JOURNAL OF MIDDLE EASTERN POLITICS AND POLICY

A HARVARD KENNEDY SCHOOL STUDENT PUBLICATION

CIVIL SOCIETY &
POLITICAL TRANSFORMATIONS

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Acknowledgements

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

We are pleased to present the ninth edition of the *Harvard Kennedy School Journal of Middle Eastern Politics and Policy (JMEPP)*. JMEPP seeks to provide advanced analysis on issues of policy relevant to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Eleven years after the 2011 Arab Spring, feelings of transformation and change still reverberate throughout the region. The Spring 2022 edition, *Civil Society and Political Transformations*, seeks to illuminate how civil society organizations operate in the region and their effects on political transformations.

As our team curated this edition, we sought a creative way to illustrate the theme for our issue. Our pursuit led us to Moroccan artist Mohamed Melehi, whose *untitled* work dons the cover of this edition and touches at the root of our discussion of civil society. To learn more about Melehi and how his work fits within the context of this edition, we spoke with *Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi*, founder of the Barjeel Art Foundation in Sharjah, UAE. Melehi belonged to an art movement named the Casablanca School, founded in the 1960s by Melehi and other Moroccan artists such as Farid Belkahia, Mohamed Chebaa, and Toni Maraini. Al-Qassemi explained that this movement sought to decolonize culture and advocated for studying and incorporating local histories and heritage, including Amazigh, Arab, and Islamic identity into artwork. Al-Qassemi tells us that civil society and movements have been at the center of many artists' works in the region, including the depiction of laborers such as in the works of Ragheb Ayad and feminist movements by Safia Farhat. From these artists and their works, one can understand civil society and political transformation in the region vis-à-vis an entirely different format. Thus, Melehi's artwork

is a demonstration of how local movements, such as the Casablanca School modern art movement, can impact culture, society and also, serve as an avenue for decolonization in the region. We are thankful to the Barjeel Art Foundation and Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi for loaning us the work of Mohamed Melehi for our cover. Our team worked hard in including a variety of writing mediums, including interviews, book reviews, and analyses on various themes in the region.

With the Taliban now exercising power over Afghanistan after the withdrawal of American forces, we aim to understand how this abrupt shift has led to a renewed attack on women's rights with an interview with Afghanistan's former Minister of Women Affairs, *Sima Samar*. Samar informs us that the war on women has relaunched in the country and that history is, yet again, repeating itself. Pivotal in our understanding of civil societies in the MENA region include reading literature from the region. *Christina Bouri* reviews Living Tangier: Migration, Race, and Illegality in a Moroccan City by Abdelmajid Hannoum and outlines Hannoum's examination of human flows in the Moroccan city of Tangier. Additionally, *Sumaya Malas* offers a review of No Knives in the Kitchens of This City by Khaled Khalifa and illustrates the arguments outlined in the book regarding the effects of autocratic regimes on Syrian civil society.

Lena Abboud and *Zeina Dbouk* of Hardwired Global, a non-profit organization, illustrate how their work takes on a holistic, right-based pedagogy on promoting pluralism in Iraqi schools by transforming classroom culture and offering a framework for teachers in the country to adopt. *Jeremy Barker* outlines the role of local religious

institutions in Iraq and the power they hold in creating a stable and inclusive Iraq, focusing on the influence of the Tishreen movement. Similarly, *Homa Hoodfar* and *Camilla Gray* argue that utilizing a women-centered approach to Islam could support gender equality in Afghanistan, as it delegitimizes the Taliban's subversive claims and advances women's rights through a religious lens.

Mary Fitzgerald outlines the opportunities and challenges presented to Libyan youth post-Gaddafi and argues that the government must pay more attention to young people as they are a critical demographic. Likewise, **Dr. Nathaniel Greenberg** illustrates the media landscape of post-Gaddafi Libya, and the role dialectics play within it. **Dr. Paul Kubicek** takes us to Turkey and assesses the era of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and what a "post-Erdoğan" Turkey would look like if the Justice and Development Party (AKP) were to lose the upcoming election.

The country of Jordan is highlighted twice in our issue. First, **Robert Laxer** analyzes the constitutional reforms enacted by the states' government at the beginning of 2022 and how this reform fits Jordan's ambition of becoming a democratic constitutional monarchy. Moreover, **Bruce Riedel** traces the stability of the Jordanian Monarchy, recalling the conspiracy surrounding Prince Hamzah's attempted coup against King Abdullah in 2021. **Dr. Daniel Serwer** and **Koen** *van Wijk* move us to Syria to outline the various de-facto authorities operating in the country and the implications these have for the future of Syria and the suffering of its people. *Arwa Mokdad* demonstrates how community-level engagement, through civil society organizations, in Yemen offers the best avenue for conflict resolution and sustainable peace. *Taurean J. Webb* centers Black and Palestinian visual cultural production and explains that these arts can be understood as an avenue for us to imagine civic possibilities.

Dr. Einat Wilf discusses Arab states' normalization with Israel in the past year and the implications of such deals on the wider MENA region and the West's perceptions of "Arab success." Finally, we conclude with **Dr. Roie Yellinek's** analysis of the relationship between Israel and the UAE and its role in the broader superpower competition occurring between the United States and China.

The JMEPP team is pleased to serve as a space for academic discussions on the ever-changing landscape of the MENA region. We invite you to read, contribute, and stay updated on our work through our website https://jmepp.hks-publications.org/

Ghazi Ghazi
Editor-in-Chief
Cambridge, MA, April 2022

INTERVIEW WITH DR. SIMA SAMAR

Camilla Gray

Dr. Sima Samar is an Afghan women's rights advocate who, after the fall of the Taliban in 2001, served in the Afghan interim government as the deputy chairperson and the first-ever Minister for Women's Affairs (MoWA). In July 2002, she stepped down from this role after receiving death threats from several religious conservative groups. From July 2002 until July 2019, she became chairperson of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), a national human rights institution that protects and monitors human rights and their abuses in Afghanistan. In 2009, she was nominated and short-listed for a Nobel Peace Prize for her outstanding commitment to supporting peace and women's rights in Afghanistan. In 2019, United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres appointed Samar as a member of the High-Level Advisory Board of Mediation and later as a member of the High-Level Panel on Internal Displacements. Currently, she is a visiting scholar at the Carr Center for Human Rights at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

Samar was born in Jaghoori, Ghazni, Afghanistan, on 3 February 1957. In February 1982, she earned a degree in Medicine from Kabul University and was one of the few Hazara women to achieve this at this time. In the years after the communist revolution in 1978, she fled Kabul to her district in Jaghori, which was already free from the regime in Kabul. In 1994, she had to move from Afghanistan into neighboring Pakistan with her son, where she worked as a doctor in a refugee camp and in a hospital that served Afghan refugees in Quetta. Prior to returning to Afghanistan and undertaking her role as MoWA, she established the Shuhada Organization and Clinic—an organization that treated Afghan refugee women and girls who were not receiving medical care and education in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

How does the return of the Taliban impact the rights of women in Afghanistan today? Do you see their return as history repeating itself?

Yes, history is, unfortunately, repeating itself in our country, and if this is possible in Afghanistan, other countries will likely follow suit. After 20 years of women's active involvement across many sectors of society, including holding positions of power, we have now returned to a similar situation as when the Taliban was previously in rule. The war on women has been relaunched, and the same pressure is being exerted to restrict women's dress, freedom of movement, access to aid, and justice. Women's liberty is once again the government's primary concern, and every week new rulings are made to impede us. For example, the Taliban opened girls' schools from grade seven to twelve. But nearly immediately after, orders were made to severely restrict students' and teachers' dress if they wanted to attend. A women's dress is far from the only problem Afghanistan faces as a nation, yet no other governing policies are so forcefully implemented.

However, irrespective of the Taliban's wishes, it is not possible for women's rights in Afghanistan to regress to a point where they mirror the past. A lot has changed within Afghanistan and across the world to prevent this relapse. Twenty years ago, we could not speak virtually the way we are speaking now. When the Taliban was first in control, we did not have access to a telephone or internet, which meant freedom of expression and media could be easily repressed. Thankfully, this is no longer possible.

How was the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA) perceived in Afghanistan before its

recent closure? Was it viewed as an important vehicle for change and supporting women's rights?

Symbolically, the establishment of MoWA was a recognition of the existence of women and their needs. The ministry also functioned to connect civil society with government and state institutions, a connection that didn't previously exist for women. MoWA ensured that at least one woman would be in the cabinet, so at a minimum, it facilitated women's access to the government after such a repressive regime. However, as the first minister of MoWA, I was aware that the value of this political status relied on MoWA's capacity to effectively use this position and institution to promote women's rights and made clear that gender inequity cannot be solved through one institution. While it is important to have women physically in government, it is also crucial to have a feminist woman that believes in femininity, let's say, beyond lipstick. Unfortunately, most of the time, women's rights were sacrificed to forge self-serving alliances that ensured that those who presided over MoWA maintained their political position. However, the biggest issue that MoWA faced was that it was not supported enough financially or politically by the leadership.

When the ministry was first established, it was to develop policy and implement programmatic work in Afghanistan. For example, we created a legal department to deal with issues of violence against women while also advising women on domestic issues that were in severe violation of human rights. However, once I left MoWA, the ministry's objectives shifted to focusing only on policy, and without this programmatic work many support systems for women fell to the wayside.

Why do you think the Ministry of Women was recently disbanded by the Taliban?

MoWA was closed because it was for women. I believe the Taliban are afraid of women and, due to this, try to control half the population through

developing a sense of fear in the community. MoWA was replaced by the Ministry of Vice and Virtue, whose main responsibility when the Taliban was first in power was to control women. MoWA's recent disbandment is a clear attempt to abolish anything related to women and to further control us. This attempt to control out of fear is demonstrated when the Taliban took Kabul in the late 1990s, and some Taliban men married the Kabuli women. After getting married, these men's behavior became very different. As a result, Mullah Omer ordered that no Taliban men could marry Kabuli women, demonstrating this sense of fear and insecurity towards educated women. In provinces such as Helmand, the Taliban were beating women who had whitish wrists as they were believed to be more educated and therefore dangerous. Whereas the rural and Quchi women who were largely illiterate were not perceived as a threat and were not even forced to wear a burqa.

Why do you think there is a fear of educated women?

In truth, it is because educated women are not as easy to control. Educated women cannot be men's property, and men want women to be their property. They want half the population to be under their absolute control, so they can easily deal with the other half. They feel unsafe around both educated men and women. But men, as seen in many countries, are often emboldened by the patriarchal attitudes set forth by fundamentalist groups. For example, men use the excuse that their daughters must be protected, and through this argument, they limit freedom of movement and expression. However, this is a common attitude in conflict situations, not only in my country.

In the current context, what is the best mechanism to facilitate change in women's rights in Afghanistan?

Firstly, I think we should uphold gender equality in the same regard as all other human rights, in

that women's rights are not something that can be negotiated. If we ignore the existence of half the population, long-term peace and stability cannot be achieved in Afghanistan. There is no progress or peace without women. This is not theory; this is practical. Secondly, we should not disregard women's rights in Afghanistan based on the belief that we must respect their religious values and culture. Are we supposed to blame the people of Afghanistan, blame those who have paid their life in the attempt to attain greater freedoms, because the Taliban is a group that resides in Afghanistan?

It is also important to recognize that many Afghans do not side with the Taliban, which has resulted in many being forced to leave the country out of desperation. I first went to the United States and Europe in 1989, and now, years after, I have been pushed out and made to stay outside of Afghanistan. Even though I know that living in another country will afford me a better quality of life, I don't want this. I want to live in Afghanistan, and I want to be an Afghan citizen. It is not my choice to leave, I have been pushed into this situation, and many others have been separated by force. My brother has four daughters; one in Germany, one in Britain, one in Canada, and one in the United States, while my brother and his wife live in Sweden. One family in five countries. Is this life desirable? Of course not. We were happy living in Afghanistan even without proper shelter, without electricity for hours at a time, and with no security.

What do you believe the role of the international community should be in terms of creating change for women in Afghanistan?

As previously mentioned, the international community should not negotiate women's rights. Currently, the people of Afghanistan need more humanitarian relief, and more programs need to be based on an approach that enhances gender equity and counters discrimination. When provisioning relief, women must also support in the development of policies, distribution of aid, and monitoring of these humanitarian programs. If you provide women with the resources and ability to work in the health sector and education, you can more effectively facilitate women's empowerment. The international community also cannot give in to the Taliban or be pressured to slowly abide by their subordinate rulings. Some UN agencies suggest that their female staff in Afghanistan should work from home, and when foreign female workers directly interact with the Taliban, they wear a headscarf even though it is not legally required. This is a form of admission to the Taliban and acts to work against the plight of Afghan women.

How do you see the future of Afghanistan?

Unless the people of Afghanistan come together and the international community acts, misogyny will continue, poverty and violence will increase, and fundamentalism will become even more powerful and spread to other countries. Something which has already occurred in Pakistan. The war on women and violence will spread to other countries, and this problem will not stay within the region. We should not wait until history repeats itself to act, as it will be too late. Fundamentalist groups such as ISIS, Boko Haram, and many others look to the Taliban for inspiration and become emboldened by their success in Afghanistan. This spread of fundamentalism will also not be bound to Islam, but it will spread to other nations and religions. These extremist groups learn how to control people and maintain patriarchy from each other. As I keep saying, we will all pay a heavy price, the people of Afghanistan have already paid dearly, and unfortunately will continue to pay the price.

Camilla is a first year MTS candidate at Harvard Divinity School, with a focus in Islamic studies and the intersection of religion, ethics, and politics. She also runs her own non-profit, Empowered Design, and previously worked for the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Copenhagen

ABDELMAJID HANNOUM, LIVING TANGIER:
Migration, Race, and Illegality in a Moroccan City

Christina
Bouri

(Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019). Pp. 312. $75.00 hardcover

As Abdelmajid Hannoum alludes to, the Moroccan city of Tangier is the offspring of modernity. Yet, like other cities in Africa, Tangier was a colonial creation because colonialism affected a cultural and economic spatial revolution. *Living Tangier: Migration, Race, and Illegality in a Moroccan City* examines human flows to and from the city and the politics of these flows within and outside of the Moroccan nation-state.

Living Tangier also examines the dynamics of migration between Africa and Europe and within Morocco itself. The book significantly contributes to migration and urban anthropology by examining how on the Mediterranean border, in the city of Tangier, migration is entangled with European Union (EU) laws and Moroccan racial perceptions and practices (13). As a postcolonial state, Morocco experienced the politics of race when France ruled its society, and, after colonialism, this ideology remains prevalent in Moroccan society.

Hannoum draws on Foucault's argument that "the existence of legal prohibition creates around it a field of illegalist practices." Laws on migration have created what we call the "illegal migrant" and "how illegal practices themselves are used" and controlled by means that are themselves illegal to achieve "illicit gains" (18). Laws, therefore, are established in a way to create illegality. In the case of migration, the EU, for example, has created illegals because they are needed in a capitalist and industrial economy – given that their illegality provides access to "cheap and malleable labor." This applies and

connects to the state of the *haggar* and West African migrants. The *haggar* are perpetrators of the *hogra*, which is a system of injustice and corruption in the country, and this system is the general political condition in Moroccan society. The *hogra* occurs in "the absence of the state law, of the rights of the privileged, of accountability, nepotism, unemployment" (35). In fact, the "*hogra* constituted the symbolic order of pre-colonial politics" (35).

Hannoum also refers to the *harrag*. *Harrag* comes from the Arabic verb *hrag*, which means to burn. Therefore, a *harrag* is the migrant who metaphorically burns themselves. Most often, the *harrag* is from the countryside or rural shanty towns outside of Morocco's major cities. This term is also used when referring to someone who has overstayed their visa in Europe, therefore being an "illegal immigrant" (66). With this latter use of the term, it's used as if the person has burned the visa itself. Moreover, throughout the book, Hannoum examines the condition of the *harraga*, the space in which they live and operate, and as social actors, how they "act and change cultural forms" and display agency through acts of transgression (or *lahrig*) (66). According to Hannoum, *harrag* is related to the condition of globalization and rural-to-urban movement (66).

Living Tangier also examines the terms "Blackness" and "Whiteness" in Moroccan society while simultaneously discussing what defines illegality or legality concerning migration. The book is also an expressive commitment to history's role as an "important mode of sociological analysis in rethinking the past." The past and the present are reconfigured in space in Tangier, as we will talk about in relation to the Europeans.

Hannoum states his aim as being twofold: it's a study of African "illegal" migration to Europe and European "legal" migration to Morocco, as well as a study of how a city has changed and been transformed by the flows of migrants from both Europe and Africa. Hannoum also shows how the Europeans socioeconomic privileges within Tangier allows them to reinvent themselves and live in anonymity. Reinventing oneself is a reason why people relocate to Tangier. Places or locations are important in the shaping of one's identity and in reimaging one's past. It does not necessarily mean that they are lying, but the place they are in requires them to resituate their past and present in the new context of the place.

Living Tangier is a study of two main regimes of mobility – one African and the other European. Because the ethnographic site is itself the city of Tangier, the book also examines how Moroccan society has been affected by the flows of migrants from Africa and Europe. In other words, the book is as much a study of transnational migration as it is a study of Moroccan society in the so-called "age of globalization" (19). Specifically, the *harraga's* presence and their marginalization in today's world is part of a global trend of neoliberal capitalism and the marginalization of youth (40). The *harraga* are willing to give up their nationality because they do not feel like Moroccan citizens. There is no relationship between them and the state. Therefore, leaving their nationality behind is essential in gaining freedom and unrooting themselves from the state that gives them nothing. Both the *harraga* and the West African migrants feel that mobility is more important than being rooted, because being rooted reflects homes, where a home can be a "reflection of their subjectivity" (213).

Reviewed by Christina Bouri, AM Candidate at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Harvard University; email: christinabouri@g. harvard.edu

Christina is a second-year AM candidate at Harvard's Center for Middle Eastern Studies. Her research primarily focuses on left and socialist movements in Iraq and the Levant in the past century. Christina is also interested in legal history and the intersection of human rights and international law in relation to the new, and ongoing, refugee crises in the Middle East.

AUTHORITARIAN TRANSFORMATIONS IN A POST BA'ATHIST COUP SYRIA:

Khaled Khalifa; translated by Leri Price, No Knives in the Kitchens of This City

Sumaya
Malas

(Hoopoe Fiction, 2016) Pp.240 $17.95)

Today, the topic of Syria is associated with extreme violence, civil strife, and a displaced people. However, the true origins of mass discontent and the obstacles for the success of the 2011 Arab uprisings are relatively unknown to the public. As thousands took to the streets to protest a violent regime and advocate for a free and democratic society, the media and US foreign policy often framed the Middle East through a lens of democratic exceptionalism. These cultural and religious arguments rely on old orientalist tropes about the Middle East rather than identifying the primacy of factors such as the *long durée* of history and the post-colonial social fragmentation many of these countries had as barriers to democratic consolidation. Khalid Khalifa's novel, *No Knives in the Kitchens of This City*, does not reach the beginning of the Arab uprisings in Syria, but it does discuss the consequences of a rising autocratic regime on Syrian civil society. Although Khalifa's work is fiction, it powerfully elucidates all the mechanisms of power and control a regime can assert to ensure their authoritarian grip and dash any early hopes of democratization and plurality during early state building and political transformations. What is even more powerful is the visceral experiences of the reader as they explore the specific qualities of early Syrian authoritarianism the characters navigate in their interactions with the regime to understand the diversity in authoritarian regime type and why, decades later, the regime was able to survive a popular uprising with mass mobilization.

