

MIDDLE EAST REPORT

ME

# ACTIVISM

ALGERIA ■ EGYPT ■ PALESTINE ■ TUNISIA



Winter 2016 ■ Number 281



**Middle East Report** (ISSN 0899-2851) is published four times a year (quarterly) by the Middle East Research and Information Project, 1344 T St. #1, Washington, DC 20009.

**POSTMASTER** Periodicals postage paid at Washington, DC and additional mailing offices. Send all address corrections to MERIP, 1344 T St. NW #1, Washington, DC 20009.

**MAILING** The magazine is mailed periodicals class in North America to the rest of the world. Send address changes to MERIP, 1344 T St. NW #1, Washington, DC 20009. Subscriptions are \$42 per year for individuals, \$150 for institutions. Overseas postage additional. Other rates on inside back cover. *Middle East Report* is available in microform from University Microfilms, 300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106. Canadian Distribution: Disticor Direct, 695 Westney Rd S, #14, Ajax, ON, CANADA L1S 6M9

**ADVERTISING** For details, contact MERIP, Tel 202-223-3677 Fax 202-223-3604. Email [ctoensing@merip.org](mailto:ctoensing@merip.org) Web [www.merip.org](http://www.merip.org)

**INDEXES AND ABSTRACTS** Abstracta Iranica, The Alternative Press Index, Index Islamicus, International Development Abstracts, International Political Science Abstracts, The Left Index, The Middle East Journal, Mideast File, Migration and Ethnizität, PAIS Bulletin, Universal Reference Systems.

**ELECTRONIC ARCHIVE** Available through JSTOR, [www.jstor.com](http://www.jstor.com) for participating institutions.

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**COVER** Journalists protest in front of the Press Syndicate in Cairo to demand release of detained journalists and an end to press restrictions, May 4, 2016. (Staff/Reuters)

## MIDDLE EAST REPORT

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**Design and Production** James E. Bishara

**Printing** McArdle Printing

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**Middle East Research & Information Project**

Printed in the USA by McArdle Printing.

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**A**s the baleful administration of President Donald Trump bumbles from one scandal to the next, a set of deeply disturbing patterns have emerged in the domestic politics and foreign policy of the United States.

The mainstream corporate media, bewitched by Trump's non-stop shenanigans, devotes a great deal of space and airtime to fevered speculation about what all the arbitrary firing and flouting of protocol means for Republican pet projects and popularity ratings. A second fixation is the "*Game of Thrones* for morons" in which a cast of cutthroat White House courtiers jostle to get the last word in the president's ear before he takes back to Twitter. Still a third preoccupation is the solemn admonitions, such as that on May 14 from the former director of national intelligence, James Clapper, that US "institutions are under assault" from both Trump and foreign adversaries, chiefly Russia.

The Trump circus is not just some grand distraction—the president's seeming propensity for decision-making by tantrum is indeed worrisome and his decisions to date really do pose dangers to democratic governance in the US, flawed as it is. His Russian connections warrant thorough and unimpeded investigation. But the anxious buzz of the times—"this is not normal"—is white noise blocking out discussion of actual policy and, particularly with regard to what the US does overseas, serving to normalize the same old imperial consensus.

An early example is the April 7 missile strikes on Syria, in the wake of the chemical attack (apparently by regime forces) on rebel-held Khan Sheikhoun. CNN hastened to pronounce the strikes "decisive," not in the Syrian war, but in the Trump administration's attitude toward the regime of Bashar al-Asad. Previously, the assumption had been that Trump, in deference to Russia, would limit US military involvement to salvos at the Islamic State, or ISIS. Now interventionists jumped at the chance to agitate for more. Just hours before Trump ordered the Tomahawks into flight, his presidential campaign rival Hillary Clinton had said the US should "take out" the airfields used by Asad's forces and reiterated her support for a no-fly zone over all of Syria. After the strikes, CNN gave her remarks heavy play—interspersed with commentary expressing relief that Trump might be moving in her direction.

Then, on April 13, a warplane dropped a 21,600-pound bomb, the second largest non-nuclear weapon in the US arsenal, on an alleged ISIS tunnel complex in Afghanistan. The Pentagon had been looking for the opportunity to use this "mother of all bombs" for some time. Its destructive power was first advertised slightly more than a week before the US-led invasion of Iraq, as a form of "psychological operations." Iraq was judged too populous a proving ground in 2003, but not Afghanistan in 2017. As Moustafa Bayoumi noted in the April 14 *Guardian*, Western nations have a long history of turning "territory inhabited by the 'uncivilized'" into a "laboratory for the newest and worst weapons of war."

The national security adviser, Lt. Gen. H. R. McMaster, is said to be pushing for deployment of extra troops and planes in Afghanistan, as well as Iraq and Syria, lest these airstrikes be seen as the "pinpricks" Republicans decried in decades past. Arrayed against him, reportedly, is Stephen Bannon, the repulsive white nationalist behind the "America first" slogan of Trump's campaign. There is nothing to root for here—only various things to dread.

It is pointless, so far, to look for a guiding principle in Trump's foreign policy. Riven by infighting and facing stiff resistance on other fronts, such as the attempted "Muslim bans," the White House has time for little beyond the occasional made-for-television explosion. Bad as that is, the worse news is that the bipartisan Washington establishment, abetted by the media, is lining up behind permanent war as the sensible alternative. ■



High-school students protest the cancellation and postponement of exams in front of Parliament in Cairo, June 27, 2016. The banner reads, "We won't postpone. We won't repeat."

# What Is Activism?

Jillian Schwedler and Kevan Harris

In early 2011, the world watched as millions of people took to the streets across the Arab world to demand the fall of regimes, or at least substantial political reforms. As the weeks and then months unfolded, the broadcast media adopted split screens to show simultaneous live footage of crowds in multiple countries. Some regimes were toppled and many were seriously shaken, but no regime in the region was left untouched. The high visibility of the uprisings, together with massive street protests on nearly every continent, led *Time* to name "the protester" as the 2011 Person of the Year.

While virtually no one anticipated the precise timing of the uprisings, close observers of the Middle East were surprised less by the fact of street protests than by the scale of the mobilizations. Demonstrations have been commonplace across the region for decades. Protesters continue to turn

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out today even as regimes are again repressing all manner of political dissent. While many commentators and scholars declare the uprisings to have ended, millions of citizens across the region continue to agitate for major change, including via street protests. But because the throngs that assembled in 2011 created such a global spectacle, those massive mobilizations have become an unreasonable standard by which to judge the political significance of protests.

Indeed, protest remains a central means of demanding political change—and one whose use may even be increasing. In 2016 alone, Tunisia and Algeria—the former the cradle of the Arab uprisings and the latter supposedly unaffected by them—each saw more than 10,000 protests.<sup>1</sup> Other countries in the region have witnessed hundreds and thousands of protests as well; a demonstration per day is not unusual. Even as large-scale gatherings have diminished, the staggering numbers of protests across the Middle East show that public assemblies remain an important tool for activists and fellow



citizens to express dissent and demand political changes, large and small.

The apparent retreat of the multitudes is disappointing for many activists, but for them the uprisings are nonetheless not over. Even in places like Bahrain—where a huge non-sectarian mobilization in 2011 was brutally crushed—protesters continue to come out, most recently marking the sixth anniversary of the February 14, 2011 uprising and torching a city hall during January 2017 rallies against the execution of three fellow citizens. Ignoring such ongoing resistance, scholars and analysts who assert the end or failure of the uprisings unwittingly lend credibility to the claims of autocrats that all is quiet—even as vocal activists prove the rulers wrong. The re-entrenchment of authoritarianism is indisputable, but this fact makes the resolve of activists and protesters across the region all the more remarkable. More localized and smaller protests have emerged in place of the dramatic marches and central square occupations of the uprisings, suggesting that a longer-term analytic framework might serve better not only for understanding the impact of the uprisings but also for broadening the awareness of contentious politics in the region. Protests, after all, are far from the only means of expressing resistance and dissent. Political activist energies have been channeled into a wider range of outlets, in large part due to necessity. In the process, activists have fostered new alliances and new strategies of resistance and dissent.

Adopting a longer timeline to assess the impact of the uprisings also brings into sharp relief the precariousness of the perches on which these reformed regimes sit. Jordan's monarch 'Abdallah II weathered a storm of protest from 2011 to 2013, but members of his supposedly loyal base openly express the view that he is the country's "last king." In Egypt, 'Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi emerged from the 2013 coup against elected President Muhammad Mursi as the new strongman, and then secured executive office himself. But struggles inside Sisi's regime, hinted at by mixed signals emanating from on high, suggest that his grip on power is tenuous. Even the present dispensation in Tunisia—which Western governments and scholars alike have rushed to label a successful case of democratic transition—is a bit shaky. Some of the country's political factions are moving to strengthen their own positions of power within the coalition government framework, justifying that consolidation as needed to safeguard the passage to stable democracy. Critics of the transition process, meanwhile, contend that the democratic commitments of Tunisia's ruling coalition remain thin.

## Activism and Protest

The political history of the modern Middle East is one characterized by diverse and continuous opposition to rulers both domestic and foreign. As these powers have sought to impose various visions of political order, local peoples have

consistently pushed back with their own ideas about how they should be governed and by whom. Many ways in which individuals and groups contest those claiming power are characterized as forms of activism (in Arabic, *nishat*), but that term has diverse meanings both across the region and over time. Indeed, scholarly analyses and categories of activism often bear little resemblance to what local people understand

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as activism—if they use that term at all. In the Arab world, *nishat* is often little more than a catch-all description of efforts to affect or resist various techniques and institutions of political power. In other instances, the meaning of *nishat* is far more specific.

In some of the word's iterations, an activist (*nashit*) is someone closely associated with the leftist political parties that were most active from the 1950s to the 1970s. In other cases, *nishat* refers to forms of political resistance explicitly juxtaposed to party politics (*hizbiyya*), social movements (*harakat*) and civil society organizations (*mu'assasat al-mujtama' al-madani*). That is, *nishat* is understood as a non-institutionalized form of resistance.

Even the concept of movements (*harakat*) can sometimes refer to long-term efforts to effect change and at other times to more localized groups (*hirak*), such as those that joined protests during the 2011 uprisings. Activism can entail organizing a demonstration or stirring up opposition to a specific policy, and at other times activism is what social movements do, such as molding public opinion over decades or providing social services. And sometimes activists are viewed as *mu'arada* (opposition), while at other times *mu'arada* refers more specifically to legal political parties in the opposition bloc of a parliament.

Because the vocabulary of activism varies so considerably across time and space, analysts of various forms of contention, mobilization and resistance must seek to understand what the actors on the ground are aiming to achieve. The goal is not to fix the meanings of those terms, but to appreciate the politics that the lexicons of activists reveal. Such an ethnographic approach gives voice to the actors themselves

and priority to what they understand to be the reality of their political struggles. It must also be attentive to changes in the meanings of words over time.

Activists and power holders attempt to ascribe different connotations to the terms they use, sometimes seeking to appropriate a term and saturate it with new meaning. In Tunisia under Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, for example, *muzaharat* (demonstrations) and *idrabat* (strikes) were words that carried anti-state and even terrorist valences, as phenomena said to be threatening to law and order. Indeed, at that time all forms of contentious politics were politicized and often criminalized. The uprising created an opportunity to recapture the rights-based impetus of protests and strikes, giving each term a more positive connotation. But those who seek to undermine the revolutionary moment or to reject demands for justice and substantial economic redistribution now use the terms *muzaharat* and *idrabat* in ways that convey anti-nationalist meanings: Anyone who protests or strikes necessarily opposes Tunisia's peaceful political transition—at least that is the meaning some political actors hope to convey.

In Egypt prior to the January revolution, the April 6 activists called themselves a movement (Harakat Shabab 6 Ibril), while those in Tahrir Square during the uprising self-identified as *thuwwar* (people who are rising up). With Husni Mubarak's ouster, the army-led "transition" began to portray anyone still engaged in street protests as *baltagiyya* (thugs), as a means of calling into question not only their loyalty to the nation but also their commitment to the revolution itself.<sup>2</sup> Before and during the revolution, the term *baltagiyya* was used to describe non-uniformed, pro-regime "muscle" who beat and bullied protesters on behalf of the state. The regime sought to use the linguistic shift to turn the very stuff of the revolution—citizens expressing dissent in the streets—into a criminalized activity that threatened the good citizens who had packed Tahrir Square in January 2011. In 2013, those who mobilized against Mursi described themselves as a *tamarrud* (rebellion). Important sites of activist struggle against Sisi's regime have been based in various independent, advocacy-oriented *marakiz* (centers),<sup>3</sup> *mubadarat* (initiatives) and new youth and left *ahzab* (parties). The analytic takeaway is that activism against the regime takes many forms and comes from many directions.

Equally complex is the full range of terms for what activists do. In addition to the varieties of activism as manifested in social movements, civil society groups and political parties, the work of activists is at times understood as the organizing of specific forms of protest—another term used in multiple and sometimes contradictory ways. The normative underpinnings of these terms vary considerably, but some meanings are relatively consistent. One common means of expressing dissent is via *muzaharat* (demonstrations), usually lasting a few hours and featuring chants and placards that demand changes to specific policies. Less commonly, such gatherings are called *ihitijajat* (protests, outcries). Workers often engage

in *i'tisamat* (sit-ins) and *idrabat* (strikes), terms that occasionally but not always are used interchangeably. Demonstrations that move are *masirat* (marches). In Algeria, localized micro-riots are called *protesta*, a word of Spanish origin rather than Arabic or French.

Political struggles in Iran exhibit similar contestations over the language of protest and mobilization. Activists and politicians both appropriate and repurpose terms in order to imbue their causes with legitimacy. Given that the Islamic Republic was born of a mass revolution, Iran's political elites use certain words (if uneasily) that evoke the power of popular mobilization (in Persian, *basij*) or coalitional front (*nehzat*, *jebhe*) while scrupulously avoiding other terms more commonly used by opposition activists for social movement (*jonbesh*), demonstration (*tazahorat*) or strike (*e'tesab*). Both the authorities and their challengers adopt language in order to convey specific meanings, so those choices provide a window into the stakes and senses of vernacular on-the-ground activism.

## Doing Activism

Just as there is a politics behind the vocabulary of activism, so there are multiple strategies, forms and techniques of resistance. Here again attention to variation across time and space yields interesting insights. Many activists seek to distance themselves not only from the regime, but also from opposition political parties. All parties, these critics argue, are part of the regime because they play by the regime's rules, and thus any real resistance must take place elsewhere. Some activists mock those who eschew grassroots organization in favor of mobilization on social media. Others are skeptical of institutionalized activism, either via non-governmental organizations or other forms of civil society. They argue that institutionalized opposition is beholden to foreign donors as well as the bureaucratic demands of running an office in ways that trade the uncertain horizon of radical opposition for the routine politics of relative stability and security.

Activists often consider the tradeoff between immediate activities and long-term agendas. Unlike outside observers, activists on the ground know intuitively that social movements are never unified. Movements are always coalitions that require ongoing work to maintain. Some social movements are relatively cohesive and more skillfully advance a consistent message. But many others are fragmented, riven by divisions over strategy and vision. Broader mobilizations—like those that birthed the 2011 uprisings—are better understood as assemblages of diverse people and groups that in an exceptional moment come to apprehend a common goal, such as the overthrow of a regime. During the more common non-revolutionary moments, however, activists try to claim persuasively—to opponents and fence sitters alike—that their movement is organic, effortless and growing. Doing so is part of the work of activism itself.



In this sense, many activists spend much of their time as catalysts rather than architects. They corral existing organizations, curious individuals and informal groups. They patch together events, convince others of shared aims, and circulate knowledge about opportunities and tactics. Some are lifelong activists, but many of those who now organize and join street protests were bystanders to political activism until the uprisings. Some emerged as front-line militants, and others simply could not stay out of the upheaval around them. Some never envisioned themselves as activists, but found themselves engaged during the uprisings, and have never been the same.

At the same time, seasoned activists from older generations express concern that the new generation is limiting mobilizational tactics to protests without a coherent plan or organization to effect real change. Such a critique was also launched against the Occupy protesters across the United States in 2011. Once the police forcibly cleared spaces of occupation, the movement seemingly dissolved. Because Occupy failed to develop a mechanism for maintaining connections or building a long-term movement, critics assert, and because it lacked a unifying ideology, it accomplished little or nothing. But the refusal to adopt more established forms of activism—that is, the purposeful avoidance of a framing and unifying program—is also a form of ideology.

Scholars of the Middle East—like scholars of contentious politics in general—often fall back on frameworks that posit politics in terms of state power vs. social resistance. That dichotomy appears in many analyses as the key cleavage that drives events forward. But such a position is too close to the public affirmations of authoritarian state leaders and dissident activists alike—the shared assumption that all protest politics is directed at the state. Activists engage in multiple struggles: They work to expand the boundaries of their own cause, seeking to draw in others and make them see the world in new ways. Scholarly categories often fail to capture what activists understand—not all acts against the state are acts of resistance, and not all acts supporting the state signal acquiescence. Indeed, not all activism is even directed at the state. Activists of every ilk seek to shape their political environment in large and small ways, altering the field of politics even if through only minor shifts in the meaning of particular actions.

## Capillary Activism, Consolidated Repression

Whither activism in the Middle East? The idea that re-entrenched authoritarian regimes have effectively quashed activism is simplistic. Activism since the uprisings and particularly during the period of authoritarian re-entrenchment has taken multiple forms—as it always has. One pattern that appears to be emerging is a shift away from large-scale movements and broad demands for regime reform and toward focused claims about particular policies and reforms. Regimes, meanwhile, continue to deploy anti-terrorist legislation to

crack down on dissent, a trend that picked up after Congress passed the PATRIOT Act in October 2001. In particular ongoing peril are journalists, human rights activists and intellectuals (with and without university affiliations). Their work has long been the work of political activism, even when framed in other terms. But such harsh regime tactics also indicate that activists continue to frighten those in power. Smaller protests and other forms of resistance are increasing rather than decreasing.

Rather than an age of ensconced autocracy, the current period might better be characterized as one marked by the global rise of populist nationalism—with Egypt's Sisi and Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan now joined by other hyper-masculinist and patriarchal rulers, including President Donald Trump. This state of affairs has led many ordinary citizens—including many who never viewed themselves as activists or protesters—to join the activist ranks, even if they continue to shun certain labels. More than 4 million in the US alone<sup>4</sup> turned out for the global Women's March on February 21, 2017, in opposition to Trump and his retrograde (if confused) nationalist agenda.

Whether activism is situated in a global perspective or viewed at a national or regional level, it is on the rise. In the Middle East, the repression of protesters since the early days of the 2011 uprisings may have driven many citizens back to their homes and computers. Undoubtedly, some question whether they were better off before the uprisings, particularly in places like Libya, Yemen and Syria, but also in Egypt. The popular embrace of protest has faded in many places since the 2011–2012 period. As citizens face failing economies, increased repression and uncertain futures, many are thinking twice about whether contentious politics are the best avenue for realizing political change. At worst, some have given up entirely on the possibility of better political futures, hoping instead for some semblance of stability or normalcy, even if that means a return to the bad old days.

But others unquestionably have found their voice and do not intend to return to silence. Just as the outcome of the uprisings cannot be evaluated in the short run, so the notion of a unified outcome—of success or failure at the macro-level—cannot capture the impact of the uprisings on politics across the region. As activism continues in a diversity of forms and meanings—even as many citizens retreat from public engagement—the lessening of mass mobilization and popular support for it in no way equals an end to political resistance. ■

## Endnotes

1 The Tunisia data was collected by Le Forum Tunisien pour les Droits Economiques et Sociaux and supplied to us by Laryssa Chomiak. On Algeria, see the article by Robert P. Parks in this issue.

2 Paul Amar, *The Security Archipelago: Human-Security States, Sexuality Politics and the End of Neoliberalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), pp. 200–225.

3 Advocacy centers often deal with issues such as human rights, women's rights and freedom of the press; some are independent research centers.

4 Jeremy Pressman, "Crowd Estimates 1.21.2017," available at: [https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/u/1/d/1xaolLqYKz8x9Yc\\_rfhtmSOJQ2EGgeUVjvV4A8LslaxY/htmlview?le=true&gid=0](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/u/1/d/1xaolLqYKz8x9Yc_rfhtmSOJQ2EGgeUVjvV4A8LslaxY/htmlview?le=true&gid=0).



