ulama*) increasingly perceiving themselves as custodians and practicing religiopolitical activism while being bureaucratized by some states. In his book, Muhammad Qasim Zaman (2007) deftly documents this discursive development and contemporary change not only in Iran, but also in Pakistan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, India, and the Philippines.

Like its revolutionary counterparts in China and Russia, the Islamic Republic exhibits weak civil-military relations and oligarchic tendencies. Additionally, the Islamic Republic's political trajectory has contained the consolidation of both supreme leaders, interspersed with intermittent reformism during the presidencies of Khatami and, to a lesser extent, Hassan Rouhani (2013-21), and potentially Masoud Pezeshkian (2024-present). After the death of China's revolutionary leader Mao Zedong (1949-76) in 1978, political elites from within the Chinese Communist Party began undertaking economic reforms to transition the republic from state socialism to market capitalism. In the end, they were repressed by party hardliners before such reforms could encompass democratization and liberalization, culminating in the crackdown on the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989. Following decades of authoritarian rule and economic centralization in the wake of the Russian Revolution, Mikhail Gorbachev (1985-91) and Boris Yeltsin (1991-99) implemented sweeping political and economic reforms before and after the fall of the Soviet Union during the 1980s and 1990s. The political turmoil and economic adversity that accompanied these reforms set the stage for the rise and consolidation of Vladimir Putin (2000-08, 2012-present) starting in 2000 until today.

To conclude, Kamrava's book permits students and specialists of Iran and Shiism to process the ideological pillars and phases of the Islamic Republic's religiopolitical consolidation and contestation – from Khomeini's revolutionary regime to Khatami's reformist renaissance to Khamenei's reactionary repression. It also pushes scholars of area and religious studies to ponder how these pillars and phases possess parallels with the perceptions and practices of ulama in other parts of the Middle East and Muslim world. Finally, the book compels comparativists to contemplate the commonalities concerning the evolutionary trajectory of the Islamic Republic and

other revolutionary states.

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Norma Clair Moruzzi, University of Illinois

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Mehran Kamrava's How Islam Rules in Iran is an erudite and accessible work of scholarship. Whether sought out as a refresher for the details of specific theological and jurisprudential arguments, or for an overview of the evolution of a national political-religious discourse, the book is accurate and readable, making a valuable contribution to the literature on the Islamic Republic both for specialists and those less familiar with arguments within the discourse of Iranian political Islam. It is clearly written and admirably jargon free, and the notes are helpfully included at the bottom of the page (thank you, Cambridge University Press). However, the project is not reflected in the title. This is not a book about how Islam rules Iran; it is a book of intellectual history and the theological and political arguments within the state's clerical elite.

The details of this elite intellectual infighting can be fascinating. Kamrava traces the political implications of theological squabbles over justifications for clerical leadership or moral authority. Following the internal fissures within the Iranian religious (primarily clerical) elite over the proper role of Islam—and their role as its designated interpreters—within the Islamic Republic, Kamrava reveals the trend toward increasing orthodoxy (both religious and political) within the clerical-political leadership. The ideological turn towards rigid conservatism is reflected in the increasing consolidation of institutional control within a narrow circle of cadres whose chief merit has been their fealty to the elderly Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei. Kamrava tracks this intertwined intellectual and political trend, manifested through jurisprudential argument, from the intellectual precursors of the revolution, including but not limited to Khomeini himself, through to the almost-current national situation, relating the subtle differences and evolving positions among both well-known and relatively under-studied contributors to an ongoing debate. Kamrava terms the resulting ideology and institutional politics to be *Khameneism*, and he argues that it has become hegemonic.