The novel follows the lives and relationships of a family consisting of two generations, illustrating the hopelessness and misery manifesting differently through several characters. The unnamed narrator is the second eldest of four children, following Suad and preceding Sawsan and Rashid. His mother is the youngest of four, including Ibtihal, Abdel-Monem, and Nizar. Through the lives and relationships of this nuclear family, we can examine the effects the changing political landscape had on the individual and family unit and the different logics and functional mechanisms of authoritarianism. Permeated throughout the novel is the sensation of fear and suspicion associated with the loss of freedoms and social safety nets critical to democracy, and how the public was at the mercy of the regime's security apparatus. The newly treacherous political landscape gave way to "veritable insanity and strange odors, Aleppo became a city given over to ceaseless fear, a city of retribution, whimpering under the appetite of the mukhabarat and the corrupt officials."[1] The people of Aleppo were under such scrutiny to ensure no resistance against the regime that the narrator explains that "spies lived in trees" and people "kept silent" about the past because "praising [it] also meant cursing the present, and that could lead to endless questioning in security branches."[2] The general sentiment of misery and despair caused by the regime's consolidation of power and lack of accountability is prevalent throughout the novel and with all the characters. The city of Aleppo "was beginning to drown in its own filth" and rampant crime "were all reported

as 'perpetuated by person's unknown,'" indicating the low quality of life due to the lack of oversight and administration in the city.[3]

Due to the destructive impact of the dictatorship, political life, religious norms, and the culture of Aleppo transformed within the lives of the Syrian people and indicated the pervasive effects of authoritarian consolidation. We can see these changes especially through how Sawsan, the mother, and the narrator all come to terms with their realities and their attempt at happiness within the regime. The mother transforms from an active and respectable schoolteacher to a delirious old woman whose death would relieve a burden off her children. As the most volatile and temperamental character, Sawsan switches between committing herself to the new regime in becoming part of the militia, to feeling guilty and repenting by reinventing herself through conservative religious views, to eventually accepting her past and attempting to create a better future. Finally, the narrator finds that he and "The Party . . . were living parallel lives which never met" because his birth was a few days before the 1963 military coup and ascension of the Ba'athist Party, thus his character attempts to subdue the acute sense of reality in order to maintain sanity.[4] The character profiles of the mother, Sawsan, and the narrator illuminate the social relations underlying a pervasive authoritarian regime as we analyze the effects of a non-democratic shift in the political landscape on the political life, religious norms, and culture of Aleppo.

The mother's character illustrates the frustration many experienced during the tumultuous times of the late 20th century. She recounts the past longingly to point out the happier and more hopeful times they had, making her children feel "that everything really had changed, and how utterly wretched [they] were for not living during this beautiful era."[5] The author is clearly identifying an important shift in the political timeline of the young nation-state of

an authoritarian transformation by examining the resistance the mother had to the new social order. The mother resented the regime and would consistently speak out against "The Party," which was never explicitly named. With increasing state security and the possibility of being reported by the mukhabarat, she "no longer wanted to invite her colleagues to her house, as most of them had joined the Party . . . [and] was anxious and afraid she would be too frank with them."[6] This focus on the regime's efforts to erode social trust and cohesion shows their importance to creating a democratic society and to the agenda setting for the authoritarian ruler if the goal is to lay waste to the prospect of a community with flourishing pluralism.

Eventually, the mother became paranoid and "was aware that the opposition she used to feel" was missing, instead she "observed the fear growing inside her . . . and she convinced herself that she loved [the president], she had never hated him in her life" denying "having ever described [them] . . . as thugs."[7] Therefore, in a political moment where there could have been resistance and opposition to the new authoritarian political order, the regime's tactics relied on party uniformity and the omnipotence of the security apparatus to scare citizens into compliance. This repressive state transformed the mother from an outspoken and empowered woman to becoming suspicious and distrustful of those around her, eventually leading to her delirium. In understanding the impact of coercive mechanisms on social relations, the author emotionally conveys the critical need for community trust to avoid debilitating delirium and paranoia, which is prevalent in the Syrian case.

Another character, Sawsan, was a product of the "long deprivation" Syrian society experienced under dictatorial rule. She embraced the regime by signing up for the Party and becoming a paratrooper. However, her motivations for doing so were to gain some power and control over the

imposing force of the state in her life believing that "when you lived in a jungle you had to be a beast."[8] Sawsan did contribute to the oppressive regime by acting on orders to rip hijabs off girls and consistently reporting friends as anti-government conspirators.[9] Despite her initial compliance with the tyranny imposed by the regime, she spent the rest of her life "trying to rid herself of the smells that still clung to her soul and to her body: the odor of the Party, the paratroopers, and the past."[10] The author successfully conveys the hegemony of the regime and their ability to politically transform society in such a way that coerces compliance as it attacks a person's sense of political agency. Although Sawsan was "no longer irrepressible," the harsh government crackdowns on "leftists and religious university students" made her have "a hard time breathing."[11] Sawsan could not find lasting happiness within the power structure of the regime and found herself pitying her Party friends, rather she "has been living an untrue image of herself" in her attempt at gaining control within the chaos.[12] Since there are no political institutions and processes to reveal the oppressiveness of the regime at work, the author demonstrates it in the social spaces between the public and the Party.

Finally, the character of the narrator, despite being unnamed and without a consistent storyline, reveals his views on political life, religious norms, and culture through descriptions between the stories of his family. The narrator understood the transformations of suspicion and persecution of people as "a natural state of affairs" where it was dangerous to "let slip a word about the state of the country, or inflation, or the violence which was becoming more overt."[13] The author illustrates the overbearing surveillance of the Party because all Syrians knew that under Party policies, whatever they saw as an offense would be punished. Therefore, political life transformed under the regime becoming non-existent for those who did not want to contribute to Party tyranny and wanted to keep themselves safe. The power

of the regime ultimately lies in their ability to identify, target, and crush spaces for resistance, civil society, and democracy. The narrator also utilized religion to instill a sense of peace and security, especially after news that the president had died—showing the alternatives that many must seek when there is no institutional recourse within a repressive political system. He noted that "Aleppo was a city of ghosts, deep silence, and fear" and that they were "content with the sound of Abdel-Baset Abdel-Samad's Quranic recitation coming from the tape recorder" amid the "sudden silence" in the city.[14]

In addition, unlike the other characters in the novel who sought to reclaim some kind of agency in their lives under an oppressive state, the narrator found that "images of power… lead a person into a labyrinth of delusion."[15] Rather than seek to chase a fulfillment that is not possible in the current state, the narrator "watched [his] weakness grow" and turn him into "a silent being, fearful, and hopeless" where he "didn't think, and didn't dream."[16] He saw no point in engaging with political life, because those who did "would disappear and melt away . . . no desires, no dreams. No future, no past," and instead living in the present would ensure his momentary safety and security.[17] The author successfully conveys the deep emotional despair a human being develops when subjected to a repressive social and political order for so long, but also the resiliency of humanity to find alternative mechanisms to assert their sense of sanity.

Throughout the novel, we see characters struggle to maintain their sanity and claim their agency amid the authoritarian political transformations of the repressive state. This illustrates the regime's understanding of the need to prevent social freedoms and democratization throughout all their mechanisms of control—the Party, the security apparatus, the removal of spaces for opposition, the hegemonic nature of the regime, and the developed apathy to motivate change for a better social order. Each character encounters

political life and understands norms deriving from religion and culture differently in an attempt to achieve happiness or maintain dignity under the authoritarian political order. The mother transforms from an independent and outspoken woman, who believes in her higher position on the social hierarchy, to a delirious woman, who dies without very many lucid moments. Sawsan chases what she thinks will fulfill her immediate sense of security and happiness, experimenting both within the regime and opposed to it, however her past and position as a woman make her vulnerable under an abusive society. Finally, the narrator is representative of the typical Syrian under the regime. Someone who is content with living life parallel to the regime in order to avoid clashing with it and attempts to live a stable and dignified life under the otherwise hopeless state of society. In reality, the subjugation of the regime suppressed multiple generations of Syrians who saw economic stagnation, political oppression, and unfettered violence. Khalifa allows us the opportunity to understand the true state of affairs preceding the now devastating revolution on the Syrian people. And how a repressive regime's efforts to enable ultimate human misery at that time resulted in a shameful burial, like Suad, a stagnant life, like the narrator, an attempt at better opportunities outside of Syria like Sawsan, or leading to a devastating end to the sadness, like Rashid.

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Sumaya is a second year AM candidate at Harvard's Center for Middle Eastern Studies. In addition to working at the United Nations and as a field translator in Al-Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan, Sumaya was a Herbert Scoville Jr. Peace Fellow concentrating on issues of international security and arms control. Her research primarily focuses on fragile states in the region and analyzing conditions that precede conflict in to pursue strategies of good governance.

Endnotes

1   Khalifa, 122.
2   Khalifa, 171.
3   Khalifa, 137.
4   Khalifa, 99.
5   Khalifa, 2.
6   Khalifa, 120.
7   Khalifa, 100.
8   Khalifa, 113.
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10 Khalifa, 65.
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CLASSROOM AND COMMUNITY TRANSFORMATION THROUGH EDUCATION IN POST-CONFLICT IRAQ

Lena Abboud and Zeina Dbouk; Hardwired Global

Organization: Everyone deserves the universal human right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief—it's how we're hardwired. Since 2013, Hardwired Global has worked with governments, legal experts, educators, and civil society leaders in more than thirty countries around the world to advance legal and social protections in countries where this freedom is most at risk. Within education, we have worked with Ministries of Education and education associations to provide training for educators to develop new teaching methodologies and educational resources to promote pluralism and associated human rights in their classrooms.

Zyad, a school director in the city of Mosul, closed his school when Da'esh—known internationally as the Islamic State—overtook the region and tried to impose their radical ideology in classroom curricula. Though his city was liberated from Da'esh in 2017, he believed the physical and psychological damage done to his community was too much to repair. "I thought to myself, 'This city will never rise again,'" he said.

But one girl changed his perspective.

"A young girl wearing a school apron and a backpack came out of the rubble and approached the school," he said. "She did not see the danger around her. She only saw the opportunity to learn again. And her parents also understood the importance of education for their daughter and their community."

Zyad re-opened the school and, in the process, invited thousands of children who survived the occupation of Da'esh to return to school and rebuild their community. Additionally, he received training from Hardwired to re-integrate students affected by the conflict in the classroom and transform their fear and mistrust into understanding and empathy through education.

"The training from Hardwired transformed me personally and gave me the tools I needed to share this transformation with students in my community," he said. *"We are working with teachers and students to rebuild Mosul with a culture of respect for diversity and social cohesion."*

The classroom can be a front line of defense against conflict along political, religious, sectarian, or ethnic lines. In this context, educators in particular can lead post-conflict reconciliation and reintegration—first in the classroom and more broadly across their communities. Hardwired Global is preparing teachers to cultivate a climate of respect for pluralism and diversity in communities fractured by generations of conflict in Iraq. Findings from our program provide a roadmap for navigating the reintegration of students in diverse post-conflict environments.

Challenges to Pluralism in Iraq

Historically, the social fabric of Iraq has frayed and torn along political as well as religious, sectarian, and ethnic lines in times of conflict. Disputes and clashes between groups have defined generations of Iraqis, and foreign interventions have undermined the country's stability for decades. Moreover, the rise of al-Qaeda and more recently Da'esh further decimated the country. Between 2014 and 2017, Da'esh overtook much of northwestern Iraq and targeted Yezidis, Christians, members of other

religious and ethnic minority communities, Shi'a Muslims, and Sunni Muslims who did not adhere to their ideology. More than 70,000 civilians were killed by Da'esh and the subsequent battle to defeat the terrorist group, and more than 5 million Iraqis were displaced from their homes[1]. While the region was declared "liberated" from Da'esh in 2017, members of the terrorist group continued to launch smaller-scale attacks on Iraqis[2].

Nearly four years after the defeat of Da'esh, feelings of fear, mistrust, and division continue to threaten community reintegration across Mosul and the Nineveh Plains. In Mosul, teachers have struggled to integrate students who lived under Da'esh with the students who the group displaced. Teachers reported students inciting violence and retaliatory attacks against others from different communities[3]. In villages like Qaraqosh and Hamdaniya, Christian communities isolated themselves from other groups and created what one local Christian leader described as new "ghettos." Across the region, students struggle to trust community members from different groups and fear another conflict will displace their families.

Establishing a Framework for Education on the Promotion of Pluralism

In this context, Hardwired set out to transform the "culture of the classroom" in communities experiencing challenges to the rebuilding and reintegration process across Mosul and the Nineveh Plains region. Since 2016, Hardwired has partnered with educators, government officials, and civil society leaders across Iraq to:

1. provide teacher-training and resource development support to educators in diverse settings,

2. establish a replicable framework for education on the promotion of pluralism, and

3. address specific challenges to education in-

terventions designed to mitigate religious, sectarian, ethnic, political, or other forms of social conflict — not only in Iraq but more broadly across post-conflict communities.

Hardwired's experience and engagement with teachers, education officials, and civil society leaders driving efforts to mitigate conflict and re-integrate classrooms and communities have informed four key components of our approach to post-conflict education intervention programs.

1. How you teach is as important as what you teach.

Hardwired's education program is based on the pedagogy of conceptual change and has been shown to produce a paradigm shift in the way people see one another, leading those we train to show deeper respect for the dignity of others and a willingness to defend others, even those with whom they may disagree[4]. Conceptual change is not about changing someone's religion, beliefs, or culture; rather, it is meant to help people develop new ways of understanding their ideas, beliefs, and opinions in the context of another person's right to have and express different ideas, beliefs, or opinions.

The program is unique in its approach as it creates an environment where transformation can occur. Education officials and educators themselves identify specific challenges to pluralism and reintegration in their communities and collaborate with their peers to develop practical solutions to these challenges. For most teachers, this is the first training they will receive to address the ideas and behaviors expressed by students that instigate conflict. Moreover, the program creates a space for teachers to express and think critically about their own experiences and develop practical skills and strategies they can implement in their classrooms immediately following the training.

2. Transformed teachers transform students.

Hardwired's work illustrates that transformed teachers transform classrooms and communities. The challenges addressed through the program are deeply personal. Nearly every teacher was displaced by or lived in communities controlled by Da'esh. The majority of teachers lost their family members, property, and livelihoods.

The program helps teachers develop skills to identify and overcome their misconceptions, biases, and fears about others that inhibit social cohesion and community reintegration. This ultimately produces a conceptual change in their understanding of and respect for the rights of people with different beliefs, opinions, or ideas. Moreover, as the teachers themselves undergo conceptual change about the rights and freedoms of diverse groups in their communities, they are prepared to lead their students through the same process.

Idrees, a Muslim teacher from Sinjar, recalls the exact date and time Da'esh entered his village. "On August 4, 2014, at 6:00 a.m., I woke up to women screaming in the streets," he said. "Within minutes, Da'esh took over the village and started to separate the Yezidi families. They took women and girls as slaves and started public execution of others." Idrees paid smugglers to escort himself and his family out of the city, and he is still unable to return. "We cannot dream of going back," he said. "Our villages and homes are now occupied with others."

Idrees managed a school for displaced students from his community. He entered Hardwired's training program in 2017 because he wanted training and tools to overcome the fear and mistrust his students expressed about others. Today, he trains other teachers and shares his expertise with other educators so they, too, can help students overcome challenges to reintegration and cultivate greater respect for diverse ideas and experiences in their community.

3. With the right tools, teachers can transform the culture of any classroom.

Educational interventions to mitigate tension in post-conflict settings require easily acquired and applicable resources for diverse learning environments. Our approach fills a critical need for teachers in Iraq, as it helps them develop valuable skills to address conflict and challenges to integration in the classroom, including:

Understanding of Human Dignity, Pluralism, and Diversity—Teachers develop a deeper understanding of key concepts inherent to human dignity, pluralism, and diversity. Key concepts include equality, non-discrimination, freedom of conscience and expression, and associated rights. Importantly, teachers understand how these key concepts can be practically modeled and discussed in a classroom setting.

Communication and Listening—Teachers develop communication skills that allow them to express their ideas and opinions and respect the rights of others to do the same. They can hear and consider other perspectives—including the perspectives of those with whom they may disagree—and identify misconceptions that contribute to conflict in their classroom and community.

Teaching Methodologies and Learning Interventions—Teachers develop skills and tools to teach and discuss key concepts inherent to pluralism and diversity in formal and informal learning environments. Teachers develop strategies to introduce key concepts and ideas in the classroom and learn best practices for creating a safe learning environment in which students are free to discuss their ideas and experiences.

Teachers in diverse learning environments—including formal or informal education settings and permanent or temporary school facilities—have effectively used these skills to deepen students' understanding of pluralism and respect for diver-

sity. For example, a 2018 study of the impact of lessons and activities developed and implemented by Hardwired-trained teachers in Iraq, Lebanon, and Morocco found that[5]:

* 75 percent of students who initially expressed negative views of others expressed a willingness to defend others, even those with whom they disagreed, after the lessons
* 100 percent of students who initially responded that they would exclude minority groups from leadership became inclusive of them after the lessons
* 60 percent of students who initially responded that they would discriminate against women and girls in leadership positions in the classroom supported gender equality in leadership positions after the lessons, with the most significant shift occurring in boys
* 50 percent of students who initially responded that they would react violently or aggressively towards those who think differently from them made a positive change in their behavior after the lessons

4. Transformed classrooms transform communities.

Teachers are instrumental in efforts to help students dismantle the misconceptions, biases, and fears that have fueled intolerance and conflict to instigate long-term and sustainable transformation—not only in the classroom but more broadly across communities. The program—and the lessons and activities implemented by teachers—does not impose or change the personal ideas and beliefs held by students. In fact, students have reported their experience in the program increases their confidence to hold and express their beliefs while also respecting the rights of others to do the same. In this way, students are invited to share and debate diverse opinions and ideas in an environment where differences serve as vibrant points of discussion rather than flashpoints of conflict. Moreover, the transformation

experienced in the classroom permeates through the community as they share their experiences with their families.

Anwar*, a primary school student in the Nineveh Plains, lost his father, a police officer, during the conflict with Da'esh. Teachers in his school led students through an activity designed by Hardwired-trained teachers to cultivate a greater understanding of and respect for diversity in the community. As he participated in the activity, he began to ask his teachers deep and reflective questions about his own experience: *Why do people in our community use violence against others who are different from them? Why would someone deprive another person of his rights?*

In pursuit of answers to these questions, he shared his ideas with his mother and grandfather. When Anwar's family attended a special presentation of the activity at his school, they could not hold back their tears. They observed how students learned to overcome the fears and mistrust they felt after the loss of Anwar's father. "I understood the need for the seeds of tolerance and respect to be planted in our community," Anwar's mother shared. "And I want my son to be a part of the change we aspire to see."

Anwar is one of more than 2,500 students in Iraq who have undergone lessons and activities with Hardwired-trained teachers in Iraq. In 2022, with support from the Templeton Religion Trust, Hardwired will partner with Hammurabi Human Rights Organization and the Regional Directorate of Education for Mosul and the Nineveh Plains to train more than 500 teachers across 40 schools to initiate a transformation in their own classrooms and reach as many as 12,000 students across Mosul and the Nineveh Plains.