Thousands of Jordanians march after Friday prayers against the Jordan-Israel gas deal, September 30, 2016.

EPA/STR/REDUX

# Reviving Activism in Jordan

## The Movement Against Israeli Gas

Curtis R. Ryan

In January 2011, hundreds and sometimes thousands of Jordanians began protesting like clockwork on Friday afternoons; they continued to do so for nearly two years. The crowds were small compared to those in Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen and Bahrain, but the turnout was sustained and marked a significant uptick for Jordan, where peaceful protest had not been uncommon. But by 2013 the demonstrations declined in both size and frequency. The regime weathered the main storm of the Arab uprisings, and without having resorted to violent repression. Many in the regime credited top-down reforms, including a revised constitution and amended laws on parties, public gatherings and elections. The political elite, including King 'Abdallah II, spoke in terms of a reformist democratic march, through which Jordan would show the region a third way between the stark alternatives of revanchist authoritarianism, on the one hand, and upheaval

and civil war, on the other. Jordan's "Arab spring" would be about evolution, not revolution.

But relative quiet is not acquiescence, and the protesters fell back for many reasons. Some eyed the increasing devastation of the Syrian civil war with growing dismay and feared undermining their own country's stability. Some became disillusioned with what they viewed as a façade of a reform process. Some, of course, had been arrested in various crackdowns, especially those who were seen to have crossed the red line between criticism of the government and attacks upon the monarchy itself. Others simply waited for the next wave of protest, or redirected their energies into other avenues of resistance, such as independent journalism or public awareness efforts via mediums such as the arts. Still others turned to single-issue activism: Rather than advocating for substantial change at the national level, they might instead strive, for example, to save the Berqesh forest in 'Ajloun from state over-development or to prevent the construction of a nuclear power plant near Mafraq.<sup>1</sup>

Curtis R. Ryan is professor of political science at Appalachian State University and an editor of this magazine.



Indeed, Jordan has seen a revival of activism in the post-uprising era, including with protesters taking to the streets. Protests against a proposed gas deal with the state of Israel in 2014 soon grew into the largest movement in the country since the uprisings era. This movement was striking for its level of organization, its innovative strategies and tactics, and its diverse membership, drawn from every stratum of Jordanian society. “The campaign against the gas deal is a new kind of Jordanian protest movement,” stated activist Thoraya El-Rayyes. “The activists in the movement have moved beyond sloganeering, [by] conducting serious research on the deal and entering into informed policy debates about energy security and the development of the national energy sector.”<sup>2</sup>

The movement’s organizers consciously tried to move beyond forms of mobilization used by activists in the past. They hoped not only to influence the gas deal itself, but also to transform political activism and even political participation in Jordan. “We want people to rethink government and citizenship,” noted one activist. Even if the campaign failed in its policy goals, activists argued, it could at least be a partial success by energizing the public, revitalizing the protest movement and reintroducing a national front for democratic opposition and civic engagement into Jordanian politics.

## A New Activist Movement

In September 2014, Jordan’s National Electric Power Company (NEPCO), with the backing of the Jordanian government, signed a letter of intent with Noble Energy, a company based in Houston, Texas. The letter called for Jordan to import natural gas from the eastern Mediterranean Leviathan field that is controlled by Israel. Government officials argued that the deal would shore up Jordan’s energy supply by fulfilling at least 40 percent of Jordan’s liquefied natural gas needs. The deal would save the kingdom \$600 million per year, spokesmen claimed, as Jordan would import 300 million cubic feet of gas per day.

Many Jordanians were angered that the kingdom would cut a deal of this magnitude with Israel, and not just because they view the Leviathan field as rightfully Palestinian, rather than Israeli. Many were also alarmed at the timing and nature of the agreement. Average Jordanians found out about the deal—just as they had learned of the negotiations earlier that year—not from the regime or the Jordanian press, but from Israeli and international media. The timing of both the talks and the deal were highly contentious, given the summer 2014 Israeli assaults on Gaza during the latest chapter in the Israel-Hamas war. Many Jordanians expressed concern not only about the fact of these Israeli operations, but also about the high death toll among Palestinian civilians.

The Jordanian regime could not have picked a more controversial partner for a gas deal. Jordan is an energy-dependent country, but activists argued that buying gas from Israel amounted to Jordanian society subsidizing Israeli military raids and occupation. The slogan of the emerging protest movement became, “The gas of the enemy is occupation.” Activists intended for the slogan to have a dual meaning: By buying

Israeli gas, Jordan was subsidizing Palestinian occupation; but the deal also allowed Jordan to be “occupied” by affording Israel so much control over the kingdom’s energy supply.

Organizers of the movement did not aim immediately to take to the streets, however. Instead, grassroots activists gathered for a meeting to plan a response and chose to focus on research before mounting a protest. The government was not forthcoming with information about the deal, so the activists sought to collect as much data as possible. A coordination committee worked with Platform, a London-based think tank, to obtain detail on the deal, including how money from Jordanian taxpayers and electricity consumers would effectively be directed toward the Israeli government itself via taxation of the gas purchases. The committee presented its findings at a press conference, setting the stage for mobilization of a broader movement.

On December 28, 2014, the campaign held the first of several national conferences expressing opposition to the gas deal with Israel. Individual activists and civil society groups were joined by a wide range of other participants, from professional syndicates, political parties, labor federations and independent trade unions to the *hirak* youth organizations forged during the 2011–2012 protests, as well as the influential association for retired military veterans. The Jordanian contingent of the boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement also joined the coalition, but it was just one of more than 30 groups to do so.<sup>3</sup>

The coalition against the gas deal rallied progressive, leftist and liberal forces together with Islamist, centrist and nationalist political parties. The Islamic Action Front, both of Jordan’s Baathist parties and the Stronger Jordan Party all participated, among many others. While prominent leaders of the Society of Muslim Brothers marched on some occasions, Islamists did not mobilize the entirety of their rank and file. The diminished number of Islamists gave many leftists and progressives confidence in their own efforts, since they were turning out significant numbers to events without having to rely on the Islamists’ constituency.

## Methods of Protest

Once the activists had carefully researched the gas deal, they adopted a series of actions designed to raise awareness of its terms, stoke public opposition and pressure the government to change its policy. These actions included marches and protests aimed at guaranteeing continued media coverage and public attention. The campaign was so successful that in early December 2014, before the first national conference, legislators debated the issue on the floor of Jordan’s Chamber of Deputies, the elected lower house of Parliament, with activists watching from the galleries. MP Hind al-Fayez arrived with a placard featuring the logo of the campaign, and MP Rula al-Hroub spoke strongly in favor of its goals both in Parliament and at protest events.

On December 10, 2014 the Chamber of Deputies voted 107 to 13 in favor of a non-binding resolution that called on the government to abandon the gas deal completely. Activists saw the resolution as a huge victory. “I really think this kind



Jordanians protest the gas deal in Amman, October 14, 2016. The middle placard reads, "Our gas bills bomb Gaza."

JAMAL NASRALLAH/EPA/REDUX

of call for accountability from a grassroots secular campaign is unprecedented in recent years," noted activist Mary Nazzal-Batayneh at the time. "If it weren't for us, Parliament wouldn't have deliberated on the issue to the same extent."<sup>4</sup>

Continued protests kept the issue in the public eye and sustained the movement's momentum. In March 2015 the coalition staged a protest of more than a thousand people, the largest in Jordan since the height of the Arab uprisings. "This was the first time after the 'Arab spring' that all these people came together and worked together on a single issue," noted lead organizer Hisham Bustani, "and one of the main things the campaign did was to link topics and concerns together." He argued that ultimately the movement is about more than gas or Israel or Jordan's concerns over either. The campaign's broader and fundamentally democratic goal was to both revitalize and transform civic activism, citizenship and governance in the Hashemite Kingdom—an aim entirely compatible with the regime's official positions on reform in Jordan.

"We also tried to redefine the relationship between the citizen and the state," said Bustani. "We talked about the taxpayers' money—our money—and how it is being used." These goals were underscored not only by the specific protest actions of the movement, but also by its emphasis on research and on sharing facts and data with the general public. "The idea is to respect the audience," Bustani continued, "to empower them and to get them the information they need."

In September 2015, the coalition moved beyond marches and protests to stage a unique event—a public tribunal that put the gas deal in the dock. Working with members of the bar association and prominent lawyers, activists held a mock trial, compete with prosecution, defense, judges and jury. They argued the cases both for the gas deal and, of course, against it.<sup>5</sup>

## New Deal, New Protests

In September 2016, the Jordanian government announced that it had officially signed the deal between NEPCO and Noble Energy.<sup>6</sup> Given the high visibility of the opposition campaign and its successes, coalition leaders and many activists and supporters across the political spectrum were startled. The announcement was made a week after parliamentary elections but before the new national assembly could be seated. The new agreement met with stiff resistance across Jordanian society, however, and helped to remobilize a range of Jordanian protest movements as activists returned to the streets.<sup>7</sup> While Jordanian officials had sought to advance the gas deal quietly, they had inadvertently revitalized street protests and opposition movements.<sup>8</sup>

Many activist movements in Jordan, especially since the outbreak of Arab uprisings, have been accused of being Amman-centric and sometimes even West Amman-centric (a reference to the wealthier side of Jordan's capital that casts movements as elitist). But from the outset, coalition leaders had organized at



the grassroots level, and they attempted to extend their reach beyond the capital. Although protests were held in other cities, the larger marches and demonstrations took place in Amman. Activists said that their efforts to organize elsewhere, including demonstrations in the smaller cities of Irbid and Zarqa, were often blocked by state and local officials.

In the capital, the campaign was able to organize and hold protests with relative freedom in some locations but not in others. Marches in downtown Amman after Friday prayers were usually unimpeded. But marching to the Fourth Circle—an intersection next to the office of the prime minister—was a red line for the state: For the first time since the campaign was launched two years earlier, security forces arrested protesters, although all were later released without being charged.<sup>9</sup>

Campaign activists also encountered resistance, some escalating into scuffles with police, in a protest during which they rolled out a 30-meter-long banner bearing the movement's slogan: "The gas of the enemy is occupation." Security forces first thought that activists were setting up a tent. While the regime is usually tolerant of marches and demonstrations of limited duration, it has tended to block long-term sit-ins or occupations of urban space. The banner was successfully unfurled, however, with aerial photos of the event gracing the front pages of many Jordanian newspapers the next day.<sup>10</sup> Campaign activists also showed up at other events—including the FIFA U-17 Women's World Cup, held in Jordan in the fall of 2016—wearing T-shirts and carrying signs bearing the campaign's slogans. Some even gave T-shirts to neighborhood kids to promote the movement and its goals. "This is a campaign on the ground," said Bustani, "not just a virtual presence."

Other measures expanded the campaign's support across society, including among Jordanians who were not otherwise involved in the movement. One popular action was to turn off lights (and hence tie the gas deal to the generation of electricity in Jordan) simultaneously across the country for one hour each week. These coordinated "blackouts" continued for several weeks in succession and garnered the participation even of people who considered themselves non-political.<sup>11</sup>

## Implications for Protests and Political Activism in Jordan

In February 2017, the coalition held its third national conference on the campaign against the Jordan-Israel gas deal, again gathering a large and diverse group of political activists and movements hoping to maintain momentum. Activists in the campaign had also compiled a report that they sent to Jordan's Anti-Corruption Commission, charging that many aspects of the deal seemed dubious. They have yet to hear back from the commission.

While many protest movements emphasize dissent against a particular policy or practice, the coalition against Israeli gas aimed also to advance policy alternatives while building a new notion of political engagement. The problem with the gas deal, they argued, was not only economic: It also threatened

Jordanian sovereignty and independence. Over-reliance on Israel, of all states, was dangerous for Jordan's future. Furthermore, the economic transactions involved in the deal would mean that the Jordanian state and its citizens effectively would be subsidizing the occupation of the Palestinian people.

As an alternative, the coalition argued that a new liquefied natural gas terminal in Jordan's sole port, 'Aqaba, would ensure that Jordan would never need to rely on Israel, or indeed any single country, as a supplier. Such a terminal would open a world of options for the kingdom. Another alternative suggestion, and one in sync with the regime's stated development priorities, was to develop alternative and renewable energy sources, especially solar and wind power. Nuclear power was not presented as an alternative because campaign members did not agree on the issue. Jordan may indeed have strong opportunities in renewable energy. Energy Minister Ibrahim Saif is charged with developing wind and solar power in the kingdom as part of Jordan's strategic development and energy plans. In March 2017, Jordan also began construction of its first oil shale-fired power plant, adding another source for its electrical energy needs.<sup>12</sup>

Within the coalition itself, however, some activists are frustrated that the Israeli gas deal seems to be proceeding despite both large-scale opposition and the existence of numerous alternative suppliers. They argue that the deal is fundamentally political, resulting in part from extensive US pressure, rather than economic necessity. "Even the government's own projections suggest that the need for gas will decrease, not increase, so we don't actually need Israeli gas," said Bustani. "It is a political deal. It has no economic value."<sup>13</sup>

Even as the Jordanian gas deal with Israel proceeds apace, many activists argue that their efforts have secured perhaps even more valuable outcomes—reenergized political activism in Jordan and a national front connecting major constituencies across the kingdom. A Jordanian public that is reengaged not only in protest, but also in civic life more broadly, may well begin to rethink the meaning of government, citizenship and political participation. ■

### Endnotes

1 See Nicholas Seeley, "The Battle Over Nuclear Jordan," *Middle East Report* 271 (Summer 2014).

2 Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are taken from interviews by the author, conducted in person in August 2016, by e-mail or via Skype.

3 "Jordan BDS Statement on Gas Deal with Israel," *Jadaliyya*, October 2, 2016: <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/25219/jordan-bds-statement-on-gas-deal-with-israel>.

4 Curtis R. Ryan, "Not Running on Empty: Democratic Activism Against Israeli Gas in Jordan," *Middle East Report Online*, April 16, 2015.

5 The website for the public tribunal on the gas deal is <https://gastribunalljo.wordpress.com/>.

6 Osama al-Sharif, "Jordanians Fuming Over Gas Deal with Israel," *al-Monitor*, October 5, 2016.

7 Zena Tahhan, "Jordanians Reject 'Stolen Gas' in Israel-Jordan Deal," *Al Jazeera*, October 3, 2016.

8 For an insightful analysis of cycles of protest in Jordan, see Naseem Tarawnah, "The Jordan-Israel Gas Deal and Our Perpetual Déjà Vu," *The Black Iris*, October 6, 2016: <http://black-iris.com/2016/10/06/the-jordan-israeli-gas-deal-and-our-perpetual-deja-vu/>.

9 *Jordan Times*, November 12, 2016.

10 *Jordan Times*, October 22, 2016.

11 Multiple articles on the gas deal and the campaign against it have been assembled by Jordan's innovative 7iber group, a collective committed to serious investigative journalism and new media. See: <https://www.7iber.com/politics-economics/what-we-know-about-the-israeli-gas-deal/>.

12 *Jordan Times*, March 16, 2017.

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Demonstration against the Social Security Law, Ramallah, April 19, 2016.

N. ALVA

# Palestinian Workers Campaign for Social Justice

N. Alva

**O**n the hot afternoon of April 19, 2016, thousands of workers and unemployed took to the streets of the West Bank city of Ramallah in protest the labor policies of the Palestinian Authority (PA). As the sun beat down on their shoulders, the marchers remained defiant, shouting “*Haramiyya!* (Thieves!),” as they reached the rally point in front of the Council of Ministers and Ministry of Interior buildings. Organizers from independent workers’ movements, left political parties and women’s committees took turns addressing the crowd from a makeshift platform on the back of a truck. PA police and security forces were deployed, some in riot gear and armored vehicles, but they did not visibly interfere. The demonstration was the first public, collective manifestation of a campaign against Social Security Law 6, ratified by decree on March 9, 2016 by President Mahmoud ‘Abbas.

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The opposition to the social security law is led by newly formed independent workers’ movements and their allies in civil society. Their campaign follows closely upon wildcat strikes by perhaps 30,000 teachers in February and March of 2016. Both efforts are emblematic of Palestinian workers’ growing rejection of the package of neoliberal economic nostrums on offer from the PA in lieu of an end to Israeli settler-colonial rule.

In 1997, after the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) released a report on corruption among PA ministers, President Yasser Arafat famously quashed judicial action against the accused, telling legislators: “We will worry about our internal problems—the questions of social justice within Palestine—after we fight colonialism, our common enemy.”<sup>1</sup> This injunction is recited still by officials in the PA and its affiliated labor federations, as well as some outside supporters of the Palestinian cause.



But the social and colonial questions in Palestine are co-constituted. To separate the occupation from injustices in Palestinian society is to conceal the complex relations between capital accumulation and class transformation, the PA's authoritarian practices, and Israel's colonial project. An understanding of these relations is crucial for those committed to transnational solidarity with Palestine.

## Shock Therapy

The campaigners against Social Security Law 6 criticize the measure on several grounds. First, they object to the law's provision for depositing the retirement savings of private-sector waged employees in a new national fund to be overseen by a council jointly appointed by the PA and business interests. Private banks and companies are to manage these investments in the financial markets. The law's opponents say that it provides no guarantee from the PA that money will actually be available to workers upon retirement and demand PA accountability in safeguarding these funds. Second, the campaigners oppose the increase in employee contributions into the fund and instead demand an increase in the contributions of employers (business owners). They call for bringing the pensions of private-sector workers into line with the retirement entitlements of workers in the public sector, and for enforcing a minimum retirement wage.<sup>2</sup> Third, the campaigners decry the law's discrimination against women, families of pensioners, and the old and disabled, among other social groups. Some strands of the independent workers' campaign call for a national program of social protection covering all workers, farmers and unemployed.<sup>3</sup>

Social Security Law 6 is part of a program of economic shock therapy that began in 2007. The PLC has not formally convened since late 2006, so all of these laws were drafted or amended by presidential decree with limited public disclosure. The new independent unions and workers' committees see a multi-front attack on labor reflecting the demands of big business.

In 2014, the Investment Promotion Law of 1998 was altered to provide tax relief to large private interests in the name of a more "investment-friendly" business environment.<sup>4</sup> In early February 2015, the PA Ministry of Labor introduced a draft law on unions, which according to independent labor federations will suppress labor organizing by imposing strict conditions under which strikes and meetings can be called. Likewise, the federations express concern that proposed amendments to the existing labor law will ease the procedures for dismissal when workers are already subject to contracts that are increasingly short-term and irregular. In closed-door meetings later that month, the Council of Ministers and big business reached an agreement on further reductions to corporate and individual tax rates. Independent unions, who were not invited to take part in these discussions, note that the tax law is unfavorable to the poor and working classes. President 'Abbas ratified the agreement as law nonetheless. Most recently, on January

23, 2017, the PA suspended the al-Aqsa *intifada* health insurance, which provided free access to medical care for the more than 400,000 unemployed Palestinians and their families. (Subsequently, the PA announced that al-Aqsa insurance is to remain available to families approved by a new oversight committee to be established. Labor organizers received the news skeptically, viewing it as a public relations move.)

## Finance and Labor Discipline

The Social Security Law is central to a process of ongoing financialization in the West Bank, as private companies and banks, in particular, are given unchecked liberties to invest and profit from the retirement pensions of Palestinian workers. (Financialization refers to the ascendant role of finance and financial institutions in the economic activities of a country and the operations of capitalism globally.) For instance, the administration of Prime Minister Salam Fayyad initiated a major expansion of consumer credit from 2007 as part of a strategy of private sector-led development under the banner of economic nationalism.

Also central to the process of deepening financialization has been the reconstitution of the functions of the PA to intervene in the construction of the free market, especially in finance and land. To support the new suburb of Rawabi (north of Ramallah), for example, the PA enacted decrees to extend the period of consumer loans from ten years to 25. In 2008, the Palestine Monetary Authority issued directives to limit bank investment abroad to 55 percent (it had been 65 percent) in order to create new sources of domestic lending. In conjunction, donors and US financiers have come up with loan guarantee schemes to boost credit supply. The World Bank is backing projects for land registration and titling, while donors support the establishment of credit registries to ease collateral requirements. The legal foundations for the free market are being cemented.