All scholars worry that a completed research project will be unexpectedly overtaken by events. This book seems to have been completed after the 2022 death of Mahsa Jina Amini and the ensuing protests of the Iranian Women, Life, Freedom movement. Kamrava's short final chapter recognizes that the consolidation of conservative clerical institutional authority the book chronicles has not been accepted by large swaths of Iranian society, and that regime stability is challenged by

unaddressed problems of gender inequality and the recurrent threat of widespread popular unrest. The chapter sits uneasily with the overall argument that *Khameneism* has become Iran's successfully dominant mode of state governance and that postrevolutionary republicanism is essentially dead. But it seems to have been written before the surprise political events of the spring and summer 2024. In May, hardline President Ebrahim Raisi was killed in a helicopter crash. Reformist-affiliated candidate Masoud Pezeshkian, who received permission to stand as a candidate in the resulting June Presidential election, did well enough to qualify for the July run-off election, and won. The shock was not so much that the Pezeshkian could win, but that he was allowed to win. Kamrava rightly notes that the period from the contested 2009 election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad through the Raisi Presidency revealed a continuous and apparently successful institutional effort, both intellectual and political, to control elections and consolidate an authoritarian and exclusionary model of governance based on the most absolutist versions of *velayat-e faqih* (rule by the supreme jurist), initiated by Ayatollah Ruholla Khomeini, and developed as a justified institutional practice by Supreme Leader Khamenei. But Pezeshkian's permitted candidacy and acknowledged electoral victory illustrate one of the Islamic Republic's other chief characteristics: its adaptability. It is quite possible that the 2009-2023 period of *Khameneism's* intellectual and institutional hegemony has come to an end.

How Islam Rules in Iran is a thorough consideration of Iranian theocratic discourse, including the frequent hostility within that discourse to the actively republican elements of the dual state. But I would argue that methodologies that confine the study of politics to only formal institutions and discourses risk missing underlying social tensions and popular discontents, especially when examining authoritarian systems. States exist in relation with their societies. In Iran, the push-pull of state and society relations has consistently resulted in the secularization and liberalization of a society more and more distanced from the state's Islamic ideology and religious governing structures. This has happened even as state ideologues have attempted to assert themselves by appropriating institutional control to a narrow base of the most orthodox. Yet the theocratic leadership's unexpected decision to permit a more open election, and to recalibrate the uneasy balance of Islamic and republican state elements, indicates an admission that the recent period's institutional bet on consolidated *Khameneism* has failed. The state has adapted, and it appears we are re-entering an era of internal state-society negotiation rather than overt and constant confrontation. Despite the extremities of its orthodox public discourse, the Islamic Republic remains a complex and dynamic dual entity, challenging us to apply equivalently complex and adaptable research methodologies.

Response by Mehran Kamrava, Georgetown University, Qatar

Mehran Kamrava is Professor of Government at Georgetown University in Qatar. He also directs the Iranian Studies Unit at the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies. Kamrava is the author of a number of journal articles and books, including, most recently, How Islam Rules in Iran: Theology and Theocracy in the Islamic Republic *(Cambridge University Press, 2024);* Righteous Politics: Power and Resilience in Iran *(Cambridge University Press, 2023);* A Dynastic History of Iran: From the Qajars to the Pahlavis *(Cambridge University Press, 2022);* Triumph and Despair: In Search of Iran's Islamic Republic *(Oxford University Press, 2022);* A Concise History of Revolution *(Cambridge University Press, 2020);* Troubled Waters: Insecurity in the Persian Gulf *(Cornell University Press, 2018);* Inside the Arab State *(Oxford University Press, 2018);* The Impossibility of Palestine: History, Geography, and the Road Ahead *(Yale University Press, 2016).*

All authors like to see their works reviewed, and it is especially gratifying when the reviewers are gifted scholars. I am grateful to Eric Lob, Norma Claire Moruzzi, and Paola Rivetti for their gracious reviews. I owe special thanks for Gamze Cavdar for having arranged the book roundtable on *How Islam Rules in Iran.*

All three reviews largely agree with the central arguments of the books, and therefore there is not much in terms of substantive analysis for me to address. I will therefore confine my comments here to three main themes highlighted by the reviewers. The first has to do with the question of women, who, as Rivetti rightly points out, have been largely left out of the intellectual discourse in Iran. I address this "blind spot" on page 237.