Outreach and Impact

Hardwired's work in Iraq is producing a replicable and scalable model, not only for other regions and

provinces within the country but for conflict-affected communities around the world. In March 2020, Hardwired hosted ministry of education officials, teachers, and education stakeholders from diverse countries—including Lebanon, Jordan, Kosovo, Mali, Pakistan, South Sudan, Oman, Tunisia, and Morocco—for the organization's first Roundtable on the Promotion of Pluralism through Education in Essaouira, Morocco.[6] The two-day gathering provided participants with an opportunity to discuss challenges and priorities in their own educational contexts and develop strategies to apply best practices identified through Hardwired's programming to their initiatives.

The program provides a holistic rights-based pedagogy that can be applied in various social, cultural, religious, and national or political contexts, consistent with general guidelines on national action plans for human rights education. By working in partnership with educators, officials, and civil society leaders in post-conflict environments, the approach is ultimately guided by the community's unique background, needs, priorities, and objectives. This approach is critical to the successful implementation of the program, as it ensures any intervention: (1) is implemented in response to needs identified by government officials and educators themselves, and (2) employs an approach that can be sustained or scaled in the unique educational context without external support.

As one student in Mosul shared: "Just because we believe different things, it doesn't mean we are enemies." The lesson is simple, but for students who have watched their communities' fracture and fall because of their differences, it can be a catalyst for life-changing—and lifesaving—transformation.

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TOWARD A STABLE AND INCLUSIVE IRAQ?
Individual and Institutional Religious Freedom Can Help

Jeremy
Barker

Introduction: "*In my country religious freedom means life. Thousands of people have been killed only for their identity or even for their name! It is not easy to live in country if the authority and the community can't accept your belief or your style of rituals. So religious freedom is crucial for my country.*"

This was the reflection of an Iraqi religious leader when asked about the value of religious freedom at the end of a two-day dialogue with representatives from many of Iraq's diverse religious and ethnic communities in northern Iraq, December 2021. The experiences reflected in those conversations highlight the truly existential nature of these threats, whether it was the testimony of Yazidis, more than 2,500 of whom were abducted seven years ago and remain in captivity,[1] or Baha'i, a religious community that is still formally illegal,[2] or Christians of various denominations who have seen their communities shrink by more than 90 percent in the past two decades.[3] Yet it is not only small minority groups that have suffered from exclusionary policies and sectarian conflict; Shi'ite and Sunni Muslim communities continue to see recurring cycles of targeted violence.[4]

This article seeks to provide some context to Iraq's political and social dynamics since 2003, including the role of the *Muhasasa* system in hardening fragmentation and division. It will then look at the 2019 *Tishreen* Movement, a core feature of which was a rejection of this system, and the subsequent attempts to translate those demands into political and social change. Finally, it will consider how religious freedom, in both its individual and institutional dimensions, may have something to contribute toward supporting a more stable and inclusive Iraq.

Managing Diversity or a Policy of Entrenched Division?

Conditions for targeted violence have been exacerbated by policy decisions made in the years since 2003, as Shamiran Mako and Alistair D. Edgar argue in their introduction to a special issue of the *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* focused on the challenges and failures of post-2003 interventions in Iraq. They point to two significant factors. First, "securitized state-building imped[ing] bottom-up, localized efforts at maintaining peace following democratization." Second, given American over-reliance on a narrow group of exiled elites, "American state-building suffered from multiple and overlapping crises of legitimacy that set the path for re-emergent authoritarianism and heightened the propensity for perpetual and pervasive cycles of conflict and fractionalization."[5]

In Toby Dodge's contribution to the same issue, he argues that the *Muhasasa Tai'fiya* at the center of the Iraqi state-building project ultimately undermined the state's capacity, coherence, and stability.[6] In the *Muhasasa*, Iraqi elites pursued an informal consociational elite bargain: a political system sharing power among representatives of social groups. As Dodge recounts, this system incentivized elites to utilize symbolic, economic, and social capital to support their case that ethnic and religious division should serve as the key organizing principle in post-regime change Iraq. The result was that,

> …specific policy platforms and individual politicians became largely irrelevant as large multi-party alliances used the symbolic violence of ethnic and sectarian ideology to solidify their target electorates, juxtapose them against other ethno-sectarian groups and on

this basis drive them in the largest possible numbers to polling stations.[7]

This notionally proportional representation would then guide the distribution of state resources through ministry positions and budgets, civil service positions, government contracts, and other forms of patronage. The control of these resources was lucrative, with the public payroll expanding more than nine times from $3.8 billion to $36 billion between 2005 and 2019.[8] Moreover, these political dynamics were augmented by the increasingly powerful, predominantly Shi'ite militias whose influence has been amplified in recent years, particularly since their role in the military campaign to retake territories controlled by ISIS in 2017.[9]

While this arrangement may have claimed to represent some governing logic initially, it has increasingly shown itself incapable of delivering for all Iraqis. Instead, the *Muhasasa* system, far from capably managing ethnoreligious differences, has hardened divisions and feeds institutionalized corruption, poor governance, weak public services, and recurring violence.

Tishreen: From Protests to Politics

The appeal of the *Muhasasa*, such as it ever had, has been increasingly questioned by the waning electoral salience of ethnoreligious blocs from a high point in 2005 throughout subsequent elections, with increased fragmentation and a decrease in the effectiveness of ethno-sectarian campaign rhetoric.[10] Beyond the ballot boxes, which have been intermittently boycotted, the system's rejection was increasingly shown in various waves through widespread protest movements, particularly from 2015 onward, reaching a crescendo with the 2019 *Tishreen* or October protests.

The protest movement grasped international headlines with mass rallies, marches, and civil disobedience centered in Baghdad but spread to cities across southern Iraq.[11] The protests were centered in the Shi'a majority south but represented demands from communities all across the country. As representatives from several communities described at the time, the demands were not just about removing a single individual but a rejection of the entire system as "sectarian politics have destroyed the country." While there were short-term steps to be taken, the heart of the protests was a demand for a country that would treat all citizens with equality and dignity. In the words of one civil society leader, "these demonstrations are showing that a different Iraq is possible."[12]

In the short run, some of these demands were met—despite intense violence against protestors by "unknown perpetrators," which killed more than 600 demonstrators. As a result, Then-Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi resigned from office, a new election law would be passed, and ultimately early elections were held in October 2021. Despite the decision by some activists to again boycott these elections, dozens of independent and "Tishreen" candidates ultimately were elected to the Council of Representatives, reflecting something of a genuine political transformation.[13] All are the first steps in delivering on the aims of the protest movement for a society that delivers for the people's interests.[14]

"Tishreen has forever changed Iraq," as is noted in *The Long Game: Iraq's 'Tishreen' Movement and the Struggle for Reform.*

> Iraqis on both sides of the struggle have come to realize the power of peaceful protest to cause change. Demands for accountability have become more organized, persistent, and far-reaching. Moreover, new political parties have emerged to translate the views and demands of Tishreen into electoral campaigns and, possibly, one day, policies.[15]

Much remains to be done, yet something powerful has been unleashed. A common cause in the push for reform has been found at some level between young activists and Shi'ite religious clerics who have come to reject the parties and individuals using "faith and sectarian identity—while furthering personal ambitions and lining their pockets from the government coffers."[16]

This represents a transition away from views of religious difference as an existential threat, as Fanar Haddad observes of Iraqi political evolution since 2003. In Haddad's view, increased political contestation and instability represent a movement away from "the prism of zero-sum sectarian competition" and toward demands for a political and social environment that can deliver for all Iraqis.[17] In crafting a new political and social system, robust religious freedom, in both its individual and institutional dimensions, is a core principle not to be overlooked.

Robust Religious Freedom: Securing Individual and Institutional Rights

In the effort to craft a new political and social order—one that embraces deep differences based on every person's inherent dignity and equality—religious freedom has a vital role to play.[18] Religious freedom is crucial in not only its individual dimension but also in an often-overlooked institutional dimension.

This institutional dimension was the focus of the Freedom of Religious Institutions in Society (FORIS) Project of the Religious Freedom Institute. The Project sought to critically engage with both the proper meaning and scope of institutional religious freedom and its contributions to a society's common good across 17 countries, including Iraq.[19]

Today, the most widespread definition of religious freedom in international human rights law is found in Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). As articulated in Article 18, this is the right of every person to have, to adopt, or change a religion or belief of their choice; to practice and manifest it individually and collectively; not to be discriminated against or suffer coercion based on religion or belief; to provide for the religious and moral education of one's children.[20] Furthermore, it requires equal and effective protection of the law for all persons against discrimination on the basis of religion.[21]

The exercise of religious freedom is in many ways the exercise of other fundamental rights such as the right to assemble, to speak, to the press, or to persuade others of your viewpoint. If one would restrict those rights for religious communities, who else might be denied those rights, and on what grounds?

These rights are not merely private, individualistic concerns but are often communal and institutional practices directly related to participation in society. "Even if we conceive of religion as a matter of individual conscience," as Bauman et al. describe, "religious institutions are critical to the formation and flourishing of religious individuals. Religious institutions allow for corporate religious action, provide venues for resolving doctrinal disputes, establish processes for reforming religious practice and belief, and offer supportive community."[22]

Paul Marshall and Timothy Shah explore this further in *Why People Need Religious Institutions and Why Religious Institutions Need Freedom*, arguing that the nature of individuals, of religion, and of societies themselves all provide strong arguments for the value in protecting institutional religious freedom (IRF).[23] In his explanation of IRF, Timothy Shah, building on the work of W. Cole Durham Jr., argues that

> We take institutional religious freedom to be the effective power of religious communities and organizations to be independent of control or interference by the state and other social actors and therefore to

enjoy meaningful self-determination in the conduct of their 'internal' affairs or self-governance as well as their 'external' affairs or engagement with the wider society.[24]

This includes three primary dimensions: a *substantive* right of self-definition, a *vertical* right of self-governance, and a *horizontal* right of self-directed outward expression and action.[25]

Bauman et al. explore at least four contributions that protecting the freedom of religious institutions make to flourishing societies as they "provide a check on government power and authority, nurture civic virtue and a spirit of volunteerism, contribute in substantial ways to the national economy, and produce social capital."[26]

These contributions of religious institutions as alternative sources of authority and influence may be contested in the Iraqi context. Yet, if cultivated, they can make substantial inroads toward peace and reconciliation. Robust religious freedom, which creates space for individual and institutional differences, offers an alternative to the sect-based and seemingly all-encompassing apportionment of power and state resources in Iraq, limiting secular and religious power.

Creating Space: Working Toward the Common Good

Ahmet Kuru has documented the negative impact of what he terms the "ulema-state alliance," which emerged from the mid-eleventh century onward in various forms and abandoned present if imperfect elements of religious separation in parts of the Islamic world.[27] On the other hand, when religious institutions operate separately from the state, a condition which the late Alfred Stepan termed the "Twin Tolerations," they contribute to the consolidation of democratic principles.[28]

The challenge of separation from the state while maintaining relevance to the street is one of the key obstacles to legitimacy for religious actors and

particularly Iraq. Marsin Alshamary describes these tensions in her examination of the role of the *Hawza* or *Marjaʿiyya*, the Shi'ite religious establishment, as peacebuilders in Iraq. While for most of its existence, the *Hawza* saw itself as representative of an oppressed minority, the post-2003 landscape dramatically reshaped that relationship, as it is now perceived as having entrenched ties with the ruling Islamist parties.[29]

This restructuring has created a contemporary example of the dangers of an ulema-state alliance, which Kuru has documented historically:

> When religious institutions establish an alliance with or become subordinate to the state, they contribute to the increasing socio-political centralization. They delegitimize the opposition and sacralize the government. They also lead to the violation of religious freedom and the oppression of religious dissent. In the case of the Muslim world, the ulema-state alliance has imposed religious restrictions to not only non-Muslims but also dissenting Muslims.[30]

Institutional religious freedom would argue that religious actors ought to be publicly and politically active; yet, neither dominating the political sphere nor dominated by political actors, a simplified phrasing of Stepan's "Twin Tolerations."

In practice, this is the tension embodied in Alshamary's account of the *Hawza* as religious peacebuilders who may function as both "*Thinkers and Theologians*" and "*Doers and Activists.*" This framing captures the challenge religious figures face in a highly religious and contested society: to articulate a theological basis, social ethos, and political representation of public religion, while not becoming overly politicized and losing moral legitimacy. It also speaks to religious institutions' capacities in addressing significant social challenges.[31]

Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani has sought to navigate this tension in his approach to public engagement

at pivotal movements, whether the rise of ISIS in 2014, the COVID-19 pandemic, or Pope Francis's visit to Iraq.[32] These opportunities are not limited to only the *Hawza*, but a host of religious actors across Iraq who possess considerable influence, whether nationally, such as Chaldean Patriarch Louis Raphaël I Sako, or on the local and regional levels.[33] These leaders and their religious institutions represent an alternative locus for public action in addressing the demands for social, economic, or intracommunal reconciliation that the state and the "zero-sum game" of sectarian politics have been woefully unable to address.

As Alshamary notes, throughout history, Iraqi religious figures, across traditions, have regularly played exactly these types of roles. Speaking of contemporary Shi'a clerics in particular, she notes that "they possess both the doctrinal and practice-based tools, as well as the material resources, international support, and legitimacy necessary for using their positions to foster dialogue and conflict resolution in their country."[34]

The influence of religious institutions writ large can be brought to bear in addressing many of Iraq's most significant issues, not through cooptation into the political process but through the lived practices of religious communities and the institutions which shape and respond to them. "Though it may seem paradoxical to many," as Marshall and Shah argue, "one essential antidote to the dangerous and divisive tribalisms of our time is the strengthening of religious institutions and the embodied local religious communities they instantiate and promote."[35] As work is ongoing toward an Iraq that offers the prospect of a dignified life for all Iraqis, perhaps promoting religious freedom, in its individual and institutional dimensions, can help.

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LIBYA'S POST-GADDAFI GENERATION:
Challenges and Opportunities

Mary
Fitzgerald

More than a decade after the 2011 uprising that brought an end to Muammar Gaddafi's rule, the generation that came of age during the turbulent period that followed is now hoping to make its voice heard. Ten years of chaos and dysfunction have resulted in interrupted lives, dashed hopes, and diminished prospects for young Libyans. Theirs is a strikingly youthful country: more than half of Libya's population is under 30 years of age.[1] It's a youth bulge that presents both challenges and opportunities. It's also a demographic few Libyan political leaders have seriously engaged with up to now. They may soon have to start paying attention.

The Youth Vote

Figures released by Libya's High National Elections Commission (HNEC) last year show that 50 percent of newly registered voters are between 18-30 years old.[2] The legal voting age for both men and women is 18. As part of an UN-mediated roadmap, presidential and parliamentary elections were planned for December 24. Still, they have been postponed indefinitely as political wrangling over the ballot's legal and constitutional framework continues.

This recent uptick in voter registration is in contrast with low youth engagement during the last national elections held in 2014, the year Libya slid into civil conflict. That year, less than 30 percent of the total number of Libyans aged 18-29 who were entitled to vote ended up registering to cast their ballot in parliamentary elections that took place in June.[3] In comparison, 64 percent of those aged 50-59 participated in the ballot, which had a low overall turnout.

I spent that election day between Tripoli—the capital—and Benghazi, Libya's second-largest city. Residents of both cities told me they had already grown disillusioned with democracy, believing that it was not elected representatives—the first post-Gaddafi parliament was elected in 2012—that held the real power in Libya but the hundreds of armed groups that held sway across the country.

Few of the 98 people who submitted candidacy papers last year for the scheduled presidential election—the first such ballot in Libyan history—published manifestos or articulated much of a vision for the country. There was scant detail on what the prospective candidates would actually do if they became president. Fewer still put the needs and aspirations of Libyan youth at the heart of their program (with the exceptions of the two youngest candidates for the presidency, both of whom are in their 30s).

Libyan politicians overlook the youth vote—and the wider youth demographic—at their peril. They should also avoid taking it for granted. Young Libyans generally comprise of an educated cohort—though primary and secondary schooling has been disrupted in many regions since 2014 due to armed conflict—yet they are the most vulnerable section of society when it comes to unemployment and economic exclusion. Frustrations over these realities proved an important driver of the 2011 uprising. Young Libyans played a key role that year, whether participating in initial anti-regime protests or taking up arms in the insurrection that followed. Many joined anti-Gaddafi armed groups that still exist in various iterations, often bound up in regional or community loyalties.

The Challenges of Unemployment

Joblessness among young Libyans, including university graduates and youth with advanced qualifications, is a challenge as it can delay marriage and starting a family, both of which are traditional markers of adulthood in Libyan society. Official figures indicate that the average age for marriage is 34.4 years for males and 30.1 years for females.[4] This older marrying age is partly to do with the fact that more Libyans, particularly women, are pursuing education for longer periods of time. Still, the prohibitively high cost of marriage is also a factor.

The current government—an interim authority appointed last year as part of the UN dialogue process and known as the Government of National Unity (GNU) —has tried to tackle this issue by establishing a "marriage grant" scheme. Newly married couples can apply for a one-off payment of 40,000 dinars (around 8,700 USD). However, critics of the initiative say it is a populist gesture and not a sustainable solution to what amounts to deeper, structural challenges.[5] Some claim it has also led to more teenage brides, some of them reportedly underage. But others are supportive. "It's better that our young men get married than join a militia," a dentist in Tripoli told me on my most recent visit.

Youth Under Arms

Since 2014, difficult economic conditions—despite Libya being home to Africa's largest oil reserves—and the weakness of state structures have allowed corruption to flourish, thus further constricting the younger generation's prospects. Moreover, young men have been drawn into the periodic episodes of fighting that have characterized the civil war that began that year. In some cases, they have been drivers of conflict themselves. As a result, Libya's younger generation has been shaped by violence, both as victims and perpetrators. In a country awash with weapons, the 2015 World

Values Survey found that a high proportion of young people—20.7 percent—carry arms because they do not feel safe.[6] That figure is unlikely to have changed much since, given that the civil conflict continued for six years until a ceasefire was agreed in October 2020. Few expect a serious disarmament effort to happen anytime soon.

Years of war brought several waves of displacement, including from Tripoli and Benghazi, which dispersed social networks and changed centuries-old demographics. Disagreements over how and why the civil conflict began in 2014 divided communities and, in some cases, families. It is common to hear Libyans wonder if the country's social fabric will ever recover. Other wounds are more visible: the number of Libyans, particularly youth, left permanently maimed following various bouts of fighting since 2011 is such that—for the first time—government ministries are incorporating the needs of the mobility impaired into their future planning.

Youth Migration

Many of the young Libyans I met in Tripoli, Benghazi, and other cities during the 2011 uprising told me they dreamt of their country becoming "another Dubai on the Mediterranean." More than ten years on, some are not just bitterly disappointed; they say they have lost all hope. A number have migrated, several he told CNN. Six years later, threatened by armed groups on all sides of the civil conflict, he decided to pay traffickers to get him across the Mediterranean to Italy. "More and more Libyans feel there is no future in Libya for them," Said told me at the time.[7] "There will be more like me . . . It's difficult, and there is so much uncertainty about my future in Europe—but it is still better than being in Libya. No one can harm me here."

Other young Libyans struggle to get by at home. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is considered widespread, but—in a country with limited

psychiatric services and social taboos concerning the issue of mental health—it is seldom diagnosed and rarely treated. Doctors report an increase in drug abuse, including illicit drugs and prescription painkillers like Tramadol, among the younger generation.[8] "It's about trying to escape our reality," one user in his early 30s told me in Tripoli. "Most of my friends do the same."