These economic and legal spheres have been important domains in which to promote the political pacification of labor in Palestine. The Oslo era's vision of economic peace has been a cornerstone of this strategy aimed at bridging the material and political interests of Palestinian political, security and PA-tied business figures; regional capital (Israel, the Gulf Cooperation Council and Turkey, as well as Jordan); US finance capital; and the Israeli business and security establishment, through cooperation and joint venture projects. These patterns of normalization continue to the present day in PA and donor visions of economic development, through the sectors and projects given priority in the Palestinian Reform and Development Plan, and the Quartet and Kerry initiatives, to which affordable mortgage finance and new credit schemes have been key.<sup>5</sup> These neoliberal modalities of accumulation and pacification, enacted in the name of development, are inextricably tied to broader regional configurations of power. The inter-relationships between US geostrategic interests in

the Middle East and the US-led neoliberal drive that have gone hand in hand with a push for the normalization of relations between Israel and other countries in the region have a strong bearing on the Palestinian economy.<sup>6</sup>

Social Security Law 6 should be situated within this broader logic, as part of a process of class restructuring and labor disciplining in Palestine through the deepening financialization of the economy. As distinct from social services for vulnerable segments of the population (covered by the Ministry of Social Affairs), social insurance refers to the individual-based retirement contribution system. In line with the neoliberal ethos, each individual worker is responsible for assuring pensions for retirement based on monthly contributions while at work. In 2003, the PA issued the Social Insurance Law concerning retirement pensions for workers in the private sector and civil society. This legal codification of labor rights took place in the same period as the launch of President George W. Bush's "road map to peace for Israel-Palestine," a process during which the political struggle of the Palestinians was increasingly reframed by the language and logic of Palestinian state building. In 2005, the PA issued Public Pension Law 7 for workers in the public sector, with a subsequent amendment in 2007. In the same year, the PA cancelled the Social Insurance Law and started work on an optional non-governmental retirement scheme that was to cover employees of private-sector organizations. This new scheme pooled workers' retirement pensions to be managed and invested in the financial markets. The major banks played a key role in the preparation of the new system.<sup>7</sup>

The pensions of Palestinians who have spent their lives laboring in Israel and the settlements provided a particular political impetus to pass Social Security Law 6. According to Article 7 of the Paris Protocol, concluded in 1994 as part of the Oslo agreement, Palestinian workers in Israel and the settlements automatically have their social insurance contributions deducted by their Israeli employers on a monthly basis. These funds are then held by the Israeli National Insurance Institute and are transferred to the Palestinian side only once an institution outside the control of the PA is created.<sup>8</sup> According to the new law, these funds are now to be part of a complementary system that will be managed by a private company and banks, but the law does not specify how these monies will be transferred to workers themselves. Retired Palestinian workers who spent their lives as laborers in Israel or the settlements are now asking, "What of my savings for old age?"<sup>9</sup> Should Israel make the transfer, the banks and conglomerates in Palestine would obtain a sizable fraction of \$8 billion in new capital—the estimated value of fees deducted from the wages of Palestinian workers in Israel—for their own financial investments.<sup>10</sup>

As financial institutions pool workers' retirement savings, they are simultaneously expanding and easing credit. As a result, the levels of indebtedness of Palestinian workers are rising dramatically. The amount of credit issued for residential

real estate, automobile purchases and credit cards increased by 245 percent between 2008 and 2011.<sup>11</sup> While debt bondage is a global phenomenon, Palestinian workers face special constraints. Under the Paris Protocol, Palestinian workers are subject to Israel's macroeconomic policies, such as those setting interest and exchange rates. Palestinian workers may earn salaries in Jordanian dinars, but their loan agreements will likely be in US dollars—and with fluctuating exchange rates, workers are left in chronic uncertainty. In addition, special legal provisions mandate that salaries of Palestinian workers must be directed to the banks from which they obtain loans, where banks deduct a percentage of workers' salaries toward loan repayment. This provision leaves Palestinian workers particularly vulnerable due to the periodic Israeli impoundment of PA clearance revenues. At such times, public-sector workers may receive no salaries for months on end, but they still owe loan payments unless the Palestine Monetary Authority issues special relief measures.

The credit push affects all workers, even those who are not formally in debt to banks. With two thirds of consumer lending directed to Ramallah, rents and land prices are skyrocketing in the city. Gentrification in downtown districts and the old city is rapid as banks buy up venerable limestone houses. Many white-collar workers are no longer able to afford rents, and those who can afford them are forced to choose between high rents and a mortgage. Meanwhile, migrant workers—who commute to Ramallah from Nablus, Jenin and Hebron—are often left to sleep at construction sites.

New financial instruments are also being used as tools for direct political interference. The \$500 million Affordable Mortgage and Loan Scheme, for example, contains explicit provisions for vetting of participants by the PA security forces. With significant funding from the Overseas Private Investment Corporation affiliated with the US government, all implementing agencies and their employees, and loan recipients themselves, must pass the scrutiny of US Office of Foreign Asset Control regulations and US anti-terror legislation. Segments of Palestinian society considered "a threat" by the PA forces, which are dominated by the Fatah party to which President 'Abbas belongs, thus do not qualify for these programs. As a partner in this program, the Palestine Investment Fund—the so-called sovereign wealth fund of the Palestinians—also must adhere to US anti-terror statutes.<sup>12</sup>

## The Making of the Client-Consumer

Since the installation of the "caretaker government" in 2007, the rhetoric of the PA has increasingly framed the horizon of politics in Palestine in a developmental and consumerist idiom. The 2014-2016 PA National Development Plan, entitled *State Building to Sovereignty*, articulates its view of development as follows: "We are resolved to empower our citizens, helping them manage the transition from dependence to self-reliance, thereby achieving prosperity and a decent way of life."<sup>13</sup> As



they face the onslaught of Israeli colonization with assassinations, settlement expansion, closures, checkpoints and other types of collective punishment, Palestinians are also being squeezed to become exemplars of *homo economicus*—the trans-historical figure posited by neoclassical economics who makes ever rational decisions in pursuit of self-interest—and to become responsible consumers who will take advantage of expanding credit, the growth of the stock and mortgage markets, micro-finance and public-private partnerships for infrastructure projects that are part and parcel of this neoliberal vision of emancipation.

While the Palestinian Authority withdraws from its responsibilities for social protection, wage laborers are being told to trust in the financial markets for their retirement savings. This disciplining of Palestinian labor is taking place through the restructuring of the PA itself. In other words, the PA is itself being disciplined to adopt the shock-therapy economic reforms of the National Development Plan, while it works in turn to discipline its own subjects, Palestinian citizens. Donors and creditors are pressuring the PA to cut social expenditures, increase revenues and reduce the overall deficit. Facing a fiscal crisis, the government took on short-term debt from domestic commercial banks at high interest rates. According to the Ministry of Finance, by the end of 2015 total public debt reached \$4.6 billion or 41 percent of nominal gross domestic product. A large portion of international aid is earmarked to service the debt, but strings are attached: The Ad Hoc Liaison Committee, a collection of foreign donors co-sponsored by the European Union and the United States, “stresses the importance of prioritizing fiscal consolidation of the Palestinian budget by reducing the deficit significantly” through limiting the wage bill, reducing subsidies and social expenditures and other structural reforms.<sup>14</sup>

The PA has already responded to the outside pressure. Since 2012, with unemployment at about 30 percent according to official statistics, the PA has maintained a policy of zero net hiring in the public sector.<sup>15</sup> In December of that year, the PA reached a first-ever minimum wage agreement with a group of workers due to a campaign led by the Union of Kindergarten Teachers; to date, however, the agreement has not been implemented. Some 33 percent of wage employees in the private sector earn less than the minimum wage of 1,450 shekels.<sup>16</sup> The International Monetary Fund notes that the PA has reduced its deficit—on a commitment basis—from 2.7 billion shekels in the first half of 2015 to 1.7 billion in the first half of 2016.<sup>17</sup>

To curb its deficit, the PA also targeted the category of net lending. This seemingly innocuous line in the PA budget refers to funds that are used to cover electricity bills owed by municipalities and refugee camps to the private Israeli companies that have a monopoly on supply. The actual amount of this debt is a source of controversy, but Israel has various means by which to collect. In the midwinter of 2015, the Israel Electric Corporation cut off the power to the West Bank cities of Jenin and Nablus for 45 minutes as a warning

over unpaid bills.<sup>18</sup> Another key lever is the customs clearance money that Israel collects on the Palestinians’ behalf, by the terms of the Paris Protocol. By these accords, this revenue is to be transferred monthly to the PA, which depends upon these transfers to pay salaries. But Israel regularly impounds these funds to punish or coerce the Palestinians. In early 2015, Israel withheld the clearance revenues for three months until the PA agreed to the electricity debt amount of 500 million shekels stipulated by Israel. The US and the European Union exerted pressure as well.<sup>19</sup> To reduce the electricity bill, the PA has introduced a system of pre-paid cards and legal penalties and fines for non-payment, as well as shifting bill collection from municipalities to private electricity distribution companies. The electricity debt is but one example of processes of commodification, in which working people and the unemployed in Palestine are ever more bound in the contractual dream worlds of liberalism.

The levers of colonial control and neoliberal restructuring have led to a deep fragmentation of the Palestinian collective body. Atomistic understandings of the self and social conditions are legitimated in the battlefield of neoliberal shock therapy, which seeks to transform the social relations between human subjects and with state power. New forms of citizenship based on individual choice, rights and contractual relations produce a redefinition of emancipation as consumer choice. In this context, labor confronts huge challenges as social and political responsibility are redefined in a manner that weakens collective action.

## Inequality and Political Polarization

While debt-based consumption and mortgages create a sense of upward mobility for some, the bulk of the Palestinian population is dealing with mounting household debt, falling real wages and rising prices; unemployment and poverty; hiring and wage freezes in the public sector; underfunded public services; pressure to eliminate PA subsidies for fuel, electricity and water; and displacement from land to make way for private developers. The GDP growth rate in the Occupied Territories dropped from 5.3 percent in 2014 to 2.5 percent in 2015; during the same period, the Arab Palestine Investment Company, a major holding company, posted net profits after tax of \$12.4 million in 2015—an increase of 9.4 percent from 2014. The company may well be on its way to achieving its “one billion dollar strategy” by 2020.<sup>20</sup>

In the face of such exacerbated inequality, the PA has become more authoritarian. As documented by the Independent Commission for Human Rights in Palestine, the PA has cracked down much harder on dissent since 2007, after Hamas won the previous year’s PLC elections and the administrations of Gaza and the West Bank split apart. The PA security forces in the West Bank, trained in counterinsurgency tactics by US Gen. Keith Dayton, have cooperated closely with the Israeli army in the interrogation and arrest of Hamas members, journalists

and activists supporting the boycott, divestment and sanctions campaign. Nearly 30 percent of the PA budget is directed to the security forces, while funding for social sectors has been systematically reduced.

Workers' organizing is also facing heavy repression. In November 2014, the Palestinian Council of Ministers issued a decision to legalize the Public Servants' Trade Union. The union was subsequently shut down by the police, with unionists arrested and dismissed from their work.<sup>21</sup> Leaders of unions who attempt to organize on a mass level are charged with corruption and entrenched in legal cases for years; workers' committees organizing against neoliberal and normalization policies in NGOs are arbitrarily dismissed from their work and blacklisted. The PA's attempts to suppress the springtime 2016 teachers' strikes set a dangerous precedent: The security forces threatened teachers; confiscated identity cards; arrested organizers, dissenting journalists and social media users; erected checkpoints across the West Bank to prevent collective mobilization; and imposed fines on taxi drivers who transported teachers from place to place. Organizers of the teachers' movement have been forced to go underground.

## Labor Fights Back

Over the last decade, independent labor federations and unions, as well as informal associations and workers' committees, have emerged nonetheless to struggle against impoverishing conditions of life for Palestinian labor. The public-sector workers' strikes in late 2014, the teachers' movement in March 2016 and the April 2016 protest against Social Security Law 6 are the most visible manifestations of a broader mobilization around the theme of *insaf*, meaning equity or justice.

The social security reforms were a central site of contestation for more than three years, involving, among others, the International Labor Organization, the PA Ministry of Labor, the private sector and research institutes such as Muwatin and al-Marsad, as well as labor unions. Of the unions, the PGFTU (headed by Shahir Sa'id), the Palestinian Trade Union Federation (PTUF, headed by Haidar Ibrahim) and the General Federation of Independent Unions (GFIU) were the key actors involved in the direct negotiations. The talks exposed deep divides in the labor movement. Political factions of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) appoint the representatives of the PGFTU and PTUF. The PGFTU has a long-standing relationship with the Histadrut, the Israeli labor federation, by which the Histadrut passes on to PGFTU 50 percent of the dues it collects from Palestinian workers in Israel (even though it does not represent these workers). In public debates, both the PGFTU and PTUF backed many of the proposed reforms in favor of business interests and worked hard to muffle the GFIU's dissent. Following the public debates and popular protests organized by the National Campaign for Social Security, President 'Abbas approved amendments to the law reflecting several of the demands of the campaign.<sup>22</sup>

In a meeting with a delegation of Canadian unionists in the West Bank, the head of the GFIU was asked, "And what is your position regarding final status—two-state or one-state?" He replied, "This is a question only you can afford to ask. We are at this point just struggling to live." He continued,

It is clear for us that the struggle against colonialism cannot be separated from the social injustices within Palestinian society. What does it mean to end my subjugation by Moshe for it to be replaced by Munir? What kind of liberation are we seeking? What kind of a society are we trying to build?

These questions cut to the deepest contradictions of the Oslo era. The Oslo agreement sold the promise of a Palestinian homeland and called on the masses to adopt a Palestinian national consciousness as defined by the PA political order. Yet the words of Frantz Fanon remain prescient for Palestine today:

This national consciousness, instead of being the all-embracing crystallization of the innermost hopes of the whole people, instead of being the immediate and most obvious result of the mobilization of the people, will be in any case only an empty shell, a crude and fragile travesty of what it might have been.<sup>23</sup> ■

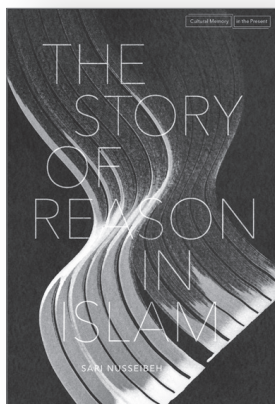
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- 1 Interview with members of the Palestinian Legislative Council, Ramallah, 2009.
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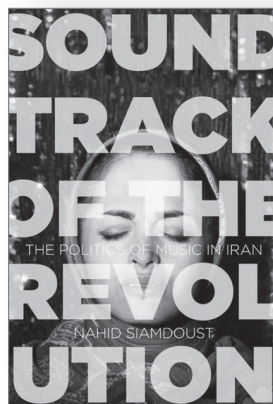




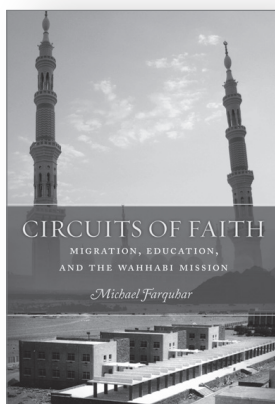
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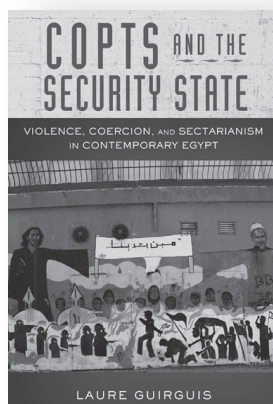
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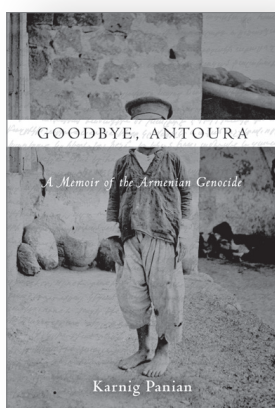
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Murals in Cairo depict martyrs of the 2011 revolution: (left to right) Gaber Salah "Gika," a member of the April 6 movement; Alaa Abdelhady, a medical student; and Mina Daniel, a Coptic activist. 2014.

# Virtual Space and Collective Action in Egypt

## Post-Revolutionary Communities on Facebook

Sherine Hafez

Traffic crawls as usual through Tahrir Square in downtown Cairo, making its noisy way around the 65-foot pole flying the Egyptian flag newly erected in the middle of the plaza. It is hard to imagine that in January 2011 this very spot was the epicenter of the grassroots revolution that toppled President Hosni Mubarak. Since the summer 2013 coup, the military-backed regime has remade this space of insurrection into one of imposed national unity. The revolutionary graffiti is long

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since whitewashed; the headquarters of Mubarak's National Democratic Party, incinerated during the uprising, is demolished.

The makeover of Tahrir Square is one highly visible manifestation of a concerted effort to reconstitute public memory of the events of January 2011. A new narrative propagated by state media outlets recasts those events in conspiratorial terms and criminalizes the revolutionaries, a large percentage of whom have left the country. Protests unsanctioned by the state are outlawed, with demonstrators who defy the ban subject to large fines and jail sentences as long as 15 years. In 2015 Human Rights Watch



estimated that as many as 41,000 political activists faced criminal charges or languished in prison. In January 2016 the al-Nadim Center for the Rehabilitation of the Victims of Violence and Torture reported that hundreds had died in detention.

Public discourse is now dominated by talk of rebuilding society based on national unity and state-approved morality. In February 2016, for example, the prominent Muslim cleric and former grand mufti 'Ali Gum'a launched a campaign called Our Morals (Akhlaquna) to promote ten values—mercy, love, cooperation, proactivity, empathy, humility, workmanship, ambition, fairness and forgiveness—that he says will “restore Egypt’s bright face.”<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, the authorities have stepped up the repression of ideas and practices they regard as deviant. The police have arrested many homosexuals in frequent “morality raids.”<sup>2</sup> And expressions of atheism are also punishable by law, as the young blogger Karim Ashraf al-Banna discovered.<sup>3</sup> Such tactics are aimed at fortifying the boundaries of a national community around the new leader, President 'Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi, and at reinforcing social cohesion against various “others” at the fringes of the community. As scholars since Michel Foucault have argued, the construction of deviance facilitates governance because it enables the conformity of the mainstream.

This environment has led many commentators to conclude that the revolution is dead, even as demonstrators persist in small numbers. Interviewers regularly find participants in the 2011 rebellion mired in despondency; indeed, a number of them believe the country has gone back to square one.<sup>4</sup> Yet there is at least one space where the state’s reconstruction campaign has met with little success—Facebook, the virtual forum that helped to galvanize the masses during the historic 18-day occupation of Tahrir that precipitated Mubarak’s downfall. Though by no means the central factor igniting the revolution, as some believe, Facebook greatly augmented the power of word of mouth as the 18 days progressed. Postings on the social networking site conveyed up-to-the-minute information about rally points, the precise locations of violent clashes with police, and safety tips and other suggestions regarding appropriate conduct at protests. This information could be had by anyone with access to “the Face.”

Today, in parallel to the state’s attempts to paper over social differences with talk of national unity, activist groups in Egypt are using Facebook to spearhead awareness campaigns of their own. These efforts challenge the state’s ability to define morals and values by debunking hegemonic notions of deviance and creating a space of tolerance for subjects considered taboo by society at large. At these Facebook “confession pages,” users can share their most intimate problems with little fear of discovery because posts in the private virtual environment are anonymous. Many of these pages offer further protections to users: A page’s status will be designated as “secret,” so it is not searchable through Facebook (though various copycat pages with similar names have appeared). Access is limited to members, with membership granted only with the endorsement of long-time members and the approval of the site’s administrators. All posts are approved by the administrators. Despite efforts to ensure privacy, however,

site administrators understand the Egyptian government has been increasing its efforts to monitor social media.

These Facebook groups, such as Cairo Confessions and Confessions of a Married Woman, address issues relevant to the younger generation that constitutes roughly one quarter of the population. Mental, emotional and sexual problems—issues of an intimate nature rare in public conversation in today’s Egypt—take center stage in these anonymous confession groups. Young people in particular gravitate toward these virtual spaces of social support that release public discourse from the grip of the state and reclaim it for ordinary Egyptians. What is the vision behind these Facebook groups? How do the administrators of “confession pages” on Facebook define their projects in relation to the state’s morality campaigns? And, crucially, what is the potential for these virtual communities to evolve into collective action or bring about social change?