This neglect of gender issues has been a chronic feature of the intellectual production of Iran's religious intellectuals both on the right and the left of the ideological spectrum. Especially striking has been the inability, or cultural and political unwillingness, of so-called religious "new thinkers," both in the

mid- to the late 1990s and in more recent years, to make women's issues part of their intellectual discourse.[1]

Related to the issue of women is the social movement that erupted in Iran in the aftermath of the killing of a 22-year-old woman, Mahsa Amini, at the hands of the state's morality police. Both Rivetti and Moruzzi wish the book delved deeper into the connection between prevailing intellectual currents and unfolding social processes. While acknowledging the validity of their arguments, in *How Islam Rules in Iran* I mention, perhaps insufficiently, how the intellectuals' unwillingness to tackle women's issues fostered the social movement of 2022:

By late 2022, Iranians of all walks of life, especially the young and particularly young women, took matters into their own hands, removed their compulsory hijabs en masse, shouted slogans about women's freedom, and refused to eat in segregated university cafeterias. As the Islamic Republic entered its fourth decade, young Iranian women and men demonstrated with their

1 Mehran Kamrava, *Iran's Intellectual Revolution.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 22.

deeds what their father's generation had pretended to care for but had failed to theorize about (p. 302).

I have elaborated on the outbreak of the Mahsa Amini movement and women's larger treatment by the Islamic Republic elsewhere.[2]

The core arguments of the book are geared toward analyzing "the ways in which current religious intellectual production in Iran has shaped evolving political–religious discourses in the country, impacted the ongoing transformation of Iranian Shi'ism, and has ultimately underwritten the political survival and fate of the Islamic Republic" (vii-viii). To this end, I have devoted some significant space to "Khameneism" (chapter 8), a notion inspired by Ervand Abrahamian's perceptive "Khomeinism." Given the post-publication election of the reformist Masoud Pezeshkian as president, Moruzzi maintains that "the chapter sits uneasily with the overall argument that *Khameneism* has become Iran's successfully dominant mode of state governance, and that postrevolutionary republicanism is essentially dead." The state's inherent adaptability, she argues, demonstrates that "consolidated *Khameneism* has failed."

Built-in adaptability is indeed a source of resilience for the Islamic Republic, a phenomenon I have explored extensively elsewhere.[3] But adaptability as manifested in the reformists' presidential victory hardly amounts to a negation of Khameneism as I have outlined in the book. In my conceptualization, as the book amply demonstrates, Khameneism constitutes first and foremost the practical manifestation of an important ideological innovation within Shia thought, one that goes beyond specific political developments. An entire group of state ideologists, many of them with clerical backgrounds and based in Qom and elsewhere, busy themselves with articulating the ideological minutia of a theology centered around the person of Khamenei. The main focus of these rightist religious scholars is to provide theoretical justifications for Khamenei's practice of clerical absolutism, a theoretical innovation within Shia jurisprudence first politically articulated by Khomeini. Khamenei has put into full practice a notion that Khomeini introduced close to the end of his life.

The resulting ideological corpus deals primarily with two questions: 1) the origins of political legitimacy – divine versus popular, as examined in the book's chapter 7; and, 2) the scope of the *Velayat-e Faqih's* authority – absolute versus limited and conditional, as discussed in chapter 8. As Lob rightly observes, I do wonder whether Khameneism will outlive Khamenei; most likely it will not. For now, however, it remains fully in force.

The fact that the reformist president saw it prudent to run his cabinet nominees by Khamenei *before* formally presenting them to the Majles speaks volumes as to the scope of the Leader's authority. For the time being, Khameneism continues to undergird the theological foundations of the Islamic Republic as the system (*nezam)* has taken shape in the post-Khomeini era.

From authors' perspective, "good" reviews are those that make a work ultimately stronger. As such, I am grateful to all three reviewers for helping me with their excellent reviews.◆

2 Mehran Kamrava, "Women, Life, Liberty: Protesting the Islamic Republic," *Case Analysis, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies*, (October 4, 2022), pp. 1-4; Mehran Kamrava, "From Misogyny to Security: Women and the State in Iran," *Third World Quarterly*, forthcoming.

3 Mehran Kamrava, *Righteous Politics: Power and Resilience in Iran*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), pp. 226-299.

MISSION STATEMENT

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