Youth Activism

Others try to channel their energies into civil society. In the aftermath of the 2011 uprising, Libya's civil society space expanded rapidly but later shrank as activists were threatened—and in some cases assassinated—by armed groups. Several went into exile. Youth activists in Libya complain that their peers are too often sidelined when it comes to local or national decision-making, and their needs and viewpoints are seldom addressed.

A draft constitution, which was finalized in 2017 but has yet to be put to a referendum, calls for the empowering of young people to allow their full participation in public life. Article 33 stipulates that "the State shall prepare the appropriate environment to develop adolescents and youth, provide ways to increase their capacities, and support their effectiveness in national life. The State shall open up opportunities for them to work, participate in development, and benefit from various sciences and human cultures as well as enable them to participate in political, social, and economic life with a spirit of citizenship and responsibility."[9] However, there are calls to revisit the entire draft constitution—several aspects of which have been contested by various interest groups—if not discard it altogether.

In the meantime, some youths have resorted to other—sometimes controversial—ways of making their voices heard. In late 2018, protests organized by the youth-driven Fezzan Anger Movement in southwest Libya ultimately led to the closure of the

country's largest oil field, dealing a blow to its main revenue stream. The protesters said they wanted the central authorities in Tripoli to address local grievances in the oil-rich yet chronically underdeveloped Fezzan region.[10] As in 2011, it was a reminder that youth in Libya—if ignored or not engaged with—are capable of not only challenging but disrupting or even upending the status quo. Two years later, authorities in Tripoli and eastern Libya were surprised when anti-corruption rallies quickly snowballed to become the most widespread national demonstrations since 2011. Again, young people played a leading role in these protests—as both organizers and participants.

Tapping into the potential of Libya's youth

The lessons here should be evident for those who hope to be part of whatever new political dispensation takes shape in Libya in the future. Libyans who have been clamoring for elections say it's time for those who have been clinging to political power for years —what they call "the dinosaurs"—to exit the stage. Libya has not had parliamentary elections since 2014. The body—known as the House of Representatives—voted in then has long since lost popular legitimacy, not least because its leadership has proved a key spoiler in resolving the power struggles underpinning the civil conflict.

UN officials are pushing for the postponed elections to be held this year. If young Libyans turn out in numbers that reflect their voter registration levels, it will show they can collectively constitute a political force to be reckoned with. Any new agenda for Libya should put the country's youth front and center. This should include economic policies to tackle youth unemployment and enhance youth purchasing power; educational reform that helps prepare young Libyans for the labor market; and an overhaul of the country's medical sector to better meet the needs of the younger generation, particularly when it comes to reproductive and

mental health. Of them taking smugglers' boats to Europe. Among them is Youssef Ramadan Said, known as MC Swat and one of the country's most popular rappers. In 2011, 23-year-old Said provided one of the soundtracks to the uprising. "It feels like we're touching freedom."

Paying attention to young people and making efforts to include them in decision-making not only makes sense in terms of Libya's demographic trajectory—given they make up more than half the population—it can also help the country reap economic and social dividends.

By tapping into the potential of a younger generation connected to the wider world in ways that were not possible during the isolation of the Gaddafi era, Libya stands a better chance of charting a more prosperous and sustainable future for itself.

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NARRATIVE WARFARE IN THE NEW MIDDLE EAST:
Understanding the Libyan Dialectic

Dr. Nathaniel
Greenberg

Libya, site of the largest oil reserve in Africa,[1] point of departure and brutal detention for hundreds of thousands of migrants seeking passage to Europe;[2] the country traditionally carries a light footprint in US foreign policy. Its relevance is next to non-existent in American public discourse, not so in Europe. Witness France where the rise of the far-right ideologue Eric Zemmour and his principal vehicle CNews helped buoy the country to national prominence. "You should praise Putin," exclaimed Zemmour in regards to the situation in Libya, "because he's the only one to truly confront the Turks."[3] In the years following the collapse of the Qaddafi regime and amidst descent into civil war, Libya became a rhetorical black box for populist bombast in Europe; a litmus test for one's hostility (or not) to Islamism (read "Les turcs") and support (or not) of the far-right cause (read "Poutine"). Such politicization created an opening for American diplomacy, and accordingly, the country's portfolio has risen in Washington in recent months. The Biden administration's calls of support for the UN-backed ceasefire in October 2020 and demand for an end to foreign-backed mercenary activity helped lay the groundwork for a joint military agreement between Libyan representatives in Geneva this past fall.[4] The so-called 5+5 Action Plan, which brought together members of the Russian, French, Emirati, and Egyptian-backed Libyan National Army (LNA) and the Turkish, Italian, and Qatari-backed forces of the Government of National Accord (GNA), was supposed to help usher in the country's safe political passage and to secure the presidential election scheduled for December.[5] It successfully held the ceasefire but did little to stem the more elusive battle that has been raging across the Middle East and North Africa for a decade. Libya's nebulous media ecosystem and the foreign-based

actors that fuel it helped sow the seeds of chaos and doubt, effectively undermining the will of the judiciary to implement election laws and to opt instead for indefinite postponement. The leaders in Washington and Geneva should have seen this coming.

The country's most "deadly war"

Virtually from the moment of Qaddafi's demise, dragged bleeding and unconscious across the hood of a car, Libya became the site of a proxy communications war, seeing an unprecedented boom in foreign and domestic mediatization, narrativization, and politicization. Hundreds of print, radio, and television broadcasts appeared where previously a handful existed.[6] New media, combined with the lifting of restrictions on access, helped catapult internet use ten-fold between 2011 and 2017.[7] From near silence to sheer cacophony, the country's information ecosystem descended into anarchy. As former Transitional Council member and CEO of the ascendant Libyan media group Al-Wasat, Mahmud Shammam, described for the *New York Times*, with no shortage of irony, the country's most "deadly war" was being fought with "lying, falsifying, misleading and mixing facts" and being waged by "electronic armies . . . Owned by everyone and used by everyone, without exception."[8] It was Vladislav Surkov's (A.K.A. Nathan Dubovitsky) "fifth world war" in Shammam's eyes: a "non-linear war of all against all" in which the winner writes history as it happens.[9]

Social media has been particularly fertile ground for such warfare in the Middle East and North Africa,[10] with Libyan social media receiving more than its fair share of fire. As reported by Facebook, the country has been the target of

multiple "Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior" (CIB) campaigns. In August and October of 2019 and again in January 2021, the company released information describing operations in which individuals disguised as local news organizations, public figures, and average citizens disseminated a barrage of information designed in the aggregate to demonize the Tripoli-based and Islamist-led GNA and to reinforce the image of the LNA leader Khalifa Haftar. Facebook traced the 2019 operation to "individuals" in Saudi Arabia associated with the Saudi government and two ostensibly private media groups in Cairo and Abu Dhabi.[11] As *The New York Times* reported, the owner of the Egyptian company "New Waves" was a retired military officer, and the company operated "from a military-owned housing project in eastern Cairo."[12] Two months later, it was revealed that Russia too was conducting an extensive digital interference campaign across many of the same platforms and to much the same end, though now Seif al-Islam al-Qaddafi, the son of the former leader, appeared as a protagonist within the operation's narrative posture.[13] According to researchers at the Stanford Internet Observatory, all of the Facebook and Instagram accounts used in Russia's Libya operation were administered from Egypt.[14] In 2020, an ostensibly separate operation, in which scores of faux-Facebook accounts pumped pro-Muslim Brotherhood information, was attributed to operators in Morocco, Turkey, and an individual in Egypt, who, quizzically, maintained a LinkedIn account advertising his skills in digital marketing.[15]

Offshore Networks of Common Affinity

The use of Facebook in Libya's information war has been impactful, not least because the social network is the third most popular website in the country, following Google and YouTube, and it is also, increasingly, a major source for news consumption.[16] For example, the three most visited Facebook pages in Libya over the spring and summer of 2021 were news and information sites, two of which—218TV and 218NEWS—are part of the same conglomerate.[17]

Based out of Jordan and broadcasting over Nilesat, the rise of the 218 conglomerate tells an important story in the history of post-revolutionary Libya. In many ways built for online consumption, 218 appears at least functionally separate from the most obvious poles of the conflict. Its broadcasters strike a liberal demeanor, and the commentators often include American think-tankers expounding on geopolitics in fairly neutral terms. Yet, the organization remains inextricable from the country's proxy communications war.

According to Alexa Analytics' "Audience Overlap Tool," which catalogs the frequency with which other sites link in or refer to a given website, 218TV and 218NEWS are part of a network of locally targeted outlets which include the Jordan-based satellite network Libya's Channel (libyaschannel.com), the Jordan-based online news site Al-Marsad (almarsad.co), the Egypt-based websites Al-Wasat (alwasat.ly) and Bawaba Africa (afrigatenews.net), and Akhbar Libya (libyaakhbar.com), an aggregator site whose Facebook managers are listed as being based in Yemen and three other undisclosed locations. Like 218, each of these media sites is located outside the country, and their funding sources remain undisclosed. The networks are highly synchronic—posting and reposting near-identical stories in rapid proximity—and reliant almost exclusively on the easily manipulatable metrics of social media. The ideological slant of some is more obvious than others. Afrigatenews.net, for example, is run by a Libyan editor-in-chief who, following Kremlin state media, has said that Russia is the key player for "balancing" Libya, that Seif al-Qaddaffi is the answer for "stabilizing" the country,[18] and that Erdogan is on a mission to "Turkify" Libya through his Islamist proxies in Tripoli. This latter position was promulgated in the form of an interview with the Emirati giant Sky News and later translated and posted in a Russian

Sputnik article titled opaquely "'Idlib, Libya'…
Turkey is following the lead of ISIS in the west of the country."[19] Al-Wasat regularly recycles and supplies micro-stories with Russian state media, including TASS and RT, and Al-Marsad.co, which is widely thought to be funded by the UAE, has drawn fire for its willingness to distort reporting in the service of its backers' agenda.[20]

Figure 1: Al-Marsad.co (Facebook): "Breaking News: The GNA confirms consent of SIG to be tried in the Hague," 12 November 2020, 10:30 am

Figure 2: Al-Marsad.co (Facebook), "Aref Nayed: GNA Violated National Sovereignty By Accepting Saif Al-Islam Trial Outside Libya," 12 November 2020, 11:50 am

Figure 3: Libya's Channel (Facebook), "Nayed: GNA Violated National Sovereignty By Accepting Saif Al-Islam Trial Outside Libya," 12 November 2020, 2:30 pm.

As I described in a 2019 talk for the National Council on US-Libya Relations, the first tactic of this viral online site was to embed its very name within the ecosystem of its competitors. In 2013 Marsad Libya (marsad.ly) was an operational media unit based out of Geneva and geared towards providing information concerning the Libyan conflict, particularly in regard to matters of human rights and democratization. That was followed in 2014 by the Tripoli-based Libya Observer (libyaobserver.ly), also administered from Turkey. But almarsad.co, launched in 2016 with a Facebook page that includes eight un-disclosed administrators, quickly cannibalized the "Observer" food chain. As was made vivid in its reporting on the International Criminal Court's campaign to indict Seif al-Qaddafi, its raison d'être has been to flood the zone. A micro post consisting of no more than a headline and a few sentences launches on Facebook (Figure 1) where it quickly gains thousands of likes and hundreds of comments. A retitled post featuring the same micro-story follows (Figure 2) before being replicated across its dedicated website and then appearing on the Facebook page and website of the news outlet Libya's Channel (Figure 3), only this time featuring a photo, exclusively, of Aref Nayed, Libya's former Ambassador to the U.A.E.

and long-time political aspirant. Unbeknownst to most readers, Nayed is also the founder of Libya's Channel and the head of the think tank that still controls its shares.[21]

While more discernible than CIB, these loosely disguised networks of common affinity have been invaluable to the soft power objectives of the same foreign actors who were forced to curtail their hard power operations in advance of the elections. Russia's RT frequently amplifies the reporting of channels like 218 and gains legitimacy when quoted and reprinted by outlets like al-Wasat.[22] The UAE uses proxies like Al-Marsad and Libya's Channel to launder their strategy. Directed towards critical flashpoints, networks like these are profoundly capable of impacting the transnational tenor of the conflict.

Witness Tarhuna. The town in Western Libya, which became the subject of a UN fact-finding mission for possible war crimes after mass graves were discovered in 2020, fell into the crosshairs of the network's web in July 2021 as the phrase "*muqatala Mohamed al-Kani*" ("The Killing of Mohamed al-Kani") was catapulted to the top of Al-Wasat's "Keyword gap," an Alexa designation meaning Al-Wasat's competitors (Al-Marsad, 218, and Afrigate) were "gaining traffic" from use of the phrase.[23]

Mohamed al-Kani had been the leader of the infamous Kaniyat clan that controlled Tarhuna and was suspected of 'switching sides' in the battle for Tripoli by supporting Hifter and the LNA.[24] The latter ultimately recognized the Kaniyat as a "regular component" of its military,[25] and Russia, via RT, referred to the Kaniyat by their designation: the "9th Brigade."[26] The largest "share of voice" for the phrase ("*muqatala Mohamed al-Kani*"), after Facebook, was held by the aggregator site Akhbar Libya (libyaakhbar.com), whose top stories were from 218NEWS, Afrigatenews, Al-Marsad (almarsad.co), and a website called Al-Mashhad al-Libi (almashhadlibya.com),[27] which, operating

out of Egypt, shares direct audience overlap with the obscure website of Al-Jamahiriya, the former state flagship of Muamar al-Qaddafi's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya that, like the online portal of the Egyptian flagship, Al-Ahram,[28] was taken over by a Russian-linked firm in 2019.[29] RT reposted the Al-Mashhad al-Libi article verbatim, sending it viral.[30] Afrigatenews also replicated it for good measure. As for the story itself, the claim was that al-Kani, according to Mahmoud al-Misrati ("a source close to the LNA"), was killed in Benghazi after LNA commanders attempted to serve an arrest warrant based on "crimes he had committed during his affiliation with the Sarraj government and the GNA."[31] Unbeknownst to readers, al-Misrati is also Editor-in-Chief of the LNA-organ Al-Hadath. The story of the "Killing of Mohamed al-Kani" was a closed circle operation between Russian, Emirati, and Egyptian influencers in the service of the LNA cause.

Narratives as Knives

Had anyone missed the RT article concerning the Killing of Mohamed al-Kani and the mystery surrounding the massacre at Tarhuna, they could have found the same narrative by tuning into the Russian movie franchise "Shugalei." Based on the clandestine maneuvers of real-life Russian "sociologist" Maxim Shugalei, who was imprisoned for eighteen months in Libya after interviewing and polling on behalf of Seif al-Qaddafi, the Shugalei franchise crystalized the strategic objectives of the real-world Wagner group with whom Maxim Shugalei has since been associated.[32] *Shugalei 2*, which premiered on RT and YouTube in September 2020, opens with a depiction of the mass grave site at Tarhuna before flashing to a golf course where three Americans discuss pinning the blame for the massacre on Hifter and the LNA ("same strategy we used in Kosovo" remarks one of the American characters). The film then implicates Fathi Bashagha, Interior Minister of the Tripoli-based GNA and a hostile enemy of the LNA.[33] Not unlike the 2015 film *13 Hours*

by director Michael Bay, a regular contributor to the US militainment industry,[34] *Shugalei,* with its sweeping vistas of Tripoli and shadow-drenched dungeons, worked to situate the Libyan scenario within the aesthetic logos of a distinctly violent and increasingly prolific anti-Islamist imaginary. Distinct, however, from Bay's depiction of the attack on the American consulate in Benghazi in 2012, *Shugalei,* which RT billed a "documentary," was developed on-site in next-to-real time. Its depiction of a brutal Muslim Brotherhood government in Tripoli operating out of a hotel and collaborating with sadistic Salafi jailors and nefarious American agents was as much geared towards an Arab audience as a Russian one. An advance headline from the UAE's Sky News described it as a "film that tells the suffering of the Libyan people under the weight of terrorism."[35]

Where viral media outlets work to "muddy the waters" and flood the zone,[36] soft power operations like *Shugalei* cut through the cacophony like a knife. American foreign policy is seldom concerned with narrative dialectics, yet here lies the bizarre strategy of Russian disinformation: from confusion comes clarity and order from chaos; East vs. West, Security vs. Terror, Putin vs. Erdogan. The manufacturing of popularity through social media or the clandestine coordination of media conglomerates is enormously destructive to the political process, not least because it imitates and effectively sublimates the intersubjectivity upon which political consensus is formed. As the Libyan people and those who support the country's transition to democracy recalibrate in the wake of the December elections, new urgency should be directed towards rolling back, or at least making transparent, all forms of interference, military or otherwise.

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ISLAM AS A POTENTIAL VEHICLE FOR ADVANCING WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN AFGHANISTAN

Homa
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Since the Taliban's unexpected seizure of Kabul in August 2021, the war against women's rights has been relaunched. Their return to power has raised serious questions about the status of women who were brutally repressed under Taliban authority from 1996 to 2001. These concerns have been met with assurances that civil rights will be maintained in accordance with the Taliban's interpretation of *sharia* law.[1] However, Since the Taliban's reconquest, women's freedoms and liberties have rapidly deteriorated, showing little, if any, sign that the group's ideology on gender has changed. The recent backslide in equality is frequently perceived as proof of Islam's inherent connection to misogyny, as the Taliban have made full use of religious rhetoric to assert their discriminatory rulings. As a result, a powerful regressive vision is being realized through a narrow Islamic paradigm, while civil society and state actors are yet to meaningfully explore Islam's potential to counter the Taliban's rhetoric and support Afghan women's resistance. This article contends that women-centered approaches to Islam may be able to vernacularize gender equality, undermine the legitimacy the Taliban accord themselves, and expand secular advancements in women's rights in Afghanistan.

Achievements and maintenance of gender justice

The lack of Islamic dialogue that promotes egalitarianism in civil society and institutional rhetoric in no way suggests that Afghan women have taken a passive role in recasting the socio-political landscape of their nation. Evocative images of burqa-clad women obscure the incredible progress that has been made in regaining and broadening women's rights. Afghan women functioned as primary drivers in ensuring that women were explicitly included in the 2004 constitution, building on their previous presence in the constitution of 1964. They spearheaded the implementation of the Law on Violence Against Women (2009) and upheld the ratified Convention and Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).[2] Women have actively carved out their political presence within Afghanistan. In 2019, a total of 15,000 women from across all 34 provinces participated in a peace *jirga*, an overt demonstration of women's demand to be included in the forging of their nation's future.[3] With regards to education, literacy rates have nearly doubled since 2011.[4] In 2020, 83 percent of girls were enrolled in primary school despite the Taliban's continuous attacks on schools, teachers, and pupils, and approximately a quarter of those who attended university were women.[56] Improvements in education can be attributed to women's ability to undertake positions of political authority and contribute to civil society. By 2020, approximately 21 percent of civil servants were women, a number just short of what was seen before the fall of the Najibullah in 1992.[7] Women's active role in shaping the future of their nation is markedly different from the informal networks of an underground resistance that existed when the Taliban first attempted to control the nation. Afghan women's heightened political presence could in part be attributed to the establishment of the Ministry of Women's Affairs Afghanistan in 2001, a major demand from activist women who were situated within and external to Afghanistan. The ministry's installation was one of the

key measures taken to eliminate discrimination against women. Most crucially, it functioned as the focal point for women's groups and a display of the government's commitment to the protection of women's rights.