## Virtual Revolutionary Space

Facebook’s reputation for sowing the seeds of rebellion in Egypt stems largely from a widely quoted CNN interview with Google junior executive and demonstration organizer Wael Ghoneim on February 11, 2011, the date of Mubarak’s resignation from the presidency. Ghoneim proclaimed, “This revolution started online. This revolution started on Facebook.... I’ve always said that if you want to liberate a society just give them the Internet.” Some 33 percent of Egyptians have Internet privileges, amounting to 30,835,256 people<sup>5</sup>—not a majority of the population but still a staggering number because active engagement with the Internet requires a certain measure of literacy and only 75 percent of Egyptians are literate. Moreover, 68 percent of Internet users in Egypt are between 15 and 25 years of age, according to a 2015 study by Nielsen Egypt.

Of course, access to Internet technology is mediated not only by literacy but also by class and socioeconomic privilege. Yet there are indicators that the “confession pages” are socially inclusive. Nearly 80 percent of the women posting on the Confessions of a Married Woman page, for instance, write in Arabic rather than English. While bilingual fluency or a preference for English do not in and of themselves signal class privilege, the preference for Arabic suggests that Egyptians of various classes and education levels are using the page. Furthermore, the ubiquity of smartphones and Internet cafés in Egypt increases Internet access for those who cannot afford a computer or a connection at home.

The Egyptian government is keenly aware of the potential for social media to slip the reins of state media, disseminate alternative information and provoke dissent. Human rights activists note that nine Egyptian nationals have been arrested for online activities since 2014. Egyptian parliamentarians have proposed new restrictions on social media. MP Gamal 'Abd al-Nasir, for example, has been developing legislation criminalizing the use of Facebook to call for protest. He complains, “The West sold us Facebook only to blackmail us.”<sup>6</sup> There are also several private lawsuits seeking to regulate the use of Facebook

in Egypt.<sup>7</sup> Yet many others, like blogger Mina Malek, digital media expert Khaled Baramawy and political activist Hazem Abdel Azim, have denounced those who would limit freedoms by restricting the flow of information on social media.<sup>8</sup>

In any case, the backlash against social media has not deterred Egyptians, who the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology claims are the largest group of Facebook users in the Arab world. Estimates put the number of members at some 31 percent of the population. Facebook membership seems to spike during periods of political turmoil, increasing by approximately 5 million in 2011, 3 million in 2012 and 5 million in the summer of 2013, when Sisi took charge. At such times, Facebook offers a virtual space in which young Egyptians can stay connected while shaping their own social media worlds.

## Collective Virtual Spaces

The Cairo Confessions Facebook page describes itself as “a community that is filled with the bright, open minds of the Egyptian people, where you can anonymously get your problems heard and responded to.” Founded in 2013 by Mohamed Ashmawy, then a 21-year old undergraduate, Cairo Confessions is the first forum in the Middle East to deal extensively with issues of mental health. Ashmawy, who majored in computer science at the University of Minnesota, recalls that he and his friend Ali Khalifa launched the page with no expectation that it would be a wild success. Because posts to the page are anonymous, its popularity is measured not by membership but by its more than 60,000 “likes.”

At first, most of the posts came from Ashmawy’s friends, but soon thousands of others began posting. Mohamed Allam, who now co-runs Cairo Confessions with Ashmawy, says:

The whole idea was to create a safe space for people to open up about taboo issues. When I joined, I said, “Let’s gather people, create a community. Let’s create a judgment-free zone.” To those ends, we focus quite a bit on the moderation of the comments on the postings to ensure that there is no judgmental feedback that injures people. This was our vision to create a social network.<sup>9</sup>

Most postings are focused on romantic relationships, which Allam views as the primary worry of young people in Egypt today, followed by family issues. The third category is sexuality, including such subtopics as masturbation, virginity and homosexuality. Allam notes:

The relationship between a boy and a girl is considered taboo in our conservative Arab society, which causes guys to be very repressed. It starts during the teens and continues through university. It increases social anxiety and complicates young people’s lives because they do not know how to tell the opposite sex, “I like you.”

He believes that Cairo Confessions allows visitors to the page to vent their frustrations.

People (mostly young people) today cannot take it any more. Many feel they cannot speak out loud—homosexuals, for instance, feel persecuted by society. Problems with family relations are also quite prominent in the postings. Family problems can be the result of financial problems or of aggressive parents treating their children badly—this is a very common concern of young people.

Today a team of 20 runs the page, joined by psychiatrists and counselors who provide care to an Egyptian public in need. The 2013 UN World Happiness Report ranks Egypt’s population at 130 out of 156 populations studied, so mental health issues are real for Egyptians. But public conversations about these issues are uncommon. Satellite television channels occasionally host psychiatrists, such as the secretary-general of Our Morals, Ahmad ‘Ukasha, to talk about how to overcome depression or to provide input on social phenomena such as sexual harassment and terrorism. But even as post-revolution trauma hits Egyptian society, some segments harder than others, deeply ingrained practices render such conversations taboo. The Cairo Confessions Facebook page offers a rare outlet.

Ashmawy and Allam noticed that young posters were suffering from social anxiety, and decided to provide opportunities for them to meet up with others with similar problems and needs. Interested parties filled out applications and, based on the responses, Ashmawy and Allam sorted people into groups and planned ice-breaking exercises. The meet-ups have included a treasure hunt in the affluent Cairo neighborhood of Zamalek, as well as monthly storytelling events and field trips. Such in-person gatherings transcend the limits of virtual space.

According to Allam, the success of the page is indirectly linked to the revolution:

The repression people suffered before the revolution was quite high. People were preoccupied with other things, but after what happened [their minds] began to open up.... Our generation is more aware than any other generation.... An irreversible change took place in society. After this period of revolution things can never be the same again.

The team hopes that the page will help create a more tolerant society that can openly discuss its problems. Ashmawy states:

We are very passionate about improving mental health and promoting self-expression; our idea is a model for an open, more accepting community. Changing society from within takes a lot of effort and a lot of time, so patience is needed—and a bit of good luck wouldn’t hurt!<sup>10</sup>

Another Facebook page that has acquired some notoriety in Cairo is Confessions of a Married Woman, a members-only forum launched by Zeinab al-Ashri in 2014. Shortly after her marriage, al-Ashri was relaxing with female friends when the conversation turned to divorce. As one friend recounted her difficulties with her husband, the others found much of her experience to be familiar. “I, too, realized that I was going through the same challenges but that I dare not elaborate



because we are taught to keep our marital lives to ourselves,” al-Ashri recalls. She saw there was a need for a virtual forum. Some discretion is appropriate—“it would be embarrassing to my husband if others were to know about our intimate life details,” she says—but staying silent when one is deeply unhappy is not healthy. “It can isolate women and actually lead to divorce, in some cases, because women think it is only them who suffer and that there is nothing to be done about it.” Al-Ashri’s Facebook group tapped into pent-up demand: The group gained two or three thousand members in its first year and, by 2017, the rolls had expanded to more than 65,000. But there has also been backlash. Disgruntled husbands accuse the group of trying to foment marital discord and encouraging women to ask for divorce. Al-Ashri shrugs off the complaints: “There will always be people who will try to find a problem with everything that you do as a woman because they cannot handle your success and their own problems.” Yet she is hopeful that these frustrated patriarchs will come to value open, honest communication with their wives.

Perhaps the most common topic is sex. Some discussions address sexual performance, but as al-Ashri notes:

Almost 50 percent of the sexual problems that women reported had to do with their husband’s lack of sex drive and not their own! Yes, of course, there are many cases where women could not keep up with their husband’s sex drive, but the numbers are much less [perhaps 15 to 20 percent].

She argues that the reasons have to do with outdated expectations of wedlock on the part of men, who assume that their marriages will be like those of their fathers:

Women now have careers and contribute to the couple’s finances. In some cases they earn more than their husbands. Some men cannot reconcile these new scenarios with their internalized notions of masculinity, whereby the husband is head of the household and the main breadwinner.

Many wives, al-Ashri continues, do not realize that their husbands feel this way and that men can experience lack of interest in sex as a result. Her Facebook group conveys to women that such situations are common, as is self-doubt as to whether one has chosen the right partner. Members find reassurance in such insights, and they encourage each other to seek counseling if needed. In the online discussions, mental health care is not for “the insane,” as popular perception would have it, but is an accessible means of dealing with ordinary life problems.

Like the Cairo Confessions team, al-Ashri views the 2011 revolution as sparking a sense of agency in a population that had long felt disempowered. “People realized that they can make change happen,” she stated. “Our generation is more self-aware and more globally aware. Young people look at what other people around the world are doing and they think, ‘Why

not us, too?’” She saw this sense of agency on her Facebook page as well, where members gradually overcame their initial caution about broaching taboos when they saw that anonymity provided them with a safe space.

Like the Cairo Confessions team, al-Ashri organizes in-person gatherings as well—workshops on topics of interest to her group’s members. In response to hundreds of posts by housewives and stay-at-home mothers, many of the workshops have addressed women’s empowerment. Even if they are unhappy, some women have little choice but to remain married for financial reasons. The workshops give them practical tips for launching home businesses, along with an alternative means of fulfillment and community. “I am building a bridge between women and the professional world,” says al-Ashri. “I am also trying to spread knowledge and tolerance for psychiatric help. I am calling for the removal of stigma from sexual matters in society and for empowering women.”

## Change and Its Proponents

Since the 2011 revolution, hundreds of thousands of Egyptians have turned to Facebook and other online forums for self-help and the support of others in dealing with the problems of daily life. Other pages and groups have emerged to create virtual spaces for mothers, university alumni, neighborhoods and entrepreneurial groups, to give just a few examples. Although many popular virtual spaces eschew formal politics, the discussions do political work by building communities and demystifying subjects that the state deems off limits, such as sexuality, atheism, divorce and dealing with domineering parents. These online conversations redefine exclusionary boundaries by challenging the state’s efforts to monopolize moral codes. When young people openly discuss career plans, parents, breakups and sexual frustration—even if they do so anonymously—they push back against traditional taboos and begin to define a new normal. To be sure, such transgressions of conventional norms are not as dramatic as the assembly of protesters in Tahrir Square in January 2011. But the online camaraderie of these groups echoes the bonds forged among Tahrir protesters. And while the Internet on its own cannot a revolution make, the participants in these online forums have begun to cross the line from the virtual to the real, through workshops and meet-ups that put them face to face. ■

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Wael Eskandar at a downtown Cairo café, May 25, 2014.

ASMAA WAGUIH/REUTERS

## "I Still Have a Realistic Expectation of Better Prospects for Egypt's Future"

**W**ael Eskandar is a Cairo-based independent journalist who blogs at Notes from the Underground. He has written for *Ahram Online*, *al-Monitor*, *Daily News Egypt*, *Counterpunch* and *Jadaliyya*, among other outlets. He has also contributed to Egypt's Kazeboon campaign and other projects that focus on youth and digital information. Eskandar spoke with Jessica Winegar, associate professor of anthropology at Northwestern University and an editor of this magazine, in April 2017.

**We first met in 2016 at the "After Tahrir" conference at the University of California-Santa Barbara. You were one of the few activist participants still living and working in Egypt, and you seemed energetic. What are the challenges of activism for those in exile? To what extent does one's geographic location make a difference?**

My energy at that conference came from seeing that the Egyptian revolution is still remembered and considered to be of importance. That was encouraging; it made it all feel like less of a defeat than if the revolution had been completely forgotten and was of no consequence.

I still live in Egypt, which gives me a lot of insight into what is happening on the ground. I think the main struggle for

activists in exile, or even analysts who don't visit Egypt often, is to understand the sentiment on the street and its exact context. It's not impossible—there are many in exile who are capable, but they need to do more work to authenticate information so as to produce accurate analysis.

In the case of activists, understanding the sentiment on the street is key to messaging and also to analysis of what needs to be addressed. In Egypt there are many layers of misdirection, propagated by numerous media outlets, so a strong filter needs to be applied. And that comes from being present, from knowing the right people and from having a lot of experience.



It's not simply about understanding facts; it's about understanding motivations. That is what makes geographic location an asset, at least with respect to topics that are not so straightforward.

### **Are you still energetic?**

I would say that I still have a realistic expectation of better prospects for Egypt's future.

I saw the hundreds who protested under [former President Hosni] Mubarak turn into thousands. And most any young Egyptian who tries to find out the truth about politics will find revolutionaries to speak with, even if they seem to be defeated.

An older Coptic Egyptian academic who supports the regime [of the current president, 'Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi] once told me that in the 1970s you had to be pro-government, join the Islamists or bury yourself in books. He chose the books, but said that if he had a choice between Islamists and the military, he would choose the military. He saw no option of rejecting both types of authoritarianism. Yet I think that, as many in the younger generations grow up, they will see that they do have that other option—and that many of their fellow citizens also want to reject all forms of authoritarianism.

This entire view, however, is strongly challenged by the state of the world, as in numerous places there is a downward spiral into right-wing fascism. The right wing has been rising steadily in Europe, and with [Donald] Trump's election in the United States, a country that took pride in at least the rhetoric of human rights is now led by a president who has openly denied science and promoted racism. Together with the state of affairs in the Middle East, it is as if young people are being told that the bar is much lower, that we're now simply fighting for basic human decency—such as respect for others.

### **What roles do journalism and blogging play in activism in Egypt today?**

Arabic-language journalism in Egypt is nearly dead—at least in its traditional forms, such as newspapers and television. Yet there are many emboldened citizens who express their opinions and help to shape [public knowledge of the] facts. Such “speaking-truth-to-power journalists” persist in their efforts in a few alleyways on the Internet. There is no blogging in Egypt, in the sense of several blogs that are updated and maintained, but there are social media platforms that act like blogs. These blog-like things seem to be sources of information in a context where formal media is completely subverted.

### **How would you compare journalism and blogging to other forms of activism in terms of efficacy?**

Other forms of activism include organizing, campaigning and taking to the streets. These forms are better in the long run, but currently there is no public space for on-the-ground activism. And there is no energy to break through the barrier, which would take masses of people and not just a select few activists.

**In a January 25, 2017 article at Open Democracy, you wrote that**

**many Egyptians are caught in fear and denial. How can fear have returned to Egypt when we all said, at the time of the 2011 uprising, that it had broken through the wall of fear? And what precisely are Egyptians in denial about?**

The barrier of fear was indeed broken through in 2011, but the Egyptian regime withstood the blow. There's a lot you can do [to rebuild the wall] when you have as many resources as the regime does.

The Muslim Brothers inadvertently did their part to bring back fear. Instead of progress toward a secular democracy that rewards competence, Egyptians were faced with a group obsessed with piety and control of personal space. [The Brothers' behavior when in power], of course, played into the Mubarak regime's portrayal of them for years as the ultimate bogeyman. But the Brothers did not understand the power of this stereotype and, in many an instance, they seemed to exert efforts to reify it. The military capitalized on this fear, the fear of violence and control in the name of religion, and pushed it even further.

People were not afraid of protesting when they gave up their right to protest; they were afraid of violence and economic hardship. So many people, prodded by the military, marched to give Sisi a mandate to fight probable terror. At first they cheered on that fight; then they realized that they would be figured as the so-called probable terror if they objected. And so, in effect, they willingly handed the keys over to the military and marched to start fearing again.

This is the exact story that many Egyptians are in denial about. They cannot cope with the fact that the military to which they handed power is a failure in handling the country's politics. They are willing to tell themselves that those who have been killed, tortured and imprisoned deserved it—rather than face the fact that the systematic brutal practices of the Egyptian regime can target anyone. Ask any Egyptian about the police, and he or she will tell you how corrupt, incompetent and brutal they are. But challenge the police in a political context, and the same person will claim that the police are protecting Egypt from terror, thus justifying what is already known about the police's brutality.

### **It seems there is a massive generational divide in Egypt in terms of support for the Sisi government and views of what is politically possible. Do you agree and, if so, what do you think has caused the divide?**

It's like the example I noted above: The older generation does not really see a choice other than the military and the Islamists, the two forces that have long contended for power. Many of them are so accustomed to the order of things that they are unable to cope with changes. For them, the events of 2011 are a source of confusion. They had been living in darkness for a very long time, and when some light came in, they were not able to process it.

Sisi restored the darkness that they're used to and the moral authority vis-à-vis the younger generation that they'd lost in 2011 and 2012. Not only can the older generation claim that their children do not understand the way the world works, but the Sisi regime will also lock up their children, proving that the older generation is right.

But I don't see the divide as strictly generational—it is more a war on the younger generation that dared to stand up to oppression and autocracy. The security state is exacting its revenge upon those whom it perceives dealt it a blow on January 28, 2011, the day that tens of thousands of protesters came into the streets in cities across Egypt and faced down the government's tanks and bullets. Most of the people who did that are youth.

**How do you manage the exigencies of daily life in Egypt while still keeping the future in sight?**

Survival, in any context, in any place, is important.

On January 24, 2011, there seemed to be no future. That was an error in judgment on the part of a great many, caused by the blinding darkness of the state of affairs at that moment. I have learned to read the present a bit more carefully and with a much less defeatist attitude to avoid that mistake that many of us made.

Yet presently the regime has given no guidelines for how to remain safe. Far too many innocent people are being targeted, for having done nothing, and so surviving is a matter of chance. Giulio Regeni is a case in point. [Regeni was an Italian Cambridge University doctoral student who was conducting research on trade unions in Egypt when he was abducted, tortured and killed in early 2016, presumably by Egyptian security forces. —Eds.]

The only way to continue is to accept that: Keep doing what you can and accept that injustices can happen to anyone. You may end up hurt or in jail just because some state security officer decided to take action against you because of some informer.

Yet how can we not also see the numbers of young students who are mobilizing every day, at least in terms of expressing their opinions rejecting the present rule? This is the future; just observing them keeps the future in sight.

**Do you think that the term “revolution” still applies to what happened in 2011 and what is happening now?**

I've always maintained that the January 25 revolution was an uprising that we name “the revolution.” I have no doubt in my mind that it wasn't a revolution in the traditional sense of revolutionaries rising to power. It is an uprising that we all hoped would be a revolution. But maybe the fact that it is remembered to this day as a defining moment in Egyptian history (and perhaps world history) makes me believe that it is a revolution. It revolutionized so many minds and completely disrupted the political system in Egypt. The question is whether it is a successful revolution or not. In terms of politics, it has failed in the short term to bring about the changes it desired, and Egypt is presently in the worst era of human rights violations in its modern history.

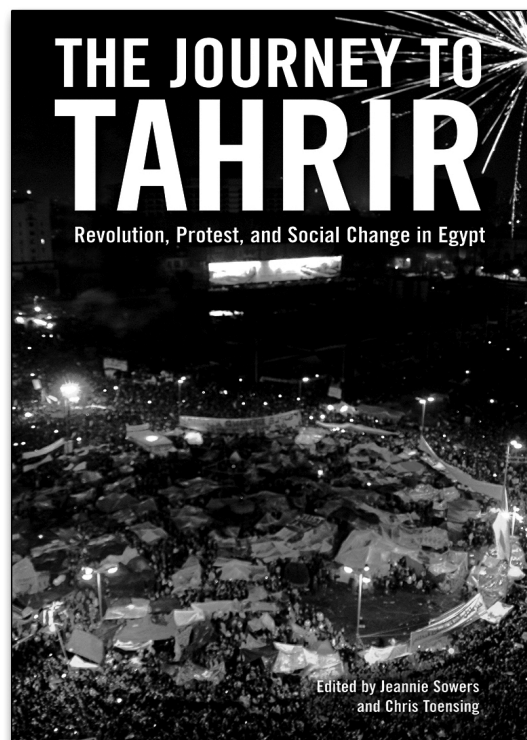
Yet in terms of creating space out of nothing—like a big bang—with no resources and no organization and very little intent, then I would say it is a miraculous success.

Now all it has to do is evolve, but that's what I'm not yet sure will happen. ■

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Rioters throw stones at police during clashes triggered by a dispute over housing in the Diar Elaffia neighborhood, eastern Algiers, November 23, 2010.

# Voter Participation and Loud Claim Making in Algeria

Robert P. Parks

Change looms on the horizon in Algeria—change that could well touch the edifice of the country’s framework of governance. In the short term, given the protracted period of low international oil and gas prices, the state is likely to introduce economic reforms that will modify its expenditures on popular distributional and social welfare programs. And in April 2019, an election will likely usher in a successor to the sitting fourth-term president, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who first took office in 1999.<sup>1</sup> Overcoming both challenges—economic reforms and the transition to a new president—will require substantial citizen participation and consensus, but voter participation has been in continuous

decline since the 1991 legislative elections, the annulment of which sparked years of civil war.