However, preserving and expanding these achievements, particularly given the Taliban's return, may require civil society and state actors to reevaluate their outward stance towards Islam. In such a highly volatile context that has endured prolonged years of civil war, Islam has become an important legitimizing force for deeply religious communities.[8] Islam is deeply entrenched in Afghanistan and central to the lives of the vast majority of Muslims within the nation.[9] Due to this, it would be remiss of Afghan civil society and state actors to presume that all women will readily replace their religiosity in favor of secular rights-based arguments.[10] However, the widespread adherence to patriarchal interpretations of Islam presents a clear challenge to religion's capacity to support women's advancements. Conservatism is deeply rooted; in 1979, the Saudi government, with the USA's blessing, began investing four billion dollars per year in Afghanistan on mosques, madrassas, preachers, and textbooks to spread Wahhabism, itself an Islamic fundamentalist sect maintaining a strict and puritanical view of Islam.[11] The importance of Islam and cooperating with religious leaders were recognized by the government and resulted in the formation of the Formal Council of Ulema. However, rather than facilitating new and more progressive discussions on Islam and its practice, the government acquiesced to a conservative vision and misogynistic rhetoric. For instance, this well-paid 3000 person Ulema Council issued misogynistic fatwas urging women to "avoid travel without company of a close relative under *sharia*." On International Women's Day in 2012, the government stressed that women should recognize polygamy as part of Islam. Provocative statements such as this, which many Muslims and Muslim majority states have disputed, go mostly unchallenged in Afghanistan as a more women-

centered approach to Islamic texts has not been given a tangible venue to be heard. As a result, Islam often represents a complex challenge for Muslim women, as their subordination has been historically justified through *sharia* law.[12] However, Islam's centrality to the existence of women begs the question as to whether it functions as perhaps one of the few factors that can meaningfully legitimize advancements in equality.[13]

Deconstructing the Taliban's Norms and Values

Examining the historical and political contexts surrounding the Taliban plays an important precursory role in facilitating the existence of varying interpretations of Islam, questioning the religious legitimacy of their divinely guided misogyny. In October 2021, Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid described the current rulings and actions undertaken by the Taliban to be bound by the "framework of Islamic *sharia* law."[14] It is comments such as this that imply the Taliban's actions are guided by absolute and immutable divine law. However, Muslim perspectives on women are innumerable, as religion does not possess universal, transhistorical meaning but is instead constructed and negotiated by specific actors in particular contexts.[15] The Taliban's subversive ideology is a concoction of Deobandi and Wahabi logic, holding its foundations in anti-colonialism.[16] The group's ideals are even too coarse and unrefined to directly translate Deobandi ideology, with the Deobandi school recently denouncing the fundamentalist's belief in killing other Muslims as something "wholly other.'"[17] One local who had lived with the Deoband for decades argued that if they were indeed proponents of radical Islam, then equally horrific terror activities would have emerged in other countries from where the students came. The Taliban's ideals were born out of several *madrassas* along Pakistan's border-states, in which the group's founder, Mohammad Omar (d. 2013), as well as many other Taliban leaders,

were graduates.[18] These boys' entire adolescence would take place within these religious schools, often with little or no contact with their family, rendering them far more susceptible to an ideology that suppressed women, as their comprehension of the outside world was severely limited. Knowledge of women's lives did not often occur through relationships with mothers and sisters but through the medieval Islamic narratives of Zulaikha as an irrepressible temptress.[19, 20] The Taliban claims to uphold the most authentic reading of the Qur'an, unobscured by the outside world. However, examining their historical underpinnings demonstrates that religiously guided action is constrained and shaped by circumstance, and that ideological values, including the Taliban's, do not exist within a vacuum.

The Taliban's restriction on women's education is also rooted in a specific set of cultural traditions and values. The fundamentalist's justification for limiting girls' education relies on the assertion that men and women must be segregated, an argument often couched in Islamic terminology.[21] However, while these rulings possess a connection to Islam, an arguably more compelling thread can be drawn between this perspective and the South-Asian and Middle Eastern elites' tradition of *purdah*, a cultural practice that predates Islam and enforces women's seclusion.[22] This practice is intrinsically tied to the notion of ensuring women's honor, where the bodies of Afghan women must be controlled physically, spatially, and politically by men because of their symbolic importance to the integrity of family and tribe.[23] Approaching the issue of women's rights with this nuanced understanding of the Taliban's ideology illustrates that engendering progressive change is hardly simple but not impossible. Thus, state and civil society should perhaps contextualize and vernacularize its actions via alternative Islamic perspectives to ensure that they are understood, accepted, and practiced by the people of Afghanistan.

Human rights orientation to Islam and its Impact

While the Taliban has constructed its rhetoric and regressive ideology on divine tenets, a lack of more liberal Islamic dialogue at a national and local level has cost Afghanistan, often leaving women's rights at odds with Islam. The diverse ways Islam is practiced and understood indicate that legal and ethical Islamic traditions do not have to function as unchanging forces of social restriction.[24] As Abdullahi An-aim notes, theological discourse should not be simply rejected as misogynistic and backward.[25] Many intellectuals, human rights organizations, and feminist scholars of Islam have attempted to demonstrate synergies between equality and *sharia* law since at least the 19th century.[26] Renowned Egyptian-American scholar Leila Ahmed articulates that Islam's tenets are egalitarian in their essence, regardless of gender.[27] Another pioneering Islamic scholar, Asma Barlas, provides a striking perspective that the spirit of the Qur'an, particularly the *suras* believed to be revealed during the Meccan era, are inherently free of gender discrimination.[28] A belief in women's equal stance is also not limited to advocation by females.[29] Indian reformist and Bohra Muslim Asghar Ali Engineer notes that "Women do not enjoy the status the Qur'an has given them in Muslim society today," vehemently proclaiming that those who support or remain silent to women's subordination were not religious.[30] These alternative explanations to women's place within Islam could serve as vital points of entry for civil society to counter fundamentalist's subversive logic.

Women-centered Islamic perspectives are not limited to the scholarly realm, and globally, Muslim women have actively engaged with religion to advance their rights. After the fall of the Shah's semi-secular government in Iran in 1979, many Islamist women activists came to reject their unequal status under religious rule, despite their continued support for regime change.[31] These

women curated and developed their own vision of females' role within society via women-centered interpretations of Islamic texts. More specifically, in retort to men's abuse of the Islamic divorce law, women advocated wages for housework (*orjat-ol masel*) in the event of divorce, argued entirely through the lens of Islam. In Indonesia, where Islam is the predominant faith and intrinsic to the daily lives of women, issues of reproductive health are taught by the Indonesian Society for Pesantren and Community Development through studying and interpreting the Qur'an.[32] This Indonesian NGO is distinct, as it provides secular education about reproductive health and encourages debate of Islamic texts in relation to women's rights. Afghan women have already been a part of this revolutionary utilization of religion as a mode of empowerment during the Afghan Education Movement in Iran.[33] During the civil war and the rule of the Taliban in the 1990s, millions of Afghans fled the country and immigrated to Iran. At the time, Iran was consumed by an intense campaign to eradicate illiteracy, a movement framed as an educational *jihad*. For Afghan refugees, this came in stark contrast to girls who were deprived of schooling in the name of Islam, and for some, this engendered their revision of what it meant to be Muslim. Being a "good Muslim" was suddenly equated with a need to be educated, without distinction between men and women. Despite a newfound ability to deploy Islam as a vehicle for empowerment, the Iranian regime banned Afghan children from Iranian schools. In defiance, Afghan women, most of whom were illiterate, used the legitimacy of religion to set up their extensive network of informal schooling, with thousands of women serving as teachers and many tens of thousands of boys and girls being educated in these Afghan schools. This change created a huge step toward demanding gender equality in the Afghan refugee community, and those who returned to Afghanistan took this ethos back to their homeland. The Afghan diaspora in Iran have demonstrated an impulse to advocate for rights from within the framework for Islam, a desire that may also be felt by those situated within Afghanistan and that could be a powerful legitimizing force against the Taliban.

Over the past 20 years, Afghanistan's state policies and civil society have been constructed predominately through secular rhetoric, with little attempt to bolster altruistic efforts via Islam, particularly regarding women's rights. Often, we turn to secularism as a mode of empowerment against gender disparity. Still, it is also crucial to look within faith and examine how perspectives can be forged to address misogynistic attitudes meaningfully. Recognizing that the Taliban's perception of women as a perceived threat to Islam is tethered to certain historical and cultural evolutions provides us with a firm basis to question gender subversive laws purported by the group. While it cannot be denied that religion often sanctions discrimination against women, in such a religiously charged society, vernacularizing policy for gender justice demands the creation of an environment that provides religious communities room to negotiate in Islamic alternatives, without taking away the support and sense of identity that religion provides to them.

Homa Hoodfar is professor of anthropology, Emerita, at Concordia University, Montreal. Describing herself as an academic in the service of civil society, Professor Hoodfar has also been actively involved in the research and publication division of Women Living Under Muslim Laws Network, whose mission has been to promote gender equality and plural democracy since the 1980s. Her research and publications have focused on anthropology of political economy; reproductive rights; Afghan refugees in Iran and Pakistan; women in formal and informal politics; hijab and clothing as political institutions; gender and citizenship; Muslim women's sports as politics; and gender and the public sphere in Muslim contexts. In 2016 she was imprisoned in Iran for her academic writings and involvement in WLUML and charged with dabbling in feminism and security matters.

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ENVISIONING A POST-ERDOĞAN TURKEY

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Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has dominated Turkish politics for nearly two decades, serving first as prime minister (2003-2014) and then as president (2014-present) under a revised constitutional system that invests an immense amount of power in that office. His well-known efforts to fashion a more nationalist and Islamic-oriented "New Turkey›› have weakened the country's long-standing secular, Western orientation. While defenders of Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) might argue that they have empowered the heretofore politically marginalized constituency of more pious and conservative Turks and ended the tutelage of both the military and the Kemalist elite, others would counter that Erdoğan has weakened both democratic institutions and the rule of law.[1] Many critics of Erdoğan have been prosecuted and jailed (often for alleged links to terrorist networks), and many media outlets have been put under de facto state control. Notably, in 2019, Freedom House, for the first time since the military coup in 1980, ranked Turkey as "Not Free."[2] While Erdoğan's rule has been both consequential and contentious, his political future is increasingly in doubt. Persistent corruption allegations, the COVID pandemic, and mounting economic problems, including 36 percent inflation and a 40 percent slide in the value of the lira in 2021, have all weakened his political standing. Turkey's long-divided opposition shows signs of coalescing, generating the possibility, one that seemed rather unimaginable a few years ago, that Erdoğan could be voted out of office in the next round of elections in 2023.[3]

This short essay takes up this issue's theme of political transformations. First, it briefly offers an assessment of the Erdoğan era, interrogating how much his rule has transformed the "Old Turkey." Second, it looks forward to the possibility of a post-Erdoğan transformation, assessing not only the chances of the opposition in unseating the AKP in upcoming elections but also the legacy and lingering effects of Erdoğan and the AKP on Turkish society and politics. Put somewhat differently, the article asks whether Erdoğan has truly created a "New Turkey" and, if so, how much of it might be undone?

The AKP and "New Turkey"

By many measures, Turkey in 2022 is a far different country than it was in 2002 when the AKP first came to power. It is far wealthier, evidenced not only by rising incomes but also numerous impressive construction and infrastructure projects, physical manifestations of the "New Turkey." The power of the military over Turkish politics has been significantly eroded, especially after the failed 2016 coup. Turkey is now a presidential republic, shifting power away from a traditionally fractured National Assembly. However, as suggested above, the accumulated political changes—many of which augured well for democratization in the AKP's initial years in power—have resulted in democratic backsliding and the rise of a "competitive authoritarian" system.[4] Turkey's foreign policy has been more assertive and confident, a reflection of its perception as a "rising power,"[5] and has included both more engagement with Russia and the Middle East and estrangement from many of its traditional Western allies.

While numerous elements may be said to make up both substantive and symbolic aspects of the AKP's "New Turkey," I will focus on three that have significant social and political consequences: the erosion of the "assertive" secularism;[6] deepening polarization; and the growth of state power.

The greater public dimension of Islam stands as one of the most notable changes under the AKP. In contrast to the pre-AKP period, when women wearing a head covering were barred from universities, state employment, and the floor of the National Assembly, now they are not only free to do so but are catered to by a burgeoning Islamic-oriented fashion industry. The government has made both promotion of (Sunni) Islam (e.g., support for religious education and the Diyanet, the state body responsible for religious affairs) and Turkey's Islamic past (e.g., re-establishing Hagia Sophia as a mosque) a priority. The government has not tried to implement sharia, which is supported by a minority of Turks, but it has tried to inject Islam into discussions of politics, economics, and numerous social issues. Turkish secularism (*laiklik*), modelled after the French laïcité, is no more. This has not been without controversy—non-Sunnis such as Alevis believe they are subjected to discrimination, and secular-oriented Turks fear creeping Islamization either by state actions or social pressure.[7]

Whereas Turkey has often suffered from political polarization, it is arguably far more polarized today than in the pre-AKP period.[8] Part of the issue concerns fears and suspicions along the secularist-Islamist divide, which have been stoked by leaders on both sides and manifested in discussions of "White Turks" against "Black Turks." Erdoğan's populist turn toward a majoritarian conceptualization of democracy, one that invoked the (ostensibly pro-AKP) "national will" (*milli irade*) is also a factor, one made worse by the failed 2016 coup, as Erdoğan has used this event as justification for demonizing any opposition and going after his political opponents. Furthermore, the new presidential system, as opposed to the previous multiparty parliamentary system, creates an even greater bifurcated, zero-sum dynamic in Turkish politics and has pushed various parties to coalesce into two coalitions[9] to vie for this all-important office.

Finally, one has seen an expansion of both *de jure* and *de facto* state power, particularly that of the executive branch. Constitutional amendments in 2010 gave the executive more power over the courts, and the subsequent move in 2017 to a presidential system (together with two years of state of emergency rule after the coup attempt) vested more power in the president vis-à-vis the legislature. Crony capitalism has given the state—or, more particular, Erdoğan and his closest allies—greater means to engage in clientelism as well as control over many sectors of the economy, including the media. The AKP has also been successful in appropriating and supporting its allies in civil society, often by showering them with financial resources or political patronage, while at the same time repressing or "taming" groups more aligned with the opposition.[10] The consequence is that much in Turkey has been politicized and, at least until recently, this served to benefit Erdoğan and the AKP.

Overcoming and Undoing AKP Rule

While AKP rule has been transformative, many in Turkey are already speculating about what might come next, particularly since Erdoğan and his party look more politically vulnerable than ever before. An economic crisis that began in 2018 and has only worsened over time has hit Turkish voters hard, particularly the lower classes that make up the AKP's core constituency. Many Turks say they cannot afford basic necessities. Notably, Erdoğan's dogged insistence on maintaining low-interest rates in the face of persistent inflation, a policy that goes against well-established economic wisdom, has thrown the lira into a downward spiral and generated doubts about his competence to manage the economy.[11] Whereas all expected Erdoğan to easily win presidential elections in 2014 and 2018, next year's contest is far more in doubt.

Can the opposition prevail? It is perhaps far too early to say, in large part because it is not clear who the opposition will field against Erdoğan. To win

the Turkish presidency, a candidate must receive 50 percent of the vote; if no candidate does so in the initial round of voting, there is a run-off between the top two vote-getters. In previous elections, Erdoğan won over 50 percent in the first round, but that outcome seems far less likely this time, thus giving the opposition a chance to coalesce behind a single candidate in a run-off.

Three factors should buoy the opposition. First, as mentioned, the economy is cratering in a fashion that voters can clearly feel. If the AKP's electoral success was driven by a strong economy in the 2000s and early 2010s, economic difficulties might now make voters search for alternatives. Second, the 2019 local elections, which were also conducted during a period of economic difficulties and saw the opposition win mayorships in several major cities, provide a blueprint.[12] The Istanbul elections, which were controversially re-run, are particularly instructive, as Ekrem Imamoğlu of the Republican People's Party (CHP) won, running a more centrist, "post-Kemalist", and less dogmatic campaign to appeal to voters (e.g., more pious or conservative voters, ethnic Kurds) not in the party's core constituency.[13] Significantly as well, the opposition was able to overcome the uneven playing field created by the competitive authoritarian system and bridge their own differences, thus unifying around common candidates and presenting a clear choice to voters. Finally, early polls for the 2023 elections show the AKP slightly trailing the CHP (24 to 26 percent), the opposition alliance defeating the AKP-led coalition by 7 points, and Erdoğan losing to the most likely opposition candidates—Imamoğlu, CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, and Mansur Yavaş (the CHP mayor of Ankara, who is the highest-rated political figure in Turkey)—in a run-off, with nearly 60 percent of voters saying they would never vote for Erdoğan.[14]

To be sure, there is no guarantee the opposition will prevail. The economy could bounce back; COVID might recede. Realizing the economy might no

longer be the winning issue it once was, Erdoğan and the AKP have turned to nationalism (against Kurds) and sectarian Islam (against Alevis) to appeal to their conservative, pious, Sunni base, a tactic that furthers polarization but could prove to be effective in getting their voters to the polls. The unfree media environment and possibility for electoral shenanigans certainly favor the AKP. The selected opposition candidate—whoever he or she might be—could also stumble or fail to unite the fractious opposition (which includes liberals, nationalists, Kurds, and disaffected former AKP supporters).

Assuming, however, that the opposition does win and worst-case scenarios (e.g., Erdoğan tries to steal the vote or otherwise refuses to leave office, sparking conflict and violence) do not transpire, how likely would it be able to carry out a far-reaching political transformation? Certainly, any new Turkish leaders will face major difficulties. It will not be easy, for example, to solve the Kurdish issue (particularly given a strong [Turkish] nationalist presence in opposition), solve fundamental problems in the Turkish economy (e.g., high levels of debt and a weak banking sector), or quickly restore good relations with the West—although an end to Erdoğan's anti-Western jeremiads will no doubt help. Beyond these types of crisis issues, one might also ask how much an incoming new Turkish government can do to undo or re-make aspects of the "New Turkey," including those enumerated above, that arose over the two decades of AKP rule.

In terms of the increased public role of religion, it is likely that this will be a lasting change in Turkey. A return to the at times repressive "assertive secularism" of the Kemalist period is likely both practically and politically impossible, as the opposition cannot afford to massively alienate religious Turks. For example, the CHP, long a stalwart supporter of Kemalist secularism, appears to have made peace with the idea that women can wear headscarves and attend university or work in

state institutions, and several opposition leaders were in support of the government changing the status of Hagia Sophia.[15] Fears of "Islamization from below," voiced in the early days of the AKP, are still present but have given way to an acknowledgement, however grudging, that Islam has taken its place to become a marker, but certainly not the sole marker, of Turkish identity. Public displays of piety, if not exactly celebrated, are far less likely to be stigmatized, let alone banned. Islamic discourse and religiously-inspired conservatism have thus established themselves as durable social and political forces in Turkey.

This, of course, need not be a bad thing. One can certainly argue that a more "passive" secular orientation and a more tolerant view for a public role of religion fits better with liberal democratic norms. Moreover, greater inclusion of the millions of pious Turks, who were long looked down upon by the Western-oriented, secular elites, would also go a long way in reducing political polarization. More generally, the success of a "big-tent," anti-Erdoğan opposition and (hopefully) a dialing down by state officials of rhetoric that demonizes opponents should also dampen political polarization, although (based upon the recent experience in the United States) a defeated AKP, particularly one with media resources, would be quite capable of stoking passions against their opponents and potentially undermining the ability of the authorities to govern. Furthermore, how long the opposition coalition can work together once it achieves power is an open question.