Meanwhile, since the mid-2000s Algeria has seen an increase in the micro-riots known locally as *protesta*.<sup>2</sup> *Protesta* are small, unauthorized demonstrations that are highly local—occurring at a particular street or intersection. While disruptive, *protesta* are only symbolically violent, with participants generally limiting themselves to throwing stones at police, blocking roads and burning tires, and refraining from theft, looting or attacks on bystanders. *Protesta* are usually spontaneous but always make a loud and specific claim on the state. While the regime needs a high level of participation in the upcoming elections to tackle the large political and economic issues, *protesta* work in the meantime as cues that let the regime know where and how it should act.<sup>3</sup>

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## Economic Centralization, Eroding Institutional Confidence and Voter Participation

The government's generous social welfare and distribution programs underwrite much of the president's continued popularity, which far overshadows public confidence in other state institutions, such as the National Assembly, the Senate, regional councils and municipal councils. Indeed, Algeria has a strong presidential regime. In addition to naming the prime minister and cabinet, a third of the senators, and a third of the Constitutional Council (Algeria's supreme court) and its chief justice, the president has de facto control of the allocation of state resources. The National Assembly votes on the annual budget, although its real authority is eclipsed by presidential decree. During President Bouteflika's 17 years in office, the National Assembly, dominated by two pro-presidential parties, has never asserted its role in formulating public spending. Individual members of Parliament do not lobby regularly to capture portions of the state budget for their individual constituencies. The executive instead distributes monies from the state budget directly to Algeria's various ministries, which in turn send the money downstream to their local divisions in the country's 48 regional prefectures. In each prefecture, the presidentially nominated prefect, or *wali*, oversees the distribution of allocated monies to the regional assembly and municipal councils within its boundaries. And while the 1,541 local municipalities—the only level of government where elected officials deliberate on how funds are distributed—have their own budgets, 62 percent of Algeria's town halls are entirely dependent on centralized monies.<sup>4</sup>

During Bouteflika's tenure, the Algerian government has vastly increased its spending, contributing to the president's popularity. While the budget was based on oil revenue at \$15 per barrel in 1999, the calculus for spending was increased to \$19 per barrel in 2000, when the regime created its Revenue Stabilization Fund, and bumped up again to \$37 per barrel in 2008. Following the spike in international oil prices in 2002, the government injected billions of dollars into development

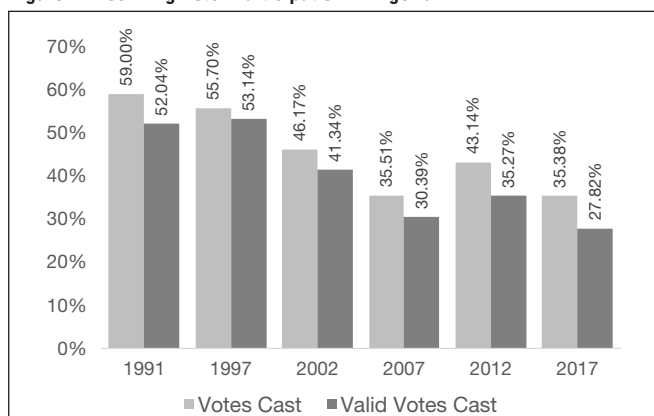
programs targeting education, health care, housing, infrastructure and jobs. From a \$7 billion five-year investment plan in 2000–2004, government spending jumped to \$200 billion, \$286 billion and \$262 billion for the 2005–2009, 2010–2014 and 2015–2019 five-year plans, respectively.

Algeria distributes its hydrocarbon rent through a number of mechanisms: directly via state employment, subsidized public goods and service provision, and indirectly through subsidized interest rates on home mortgages and other credits. Between 2009 and 2012, the average share of government expenditure as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) was 40.8 percent—significantly higher than elsewhere in the region.<sup>5</sup> Under President Bouteflika, state employment has been an important driver of domestic consumption: In 2013, nearly 35 percent of the Algerian work force was employed by the state.<sup>6</sup> While a significant proportion of this work force is made up of temporary workers employed by the provincial government—akin to the Works Progress Administration in the United States that was part of the New Deal in the 1930s—permanent employment offers virtual life tenure and retirement benefits and thus continues to attract recruits.<sup>7</sup> In 2012, government subsidies made up 18.3 percent of GDP.<sup>8</sup>

A look at the 2010–2014 plan, dubbed Algeria's Second Marshall Plan, gives a good sense of how public investment monies have been spent. While 22 percent of monies were directed to health care, education, public utilities and transportation infrastructure—collective goods—a significantly greater portion funded programs that targeted individuals for state-subsidized redistribution, viewed as a form of social justice. Rural and urban employment and job creation schemes (e.g., direct employment or subsidized loans) accounted for close to 8 percent of the plan. Housing made up the lion's share—17 percent of the 2010–2014 plan, which set a target of 2 million new subsidized housing units. The government's program offers four layers of subsidized housing, including a \$7,000 grant for rural housing, free public housing for the poor, government-private participation programs and a final program that offers 0 percent interest on bank loans for housing.<sup>9</sup> Accounting for close to a quarter of each of President Bouteflika's four five-year plans,<sup>10</sup> the program is one of the distributional cornerstones of the government.

While such top-heavy distribution has boosted the popularity of the chief executive, the practice also calls into question the utility of elected officials, political parties and civic groups.<sup>11</sup> According to a 2013 Afro Barometer survey, 91.9 percent of Algerians have some or a lot of trust in the president, while 89.5 percent approve or strongly approve of his performance.<sup>12</sup> In the same survey, only 11.4 percent of Algerians believed that Parliament listens to what people have to say.<sup>13</sup> The Arab Barometer surveys also show that between 2006 and 2011, the percentage of Algerians who claim to have little or no confidence in Parliament increased from 63.7 to 75 percent.<sup>14</sup>

Figure 1. Declining Voter Participation in Algeria







Police clash with protesters against President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's decision to run for a fourth term, Algiers, April 16, 2014.

ZOHRA BENSEMRA/REUTERS

Declining levels of public confidence in elected institutions' ability to effect change are reflected in voter participation rates for the National Assembly, which has declined steadily over the past 25 years.<sup>15</sup> Fifty-nine percent of registered voters participated in the first round of the annulled 1991 elections, dropping to 55.7 percent in 1997. Participation fell further in 2002 to 46.2 percent and hit a historical low in 2007 at 35.5 percent. While participation rates did increase slightly in 2012 to 43.1 percent, the bump is likely linked to the effects of the Arab uprisings.<sup>16</sup> Rates fell again in the 2017 contests to 37.09 percent. Morocco saw similar declining participation rates with a record low in 2007 at 35.51 percent, also increasing slightly in 2012 to 45.5 percent before falling again to 42.3 percent in 2016.<sup>17</sup>

## Protesta in Algeria

Against this background of declining voter participation, the countries of the Middle East, North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa have seen a proliferation of agitation against unpopular regime policies. One significant dimension of this turbulence is the increasing number of *protesta*. While Algeria witnessed nearly three *protesta* per day on average in 2008, the Ministry of Interior recorded more than 11,000 interventions by riot police units in 2011 and nearly 10,000 in 2012.<sup>18</sup> In February

2016, the Ligue Algérienne pour la Defense des Droits de l'Homme cited 14,000 protests during the preceding year.

What characterizes these micro-riots, and what are they about? Scholars of social movements do not agree on a single definition of a riot, including events as diverse as low-intensity conflicts, large and small urban protests that turn violent, pogroms and inter-ethnic violence. The common thread is that, during riots, "unruly crowds burn, loot or otherwise assail stores, public buildings, cars and/or symbols of state power."<sup>19</sup> Algerian *protesta*, however, are generally small, contained events with only theatrical displays of violence. A subset of demonstrations, *protesta* have a specific target and script: They always make claims. Unlike most demonstrations, however, they appear to act in "radical disconnection from Algeria's political parties, but also...without any links to or help from trade union movements or other organized associations."<sup>20</sup> They generally involve between 50 and 200 citizens from a common locality and are rarely citywide. While they can sometimes involve entire neighborhoods, they most often occur within localized parts of neighborhoods or along sections of streets.

According to a database of nearly 500 *protesta* in Algeria between 2008 and 2012, most *protesta* make distributional claims on the state.<sup>21</sup> Nearly two thirds of those *protesta* called for the provision of public goods. The most common



Graduates in temporary public-sector jobs protest in Algiers, April 29, 2012. The banner reads, "We want permanent employment."

ZOHRA BENSEMRA/REUTERS

demand, at nearly 29 percent, was for better housing. But the next most common claims asserted by the protesters varied by municipal size. In Algiers, the capital, youth mounted *protesta* over the cost of living and continued access to subsidies. In large provincial cities, the claims concerned greater access to municipal water, electricity and gas supplies. In mid-sized provincial towns, citizens demanded small-scale municipal public works, such things as paved roads, speed bumps and pedestrian overpasses. In villages, protesters demanded employment in local state-owned enterprises. Although *protesta* rarely called for democratization, many (15 percent) decried police abuses. Most *protesta* assert claims against the state for its inattention to local issues or the mismanagement or misallocation of state resources by local elected officials or state cadres.

Why *protesta* are so common in Algeria, averaging around 10,000 annually? One answer concerns the ways in which the highly centralized state and economy have sidelined elected officials. Algeria's semi-open political system permits vocal opposition and uses the distribution of state resources through select social justice programs, such as housing policy, to fulfill the state's historic mission while buying enough support to maintain internal cohesion. Finding the right balance, however, is difficult. Pro-regime and opposition

political parties and civic groups attempt to function as effective intermediaries between citizens and the state. In Algeria, however, neither political parties nor civic groups play an active role in formulating socio-economic policy or in distributing state resources to citizens. Rather, many such groups and organizations are themselves financed by the state, thus diminishing citizen trust in their efficacy and probity. Citizens view elected bodies as an ineffectual component of the current system, as demonstrated in public opinion surveys as well as by steadily declining voter turnout at national and local polls.<sup>22</sup> Surveys show that Algerians have little trust in state institutions or their capacity for political performance, which larger cross-national studies have shown to be a condition necessary for the proliferation of micro-riots. In such contexts, citizens view peaceful opposition as ineffectual and look instead for means of confronting the state directly. Even when they are small and localized, *protesta* bring significant levels of disruption and noise that the state cannot easily ignore.

## Elections, Economy and Participation

The outcome of Algeria's May 2017 National Assembly elections may define the state's commitment to its generous



social welfare and public investment programs, as well as the relationship between the presidency and the legislature.

Since the 2014 oil price slump, the country's foreign currency reserves have steadily decreased from a record \$190 billion in 2014 to \$109 billion today.<sup>23</sup> While the International Monetary Fund admitted that its growth estimates for 2016 were off—the organization had predicted 3.6 percent, against a real growth rate of 4.2 percent—it has lowered its estimate for growth in 2017 and 2018 to 1.4 percent and 0.6 percent, respectively, and predicted an increase in unemployment from the current 10.5 percent to 13.2 percent in 2018.<sup>24</sup> While the 2017 Algerian Finance Law aims to re-equilibrate government spending—expenditures in key sectors have been decreased, government employment in certain ministries frozen and rules on importation imposed—significant changes are being discussed in semi-official circles. The government has promised not to deviate significantly from its current course of action, although leading regime figures have announced the need for a broad-based dialogue on the future economic relationship between citizen and state<sup>25</sup>—a dialogue that many party leaders claim begins with a large voter turnout.

But how a Parliament-led dialogue could occur remains unclear. The March 2016 constitutional revisions strengthen parliamentary prerogatives, including Article 136, which gives any group of 20 or more deputies the right to initiate bills. The article also protects smaller parties' interests from being automatically blocked on the floor. The incoming National Assembly, however, is unlikely to be altered significantly in political composition: Low voter turnout has historically benefited ruling-coalition parties, which have great resources at their disposal to mobilize supporters to the polls. While the National Assembly can play a greater role in preparing legislation, the executive will continue to pass laws via decree unless the leadership of both government and the major parties actively push for dynamic debate.

Should the 2017 parliament break with past behavior and assert its constitutional rights, elected representatives could initiate a series of dialogues with political parties, trade unions, economic associations and civic groups over the role of the state in the future economy. Such a debate could shape a wide consensus on how to embark on significant administrative, economic and political reforms. More importantly, such actions would surely increase political participation in future contests, possibly strengthening the parliament further and opening the possibilities for greater democratizing reform. Absent changes that promote dialogue between pro-regime parties and the opposition, and between citizen and state, the ongoing liberalizing economic reforms will likely result in even more *protesta*—citizen actions from the streets that could either force reform or, just as likely, push the system to a breaking point as has happened elsewhere in the region. ■

## Endnotes

- 1 The March 2016 constitutional revisions limit the president to two five-year mandates. It remains unclear whether the revision is applicable retroactively, or beginning mid-term, or beginning with the next presidential election.
- 2 The term *protesta* has no corollary in Algerian Arabic. Algerians also use the expression *al-khuruuj ila al-shawari* (taking to the streets) interchangeably with *muzaharat* (demonstrations). Larger riots that include looting and widespread destruction of property are sometimes called *balbala* (confusion) or simply *shaghab* (riots). The term *fauda* (disorder) is used interchangeably to describe demonstrations, riots and *protesta*. In Oran, *khali* (mixing, or stirring up) is also used to describe *protesta*.
- 3 Robert P. Parks, "Algeria, Hydrocarbons, and the Provision of Public Goods and Services," paper presented at the Varieties of Rentierism Workshop, London School of Economics, September 16–17, 2016; and "Sounds Like Participation: *Protesta* and Claim-Making in Algeria," unpublished manuscript.
- 4 Algérie Presse Service, May 25, 2016.
- 5 Lahcen Achy, "The Price of Stability in Algeria," Carnegie Middle East Center (April 2013): [http://carnegieendowment.org/files/price\\_stability\\_algeria.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/price_stability_algeria.pdf).
- 6 Alberto Behar and Junghwan Mok, "Does Public-Sector Employment Fully Crowd Out Public-Sector Employment?" IMF Working Paper 13/146 (Washington, DC, 2013).
- 7 For a breakdown of the Algerian labor market, see Mohamed Saïb Musette, "Employment Policies and Active Labour Market Programs in Algeria," *Algeria: Background Paper* (Algiers: European Training Foundation, 2013).
- 8 Andrew Jewell, Amina Lahreche and Gaëlle Pierre, "Algeria: Selected Issues," IMF Country Report 14/342 (Washington, DC, 2014), p. 18.
- 9 Of the close to 1 million housing units built during the 2005–2009 plan, 11.7 percent were reserved for poor urban families, 27 percent for poor rural families, 30.4 percent for government-private and 30 percent for lease-to-own with 0 percent interest. 2012 *Year Book, Housing Finance in Africa: A Review of Some of Africa's Housing Finance Markets* (Parkview, South Africa: Center for Affordable Housing Finance in Africa, 2012).
- 10 Malika Seddiki, "Investissements publics et gouvernance en Algérie: Quelle relation?" Faculté des sciences économiques, commerciales et sciences de gestion, Université de Sétif 1 Conference, *Évaluation des effets des programmes d'investissements publics 2001–2014 et leurs retombés sur l'emploi, l'investissement et la croissance économique* (Sétif: Université de Sétif: 2013), pp. 1–24.
- 11 Robert P. Parks, "Algeria and the Arab Uprisings," in Clement M. Henry and Jang Ji-Hyang, eds., *The Arab Spring* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 101–126.
- 12 See the 2013 Afro Barometer: <http://www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis/analyse-online>.
- 13 The 2015 Afro Barometer numbers are a bit different. Trust and approval in Parliament continued to slide: only 31.2 percent of respondents claimed to trust or somewhat trust Parliament, and only 29.6 percent reported strongly approving or approving parliamentary performance. Confidence and approval in the president, more importantly, took a steep decline: in 2015, only 47.2 percent of respondents claimed to trust or somewhat trust the president (down from 91.9 percent), and only 45.8 percent claimed to approve or strongly approve of his performance (down from 89.5 percent). This rapid erosion likely signals widespread concern for the health and capacity of the president, following his April 2013 stroke.
- 14 Unless otherwise indicated, subsequent data presented from the 2006 or 2011 Arab Barometer Survey is derived from: "Comparative Findings of all Arab Barometer Surveys in Jordan, Palestine, Morocco, Algeria and Kuwait," 2006: <http://www.arabbarometer.org/reports/countryreports/comparisonresults06.html>; "Algeria Country Report," 2011: <http://www.arabbarometer.org/arabic/reports/ABII/countryreportyAlgeria.pdf>.
- 15 Robert P. Parks, "Algerians Head to the Polls Thursday: Here's What to Watch," *Washington Post*, May 3, 2017.
- 16 Robert P. Parks, "Algeria's 10 May 2012 Elections: Preliminary Analysis," *Jadaliyya*, May 20, 2012.
- 17 See the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance's Voter Turnout Database (<http://www.idea.int/data-tools>) and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems' Election Guide (<http://www.electionguide.org/>).
- 18 Parks, "Algeria and the Arab Uprisings."
- 19 Cathy Lisa Schneider, *Police Power and Race Riots: Urban Unrest in Paris and New York* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), p. 31.
- 20 Hugh Roberts, "Algeria's National 'Protesta,'" *Foreign Policy*, January 10, 2011.
- 21 Data on Algerian riots compiled by the author are based on various social movement and conflict databases and the local Algerian press.
- 22 According to the 2015 Afro Barometer Survey, only 35.6 percent of respondents approved or strongly approved of the way their local mayors or city council performed their jobs. According to the same survey, only 22.9 percent of respondents claimed local officials always or often listen to the public; while 79 percent of respondents reported that some or all of their town council was involved in corruption. In the 2011 Arab Barometer Survey, 72.3 percent of respondents claimed to have little or no confidence in political parties—60 percent for civic groups.
- 23 Reuters, March 6, 2017.
- 24 Algérie Presse Service, April 18, 2017.
- 25 Algérie Presse Service, April 21, 2017.



Journalist Lina Ben Mhenni, second left, holds a banner reading "No Reconciliation with Thieves" during the September 12, 2015 march against the reconciliation bill in Tunis.

## Refusing to Forgive Tunisia's Maneesh M'sameh Campaign

In 2015, Tunisia's President Beji Caid Essebsi proposed a draft economic reconciliation law to forgive graft and other corrupt acts committed by civil servants and businessmen under the regime of ousted president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in exchange for closed-door confessions and return of ill-gotten gains. Such economic crimes were a major trigger of the 2010–2011 protests that led to the Tunisian revolution—and Essebsi's bill provoked a powerful response, a campaign called Maneesh M'sameh (I Will Not Forgive). The campaign's initial goal was to protect the integrity of investigations of economic crimes by the Truth and Dignity Commission (L'Instance Vérité et Dignité), created in the summer of 2014.

Maneesh M'sameh has gone on to spark debate about the meaning of truth and reconciliation. It has also brought to the fore lingering issues of corruption and structural inequality. On April 29, 2017, the movement called for protests of Parliament's decision to reconsider a third version of the draft law. The large demonstrations drew the rank and file of opposition political parties and other critics of the controversial bill.



**Wassim Sghayr** is the Maneesh M'sameh coordinator. Prior to the 2011 revolution, he belonged to the legal opposition Progressive Democratic Party and wrote for the party's *al-Mawqif*, a newspaper that was above-ground but heavily censored. Laryssa Chomiak, a political scientist based in Tunis, spoke with him there on August 18, 2016. **Hamza Abidi** is a young Maneesh M'sameh member. In 2011 he was briefly a member of the left-leaning Reform and Development Party and headed the Tunis branch of the nationwide non-governmental organization Sawti (My Voice). He spoke with Lana Salman, a doctoral candidate in city and regional planning at the University of California-Berkeley, who is in Tunisia for her dissertation fieldwork, on April 12, 2017. The interviews were conducted in French and Arabic, respectively, and translated by the interviewers.

### Why was Maneesh M'sameh created?

**Sghayr** Maneesh M'sameh's primary goal is to safeguard a sovereign process of transitional justice in Tunisia. The movement is a realistic initiative, in the sense that it took advantage of a political opportunity and was started by a group of young activists with experience dating to the pre-revolutionary period. After the president announced the economic reconciliation bill, the group created an online forum to discuss how best to resist this dangerous initiative. Initial discussions included two components: What are the best techniques for resistance? And, given the alarmingly low youth participation in politics, how can young Tunisians be integrated? The Maneesh M'sameh campaign is anchored in pre-revolution resistance politics and post-revolution instances of radical and progressive political engagement.

Maneesh M'sameh is opposed to all versions of the economic reconciliation bill because of the vast number of economic crimes committed under the previous regime. We believe that the reconciliation processes must happen under the transitional justice framework [Transitional Justice Law 53, which created the Truth and Dignity Commission] in order for Tunisian society to make sense of the effects of this form of economic violence and to heal.

**Abidi** After the 2014 parliamentary elections, the new assembly drew up its legislative road map. The president put forward an economic reconciliation bill that bypassed the transitional justice legal framework. Many activists, especially those on Facebook at the time, expressed anger about the bill. They started a Google group called Maneesh M'sameh to block it. This group organized demonstrations and the campaign grew out of those. The bill did not pass, but the president responded by pushing for it again. We pushed back, and for a second time we succeeded in blocking the bill.

We are now in the middle of a new phase. The president has put the reconciliation law on the table yet again, and we have mobilized against it in what, on Facebook, we are calling "round three."

### What is the campaign's strategy?

**Sghayr** We organized our first protest on September 12, 2015, in front of the [Tunisian General Labor Union] UGTT headquarters in downtown Tunis. The group then marched toward Bourguiba Avenue, where the NGO I-Watch had

organized a debate on the economic reconciliation bill, including both proponents and opponents of the proposal, at the Africa Hotel. Maneesh M'sameh was formed to support the opponents.

Following the protest, the coordinating team of Maneesh M'sameh organized an awareness week, which commenced in Sfax, Tunisia's second largest city, with later events in Mahdia and Sousse. To the surprise of the organizers, the police reacted violently, as they had received orders to stop our movement from spreading. Because of the police reaction, Maneesh M'sameh's mission expanded from fighting economic reconciliation to protecting freedom of assembly and expression in the post-revolution political context.

For that main September 2015 protest, Maneesh M'sameh worked to unite all of the political factions but also to attract wide participation of young people, especially those who either have not been involved in politics or do not have clear political affiliations, through cultural activities. The fusing of a clear political protest with public cultural activities also signified a new strategy for activism beyond the purely political.

The second coordinated round of activities was called Wanted. The idea was to choose a photo of a notoriously corrupt businessperson from the Ben Ali period, write "Wanted" over the image and plaster it across public space overnight. The goal was to shock the public the next morning. The first posters targeted "Ab-Ab" [Abdelwahab Abdallah], a close adviser to Ben Ali who held various ministerial posts. His photo was accompanied by [tongue-in-cheek] mention of a 1,000-dinar reward. The second batch went after Slim Cheiboub [a businessman married to Ben Ali's daughter] and the third Mohamed Ghariani, former secretary-general of the Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD), Ben Ali's party.

In 2016, the president reintroduced the economic reconciliation bill, so Maneesh M'sameh mobilized again with a new, two-pronged strategy that included writing letters to each of Parliament's 270 members and assembling files that detail each type of economic violation. These activities were accompanied by a cross-ideological protest in downtown Tunis.

### Can you say a bit about your history of activism?

**Abidi** I had a teacher from 2003 to 2005 who was active in the Progressive Democratic Party, the only legal opposition



party that existed back then. After high school we remained friends; we met regularly to discuss politics throughout 2008 and 2009. Then the Sidi Bouzid events [the self-immolation of street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi and the subsequent protests] occurred in December 2010. I started demonstrating, taking pictures with my phone to document events. That period was one of despair among young people. We witnessed corruption and acts of violence against us every day. I was a soccer fan then, and used to go to the stadium regularly to watch games. The police attacked and beat us in the stadium, too. All the slogans of the revolution that we would hear later, the ones about freedom and dignity, we had started singing in the stadium.

In 2011, I joined a party, Development and Reform, from the leftist milieu—we participated in the 2011 elections but did not win. The elections reconstituted the political landscape, as new alliances were formed and parties merged. We formed an alliance, too, the Democratic Alliance of Mohamed El Hamdi [a journalist and owner of two TV channels] and Mehdi Ben Gharbia, who is currently the minister responsible for relations with civil society and human rights. Ten parliamentarians represented the alliance.

But this experience shifted my intellectual and political outlook. The most important realization was that a political party is not a vehicle for change—my friends and I came to view party politics as defunct. So I joined civil society, first Sawti, an NGO present in five of Tunisia's governorates. I headed the branch in greater Tunis, and then left to engage in activism on my own.

At the end of 2011, I helped to put together the campaign called I, Too, Burned Down a Police Station (Hatta Ana Haraq Markaz), in response to the arrest of many young people who had participated in the revolution. We followed up with the campaign Make Them Accountable (Hasibhum), and now we are in the midst of Maneesh M'sameh.

We discovered that this form of activism—a campaign that distances itself from formal politics—is a better way to attract participants.... As a campaign, we are critical of certain public policies, but we are not interested in narrow party politics. Add the fact that we are all young people who speak the same language; we know and trust one another.

#### **How does Maneesh M'sameh fit into the broader political landscape in Tunisia?**

**Sghayr** Maneesh M'sameh is one of many campaigns, including I, Too, Burned Down a Police Station, or the effort to grab cameras and other equipment from journalists who were misreporting, to be formed by committed young activists.

But Maneesh M'sameh has a pre-history, in terms of both leadership and strategy. Before the January 14, 2011 revolution, resistance to Ben Ali's regime was united—the opposition split only after he fell. Maneesh M'sameh...was the first organized effort to reunite the opposition since 2011. It

is led by groups that have experience in political activism and is composed of groups and individuals representing the center-left, labor unions, progressives and the left.

Maneesh M'sameh is tied to a rich experience of youth movements, including leftist student movements and other creative campaigns during the Ben Ali era. Globally, it links up with youth movements for an alternative politics, particularly Occupy and initiatives in Spain and Greece, transcending the political party establishment.

#### **How does Maneesh M'sameh compare to other social movements in Tunisia? Are there alliances? Fissures?**

**Abidi** What differentiates us from other social movements, I believe, is the way in which we communicate our goals: Our message is contemporary (*mutajaddid*) and addresses the concerns of young people.

The list of participants in our demonstrations and events spans several political parties and associations. We have organized discussion forums with opposition parties such as Democratic Current [a social democratic-progressive party], the Popular Front [a leftist-communist party] and the Republican Party [a centrist-liberal party]. We did the same with NGOs such as I-Watch, al-Bawsala and others.

But mostly it is our thematic focus on the draft reconciliation law that differentiates us. You will find other organizations that work on the topic alongside other issues. The reconciliation bill is not the only item on their agenda, and they address it from different vantage points, such as transitional justice or the anti-corruption law or even economics. We, on the other hand, cover all these vantage points but talk only about the reconciliation law itself, whether from a political point of view, or from economic, social or transitional justice perspectives.

#### **Some social movements accuse you of elitism.**

**Abidi** The issue is not specific to Maneesh M'sameh. In my opinion and based on my experience, there are broader ideological differences among young activists today—the conflict between activists and militants. Let me explain.

Some of the youth who consider themselves militants accuse activists of being, well, activists—in the sense of having relationships within civil society motivated by biases and foreign funding. Also, by definition, being a militant means that you fight for a cause over a long period of time, whereas we at Maneesh M'sameh are mobilizing specifically against the draft reconciliation law. If we are successful in having the draft law dropped, the campaign will end. Militants take a longer view of political change and the cumulative effects of struggle.

But despite these differences, militants support us and participate in our campaign. That includes the Tunisian Student Union and the UGTT, which even changed the cover photo on its Facebook page to Maneesh M'sameh! At the beginning, some organizations were reticent and

concerned that we were poaching their members. People imagined that Maneesh M'sameh would have its own electoral lists, for example, though that is not our current project. It took us months to explain to these organizations that Maneesh M'sameh is not partisan; it is a focused campaign whose mission will end when the reconciliation bill is dead.

**Why would you rather be in a movement like Maneesh M'sameh than, say, run for election or be active in a party?**

**Abidi** Let's first agree on what we mean by civil society activism. When I talk about being an activist in civil society organizations, I don't mean it in the classical sense of activism mediated through NGOs. To my mind, any citizen who walks out of the house, finds the neighborhood littered and heads to the municipality to express his anger is active in civil society.

As for political parties, let's think of the issue simply: You hear about this or that party, which everyone knows to be involved in corrupt deals with businesspeople, but which ends up winning elections anyway and getting a majority in Parliament. Then you hear about another party, one whose discourse is commonsensical, honest and pro-poor...but no one has ever heard of it.

My position is that in Tunisia you need two things to be successful in party politics—money and the media. This media-money combination means that you have to protect narrow interests, partake in corrupt deals and then defend them. Today, parties are forming alliances and then offering themselves for sale to the highest bidder—for example, the Tunisia Project of Mohsen el Marzouk. They do not even deny it.

I simply do not believe in politics that is party politics. I adopt a vision that Kais Said [a specialist in constitutional law who made key interventions resolving many conflicts during the drafting of the Tunisian constitution] discussed in terms of inverting the hourglass, meaning a bottom-up approach to gaining power. This vision translates into a different type of elections, not top-down elections of the type we have witnessed so far. Rather, it consists of forming local councils, out of which are formed regional councils, and from those national councils. This vision calls for a simultaneous reorganization of political and administrative power.

In our minds, this is how we could enshrine Article 7 of the constitution on decentralization: You turn to your local community rather than a political party. Political decisions in Tunisia are hyper-centralized, and parties are integrated automatically into that system. Parties have branches across the nation's territory, but the local branches have no leaders until 30 days before elections. So the relationship between regional party branches and voters is strained. The parties reach out to local communities in the month before an election, but then stop as soon as the election is over.

I believe in and adhere to a pyramidal structure of power that does not require you to join a party; it asks that you



**Demonstration against the reconciliation bill's third version on Habib Bourguiba Avenue in Tunis, April 29, 2017.**  
ZOUBEIR SOUSSI/REUTERS

focus on your own neighborhood. The election law that would support such an organization of power would rest on the election of representatives at the smallest possible spatial scale—not on the basis of the electoral lists of political parties. So you would no longer vote based on partisan politics, but based on the integrity of particular people who are your neighbors. Your neighbor can't possibly promise that he will create 500 new jobs. You know him—he is your neighbor, and you know what he can and can't do.... If you had a new local governments law that prioritized local representation over the national parties, you could prevent all the chicanery, all the false promises.

**Do you think that Maneesh M'sameh has been successful?**

**Sghayr** Yes, it has been successful on many levels. Most importantly, it blocked early efforts at passing the economic reconciliation bill. But as a horizontal campaign, the movement is difficult to break up. The campaign reunited activists who previously had worked together, but it also attracted new people who had not engaged in activism previously. The two phases—the protests against the economic reconciliation bill and the Wanted posters—each had a public shock effect but also effectively blocked the introduction of the bill to Parliament.

**Abidi** Maneesh M'sameh blocked the reconciliation bill on

two occasions. We consider that a victory. But we failed to get the draft law dropped once and for all. I attribute the lack of success on that front to the fact that the various parties who opposed the law did not have a consistent position vis-à-vis the transitional justice framework, including the Truth and Dignity Commission. The campaign's position was to oppose the reconciliation law, and that's it, whereas we should have been both against the reconciliation law and committed to the transitional justice framework. It is true that the transitional justice framework has problems, but I think that there is more awareness now that may be our only refuge. Some also fear that proposals for changes brought to the transitional justice law could be coopted by Nida' and Ennahda [the two parties in the coalition government]. Those in power keep trying to update the reconciliation bill, making use of this lack of consensus about the transitional justice framework.

#### **How do you see the movement evolving in the coming years?**

**Abidi** We are thinking about the future. Some members want to continue working beyond the reconciliation law, so we are thinking about both the political and organizational vision of the campaign. We live in a context [after Ben Ali] where there is freer airing of political and ideological differences. Maneesh M'sameh is not a monolithic movement. It includes members from various backgrounds and all walks of life, and we need to accommodate that diversity. But now that the president has put the reconciliation bill back on the table, we have decided to postpone discussions about the future of the campaign.

In my opinion—and I want to emphasize that I am not speaking on behalf of the campaign as a whole—the campaign should end once the draft reconciliation law is canceled. I say that given my own experiences with attempts to transform youth movements into more institutionalized entities, which failed miserably. I really want to let history remember the victory of Maneesh M'sameh as a narrowly focused campaign.

At present, our institutional organization is completely horizontal. Suppose Lana decides that “she is not forgiving” (*manhash m'samha*). She can join the campaign and suggest organizing a demonstration to other members. She then presents a detailed proposal, and if there are no objections—which must be supported with evidence—then the demonstration takes place as she planned. So the campaign has no leaders in that sense. On our Facebook page, you find contact information if you have questions, but otherwise, anyone can speak for the campaign in the media after consulting with the community. That's why the campaign has persisted, precisely because we don't have the organizational structure of five leaders with mustaches and four young people who are always out on the street doing the activism.

But that structure also raises challenges for transforming the campaign into something else. That's why I think it should end once the draft law is dropped.

#### **Are you hopeful about Tunisia's future?**

**Abidi** In the past, I straddled hope and despair. But I gave up both for clarity about the phase we are in. If the immediate situation is clear to you, you no longer think about hope or despair because you focus on what needs to be done. The hope I still have, though, is not blind hope, all pink and happy. The hope I have is connected to clarity. Look, for 60 years Tunisia has been ruled by corrupt governments. We can't make a revolutionary change in five or six years. We have a lot of work ahead of us, and we have time for it, especially the up-and-coming generations.

The generation that is currently in power will die soon—actually, that's the only solution, to wait until they die...and they don't want to die! [Laughs] But I am sure that we are on the right path, because we are vigilant watchdogs. What has been achieved since 2011 was achieved because of the pressure exerted by civil society. Don't forget: Our constitution almost included a clause on *shari'a*, and it is not there today because of civil society opposition. There is vigilance. So I do have hope, but it is realistic.

#### **What do you want outside observers of Tunisia to notice?**

**Abidi** Post-revolution Tunisia has witnessed a whole new market of political rhetoric, and all the new terms floating around serve to fragment opinion when the media picks them up. Let me give you a very simple example—the term “democratic transition” (*al-intiqal al-dimuqrati*). Not one youth who participated in the revolution used that term. Not one. But now you hear it a lot.

To my mind, we don't need these complex terms. The classic definition of a revolution is replacing the old with the new. That has not happened in Tunisia. What happened here is that elections were held based on an outdated framework. And the trajectory that Tunisia took after the revolution is a direct consequence of that outdated framework, which brought an outdated parliament to power and created the outdated political landscape you see today. So these other terms don't capture what is really happening.

In our opinion, those currently in power were involved with the old regime. They still finance political parties, and still, in effect, rule the country. There isn't one party in power today that has proposed a 20-year vision for Tunisia, or any vision for that matter.... There isn't one party that has put forth a road map, with operational phases and procedural requirements. Our demands today are not for jobs or resources. Our demands are to have a date, a horizon when promises will be delivered. There is none of that. There is an endemic lack of vision, and that is why social movements have so much legitimacy. Anyone interested in what is going in this country must support the social movements in Kef, Tataouine, Kasserine, Karkenah, Kairouan and Jbeneina.

I don't know if you heard about the successful strike [on April 11] in Tataouine... They kicked out the government

*Continued on page 40.*





The Yemeni bodega strike in New York, February 2, 2017.

SCOTT LYNCH

# The Ties That Bind

## An Interview with Rabyaah al-Thaibani

**Y**emeni-American activist Rabyaah al-Thaibani was born in Ta'izz, Yemen's largest city, in 1977. She moved to the United States as a child to join her father, who was working nights cleaning office buildings in Manhattan. She grew up in Brooklyn, attended Columbia University and since has worked in community development in New York City. In 2011, she helped establish the Yemeni-American Coalition for Change, and in February 2017 worked to bridge Yemeni and American concerns by co-organizing the Yemeni bodega strike, mounted in protest of President Donald Trump's first attempt at a "Muslim ban." A named plaintiff in New York State Attorney General Eric Schneiderman's effort to challenge the second "Muslim ban" in court, al-Thaibani agreed to talk with MERIP about how her childhood in Yemen and her experience as part of a wide Yemeni diaspora have influenced her activism in the US. She also spoke about what she would like outsiders to appreciate about Yemen and its current conflict. In a wide-ranging conversation of more than two hours with Stacey Philbrick Yadav, associate professor of political science at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, al-Thaibani described the connections she sees between her home and her homeland, the optimism she feels about Americans' "accidental awakening" since Trump's election, and the ways in which Yemenis are represented in American policy debates. The following is an edited excerpt of the conversation.

**Can you speak about your development as an activist? Have you always been politically engaged?**

I grew up in a political household. My dad and his brothers were born right after World War II, during the "days of hunger," as the period is known in Yemen, the last days of the imamate.<sup>1</sup>

Food was very scarce, and I grew up hearing stories about this time from my dad. He really shaped me.

My dad came to the US in 1981, and then petitioned to bring us [in 1985]. But in the meantime, we moved from Ta'izz to my mom's village for a year and half, and you can

imagine me, a city girl! But the mountains, the smells! It's something that lives in me until today. While we were there, my dad would communicate with us by cassette tape. This is how I came to know that he worked at 505 Eighth Avenue in Manhattan. Later, when I was in the US, he would take us there, and show me where he worked mopping the floors.

My dad worked really hard, and he invested in real estate in Brooklyn. But in everything he did, in all his spare time, he was immersed in politics. He would go every week to get *al-Sharq al-Awsat* [newspaper], and everyone who came to the house for a holiday, whenever...the talk was all politics. This is why I am who I am. It's in my blood.

**You grew up politically informed and engaged, but the Yemeni American Coalition for Change was your first move into Yemen-focused activism in the US, yes? Can you tell me more about it, about what got you started?**

I was in Yemen about six months before the revolution, in the summer of 2010, for my brother's wedding. I remember, my God, the intensity...a lot of people were really on edge. And I went to some gatherings, especially with journalists.... This is when I met my husband, Basheer.<sup>2</sup> I had read some of his writings, and he just doesn't care who he offends. He's not a sellout—this is what attracted me to him. Anyhow, there was this crazy, intense energy at the time, of people coming together across these huge differences.

Then back in the US, four or five of us started the Yemeni American Coalition for Change [in support of the revolution]. It was one of those times when Yemenis were really united...Islahis, Houthis, it was really magical in Change Square [in Sanaa], but also here in the US, except for a tiny fringe of GPC-ers [loyalists of the former president, 'Ali 'Abdallah Salih]. I mean, can you believe that unity?

Then the grassroots were eroded. And I say "were eroded" because it didn't happen because of the movement itself, but because of external influence. The US, Saudi Arabia, Iran... they fucked us all. They turned this beautiful movement into a nightmare. After Salih was given immunity, and came back, whatever...you know, if they wanted to get rid of him, he would have been gone. But he went back to Yemen [after receiving medical treatment in Saudi Arabia], and then you know the rest.

After that, a lot of the educated elite left Yemen and settled in the Gulf, the US and Europe. What was left was this super-corrupt high elite and then a huge mass of Yemenis, like the 99 percent. After the failure of the transition period—the National Dialogue—there was an exodus of Yemeni elites who took whatever they could to save themselves.

The people who stayed—a lot of journalists, like Sami Ghaleb and my husband Basheer—they were an intellectual elite who really did believe in Yemen [and] couldn't imagine leaving it behind. Bushra al-Maqtari, you know, all these intellectuals. Who left? The corrupt elite who looked down

on everyone else.... And now you see how barbaric the Saudis are, how the Islahis are holed up in five-star hotels in Saudi Arabia, and [how] a tiny number of people are screwing over millions and millions of Yemenis.

I'm not going to be apologetic. I'm a humanitarian activist. I paid how much to attend Columbia University? I didn't do it to be politically correct but so that I can call out bullshit. I don't judge people by who they are: "Oh, you're Islahi, you're Houthi." If I see that you're doing good work, I don't have a problem. But if I see you spewing the same bullshit rhetoric, I will call you out. There's so much that the Houthis and Afash [Salih loyalists] are doing, we can't deny it.