Perhaps the most fundamental challenge, however, concerns the role of the state. After gaining power, the temptation for incoming leaders will be to use state power to their own advantage. Certainly, there is a history in Turkey of corruption and weak respect for the rule of law that long predates the AKP. Clientelism and crony capitalism could be employed to distribute spoils and keep the various factions of the opposition together. The opposition could conduct its own purge of officials, including from the courts, and also try to use the media to give it a political advantage. To be sure, at present the opposition presents a far more benign, democratizing image, but the AKP did the same prior to its electoral success two decades ago. It may be far easier and perhaps even satisfying to extract revenge against opponents than to build up strong democratic institutions and the rule of law, both of which could easily be aimed at limiting the power of the state. On this front, any post-AKP government will have make a strong and concerted effort to undo perhaps the most pernicious effect of the AKP's rule.

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JORDAN'S CONSTITUTIONAL REFORMS:
More of the Same or an Opportunity for Progress?

Robert Laxer

On 18 January 2022, the Jordanian Senate approved the constitutional amendments passed by the House of Representatives the week prior. The changes to the constitution are part of an announced three-phased plan to transition Jordan to a fully democratic constitutional monarchy. However, activists, lawmakers, and observers are divided over whether the amendments advance or regress Jordan's democratic development.

In the aftermath of King Abdullah's feud with his brother, Prince Hamzah, in the spring of 2021, the king convened the "Royal Committee to Modernize the Political System." The 92-member group was tasked primarily with recommending changes to laws governing elections and political parties. The committee came up with 22 constitutional amendments, the vast majority of which have now passed the upper and lower houses of Parliament. In Jordan's bicameral legislature, the House of Representatives, which traditionally introduces legislation, is made up of elected members. The Senate, which examines and approves legislation for royal approval or refers it back to the House, is constituted exclusively by members appointed by the king.

The amendments expand eligibility for appointment to the Senate; increase the authority of the Independent Election Commission to facilitate the establishment of partisan political parties; shorten the term of the Lower House's speaker and allow for their deposition; and reduce the age of candidacy for the Lower House from 30 to 25.[1] The Parliament also passed a constitutional amendment which established the National Security and Foreign Policy Council, which assumes responsibility over foreign policy and national security

matters from other parliamentary committees and ministries. Lawmakers did reject a proposal to have this powerful council chaired by the king. Instead, the prime minister will lead the council, but the king will select all members and decide when it convenes. The council's membership will consist of the ministers of defense, foreign affairs, and interior; the heads of the military, intelligence service, and public security directorate; along with two additional members selected by the king.[2]

The timing of the establishment of the Royal Committee suggests that it was founded in response to the king's recent tensions with Prince Hamzah. While it is unlikely that the two events are unrelated, the reasons King Abdullah called for a transition to democracy and established the Royal Committee extend beyond the recent challenge by the former crown prince.

Abdullah's father, the well-loved King Hussein I, is remembered for leading a program of democratic liberalization in the late 1980s. This program originated in response to demonstrations by east-bank Jordanians who were protesting austerity measures. The ensuing establishment of parliamentary elections in 1989 and a royal commission tasked with outlining the trajectory of Jordan's democratization began the tradition of what Glenn Robinson labeled "defensive democracy."[3] King Hussein's model has been recycled more than once by his son, King Abdullah II.

King Abdullah's succession remains a dramatic event in Jordan's history, and it continues to influence the King's reign. Before succumbing to lymphoma, King Hussein named his son, Abdullah, crown prince in a surprise move that caught

the incumbent, Prince Hassan, and reportedly Abdullah himself, off guard.[4] The drama of King Abdullah's accession meant that he had to solidify support for his rule among his subjects. The king looked to his father's legacy for inspiration and sought support among the politically important east-bank Jordanian tribes by filling the civil service, military, and intelligence services with their members. The majority of the Jordanian population, who are descendants of Palestinian refugees, have received little such patronage and as a result have had to support themselves within the private sector.[5]

King Abdullah spent the beginning of his reign focused on economic reform. In the early aughts, he stated publicly that he was committed to continuing his father's democratizing programs, and that they were an important part of achieving long-term stability for Jordan.[6] However, the king hedged this statement by noting that his immediate focus was economic growth. In those early years, King Abdullah did succeed in signing a free trade agreement with the United States and privatizing the telecoms and transportations sectors.[7] These achievements were not uncomplicated, the government had to contend with significant layoffs due to the privatizations, which resulted in significant compensation costs and the reabsorption of personnel into other public organizations. However, Jordan's GDP growth did increase from 3.39 percent in 1999, the year of Abdullah II's accession, to 8.2 percent in 2007.[8]

The 2007 financial crisis and the protests that erupted during the Arab Spring prevented the king from continuing to neglect political development. In 2011, Abdullah II implemented his first course of substantial political and constitutional reforms. Notably, the king sacked prime minister Samir Rifai, established a National Dialogue Committee and the Royal Committee on Constitutional Review. Like his father decades before, King Abdullah leveraged defensive democracy to appease the protestors without ceding any real

authority. Mr. Rifai was replaced by the loyalist Marouf al-Bakhit, and though the constitutional reforms strengthened freedom of expression laws, they also cemented the king's control over the military and intelligence services.[9] The frustration that many young Jordanians feel at the lack of tangible political progress in Jordan stems from this period.

The Arab Spring also exacerbated the economic stagnation in Jordan which began during the Great Recession. Jordan has since struggled to absorb the influx of refugees from the Syrian civil war while continuing to sustain its bloated public sector. Unemployment in the kingdom has reached 25 percent, but for those between the ages of 20 and 29, that figure climbs to nearly 50 percent.[10] Jordan's poor economic growth and its political stagnation have encouraged young Jordanians who are able to seek opportunities abroad, and those who cannot have become increasingly vocal about their grievances. Large scale protests in 2018 resulted in another swap of prime ministers, but no significant reforms came of the demonstrations, further exacerbating many Jordanians' feelings of disenfranchisement.

While protesters have largely avoided direct criticisms of the monarch, many Jordanians are becoming increasingly frustrated with their country's governance. Even among the influential tribes, frustration is growing. Political patronage is no longer sufficient to counteract the grim economic challenges these communities face.[11] With soaring youth unemployment, and with so many communities lacking critical infrastructure and resources, the government does not have the ability to adequately provide the support they require. The arrest of Prince Hamzah last year demonstrated the significance of the grievances felt by many tribe members. Furthermore, the recent contraction of Jordan's private sector during the Covid-19 pandemic has particularly affected Jordanians of Palestinian descent, who receive little government patronage. When the next bout of

protests eventually occur, Jordanians of all origins may be more willing to criticize the monarchy.

It is within this context of economic stagnation and growing political frustration that the king's establishment of the Royal Committee should be viewed. After Prince Hamzah's arrest, the king's swift establishment of the Committee and the government's implementation of its recommendations served as a device to placate Jordanians. Simultaneously, these actions consolidated the king's control over the military and security services. Though the Royal Commission and the reforms that have followed it may have been born primarily out of the king's desire to secure his rule, they may yet contribute to the democratic transition that the king claims to support. Members of the Royal Commission have stated that their reforms are just the beginning of a ten-year transition to a democratic constitutional monarchy.[12] King Abdullah has supported such gradual plans in the past, but he is now facing increasing pressure to finally commit himself to this process. Jordanians' increasing willingness to protest, the king's rift with Prince Hamzah, and the monarchy's tightening grip over the security establishment have exposed the fault lines forming in Jordan's political system. To keep these cracks from widening, the king should give up his tired playbook and finally commit to substantive reforms.

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REIMAGINING PEACEMAKING:
Engaging Yemeni Civil Society to Achieve Sustainable Peace

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Despite numerous talks and summits over the past seven years, negotiations to end the war in Yemen have remained unsuccessful; the war still rages, and hostilities have recently expanded with a 224 percent increase in civilian casualties in 2021.[1] Yet although international actors have failed to broker a settlement, civil society actors in Yemen and across the diaspora are pursuing peace and justice, with notable success, demonstrating that civil society must be at the forefront of the peacemaking process.

Unfortunately, the mischaracterization of the conflict as primarily a proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia minimizes Yemeni civil society's role in peace negotiations. While international actors are deeply involved in the conflict, their involvement exacerbates already existing divisions within Yemeni society that must be addressed for the country to move forward. These divides stem from historical and regional challenges such as the North-South reunification and the global war on terror. Importantly, denying Yemenis a role in peace talks undermines Yemeni agency and peace prospects in general.

Historically, the limited influence of western imperial powers in Yemen enabled tribal traditions of egalitarian ethics, mediation, and cooperation to remain cornerstones of Yemen's social and economic environment.[2] While these traditions of community-led politics and decision-making are currently under threat as a result of the prolonged conflict, Yemenis continue to practice everyday peacebuilding.

In Yemen, civil society has evolved from long-standing tribal institutions and practices. Zamil—traditional Yemeni poetry—often calls for reconciliation and tolerance and is used to settle conflicts within the community as well as with outsiders.[3] While some in the Yemeni political elite and expatriate scholars view traditionalist elements as deterrents to reconciliation and state-building at large, this is a myopic approach towards conflict resolution that does not account for Yemeni history and culture, dismissing essential parties who could play instrumental roles in peace negotiations.

Yemeni civil society consists of a diverse set of actors with multi-layered identities and no overarching political and religious ideology, illustrating the country's diversity. Following the 2011 uprising, which resulted in the fall of former dictator Ali Abdullah Saleh, Yemenis have created spaces for activism and discourse.[4] While perpetrators of the conflict are limiting these spaces, Yemenis continue to build upon the hard-earned foundations of 2011. Notably, women and youth are leading efforts for political and social change, oftentimes with the aid of traditional practices.

Yemeni women resolve conflicts and raise awareness about the importance of peace through utilizing local and tribal customs. Realizing the unique social nexus in which they operate, women advocate for peace throughout the country. In Yemen, women are able to enter homes more freely than men and must be treated with respect. For example, tribal custom dictates that women must receive hospitality invitations when visiting new areas, and it is customary that they accept

such invitations. By staying near warring tribes in Marib and refusing all hospitality invitations from tribal leaders until a ceasefire was accepted, Yemeni women utilized this tradition to secure a week-long ceasefire agreement.[5] In addition to public and symbolic actions such as shaving their heads and challenging armed tribesmen, women lead community-based mediation groups and workshops to foster relationships and settle local disputes, with support from local authorities and traditional leaders.

Youth activists are also pursuing peace and national unity through innovative mediums and strategies.[6] In particular, Yemeni youth are engaged in cultural and artistic activism that establishes common ground and spreads messages of peace. These efforts include a growing number of cultural spaces such as concerts, photo exhibitions, and film screenings. In addition, young Yemenis are offering their peers alternatives to violence by building ties between communities and providing volunteer opportunities.[7]

As state institutions are weak or absent in many areas of the country, civil society is increasingly influential.[8] Yemeni civil society ranges from cosmopolitan artists in Sana'a and the diaspora to tribal leaders in the rugged highlands. These diverse actors engage in a multitude of activism in vital sectors such as the economy, education, and the environment. Their efforts range from documentation of war crimes to local conflict mediation. For example, through local mediation, there have been more than 350 prison exchange deals in which upwards of 7,000 prisoners were released from both sides.[9]

Civil society is also laying the groundwork for peace and social cohesion in Yemeni communities via the preservation of collective memory, addressing the psychological impact of prolonged violence, and contributing to economic recovery.[10] These successes are possible because civil actors understand varying Yemeni contexts and have local buy-in. Yet, despite these promising achievements, formal peace-brokering institutions and actors have continued to focus on the same local and regional stakeholders for over seven years, without much progress.

Rather than addressing the dynamics that further drive conflict, the international community has chosen to pursue peace negotiations with the perpetrators of the war—Saudi Arabia, the UAE, the Internationally Recognized Government of Yemen, and Ansar Allah—outside of Yemen. Due to security reasons, many diplomatic missions to Yemen operate outside the country.[11] This runs the risk of losing contact with both reality and local demands. Given the challenges of accessing information on Yemen, these risks are especially concerning.

Furthermore, Yemenis are hostile towards perceived foreign meddling. By working with local non-combatant actors, a dialogue will not only include the voices of Yemenis within the country and diaspora but also mitigate concerns over foreign interference and misinformation. Basic authority remains contested within Yemen, which furthers the need to work with civil society actors that are less entangled within complex networks of volatile alliances. Importantly, partnering with local communities allows for wider representation of groups that have been marginalized throughout the peace process and provides greater social cohesion.

For sustainable peace, negotiations must be inclusive and extend beyond the politicians and warring parties. Committing to a ground-up approach begins with recognizing the grassroots work Yemenis engage in and the cultural practices that underlay these efforts. Engaging more actors may be challenging, but inclusive peace agreements are more durable.[12] Continuing to favor failed western institutional approaches threatens to prolong the conflict and exacerbate the worst humanitarian crisis in the world.

We must connect everyday peacebuilding to formal peace-brokering institutions and actors. This includes building upon the capacities of civil actors via funding and engagement. Through listening to civil society and learning from their efforts, we can support post-conflict social re-learning and transformation.

Partnerships with international groups, governments, and policymakers are crucial, but they must not overshadow the needs and perspectives of Yemenis themselves. Furthermore, collaborations must be exercised with caution to avoid undermining local legitimacy.

With new forms of warfare and the internationalization of internal conflicts, actors in 21st-century wars are less defined. Thus, we must forge new methods of conflict resolution to address these new realities. Through creating opportunities outside of conflict and building relationships, community-level engagement is the foundation for long-term peace. The international community can aid this process by prioritizing a multitrack peace mediation. By actively centering civil society in the peace process, we can ensure sustainable solutions and advance new ways of approaching conflict resolution.

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JORDAN: HOW STABLE?

Bruce Riedel

Last April, Jordan experienced an unprecedented domestic political upheaval: a clash within the royal family. It was perhaps the most serious threat to the Kingdom's stability in the fifty years since the 1970 civil war known as Black September. At the center of the conspiracy to destabilize the Kingdom was Prince Hamzah bin Hussein, the 41-year-old eldest son of the late King Hussein and Queen Noor. When Hussein died in 1999, his final wish was to name Hamzah crown prince. Despite his father's wishes, current King Abdullah, removed Hamzah from the line of succession five years later, naming his son, Hussein bin Abdullah, the new crown prince.

Hamzah is a natural alternative for those in the family and the nation dissatisfied with the king's handling of the pressures facing Jordan. The unpopular peace treaty with Israel, the lack of economic opportunity, especially for the young and for women, the massive burden of refugees from Syria and Iraq, and endemic corruption in a weak economy, combined with the pandemic lockdown and recession, have created much discontent in the nation. Many looked to Hamzah for a solution.

The security services smoothly foiled the conspiracy and arrested its leaders. The United States expressed its clear and unequivocal support for the king. But the plot remains a question mark in Jordan today. Has the split in the royal family truly come to an end? How loyal are key elements of the establishment, including the East Bank tribes?

What Happened?

Jordanian intelligence determined that Hamzah was actively conspiring in mid-March 2021, detecting over fifty cells of plotters connected to the prince. The mastermind was Bassam Awadallah,

a former cabinet member and chief of the royal court who had fallen out with the king and later worked as an advisor to Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman. Another plotter was Sharif Hassan bin Zaid, a former envoy to Saudi Arabia and the brother of the Jordanian intelligence officer who was killed in the 2009 Afghanistan suicide bombing by al-Qaeda that took the lives of five CIA officers.[1]

On 3 April 2021, the army and the intelligence service preempted the plot. Awadallah, Sharif Hassan, Hamzah's chief of staff, and several others were arrested in a well-organized crackdown. The army and security services had concluded that the conspirators planned to organize national demonstrations calling for political change at the start of the holy month of Ramadan later in April. The intent was to create sufficient instability to force Abdullah to abdicate.

The chief of the army Major General Yousef Huneiti confronted Hamzah directly at his palace in Amman. Huneiti laid out the evidence of the plot, namely the fact that Hamzah had been present at meetings with East Bank tribal leaders who had sharply criticized the king and that he had appeared to agree with their statements. This was striking at the heart of the monarchy's Bedouin base. Hamzah was told he had "crossed the red lines" and would be confined to his palace indefinitely.[2] He protested and then released a tape in English to the BBC criticizing the government without naming the king directly. He also released a shorter tape in Arabic.[3]

The family turned to former Crown Prince Hassan for a solution. At the king's direction, Hassan met with Hamzah and persuaded him to back down in the interest of family unity. Hamzah publicly

pledged his loyalty to the king. The king announced the "sedition" had "been nipped in the bud."[4] But those arrested were not released.

The Saudis were directly involved in the plot. They had helped finance the conspiracy and encouraged tribes along the long Jordanian-Saudi border to join it. Awadallah had promised the conspirators that the Saudis would help them once the protests began. The day after his arrest, the Saudi Foreign Minister, the head of Saudi intelligence, and the Crown Prince's chief of staff all flew separately to Amman and demanded that Awadallah be handed over to them and sent to Riyadh. The king refused. The Saudis publicly affirmed support for the king, but he knew better.

The Saudi role was very alarming for the Jordanians. Saudi money could attract a lot of unhappy people. But accusing the Saudis of interference risked the ejection of tens of thousands of expatriate Jordanian workers in Saudi Arabia, adding immensely to the country's economic burden while eliminating the all-important remittances which make up roughly 9 percent of Jordan's GDP.[5] The fragile Jordanian economy would have risked collapse.

The American Role

President Joe Biden stepped in to back the king. On April 7, he called the King and expressed his total support. The White House released a readout of the call in which it expressed "strong US support for Jordan" and underscored the importance of King Abdullah II's leadership to the United States and the region. The President also affirmed American support for "a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict."[6] Biden's strong statement of support and affirmation of the two-state solution, Jordan's longstanding position, was a powerful assist to the king.

Biden's call followed a special briefing he received from the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency William Burns that morning. Burns had been ambassador to Jordan when Abdullah ascended to the throne in February 1999, and he appreciated the unprecedented nature of a split in the royal Hashemite family.

In July, Abdullah became the first Arab leader to visit Washington following Biden's election. On the 19th he met with Biden in the Oval Office accompanied by his son, Crown Prince Hussein bin Abdullah, another sign of American support for the current line of succession and the king's leadership. The king, Queen Rania, and the Crown Prince also met with senior officials at the State Department and Pentagon. Biden has yet to meet with King Salman of Saudi Arabia, and he has said he will not meet with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman whom the CIA has determined was responsible for ordering the assassination of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Turkey.[7]

More bad news for the king came from American journalists, however, when the *Washington Post* broke the so-called Pandora Papers, revealing that the king owns more than $100 million in luxury homes in London, Washington, and Malibu. The Malibu estate consists of three adjacent properties overlooking the Pacific coastline in one of the most expensive neighborhoods in America. Moreover, the *Post* revealed that the King had deliberately disguised his holdings; the homes were not identified as his.[8] The palace quickly justified the secrecy as being necessary for security and labeled the revelations "a threat to His Majesty's and his family's safety."[9] More recently, a leak of client data from Credit Suisse, dubbed "Suisse Secrets," revealed that King Abdullah at one time held six Swiss bank accounts, one of which contained more than $224 million.[10]

Neither the Pandora Papers nor Suisse Secrets have produced any visible criticism in Jordan, but undoubtedly beneath the surface, both revelations have reinforced the sense of an isolated

and corrupt leadership. Even prior to the king's financial information becoming public, he had promised to bring greater openness to Jordanian society, most notably through his February 2021 letter pledging to reduce the interference of the security services in public life.11

What Next?