**Is there any underlying issue that drives your activism, from supporting the revolution in Yemen in 2011 to working on the bodega strike this year?**

You cannot separate my involvement with politics in the Middle East from what is happening here. We are paying a price for our direct involvement in what's happening in Yemen, meaning we—you and me—as taxpayers, as US citizens. This goes back at least to the first drones, of course, but US involvement is much deeper now. So yes, of course it's connected. But also, as a woman, I grew up here thinking I was in a free society. And now? A misogynist is president? Not even a man in a remote village would brag about grabbing a woman by the pussy! You can't talk about misogyny and not talk about people being killed by Saudi airstrikes, or talk about women's rights and separate that from poverty and structural racism. It's all connected.

**Have you also found strategies or practices that carry across the two contexts, Yemen and the United States?**

The Yemeni American Coalition here in the US was established to support change in Yemen, so our movement was transnational from the beginning. But I learned a lot in terms of being really diplomatic with different groups, different agendas. At the end of the day, we had a common goal, and we do today—what's happening in the United States as a whole. We're all in this together, against this... corrupt establishment that makes the rules for themselves and their buddies.

The Muslim ban was serious for me. We kind of thought it was all rhetoric [during the presidential campaign], but then we read the leaked version. Even then, we thought the Department of Justice must be giving [President Trump] some advice, and that the ban couldn't end up like that. But he signed it, like that, at 5:37 on a Friday night. I have thousands of Yemeni bodega owners on my newsfeed, and usually they're up all night, constantly posting, and I can't keep up. But that night, there was this eerie silence. I was so shocked, and then saddened, and then defeated. This felt like post-9/11 2.0, like my community was going through PTSD. Not even one word.

I remember telling my husband, “Don’t worry, we’ll see.” And then I talked to my uncle, a refugee in Jordan with his two kids and he said, “Wait, this is the America that you keep telling me about?” I cried myself to sleep that night. Words can’t even explain it. I’m very optimistic and strong, but that night was one of the worst nights.

But then I woke up Saturday morning to a text from Murad Awawdeh, from the New York Immigration Coalition, and he said, “Rabyaah, where are you? [Come to] JFK [Airport], right now.” I said to Salma, my daughter—she’s always involved in my activism—“C’mon, can you write something for me?” And she wrote a simple sign that read, “Refugees Welcome #NoBanNoWall,” and I headed to JFK.

Hundreds of people were already there in the freezing cold. You know New Yorkers—no one wants to go to JFK if they can avoid it. They’d rather give you a kiss, say “bye” and put you in a taxi. But so many were there, and I thought, my community needed to see this, so I went on Facebook Live, said “C’mon out!” The same thing was happening all over the country. By noon, JFK was basically shut down, and the taxi drivers held their strike.... Those two weeks leading up to the Ninth Circuit decision [suspending the ban] were the most exhilarating. Like they said in that *New York Times* editorial, it was an “accidental awakening” of people who’d never been involved in politics before. Maybe it had to take hate in the ugliest form, at its most open and not even trying to hide, just, “This is who the fuck we are and this is our agenda.” [Trump] ran his campaign in such a disastrous way, and he started his presidency in the same way, and I kind of thank him for it. If people ask, “What do you have to say to Donald Trump?” I say, “Thank you, for inspiring people to wake up and refuse your agenda.” I’m not saying it’s all going to be easy or rosy. There are divisions, but there is also this momentum, and I hope it continues. I’m an optimist.

**With the Trump administration increasing direct US military engagement in Yemen, a lot of people will be writing about Yemen for American audiences who haven’t spent much time on this issue before. What do you want to say to “newcomers” to the war in Yemen?**

Think about your children and your family, when you think about Yemeni children and families. Before you write a word, make sure you know what you’re writing about because these are real lives that you’re dealing with. In March alone, we had more than 1,000 deaths in airstrikes by outside powers. Think about that, as if it were happening here in your towns and the bars where you drink with colleagues, as if your backyard burned and your children were running from the bombs. It’s no longer talk.... To policymakers, writers, please do your research, be objective and do what’s right in the name of your own humanity.

**What would you say to people who have been writing and thinking**

**about Yemen for a long time? What do we need to pay attention to that we are not noticing?**

You need to look at both sides. I know I have sometimes ignored certain aspects of Yemen, too, but you have to look at all sides. Yes, the Saudis are a poison in the region, as are the Iranians. But it’s not so black and white with regard to the politics on the ground. There is a long history in Yemen where the Hashemites [descendants of the Prophet Muhammad] ruled for 1,000 years—I remember my dad telling me that if a Hashemite was walking down the road, he would have to move over and make room for him so he could pass by. I remember my dad telling me that no one was allowed an education except the children of Hashemite families.

It’s in this context that the word “indigenous” is sometimes used in a political way. It means something different to those from the far north than it does when you’ve grown up in Ta’izz, and you’re educated, and you come from the regions where most of the resources exist, where people are darker, and you hear this racist rhetoric about Yemen’s “original inhabitants,” as if some Yemenis are more authentic than others.

You know Yemen’s political history in depth. But the policymakers in Washington don’t know anything about these long-standing dynamics, and still they make life-and-death decisions. I worry that when they hear the Houthis described as indigenous in the *New York Times*, or by an “expert” at an event, they wrongly think, “Oh, they must be the original inhabitants of Yemen.” They think of it like the Native Americans, as the people who were there first, but that’s not correct.

**But isn’t it possible that people use the term “indigenous” to mean “from Yemen,” as opposed to, say, from Iran? To emphasize that the conflict is domestic, and cannot be reduced to proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran?**

Perhaps, but instead of “indigenous” you could say, “These are Yemenis like any other Yemenis,” which is what you really mean. I expect from you, and people like you who write about Yemen and have an influence on what policymakers think, that you take the historical perspective and think carefully about how these words and concepts sound among Yemenis on the ground. Be cautious about what gets lost in translation, because there’s a lot of politics in words. ■

## Endnotes

1 In the context of Yemen, this reference is to a system of hereditary rule organized under a Zaydi Shi’i imam drawn from among the *sada* (sing. *sayyid*), or Hashemites, descendants of the family of the Prophet Muhammad. Zaydi Muslims are denominationally distinct from other Shi’i Muslims and are territorially concentrated in northern highlands of Yemen. The last of the Zaydi imams was overthrown in 1962, initiating a civil war that was eventually resolved through the consolidation of the Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen). Al-Thaibani was born in that country, which formally merged with the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen) to form a single state in 1990, after her family had relocated to the US.

2 Al-Thaibani is a plaintiff in the New York case against the second “Muslim ban” because it prevents her husband from joining her in the US. The global media and Amnesty International have covered the details.



# The Emergence of Alevi Televisual Activism From Secrecy to Visibility

Nazlı Özkan

*Back in the 1990s there was this columnist writing for the Hürriyet newspaper in Turkey, Hikmet Bil, who published reader letters in his column. He would sometimes receive questions like if an Alevi woman could marry a Sunni man. Not that we were particularly interested in the question itself, but we would archive that column for the mere reason that a newspaper had the word Alevism used in a sentence. . . . Now think about seeing Alevism on television today—it is that big of a difference for us.*

—Halit Büyükgöl, December 2015

Alevis are the second largest faith community in Turkey. As a religious collective incorporating aspects of Shi'i Islam into their teachings, Alevis have faced systematic state exclusion since the 1923 establishment of the Turkish nation-state, which privileges Sunni Islam despite its avowed secularism. Although the community constitutes 15–20 percent of Turkey's population, their places of worship, *ceमेvis*, have no legal status and do not enjoy the state economic support accorded to mosques. A glass ceiling blocks Alevis from obtaining high-ranking government jobs, and various other forms of daily discrimination push members of the community to hide their identity in public. In fact, secrecy (*sır*) is a practice so long adopted among Alevis that since the Ottoman era it has become a central element of the Alevi path/teachings (*yoll/öğreti*). In the last couple of decades, however, visibility has emerged as a new strategy for communal survival, particularly for Alevi activists such as Halit Büyükgöl, the Berlin-based television producer quoted above. For these activists, visibility was a necessity because secrecy was no longer the only viable means of keeping the community alive.

The urge to attain visibility had its roots partly in the global proliferation of mass media technologies, which enabled religious minorities across the world to publicize their diverging and previously suppressed devotional practices. But rapid migration to urban areas, and the transnational connections that followed, were additional factors that compelled Alevis in Turkey to strive for a more secure public footing. As they came into closer contact with the hegemonic Sunni Islam, enshrined in major institutions in Turkish cities, the community sought ways to combat prejudice and live more openly as Alevis.

Starting in the 1990s, Alevis living abroad worked to address the problem by creating television programming that targeted Alevi audiences.

Alcanlar TV, founded in Berlin in 1991, was one of the first of these efforts. Büyükgöl was lead director and producer of the channel, which aired on a locally accessible and publicly funded network named Open Channel Berlin. Open Channels was a broader initiative that emerged in Germany in the 1980s to

counter the increasing dominance of profit-oriented televisual production by providing room for underrepresented minorities who otherwise could not afford such a costly mode of communication. The users of these open networks were charged no fee and were offered training and technical assistance. Their programs' content was unrestricted. Büyükgöl, having arrived in Berlin as a teenager in the 1980s to live with his migrant worker family, became interested in the network in 1991 as a means of airing the video clips he recorded during summer visits to his village near the city of Muş in eastern Turkey. Open Channels eventually provided Büyükgöl and his peers with the opportunity to satisfy the yearning for visibility sooner than Alevis living in Turkey.

At first, the producers of Alcanlar TV had one mission—"having Alevism mentioned on German television." The channel collaborated closely with the Confederation of Alevi Communities in Europe, the umbrella group for all the communal associations on the continent. In its ten years on the air, Alcanlar featured a great variety of programs, ranging from religious ceremonies (*cem*) to live discussions of Alevi issues, such as the obligatory religion classes in Turkey that teach only Sunni Islam; from Alevi *deyiş* songs to commemorations of Karbala' (site of the martyrdom of Imam 'Ali's son Husayn and his family) and other massacres in Alevi history. The programming choices went well beyond the initial promise simply to mention the faith on television. In fact, the anthropologist Kira Kosnick, who conducted extensive research on Turkish migrants' broadcasting practices in Germany, underlines that a great portion of programs aired on Alcanlar TV also had the purpose of dispelling prejudices against Alevis common among Turkish migrants in Berlin.<sup>1</sup> Visibility was thus deployed in part to disprove the negative portrayals of Alevism among Sunni Muslims. As a very early example of Alevi television, Alcanlar inspired and sustained the hope that Alevis would have free-standing television networks of their own one day.

Beginning in 2004, that hope was realized when the Confederation of Alevi Communities in Europe collaborated with Alevi associations in Turkey to produce a series of programs titled "Muharrem Conversations." The programs appeared on Turkey's mainstream news channel, Kanaltürk, during the 12-day period

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of mourning that Alevis observe in the holy month of Muharrem for the victims of the Karbala' massacre. The series hosted several Alevi *dedes* (religious leaders), intellectuals, activists and *zakirs* (musicians) who discussed issues ranging from the basics of their faith to the prevailing prejudices against the community. In 2005, another major Alevi organization in Turkey, Cem Vakfi, founded Cem TV in Istanbul as the first Alevi television network based in the country. In 2006, the Confederation launched the satellite channel Yol TV in Cologne. Cem and Yol were the longest-lasting networks, but others, such as Su TV and Dem TV, were on the air for shorter periods. In 2010, TV 10 was founded in Istanbul as another network that looked like it would have staying power on the Alevi media scene. Many Alevis living in the mixed neighborhoods of Istanbul stressed the importance of the resulting visibility, for instance stating that the *cem* ceremonies broadcast on Alevi television networks are useful for countering falsehoods that circulate among non-Alevis, such as the canard that the community engages in incest during the rituals.

Alongside the Alevi-led media productions, the state also sought to mediate Alevis' visibility on television.<sup>2</sup> Beginning in 2007, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP, by its Turkish acronym) embarked on what it called the "Alevi initiatives" (*Alevi açılımı*), which included a series of meetings with Alevi activists with the promise of reforming the community's status. As part of this process, beginning in 2008 the AKP government broadcast its own short programs about Alevis on the state television network, TRT, during Muharrem.<sup>3</sup> But such official attempts to control representations of the Alevis were abandoned in favor of strict measures against the community with the declaration of emergency rule after the failed coup attempt of July 15, 2016. The AKP government cancelled the access of Yol TV and TV 10 to the national Türksat satellite. Today, Alevi televisual producers have to limit themselves to web-based distribution, which restricts their ability to represent themselves in public and deprives them of the capacity to counter derogatory depictions of their faith.

The generation of Alevis that grew up in Turkey in the 2000s—amid the presence of Alevi television networks and the abundance of mainstream media coverage of their faith—took for granted that Alevism would appear often on the small screen. Official discrimination against Alevis continued, but for older generations the breadth of the presence in the media marked a noteworthy shift, particularly since the original goal of the televisual activism was simply to make Alevism visible in mainstream media. From the 1990s until 2016, Alevi activists were able to use their media access not only to counter pejorative representations of Alevism, but also to provide Alevis with platforms to represent multiple versions of their faith where the official accounts had rendered them invisible. ■

## Endnotes

1 Kira Kosnick, *Migrant Media: Turkish Broadcasting and Multicultural Politics in Berlin* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).

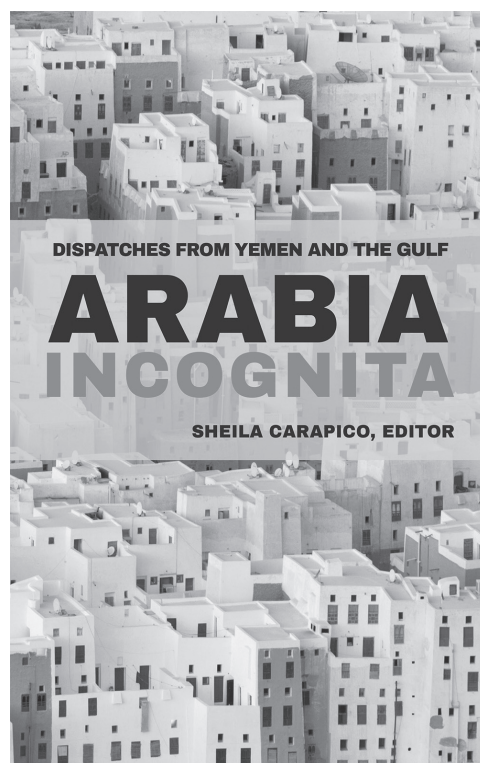
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Şırnak in southeastern Turkey, almost destroyed in renewed attacks by Turkish security forces, in March 2016.

MERT ÇAKIR/REDUX

## Imperiled Academics in Turkey

**D**ilsa Deniz, an anthropologist of the Alevi-Kurdish religion, was fired from her position as an assistant professor at Nişantaşı University in Istanbul after she signed the Academics for Peace petition issued in Turkey on January 10, 2016. More than 1,000 scholars signed the petition to protest the Turkish government's disengagement from the peace process with the Kurdish opposition and the killing of civilians in several Kurdish towns. Under the auspices of the Scholars at Risk network, Deniz left Turkey in August 2016 to take up a visiting lecturer position at the University of New Hampshire.

Deniz, along with five colleagues who also signed the petition, was fired without due process or right of appeal. The authorities detained several signatories as well. The dismissal of these and many other faculty was a harbinger of the much broader purges that President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan pursued after the failed military coup of July 15, 2016. As of the following April, as reported in the *New York Times* and elsewhere, an estimated 130,000 civil servants and military and university personnel had been discharged from their positions. Using the coup as a pretext, the government has targeted legitimate Kurdish institutions and representatives. The government has sacked approximately 12,000 Kurdish teachers as well as 24 elected mayors, closing Kurdish-language media outlets only recently legalized and generally creating a climate of intimidation and repression. The government's return to casting all Kurdish

opposition as terrorists associated with the Kurdistan Workers' Party has taken the country back into open conflict. Clearly rattled by the military success and de facto territorial control achieved by Kurdish fighters in northern Syria, the government has opted to intensify military operations in the Kurdish regions of Turkey.

Jeannie Sowers, a political science professor at New Hampshire, spoke with Deniz in December 2016 about her activism, the situation of scholars in Turkey and the Turkish state's renewed attacks on Kurdish culture, language and political participation.

**What prompted you to sign the Academics for Peace petition that would cost you your university position?**

From 2012 to 2014 the Turkish government and the Kurdish movement were engaged in a peace process that was progressing quite well. But after the June 2015 parliamentary elections, the government disengaged from dialogue and turned back to repressing the Kurdish movement. Erdoğan likely did this because in the 2015 elections, the HDP [People's Democratic Party], a party with large Kurdish support, showed that it could win votes across communal lines and become a strong democratic force against his authoritarian tendencies.

Erdoğan took revenge against the HDP and the Kurdish people by attacking the Kurdish towns of Şırnak, Cizre, Lice, Silopi, Nusaybin, Sur, Yüksekova and others. There were killings of civilians—some people were trapped in basements where they had sought refuge. Instead of getting them out, forces affiliated with the state killed them. The residents were so desperate and terrified. They had to watch their family members set on fire and see snipers shooting civilians.

The regular media stuck to the old script—that these were bad people being hunted down by the state. There was no outcry from Turkey or from abroad. We watched all these terrible things happen only through coverage from independent and social media.

We signed the peace petition because we could not fathom that these things were happening again, even after the peace process. The petition was a demand for peace and for respect of basic rights. And it was a refusal to be silent—if we had been silent, we would have been cooperating with what was taking place.

On January 11, the day after the petition appeared, President Erdoğan threatened the signatories by calling us colonialists and traitors. This kind of talk emboldened some of Erdoğan's supporters, who threatened us, saying such things as, "We are going to bathe in your blood." Some of the newspapers put our names and pictures online. The message was, "We have you—we have your pictures and your addresses, and you are going to get what you deserve." When our lawyers filed a petition for these web pages to be removed, the court decided that it was freedom of expression.

Honestly, none of us expected such a strong reaction from the government, because ours was just a normal petition addressed to the state. Many of us had signed a previous petition in 2013, in which we urged both of the parties, the

government and the Kurdish movement, to continue the peace process. We didn't have any problems then, because the government was part of the process.

Liberal Turkish intellectuals have also been targeted by the state. It's a symbolic thing for the Turkish authorities. They don't want cooperation between Turks and Kurds, because that undermines their case for an exclusionary Turkish nationalism that marginalizes the Kurds. There are notable cases of Turks who have a connection with the Kurds and therefore have been dealt with harshly, such as the famous writer Aslı Erdoğan, and the linguist and translator Necmiye Alpay.

The government's reaction to us prompted another thousand scholars to sign the petition, as well as international scholars to join us. But the universities, particularly the private ones, are insecure and have few defenses against political pressure. So they dismissed us. More than 30 faculty from the original Academics for Peace group have taken refuge abroad, mostly in Europe. Germany has been particularly welcoming. Many of us have found positions overseas through the Scholars at Risk network and the Scholar Rescue Fund.

**How did you become a feminist and an activist? What is your personal background?**

I am Kurdish, an Alevi and a feminist—all positions that are not welcomed by the nationalist, racist, chauvinist and militarist ideologies prevalent in Turkey now. I was born in the village of Kupik in the Dersim region in 1964, and lived there until the age of eight, when my father moved us to a small town for his work. We started our primary education in that small town.

My eldest brother, who died in 1978 at the age of 28, helped all the girls in our family get a secondary education as well. My father wanted at least one of his three daughters to stay home after finishing primary school, in order to help out my mother. But my brother was determined to take his sisters to secondary school in Ankara. My brother was involved with the socialist movement, and he really believed in gender equality.

So I moved to Ankara for high school. When my brother was exiled to another city for his political activities, I had to move with him. I came back to Ankara in 1980, but then there was a military coup. We had to get rid of all of my brother's books—thousands of socialist, political and scientific volumes. We were so scared. My sister was taken to prison and tortured.

She was dismissed from her job. It was a very hard time, with thousands of people—mainly young leftists and trade unionists—fired from their jobs, tortured and even killed.

**So your family has long been involved in politics.**

Yes, but because the state makes everything political. Even using the words “Kurd” or “Alevi” is so political in Turkey. I am part of these communities. So whenever you do anything related to these communities—asking for equal rights and fighting against racism, discrimination and male chauvinism—it is political.

For example, the Gezi protests in 2013 started with an effort to save some trees and green space in Istanbul. There are hardly any parks left in the city where people can enjoy themselves and let their children play. People wanted to prevent the Gezi park from becoming a mall. But because the profits from real estate development accrue to powerful companies backed by politicians, protesting this mall became political. Therefore, if you are a person involved in environmental issues, if you are Kurdish, Alevi, a woman, feminist, socialist, gay or a green activist, that means you are already involved in politics.