The country sits at the linchpin of the region, surrounded by Israel, the West Bank, Syria, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia, and just across the Gulf of Aqaba from Egypt. For the first 20 years of King Hussein's reign, Jordan was wracked by coup plots, assassination attempts, foreign interference, and ultimately civil war. Since 1970, the country has been fairly calm. The biggest threat was terrorism at the hands of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. The wars in Iraq and Syria and the intifadas in Palestine did not lead to unrest in Jordan.

As noted above, a public falling out between a senior prince and the king is unprecedented in the near century since Jordan gained independence. The challenge underscores the pressures, and serious structural problems, facing Jordan today. The country lacks natural resources, water is scarce, and the population has grown to more than 10 million. Unemployment is high, especially for women. Waves of refugees have arrived from Iraq and Syria. The pandemic has added to the underlying difficulties. The tourism industry, key to the economy, has slowed significantly thanks to the COVID-19 crisis. Corruption is endemic.

The government now takes the position that the conspiracy is old history. The problems are over. They do not want to talk about it, especially in public. But most of those arrested remain in prison, and Hamzah's infrequent public appearances are limited to tightly controlled situations. Queen Noor lives abroad.12

But the crisis also underscored the strength of the monarchy. The army and intelligence service remained steadfastly loyal. There was no evidence of any trouble in the military. No other member of the royal family expressed support for Hamzah aside from his mother in exile. Biden's strong public affirmation of support reaffirmed the importance of the enduring friendship between Jordan and America. Jordan has initialed a large deal with the new government in Israel to trade solar power for desalinated water from the Mediterranean Sea: the largest project with Israel since the peace treaty was signed.13 The king sits securely on the throne.

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DIVIDED SYRIA:
An Examination of Stabilization Efforts and Prospects for State Continuity

Dr. Daniel Serwer and Koen van Wijk

The war in Syria started ten years ago with a ferocious regime crackdown on nonviolent demonstrations but transformed rapidly into a hydra-headed conflict. Syrian citizens with Gulf support took up arms to defend themselves, extremists rushed in, Iran and its proxies upped the ante, and moderate and extremist opposition forces fought both with each other and regime. The US supported Kurdish-led forces battling the Islamic State and eventually sent troops, Russia intervened in support of the regime with air power and mercenaries starting in 2015, and Turkey invaded portions of northern Syria in 2016, 2018, and 2019 to push Kurdish forces back from the border. Since 2015 the Syrian government has been regaining territory, with support from Iran and Russia. In 2019, the Americans shrank their military presence and moved away from the northern border. Still, hundreds of American troops remain in eastern Syria to counter remnants of the Islamic State and maintain control over oil resources, in co-operation with Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). There has been no more complex nor deadly conflict on earth since the Congo War of 1998-2003.

In much of the country, the intensity of violence has now moderated. Contiguous parts of Syria are under the control of identifiable forces. The most recent large-scale offensive took place in Aleppo and Idlib Provinces, where the Syrian army pushed northwards in 2019-2020 to wrest control from the remaining opposition, primarily a former Al Qaeda offshoot known as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), aided by Turkey and allied militias. One million Syrian civilians have fled into a cul-de-sac because the Turks have closed their border. The center, including Damascus, and the west are largely under President Assad's control. The south is also under Damascus' control, with assistance from minimal Russian forces. The Turkish Army controls much of the northern border area. Other parts of the northern border and large parts of the northeast and east are more or less controlled by the SDF, with US support.

Each of the different de facto authorities is trying to stabilize the situation within its areas of control, made more difficult for the past two years by the spread of COVID-19. This paper seeks to describe how they are doing in that enterprise and what the implications are for the future of Syria.

Regime-controlled areas

The Syrian regime seeks to reassert its authority using its pre-war autocratic instruments, the internal security services. Syrian citizens are required to obtain permission from one or more of these services for many ordinary activities like buying property, establishing a business, obtaining foreign currency, and moving from one part of the country to another.[1] Violations can be referred either to the regular court system or to "anti-terrorism" courts, where decisions are generally believed to be under security service control. Those services also run the prison system, which currently contains tens of thousands of political prisoners, many of whom are tortured and some of whom will be executed.[2]

Key positions in the state apparatus, especially the military, are held mostly by Alawites, adherents of a heterodox sect affiliated to Shiism to which President Bashar al Assad belongs. But the Shiites and Alawites are relatively few, so the regime also relies on a network of mostly Sunni businessmen, who are rewarded for loyalty with state contracts and concessions.[3] Elections are used to confirm those in power, not for political competition. Opposition exists only nominally. Serious opponents of the regime are jailed or forced to depart regime-controlled territory. The economic situation is dire with rapid inflation, devaluation of the Syrian pound, and dramatic shortfalls in government revenue.[4] A major source of income for the regime and its allies has been the production and export of illegal drugs, notably hashish and the amphetamine Captagon.[5]

Turkish-controlled areas

Turkish stabilization efforts vary across the territories Ankara controls along the northern border of Syria. Ankara regards the US-allied Syrian Kurdish forces concentrated there as terrorists. The Turkish security forces and allied Arab proxy forces have forced large numbers of Kurds out of both Afrin in the west and formerly Kurdish areas along the border in the east. Ankara seeks to repopulate these areas with Turkmen and Arabs, including Syrian refugees who have spent years inside Turkey.[6] In addition, Kurdish forces are conducting a low-level insurgency against the Turks.[7]

Civilian governance and reconstruction in Turkish-controlled areas of Syria is primarily the responsibility of the governors of neighboring Turkish provinces. However, some Arab-populated parts of the Turkish-controlled territory are stable enough to permit reconstruction as well as limited local self-governance. The legal framework used is Syrian, but Turkish currency and language are increasingly prevalent.[8]

HTS-controlled Idlib Governorate

The northwestern corner of Idlib province, contiguous with Turkey's border, is the last enclave of the traditional opposition to Assad's rule. It hosts dozens of primarily Islamic armed groups, of which HTS is dominant. The small area is home to millions of inhabitants, most of whom are IDPs who fled there or were relocated through "reconciliation" deals with the Assad regime. Faced with a closed Turkish border and a Syrian-Russian siege, Idlib has earned the appellation "new Gaza."[9] HTS relies on Turkey for military support and most of its trade, but their working relationship is troubled.

Governance in Idlib is administered through the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG), which maintains HTS dominance through authoritarian means and applies an idiosyncratic version of Sharia law. Reports of disappearances, torture and secret prisons are widespread.[10] HTS has attempted to downplay its authoritarian and Islamist character in an unsuccessful appeal for Western support.[11] Large numbers of IDPs, Russian and Syrian attacks that target civilian infrastructure and high inflation of both the Syrian and Turkish currencies have led to economic collapse and dire humanitarian conditions.[12]

Syrian Democratic Forces-controlled areas

Much of agriculturally productive eastern Syria is controlled by the SDF, who are Kurdish-led but include substantial Arab troops as well. Like the regime and the Turks, internal security forces maintain the SDF monopoly on violence and repress resistance. The SDF faces serious opposition not only from the regime but also from the Turkish Army and the Islamic State, which has lost its territorial caliphate in the east but continues to conduct insurgency operations there. SDF governing structures are financed in part by oil produced in the east and smuggled to

regime-controlled refining facilities.[13]

SDF governance structures are distinct from those of the regime and the Turks. Their "autonomous administration" is based on the egalitarian, bottom-up philosophy of Abdullah Ocalan, who is in prison in Turkey. Women play a far stronger role than elsewhere in the Middle East, including Kurdish security forces. Local neighborhood councils are the basis of governance, which are aggregated by stages of cooptation to larger geographic units. This allows for more free expression than elsewhere in Syria and, in theory, more opposition. In practice, the Ocalanist Democratic Union Party (PYD) remains dominant, especially in Kurdish-populated areas.[14]

What does this mean for the future of Syria?

This patchwork of stabilization efforts in Syria necessarily makes some doubt that the country can be put back together again. The Turks have not clarified their intentions with respect to the territory they control. Nor have they have not declared an occupation, which entails obligations under the fourth Geneva convention. In theory, the Turks could hand back their holdings to Damascus with relatively little change in the draconian style of governance. But the population of the Turkish-controlled areas prefers Ankara to Damascus. Virtually no one has fled south. Especially in Idlib, Assad sent irreconcilables from other parts of Syria, it is hard to picture ready acceptance of a return to Damascus' authority.

Unlike their Iraqi compatriots, the Syrian Kurds have not sought independence but rather autonomy within the Syrian state. But their bottom-up, egalitarian governance is incompatible with Assad's top-down autocracy exercised by a privileged group of co-religionists, albeit with ample Sunni support. Assad used PYD-affiliated forces in the past to harass Turkey. But to resume that role, the Kurds would want in return more autonomy than Assad would be willing to give.

If reunification under Assad looks unworkable, a formal breakup of Syria looks unappealing. Assad has vowed to retake every inch of the country. No one any longer imagines that the parts of Syria in opposition control in Idlib and Aleppo provinces could survive as an independent state. The Syrian Kurds have not sought one. None of Syria's neighbors would favor its breakup: Turkey for fear of a Kurdish state on its southern border, Iraq because of the precedent that would set for Iraqi Kurdistan, Jordan because it has enough trouble already, and Lebanon for fear of absorption into a rump Alawite/Shia Syria. Even Israel, which has been attacking arms shipments to Hezbollah passing through Syria, would not want to risk Sunni or Shia extremist takeover of the Syrian side of the border.

The concerned great powers will also be opposed. Russia and Iran want their ally whole again. The Europeans fear a new wave of refugees if the Syrian state collapses. The Chinese want stability that could allow profitable reconstruction. The Americans are comfortable with their fiefdom in the east, which has the virtue of sitting astride Iran's land route through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon.

Conclusion

Unless one or the other force risks a major new offensive, the current situation is likely to continue. Undefeated, Assad enjoys political and economic normalization with Arab states that once sought his downfall.[15] He is militarily and economically constrained from pushing north, as is Turkey from pushing south. The risks of either move would be substantial. The SDF is unable to recover territory from Turkey. The Americans, Russians, Israelis, and Iranians accept the current stalemate. For lack of better, Syria will continue to suffer.

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UTOPIAS (UN)REMEMBERED:
Notes on the Possibilities for Political Re-imagining within the Afro/Arab Visual Arts

Taurean J. Webb

In recent years, what is now being called Black-Palestinian transnational solidarity has received increased attention in popular and scholarly discourses. Largely incited by the ways that Black US, Palestinian, and Palestinian-American activists coalesced, sometimes via social media, other times, in-person, during the civil unrest that tarried—in Ferguson, Missouri—in the wake of the 2014 police killing of Michael Brown, Jr.

Part of what accounts for the recent re-investment into the Black-Palestinian analytic is the contemporary vibes that feel warmly, yet fervently, reminiscent of the transnational circuits of movement building that characterized the last century. Although the currents of intellectual cross-fertilization, joint action, shared friendships, and shared grief between Black US Americans and Palestinians in the 1960s and 70s should be read through the wider frame of Black Third Worldism—of which Palestine was one site of anti-colonial struggle among others, with which Black radicals resonated—it is nevertheless the case that these former moments of relationship reverberate deep into the present. Partially because of this reverberation, and likely also in spite of it, the present moment of Black-Palestinian transnationalism—significantly marked by the simultaneous militarized siege on Ferguson and the 2014 bombardment of Gaza—has developed into a sustained movement in its own right, notes legal scholar, Noura Erakat.[1]

Indeed, in the Black radical imagination, some of the last century's most remembered figures in pursuit of carving what Alex Lubin calls "an Afro-Arab political imaginary" were persons such as Ethel Minor (the young, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee writer, intent on pushing SNCC to stand firmly in its anti-occupation commitments); or Stokely Carmichael (later, Kwame Ture), the famed Black Power leader; or, of course, the stalwart religious thinker Malcolm X. In fact, many contemporary US-based Black activists who consider themselves part of the international Palestine solidarity movement read themselves, ideologically, through these figures and their intellectual traditions. But insofar as much US attention in the solidarity movement has tended to focus on direct political action or the civic currency of social movements, there are also important chords to sound in relation to dynamics that are more keyed to creative culture.

By invoking "creative culture" or "cultural production," I specifically mean to signal the arts, broadly: the literary, the performative, the visual, and otherwise. To be sure, some scholars and creatives, past and present, have certainly already tapped into either the symbiosis of Black-Palestinian struggle; the transnational circuits of influence between creatives from various African and Arab exilic migrations; or at least, the shared artistic (and political) commitments across traditions. These synergies have been especially salient between literary artists. For instance, the work of Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish echoes core tenets of the US-based Black Arts Movement when it announces poetry as an integral public witness. Or, as Keith Feldman notes, the Black essayist June Jordan's writings that interrogated the curious formulation of Palestinian humanity

within a post-Civil Rights United States required a type of feminist antiracism that broke with typical second-wave feminisms and "put her in conversation with nascent Arab American feminist and Arab American literary formations."[2]

But in this brief conceptual essay, I center the visual arts and the possibilities they invite us to imagine. My argument is that the visual arts—particularly Black and Palestinian visual cultural production—can be read as a site by which a transnational futurist imagination invites us into new ways of envisioning civic possibilities, especially bringing to bear the untethering of subjects from utopian visions. Of course, I don't seek to make any universalizable claim about the entire canon of what might be called "Black-," "African Diasporic-," "Palestinian-," or "Arab-" art—and certainly not about any ethnic essences pertaining thereunto. Instead, I center two artists who self-reflexively emerge from these traditions—US-based African American muralist Max Sansing and Australia-based Palestinian photographer, Lux Eterna—as a way of gesturing towards different iterations of the *possible* embedded in these genealogies in ways that one might not expect, given the usual interpretation of "artistic expression" from historically marginalized groups.

To guide our remaining time: I first offer commentary on select works in Sansing's and Eterna's respective corpora. From there, I think alongside theorist James Cone, insofar as his interventions about the relation between the "here-and-now" and the "hereafter" are instructive for how I situate the utility of creative culture. I then turn to the question of futurism and conclude with brief meditations on the potential implications of such conceptual work on the public sphere, policy, and political transformation.

I spend time discussing a typical problematic with which imagined futures usually have to reckon utopias. Many times—especially when considering creative cultural production from communities

historically under siege—an expectation is that the ethos of the work will point to some better future, some idealized time-space. Too often, the expectation is that the work would take the viewer on some progressivist journey, through which an oppressive history is reconciled. This is an explicitly utopian vision, in one sense. But even in cultural narratives in which a fully reconciled history-future timespan is not made explicit, a far-too-common expectation for works to be "resistance art" or "protest art," I argue, still bleeds back into the structure of a future that utopian ideals strive to create. In effect, "utopia" as conceived in both these senses ought to be at least reformulated, if not disposed of entirely.

In my estimation, these artists allow us a glimpse into a different type of embodiment of futurity, one that we would do well to take seriously.

Against Utopian Horizons: The Works of Lux Eterna and Max Sansing

The artists whose work I invite us to walk alongside offer important heuristics that could nuance how we imagine ourselves in relation to the cultural politics of communities under siege. Also, in recent years, within the Black intellectual tradition, much attention has been given to the ways in which Black religious thought, in particular, can be deployed to mine new questions and new sites of inquiry within a creative culture. To be clear, my ultimate interest is not to raise theological talking points. Instead, I mean to suggest that as an analytic, the grammars of the Black religious thought tradition can lead us into especially robust ways of knowing "the creative."

I am informed by Cornel West's and Eddie Glaude's argument of Black religious thought as a tool in their 2003 volume, *African American Religious Thought: An Anthology*. They posit Black religious thought less as a study of specific religious institutions or communities and more as a "critical analysis of the discursive and

ritualistic formations that question traditional scholarly categories and open up new sites for investigation."[3] What makes particular discursive and ritualistic formations—across racial, ethnic, or national contexts—intriguing to Black religious thought is their movement towards questions of "ultimate concern." And any sensibilities towards "the future," "liberation," "home," etc.: these motifs chip at the very core of the mind preoccupied with the ultimate.
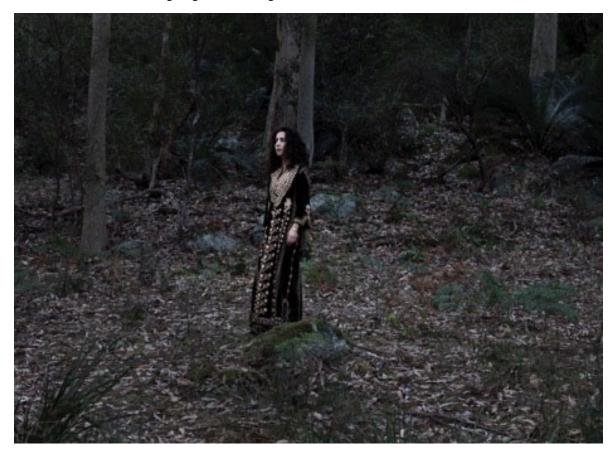

Figure 1.

Lux Eterna is a Palestinian photographer and filmmaker whose work revolves around questions of diaspora, indigeneity, and embodiment. In her 2017 work, "Motherland, Here On In" (Figure 1), Eterna says:

> The first of [an] ... ongoing portrait series ... holding questions around what it means to be living between worlds borne out of displaced homelands. I stand within a typical Australian landscape, known for and canonised by white male settler landscape painters ...

Having only once visited the grandmother land, I never knew how displaced from my heritage or from my parents' dispossessed, yet inherited trauma I was, until later in life ... [My family,] uprooted from a land that is still maturing in the trauma from colonisation, dispossession and erasure of its Levantine people. From one colonized land still aftermathing in the ferity of genocidal violence and dispossession to another. I was later born in Australia, and have always struggled to make sense of what is home. Looking to our First Nations peoples, I discovered shared connection of caretaking for land, dancing and family. I cannot speak on behalf of their wounds, yet seek to ... spark dialogue from which ... new futures authored in our own agency [may emerge].

That Eterna invokes time and place is significant. Upon encountering this self-portrait, the viewer is immediately struck by the figure—the artist—wearing indigenous Palestinian garb, standing center frame, gazing off into some unknown landscape, from an admittedly already complicated one. In a 2021 conversation, Eterna told me that she understands her work as situated differently than that of other Palestinian visual artists—expected to stand within a tradition of explicit protest or resistance imagery. Eterna's process and subjects do different work. "Opposed to the more typical Palestinian artist," she says, "where we do get the landscapes, the women, the olive trees, Jerusalem, etc. . . . We're consuming the same images, but we're not using our imaginations to dream up new ways of being."[4] In making such a claim, these "new ways of being" signaled questions of embodiment, comportment, affect, and Eterna's hope to invite viewers into a different mode of positioning their bodies in space. This point was especially salient, given the multiple worlds in which her work sits: the "high art spaces" in which the human viewer body is expected to comport in a manner that is stoic, contemplative, and sterile. And the "movement spaces" that, by definition, require human participants to assume postures of protest or resistance—always presumably knowing what such a posture should look like.

Critically, Eterna's work points us to questions of utopia. Is such a thing possible? Is imagining the possibility of utopian visions even useful in pursuits of social transformation? And why is it the expectation that our cultural productions *must* help articulate them?

On one level, the artist is pushing against the idea of the visual arts as needing to articulate, for us, a liberationist vision that ultimately deposits us within some progressivist future. Surely, one reads this in her countenance; she wears not a hopeful expression. It is the expression of a woman standing within, as she says, "a strained colonial past, a strained present," looking towards a likely, labored future. On the other hand, the work challenges the form of utopianism that doesn't necessarily output us into a progressivist future but does factor a particular posture (of resistance) within the present, insofar as there is presumably room for such civic expression in democratic struggles for liberation. Her body comportment is not that; it does not imbibe the familiar postures of civic resistance. In some ways, Eterna is pointing us towards a type of dystopian future and inviting us to re-imagine, with dignity, our place within it.

Figure 2.

Chicago, IL native Max Sansing has deep roots within the city's African American cultural heritage. As one of the city's most prolific muralists, his work combines abstraction with photorealism, "capturing intricately rendered faces set against dynamic backdrops that cast them as real-world heroes," but doing so as they are grounded in their own (mostly, neighborhood) context. A fine example of this technique is the artist's 2019 mural (Figure 2), "New Frontiers, Same Old Nine"—a nod to Chicago's iconic 79th Street.

Sansing's work—along with a companion mural by artist Kayla Mahaffey—flanks an abandoned lot on Chicago's South Side. Prior to the opening ceremony that celebrated these two murals' completion—a neighborhood magazine says—the lot was colored with uncut grass and broken bottles and was generally, rather tragically rendered. And from this place—geographically and conceptually—Sansing's work stands. It depicts a presumably Black woman, standing in the foreground of a neighborhood sunset, wielding a long rod as she gazes, focused, beyond the viewer.

One of the most interesting aspects of the portrait is the figure's astronaut-like headgear. It's intended to resonate with Sansing's commitment for the mural to probe ideas of discovery, exploration, even "new frontiers." But the artwork and her artist go about this task paradoxically, precisely because, in the end, the work is set within a very particular geopolitical landscape, along the main thoroughfare that is the lifeblood of a Black neighborhood profoundly disinvested in by the City of Chicago.

In effect, the work and viewer are invited to raise the question, "But what newness is waiting to be discovered here?" Sansing has answered a similar question by noting that the work is about "rediscovering where you are" (emphasis added).[5] Returning to the question of utopia(s), one cannot help but be struck by the intensity with which "New Frontiers" foregrounds the viewer within its own—and perhaps, therefore, our own—context. It does not seem to bespeak a particularly hopeful future, but one in which our protagonist is nevertheless singularly focused.

The Question of Time and 'Black Religious Thought'-as-Heuristic Grammar

Black religionist James Hal Cone helped frame critical thought around US Black religious history and discourse in the 1960s and 1970s—that great season of social and religious upheaval. For Cone, his corpus was viewed as a companion project to the Black Power Movement—the more "secular" arm of 1960s-era US Black radicalism—specifically focused on Black religious thought and experience. Though the relationship between Black Power and Cone's Black Theology was complicated, his theoretical masonry should nevertheless be understood as a critical way station in the trajectory of Black radical thought.

One of Cone's anchoring concepts was the idea of how eschatology—of or relating to "the end"—figured into the Black imagination. Contrary to what Cone considered the progressivist, cheaply hopeful eschatology of European/White American religious thinkers that focused much too much on the otherworldly (at the expense of the tangibility of the "this-worldly"), Black eschatology had no such luxury. In other words, because of the depth of anti-Black violence and oppression, Black folks did not have the luxury of using an otherworldly utopia—in effect, a "heaven"—as a viable starting point. Instead, Cone suggests the starting point as the reality of a potentially non-existent future, grounded in the context of a present existence conditioned by both oppression and pursuits for liberation. Projecting—via insurgent action—into an imagined future is the mechanism by which other worlds are dreamable. But Cone is clear that White supremacy's control over the rules and policies that manage Black life tend to render even these modestly imaginable futures untenable.

But he is just as intent, however, on articulating that this fact has never, historically, prevented Black folks from "living the future as if it were the present."[6]

I suggest that this analytic is instructive as we turn to the visual arts. I am less concerned with what Cone might have understood as the promise of imagining the future in this way and more so with the implications of this formulation on how we imagine time. In effect, my claim here is that this tool of Black radicalism/Black religious thought can be interpreted as a heuristic by which we read particular visual arts representations as reorienting ourselves in relation to re-imagined pasts, strained presents, and hoped-for futures.

Much like Cone's insistence, Eterna's and Sansing's challenge bespeaks a type of impossible utopia, partially because of the potential inevitability of the/a future, as such. For Cone, part of the work was to bring a viable future into a sobered present. In other words, there was no such reality as an aspirational horizon into which we will all, one day, arrive. Instead, time collapses, and the future folds into the present. That's the dream. What might it mean—the question emerges—to not hold the expectation of creative culture to point towards some progressivist, liberated or utopian future? Or how might a futurist orientation—grounded in the burgeoning literatures of Afro- and what some call, "Arab-futurism"—allow artists and interpreters of the visual arts to tell *other stories* about culture, time, and things to come, even if those "things" stand in stark contrast to present assumptions about freedom and liberation?

Final Thoughts on Implications

One potentially generative set of questions, following this analysis, revolves around the relationship between protest (as a tactic of liberation) and institutions—appendages of the state—either governmental or non-governmental. Insofar as the arts can invite us into opportunities for a transformative political imagination that does not wed us to utopian models that promise democratic assurances (i.e., "rights," "progress," etc.) so long as actors are bold enough to participate in the civic dance (i.e., protest, in response to conditions of oppression), they open new space for analysis. These are the terms by which liberal statecraft so often operates. And I, by no means, am standing against the always-possible utilities of protest as a viable tactic of ensuring equity and accountability. Instead, I only mean to suggest that we are, perhaps, long overdue to ask different sorts of questions—especially given such abject oppression under which many communities exist, Palestinian, Black, and otherwise. What narratives, for instance, beyond "countering" or "resisting institutions" might viably exist? I submit that the visual arts help till the soil for new questions to bud.

My hope, in this brief essay, has not necessarily been to suggest that these two artists—Eterna and Sansing—are explicit interlocutors; nor am I interested in signaling that there is some essential thread, stretching across their work, that is akin to the corollaries, across context, when we typically discuss Black-Palestinian transnationalism. What I have hoped to do, instead, is begun to articulate that such artists and traditions can be read as inspiring an incipient futurist ethic that allows us to re-imagine ourselves in relation to the systems we engage and the ideas of time, itself, with which we engage them.

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ARAB SUCCESS AND NORMALIZATION

Dr. Einat Wilf

A few months ago, the following headlines appeared within a short time of each other: "UAE Welcomes Israeli Prime Minister on Official Visit," "Dubai Becomes World's First Paperless Government, Saves Over 336 Million Papers," and "UAE Named Top Country to Live in for Arab Youth for 10th year." These three headlines are supposedly unrelated. Yet, they tell the most hopeful story to come out of the Middle East in a generation. It is the story of Arab success and the way in which normalization with Israel is now associated with Arab success.

For decades, the story of the Arab Middle East, especially in the West, has been one of failure. Notably, in the wake of 9/11, news stories, government reports, and UN papers repeatedly decried the systemic failure of the Arab world. The West argued for the need to address the Arab world's various "deficits" such as a democratic deficit, a human rights deficit, and an economic development deficit. The common thread of these stories was of young people growing up in a hopeless society that offered them no future. One implication was that terrorism was an understandable by-product of such youth despair.

One decade after 9/11, the Arab Spring promised a new hope. At a time when Facebook was still considered a force for good, Westerners looked on with hope as young people flocked to the main squares of Arab capitals chanting "The People Want the Fall of the Regime." They imagined how these "Facebook Revolutions" would bring freedom, democracy, accountable government, and prosperity to the Arab world. Alarmed warnings by Middle East leaders, including Israeli leaders, that the democratic replacement for secular autocratic leaders was going to be either Islamist fundamentalist rule or chaotic breakdown, were

considered the grumpy mumblings of a dying old order.

Those warnings proved prescient. The magnitude of the folly of the United States going to wars in the Middle East to repair the region's "democratic deficit" became all too evident. The United States then declared a "Pivot to Asia," pursuing a policy of disentangling itself from a region that seemed to offer no prospect of foreign policy success.

Yet as the United States began to reduce its footprint in the region, the Gulf states, which for decades were considered nothing more than Western client states, began to create a homegrown model of Arab success. Realizing that they would not be able to rely on oil and the West forever, local leaders began to forge a vision for their societies that would allow them to thrive even in the absence of direct Western support and unlimited oil. This model of Arab success was marked by a fusion of cultural tradition with technological modernity. It was unapologetically Arab and Muslim while fully pursuing all that modernity had to offer, from gleaming skyscrapers and ambitious space programs to branches of international universities and museums.

While the Gulf model of governance wasn't even remotely democratic, it enjoyed widespread legitimacy among the governed. This legitimacy emerged from being rooted in tradition with effective policies in the service of the people's prosperity. This legitimacy was further cemented by policies that combined traditional rewards for tribal loyalty with meritocracy, expanding the number of women and highly educated people in governance.

Increasing numbers of young Arabs flocked to

lucrative jobs in the Gulf and soon noticed the success of this model. An Arab colleague recently told me that for a very long time, even as they were flocking to the Gulf for financial gain, Arabs of Egypt and the Levant snubbed their noses at the "Bedouins of the Gulf." But, he said, they suddenly realized that in the process of helping build the shining cities of the Gulf their own cities have been sidelined. The once great urban centers of Arab leadership and ideological ferment of Cairo, Alexandria, Beirut, and Damascus, have given way to the rising cities of the Gulf. He said that it is now clear that the center of the Arab world—culturally, ideologically, and of course economically—has shifted to the Gulf.

In the process, the Gulf states emerged as models not just of economic success, but of Arab and Islamic identity itself. Against the fundamentalist Islamism of ISIS and the chaos of the once Arab secular states, the Gulf monarchies offered a cultural model of a moderate and tolerant Islam. Throughout the decade-long turmoil of the Arab Spring and its aftermath, the Gulf monarchies, together with the monarchies of Jordan and Morocco, realized that they possessed a unique form of Arab and Islamic legitimacy that was grounded in the lineage of the monarchies themselves. They also realized that their legitimacy, a key to their survival, depended on presenting an alternative to ISIS that was unmistakably Islamic, rather than an imported system, whether democracy or secular autocracy.

The leaders of the Gulf states then, each in their own way, embarked on a process of representing a centrist Islam with special emphasis on tolerance. This Islam was grounded in known moderate interpretations of Islam and was therefore unmistakably Islamic. The tolerance expressed itself in a variety of ways, national and religious, including towards Israel and the Jews. Normalization with Israel thus became a form of "collateral benefit." It is not that the Gulf states chose to normalize relations with Israel without context and against

everything else they were doing. On the contrary, normalization with Israel was part and parcel of this new Arab and Islamic projection of success.

If the Arab world were divided between failure and success, past and future, war and peace, the Gulf states were firmly situating themselves on the side of success, future, and peace. In the vision of Gulf leaders these three ideas were intertwined. Gulf leaders were modeling Arab success. Their model represented the Arab future and peace was part of how they pursued this success and brought about this future.

In the wake of the Abraham Accords, I co-authored an op-ed with two young Emiratis, a woman and a man.[1] They argued that "It is time to dispense with the idea that to be a proud Arab and Muslim one must be anti-Zionist." The thing that was most important for my co-writers to include in the essay was the notion of "waste." They wanted to emphasize the extent to which "the inculcation and dissemination of anti-Zionism in the Arab and Islamic world has resulted in a massive waste of valuable resources." They wanted to underscore that it was not just "wasted human and financial resources and unnecessary suffering," but especially "wasted time." As young Emiratis they already had a sense of themselves belonging to a successful Arab future. It was clear to them that Arab hostility to Israel belonged to a past of failure, of which they were no longer part and for which they had no nostalgia.

These sentiments were echoed beyond the Gulf in a remarkable statement issued by hundreds of Iraqi leaders and activists—Sunni and Shia—that gathered in Erbil in the fall of 2021 to call for full normalization with Israel. Echoing the Gulf vision of tying normalization with Israel with moderate Islam, they emphasized in their declaration that "some of us have faced down ISIS and al-Qaeda on the battlefield," and that "we oppose all extremists."[2] Harking to the Islamic division between the "House of Islam" and the "House of

War," they described the Arab countries as divided between those of peace and those of war. They described Syria, Libya, Lebanon and Yemen as "mired in war" while pointing to the Abraham Accords as representing a hopeful trend of "peace, economic development, and brotherhood." These local Iraqi leaders and activists made it clear that in this binary choice they were very much hoping to situate Iraq in the camp of the future—that of Islamic moderation, peace, normalization, and Arab success.

The Erbil declaration also highlights the connection between Arab failure and the rejection of Jews, not just in Israel, but those who once lived for millennia across the Middle East. In the declaration, Iraqis called the mass expulsion of Iraq's Jews "the most infamous act" and have tied it to the country's decline. For Iraq to embark on a path to success, the declaration calls on Iraq to "reconnect with the whole of our diaspora, including these Jews" while rejecting "the hypocrisy in some quarters of Iraq that speaks kindly of Iraqi Jews while denigrating their Israeli citizenship, and the Jewish state, which granted them asylum." The UAE, Bahrain, Morocco and even Egypt, have all demonstrated an understanding of this connection, tying their embrace of Israel with celebration of Jewish life in their midst, present and past.

It is unfortunate that some in the West still find it difficult to let go of their notion of Arab failure, discounting the relevance of the UAE and the Abraham Accords. Some in the West might find it difficult to realize that the world is diversifying its models of successful development and governance. Various countries are moving forward by themselves and for themselves. This is excellent news that points to a possible future of locally grown peace and prosperity. The poll that placed the UAE for ten consecutive years, as the country "Young Arabs Would Most Like to Live in and Have Their Own Country Emulate"

did not only compare the UAE to other Arab countries. While 47 percent of respondents, aged 18 to 24, said they would want to live in the Emirates, only 19 percent chose the US, 15 percent Canada, 13 percent France and 11 percent Germany, as the top five. This demonstrates that, given a successful local model that is unmistakably Arab, young Arabs far prefer their own model to that of the West.

This is cause for celebration, and, for a change, it's coming out of the heart of the Arab and Islamic Middle East.

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UAE AND ISRAEL UNDER THE SUPERPOWER COMPETITION

Dr. Roie
Yellinek

Over the last several years, China and the United States have been experiencing growing tension in many fields, from technological to ideological. This international development, maybe the most significant one in this decade, raised the following question: are we going back into another Cold War? Joseph Nye, a former United States assistant secretary of defense for International Security Affairs and a current Harvard professor, commented about this question in the *New York Times* and argued that the current situation is not a new Cold War, adding that this "analogy is lazy and dangerous."[1] Despite this reservation, many countries in the world have needed to ask themselves how to navigate the superpowers competition age we are currently in.

The navigation becomes harder for countries that want, or even sometimes need to, maintain good relations with both superpowers. Israel and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) both fall under these categories since both countries enjoy thriving trade relations with China and the United States. Leaders from the UAE and Israel facing this growing dilemma should find ways to help and learn from each other. The two countries signed the Abraham Accords a year-and-a-half ago, and since then have kept this new partnership in high profile as they share common interests and concerns in regard to the superpowers' competition—making this path of cooperation even more relevant. The Emirati and Israeli leaders must navigate between the two superpowers in order to shape their foreign policy in a turbulent region.

The historical background of the relationship started with the UAE and China signing a dip-lomatic relationship back in 1986, and Israel did so six years later, nearly the last country in the region to do so. Since then, as mentioned, the relationship between these two Middle Eastern countries and China has been getting stronger. On the other hand, many years before the countries signed a diplomatic relationship with China, they maintained a deep strategic relationship with the United States.

The clear understanding that both countries need to keep a good relationship with China and the United States at the same time forces them to work hard and be creative. The main reason for the urgent action needed is the fact that the superpowers have already moved to the next stage of their competition and started to build separate groups of countries that are loyal and supportive of them. The recent examples of such a move are the establishing of the AUKUS by the American side and the acceptance of Iran to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), after long years of waiting, and also China urging the Southeast Asia countries to join the "united front" with them and not with the United States.[2]

Although Israel and the UAE are clearly part of the "the American group" and therefore cannot join any Chinese strategic initiative, they already have a deep relationship with China. Under this situation, the two countries must find a path to navigate their way, even when the superpowers become more exigent in their requests from their camp. For instance, the American side pushed the UAE to give up the 5G infrastructure built by the Chinese company Huawei, as well as the secret Chinese port project in Abu Dhabi that

was recently discovered. From the Israeli perspective, the situation looks quite similar. After the Shanghai International Port Group (SIPG) won the bid for operating the new Haifa port in 2014, the Americans sent a clear message to the Israeli government and expressed their deep concern over the twenty-five-year operating contract between the state of Israel and the Chinese company.

So far, it looks like the UAE and Israel can 'walk between the raindrops,' with the current trend of escalating the tone between China and the United States forcing them to build a new strategy for facing this challenge. The first thing they should do is to identify the challenge, even if only behind closed doors in order to avoid unnecessarily escalating the situation. Also, there is a claim in international relations that sometimes "no strategy is also a strategy and sometimes the best one" because you can enjoy wider maneuvering space. In this case, it becomes impossible to do so, mostly because the United States and China have been pushing countries harder than ever to show their loyalty. Because of their similar characteristics and the warm relationship, Israel and the UAE should work together to face this challenge, and maybe even offer other Middle Eastern countries, such as Bahrain and Morocco, to join them.

The necessary strategy probably will not change the basic structure and network of alliances of Emirati and Israeli foreign policy but shape them in accordance with the evolving reality. The most significant action and the first step to take with this strategy is to find what the sensitive issues are in general for the superpowers—and in particular in the bilateral relationship between the UAE and Israel—and then to map what these are. After precise wording of the two categories of sensitive issues, Israel and the UAE need to demonstrate to the United States and China that they are aware of this and send a message that these sensitive issues are recognized. Sensitive issues include the 'One China Policy' for the Chinese side and not to

trade with China in arms or military technology for the American side.

If Israel and the UAE are to learn from past experience, then the second most important step should be to keep an open and honest dialogue with the superpowers and not to keep trying to "walk between the raindrops," because in the end, if one of the super powers finds out, the damage will outweigh the benefit. For example, the Israeli authorities must monitor more closely the trade with China and make sure that no arms or military technology are transferred from Israel, as was recently revealed.[3] The third step should be to make a plan of response if or when the superpowers demand them to reduce their relationship with the other superpower. The answer must address the political-diplomatic level, the economic level (mostly supply chains and such things), and military and defense issues.

Israel and the UAE are facing a major challenge that can influence their future significantly, and both governments, alone and together, must buckle down and use the challenge for growth. Besides the possible growth in the bilateral relationship, the countries can take advantage of the current international situation and strengthen their international presence, mostly in the tech industry, and as regional powers in the gaps created by the superpower competition.

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Endnotes

1   Joseph Nye, "What Is Going on With China Is Not a 'Cold War," *The New York Times,* accessed 11 February 2022.

2   "Aukus: UK, US and Australia Launch Pact to Counter China," *BBC News,* 16 September 2021, sec. World; Vali Kaleji, "What Iran's Shanghai Cooperation Organization Membership Really Means," *The Center for the National Interest,* 28 November 2021; Simeone McCarthy, "China Urges Southeast Asia to Join United Front against New Cold War," *South China Morning Post,* 11 accessed February 2022.

3   "הפרשה הביטחונית החמורה *נחשפו והחשודים במכירת טילים לסין לל* | כלכליסט, *היתר כ* accessed 11 February 2022.