Scholarly work on the Alevi and Dersim Kurdish communities is also seen as a political act—one that can doom your academic career. For instance, studies of the etymology of the dialect used in Dersim draw mainly on the Persian, Armenian and Turkish languages, but not on Kurdish, the dominant language in that area. You almost never see the two local dialects of Kurdish, Kurmanci and Kurmancki, used for studies in etymology.

One can say the same about the study of indigenous Alevi religious traditions, many of which predate Islam. For my dissertation, I chose to focus on the religious traditions of Dersim and surrounding areas because I thought it wouldn't

be considered political. I didn't know that the Alevi religion was considered so political by the state—how ironic! Your communal background, your subject of study, your approach and findings—all of these are seen to have political ramifications. So there is deep structural discrimination that threatens you in many ways.

**How has your family been affected by recent events? Are they still in Turkey?**

Part of my family is there. My brother is a journalist, and he worked at a TV station with many Kurdish viewers. The channel was shut down this past fall, however, as part of the Turkish state's broader crackdown on the media. He lost his job, his press card was cancelled unlawfully and he is not allowed to travel outside the country.

**How do you engage in activism now that you are outside of Turkey?**

Recently, I have been active on social media, mostly Twitter and Facebook, because people in Turkey are so depressed and so scared, which I really understand, truly. So I am trying to make people around the world aware of what is happening in Turkey. Our group Academics for Peace is also active online.

**What has it been like teaching in the United States? How does it compare to academic life in Turkey?**

The system is so different—the university culture is so strong here. I really like the attitude toward people of diverse backgrounds that I've found at the University of New Hampshire. When people here meet me, and learn that I am from Turkey and of Kurdish background, their first reaction is, “How good—students can learn from you.” I was shocked, as this is so unlike reactions in Turkey! People here are aware of the importance of diversity among the academic community and how much it helps students. That has been very refreshing. ■

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*Continued from page 32.*

delegation that had been dispatched there because they knew that the delegation was there to do some anger management and nothing more. The same thing happened in Meknassi.

To my mind, the term we should use today is “straightening the trajectory” (*tashih al-masar*). We need to pull the rug out from under the feet of the lobbies that are stripping away our resources. We should seriously discuss Tunisia's future and unite around a national project with clearly articulated prerogatives, deliverables and deadlines.

I want to insist on one final point: That powers that be don't have the slightest interest in pushing this country forward, and, believe me, the topics that are debated at that level have nothing to do with the reality people are living. All you hear is, “The son of the president did this, his sister did that, this businessman did this and that.” I mean, the people governing are subject to investigation for

money laundering! The article in Inkyfada [a progressive investigative journalist collective in Tunisia] on the Panama Papers shows what our political landscape is made of. So the problem is not with particular persons; it is with the system. The current conflict, at that level, is fake (*ghalit*). The parties trading accusations, the schisms within parties because so-and-so did not get the ministry he wanted, who should participate in the Pact of Carthage and what they would get in return...this is a fake conflict. It is no longer about splitting up the cake. It has become a filthy game... and that is why we are mobilizing today. ■

CORRECTION: A technical glitch resulted in the omission of three footnotes from Zachary Cuyler's article on electricity in the Arab world in the last issue (MER 280). A corrected version is available at our website. We regret the error.



# Oman's Consultative Council Elections

## Shaking Up Tribal Hierarchies in Dhufar

Alice R. Wilson

In October 2015, the Sultanate of Oman held elections for its Consultative Council. There was widespread coverage in the international media of elections convened during the same period in Argentina, Guatemala, Poland and several other countries, but the contests in Oman received little attention.

Yet, in Oman itself, an electoral alliance sent shock waves through Salala, capital of the country's southern governorate of Dhufar. Previously, this alliance had proven so disruptive of the political landscape that some of the locals dubbed it "al-Gono," after Cyclone Gonu, which devastated the Omani agricultural sector in 2007. In the ordinarily calm coconut groves of tropical Salala, Dhufar's own "Gono" now struck again, shaking up both tribal hierarchies and notions of legitimacy.

### In and Out of the News

The scant international coverage of Oman's 2015 Consultative Council elections is not surprising. An absolute monarchy widely perceived as a bastion of political stability, Oman rarely features in world news. The sultanate's strong ties with both Iran and the Arab Gulf monarchies allow it to play an important role in regional diplomacy, but the representatives of Sultan Qaboos bin Sa'id al-Sa'id fulfill this role discreetly. When the wave of Arab uprisings in 2011 reached the sultanate's shores, Omanis were as surprised as the international community. Protests in the cities of Muscat, Salala and Suhar lasted from January 17 to May 14 of that year, with demonstrators voicing demands for political, economic and social reform.

The last demonstrations to be shut down, on May 14, took place in front of the office of Dhufar's governor in Salala. The sight of protesters in Salala was particularly uncomfortable for the regional and national authorities, because 40 years earlier Dhufar had witnessed an insurrection against first Sultan Sa'id bin Taymour and then his son Sultan Qaboos. Beginning under the name the Dhufar Liberation Front, and later taking on a communist leadership, this rebel movement controlled varying amounts of Dhufar's territory between 1965 and 1975. The state and its allies waged a long war to achieve dominion over the entirety of Dhufar. Although during the war Salala remained under the sultan's control, the city's current population includes many families hailing from the mountain hinterland, where support for the former liberation movement once ran high. After the 2011 protests in Salala, a large police station

was built on the site where the demonstrators had gathered.

In the wake of the 2011 demonstrations, the government introduced reforms, including measures to expand the functions of the Consultative Council to include the amendment and approval of draft laws.<sup>1</sup> These reforms continued a history of changes in the Council's form and function since it was created in 1991. Suffrage was gradually extended from (male) elites until becoming universal in 2003. Women have been able to contest seats nationwide since 1994. Currently, one of the 85 council members is a woman. Several leaders of the 2011 protests were elected to the Council that year, including one member from Dhufar, Salim al-Mashani. He represented the constituency of Taqa, a town lying east of Salala along the coast and well known as the home of Sultan Qaboos' maternal relatives. But the inclusion of these government critics in the assembly proved to have limited impact in advancing the demands made during the protests. Although the government introduced financial support for job seekers, it later cut these benefits. The government went on to pass legislation facilitating the arrest of dissenters, criminalized the kind of protest that had erupted in 2011, and arrested more than 40 of its critics over the summer of 2012.<sup>2</sup> Power remained concentrated in the hands of the sultan. Many of the hopes ushered in by the 2011 protests were replaced by disappointment. In the runup to the 2015 elections, the authorities deemed three members of the Council—including Dhufar's al-Mashani—suddenly ineligible to stand for reelection.

The sultanate's unswerving priorities of regime survival and political stability go hand in hand with an official narrative of success in fostering social and economic change. Like other Gulf monarchies, Oman has experienced enormous economic, demographic and social transformations since the 1960s. According to the hegemonic official narrative, state-endorsed modernizing progress dates back to 1970, the year of Sultan Qaboos' accession and the inauguration of his leadership of Oman's renaissance (*nahda*). This story celebrates perceived great achievements of the era such as investments in infrastructure and public services, the gradual expansion of suffrage to all adults and the creation of opportunities for women to participate in public life in roles ranging from Consultative Council membership to work in the private and public sectors. Yet the place of Dhufar in Oman's official narrative of post-1970 progress is ambiguous. On the one hand, since the accession of Sultan Qaboos and the subsequent formal defeat of the liberation movement in 1975, the state has invested heavily in

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Boys stand in front of graffiti—"The blood of martyrs will not be sacrificed"—during Friday prayers in honor of Omanis who lost their lives during the 2011 protests. Suhar, March 4, 2011.

Dhufar. The village-like Salala of 1970 has been transformed into a city, boasting some 172,000 residents in 2010. A large container port at nearby Raysut has encouraged economic development in the region, as has the new airport terminal in Salala opened in 2015. Keen to broaden Dhufar's appeal to the Gulf visitors who flock there during the cool monsoon weather from June to September, the government has relocated the mostly black residents of Salala's beachfront neighborhood of Hafa in order to develop the area as a high-end tourist resort. On the other hand, Dhufar's reputation for strong tribal loyalties, the increase since the 1970s in the number of women who veil their faces in public, and local ambivalence on questions such as whether it is acceptable for women to drive make Dhufar an awkward fit for official narratives of Oman's ongoing modernization.

## New Voices in Dhufar's Elections

Despite the saturation of the national domain with official narratives of progress, and despite the state's tight monitoring of political life, not all forms of change in Oman

are state-endorsed. The electoral league that some nicknamed "al-Gono" shows how Dhufaris find ways to challenge predominant power relations and state patronage by drawing on networks outside the state's control. In the early 2000s, Dhufaris hailing from non-elite tribal backgrounds mobilized around rejection of the long-standing pattern of representation on the Consultative Council. The two members from Salala habitually hailed from two powerful Dhufari tribal elites: the *hakli* (non-Arabic-speaking elite mountain tribes) and the *kathiri* (town elites, also related to mountain and desert tribes). The two Consultative Council seats for Salala rotated from tribe to tribe within the *hakli* and *kathiri* alliances, respectively. The number of voters whom the *hakli* and *kathiri* alliances could command left no opportunity for members of tribes and social groups that traditionally ranked lowest in Dhufar's hierarchies to be elected.

These less powerful groups include non-elite town tribes, non-elite mountain tribes (the *shahra*), blacks whose historical status would have been that of slaves (whether owned by the sultan or by other families) and town families whose traditional livelihoods had focused on fishing (the *bahara*). Members of these groups could achieve public prominence in other ways. For instance, one family from a traditionally

non-elite town tribe from Salala enjoys national prestige in the banking sector. But the *hakli* and *kathiri* alliances monopolized Dhufar's representation in the Consultative Council, even though some Dhufaris (including members of these alliances) at times judged the selected candidates to be poorly qualified.

To contest the elites' domination of Salala's Consultative Council representation, men from various, predominantly non-elite backgrounds in Salala and the nearby mountains formed alternative electoral alliances—and eventually alliances across those alliances. Given Oman's prohibition on independent political parties, electoral alliances usually lack official names. Dhufaris generally refer to electoral alliances—whether of the *hakli*, the *kathiri* or their eventual opponents—through informal names such as "the gathering" (*tajammu*). In the 2003 and 2007 elections, the various alternative, predominantly non-elite alliances formed a nameless league and succeeded in electing their own candidate, who joined a *hakli* member to represent Salala on the Consultative Council. On each occasion, the league organized an internal vetting process to ensure that a competent and qualified candidate prevailed. In 2003, lawyer Sa'id Shahri won a seat. By his own reckoning, he

was the first person from a non-elite mountain tribe to hold a high-ranking position in the Omani government. In 2007, the league earned its nickname drawn from the destructive cyclone when members elected Rashid al-Safi, whom they believed to be the first black Omani to be popularly elected to the Consultative Council. Al-Safi hailed not from the former slave families once owned by and often still close to the sultan's family, but from a family with no royal connections. When al-Safi was given a ministerial portfolio in 2011, members of "al-Gono" interpreted his appointment as confirmation of the high quality of their selected candidates.

In 2011 fissures appeared within Salala's experimental league, and members failed to reelect the lawyer Shahri. In 2015, however, the league reasserted its winning ways of 2003 and 2007 and extended its alliances to two further groups of town elites—a collection of elite town tribes, including the al-Ghassani tribe, and some of the tribes claiming descent from the Prophet Muhammad (*sada*). The expanded league also took on a new public presence, including a formal name—the Electoral League of the District of Salala—a Facebook page, an Instagram account and sponsorship of highly publicized public meetings for each of its targeted constituencies. Muhammad al-Ghassani, the winning candidate of the internal selection process and later the election, hailed from one of the newly joining town elites. The other Consultative Council members later chose him as one of the two deputy speakers. Increasingly professionalized and continuing to gain national prominence for its candidate, the Salala League had nevertheless broken with the previous pattern of the election with an outsider candidate who lacked the advantage of hailing from a prestigious tribe.

## Women Candidates in Salala

The Salala League and its predecessors are not alone in taking up elections as a means of changing social attitudes and power relations in Dhufar and in Oman more broadly. Although none of the women elected to the Consultative Council have hailed from Dhufar, women from Salala do stand for election. The dynamics of tribal loyalties and hierarchies have nevertheless helped to determine which women stand for elections, and the ways in which women vote.

In many places across the world, socially and economically privileged women have benefited most from the increase in opportunities for women to participate in national (and international) political life. In Dhufar, however, members of elite tribes—many of them men but some women as well—tend to hold conservative views about the appropriateness of a woman from such a background circulating in public, and thus being known, seen and talked about beyond her immediate circle. As a result, the majority of the handful of women from Salala who have stood for election to the Consultative Council (as yet unsuccessfully) hail from the black community. Dhufaris' explanations for this phenomenon focus on the fact that

because black women do not hail from elite tribes, these women are not under pressure to uphold a tribe's reputation by refraining from circulating their names, faces and reputations in public. Indeed, black women in Salala and other towns in Dhufar have been pioneers in other forms of circulation in public, such as driving and working in certain commercial sectors.

When women candidates have stood for election in Salala, some have approached the regional branch of Oman's national Women's Association seeking support. Some of these candidates nevertheless recount being told by Women's Association representatives that women vote according to tribal affiliation. The possibilities of using tribal networks to buck dominant trends have favored the electoral success of the Salala League and its predecessors. But that very success is contingent upon preventing the formation of other electoral alliances, such as those that might favor a cross-tribal and cross-status mobilization of women. The Salala League sought to field a woman candidate in its own internal selection process in 2015. But as the internal selection approached, the woman who had expressed interest in standing withdrew, apparently stating to the organizers that she did not wish to jeopardize the League's ultimate chance of success.

## Changing Elections, Changing Oman

Members of what eventually became the Salala League disrupted power relations at the local and national level. The league forged alliances between unrelated town and mountain tribes, between non-elites and elites, and across racial lines. These alliances disturbed Salala's long-standing social and political landscape. By advocating that candidates should be elected on the grounds of qualifications for the post, and without regard to social background, members of the League used the very tribal networks that clash with dominant depictions of "progress" in order to achieve non-traditional results that at least in some respects were socially progressive. By mobilizing socially marginalized groups, the League challenged the hegemonic national networks of patronage from which marginalized groups had been excluded.

Many members of what became the Salala League, and perhaps some of the pioneering women who have stood for election, might not be comfortable with using the term "activist" to describe themselves. Although the possibilities for voting for change within current political structures in Oman have not yet captured the attention of international audiences, recent electoral cycles in Dhufar nevertheless demonstrate how Omanis can and do vote to signal appetites for change—and in some cases go on to achieve it. ■

### Endnotes

1 *Gulf News*, October 21, 2011.

2 Marc Valéri, "The Suhar Paradox: Social and Political Mobilisations in the Sultanate of Oman since 2011," *Arabian Humanities* 4 (2015).



# BDS in a Time of Precarity

## Graduate Students, Untenured Faculty and Solidarity with Palestine

Omar Sirri

**T**he University of Toronto is not known as a particularly progressive institution. Like many universities, it has adopted neoliberal thinking and practice, becoming part of Academia, Inc. But two seemingly unrelated events during the 2014–2015 academic year showcased the increasing political activity of the school's graduate student body.

In October 2014, Toronto graduate students launched a campaign in support of the global boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement, calling on the school to divest from companies that facilitate and profit from Israel's violations of international law, including war crimes, in its treatment of Palestinians under occupation. Then, the following March, graduate student workers in the Canadian Union of Public Employees' Local 3902 mounted a near four-week strike to demand that university funding packages no longer leave them below the city's poverty line. These events point to trends—the increasing reliance of universities on graduate students, adjuncts and untenured faculty to teach classes and the growing embrace of BDS by those same precarious academic workers—that make up a common political-economic reality, one that takes seriously the polemic that universities today are no more than hedge funds that grant degrees.

More and more, precarious academic laborers are drawing connections between the local and the global: their own economic plight and how their universities are implicated in—and financially benefiting from—the ongoing oppression of the Palestinians. These insights are not surprising to students of political economy or those well versed in the workings of university endowment funds. But less obvious is how precarity and political economy analysis often fuse with race and racialized struggles at the university. This fusion suggests that university actors concerned with different social justice initiatives are finding common cause. Cross-cutting solidarities offer a critical way forward for those seeking to advance the BDS movement while also combating economic violence and structural racism.

### Linking Precarity and BDS

A range of interrelated criticisms has been directed at university economic policies and practices. Some critics point to large annual increases in administrators' salaries and the propensity to hire more full-time managers than full-time educators.

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(One of the more innovative chants by striking graduate student workers at Toronto referred to the powder-blue color of a university vice president's Jaguar.) Others take aim at the university's vast real estate holdings and concomitant debt obligations, inspiring faculty to research complicated land and development deals that cost tens of millions of dollars and are paid for by students through tuition hikes.<sup>1</sup>

Reliance on precarious academic labor means lower teaching costs for universities. The use of adjuncts has risen steadily across the United States, and "zero-hour contracts" have become the norm at British universities. The American Association of University Professors states that more than half of faculty appointments are now part-time, and more than 70 percent of instructional staff appointments are non-tenure-track. A recent investigation by the *Guardian* suggests that among junior academics working at top British universities, 75 percent are on temporary contracts.

These dynamics help to explain the uptick in political interventions by graduate students and their unions. In March 2015, graduate students at neighboring York University joined their Toronto colleagues and went on strike to protest their own economic precarity. The same month New York University narrowly avoided a strike after relenting to graduate student demands for better pay and benefits. It was one of a string of wins by graduate students at private US universities. In August 2016, Columbia graduate students won an historic victory at the National Labor Relations Board granting them the right to unionize and bargain collectively.

Many graduate student unions have been involved simultaneously in efforts to advance BDS. Days after the strike at the University of Toronto ended with an agreement to enter into binding arbitration with the university, the union voted at its annual general meeting to back BDS. CUPE 3902 endorsed the divestment campaign that had been launched by many of its members and institutionalized its own BDS political action committee.

At the end of 2014, United Auto Workers Local 2865, representing more than 12,000 student workers across the nine University of California campuses, became the first major labor union in the US to endorse BDS by member vote. In May 2016, the oldest graduate student labor union in the US—the Teaching Assistants Association at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (AFT 3220), which represents 9,000 members—likewise voted



Launch of the McGill University BDS campaign in Montreal, February 2016.

SONIA IONESCU (LICENSED UNDER CC BY 2.0)

to support BDS. These votes came at times of funding cuts and economic crisis at both institutions, as well as attacks on long-held tenure norms and graduate student worker compensation and insurance. When NYU's graduate student union passed its BDS resolution in April 2016, one graduate student professed a view that her colleagues in these other unions perhaps share: "In addition to bringing material gains for their members, NYU graduate students are reclaiming the union as a political platform for social justice causes."<sup>2</sup>

## Race, Precarity and Social Justice

Identifying links between academic precarity and other social injustices requires querying the logic that governs university practices and uncovering a critical intervening factor—race. According to Nick Mitchell, the roots of precarity for academic workers lie in experiments by administrators in the late 1960s and early 1970s. With more minority youth attending college, there was mounting pressure on administrators to expand the "epistemological foundations of the university. Or the contents of what was considered valid knowledge." With rising demand for black studies, women's studies and ethnic studies, administrators aimed to offer such courses without having to pay for them, "by instituting experimental colleges in which students taught their own classes."<sup>3</sup> This history of precarity and racial marginalization illustrates that these intertwined grievances never have been the university's priority. The neglect is ironic given that undergraduates, the original actors pushing for the new courses, are also ostensibly central to the university's teaching mission (and institutional funding).

In many respects, undergraduates are still key to the links between race, precarity and social justice struggles. The rise

\$1 million—a financial threat that exposed the university's political-economic sensibility and vulnerability.

Similarly, the growth in support for BDS aligns with the nearly biannual Israeli assaults on Gaza—in 2006, 2008–2009, 2012 and 2014—since the campaign was launched. In the intervening periods, Palestinians continued to suffer lethal everyday occupation and settler colonialism. Undergraduates have been usually been the ones on the front lines of campus activism condemning Israeli violations of international law. The first Israeli Apartheid Week was debuted by undergraduates in Toronto in 2005; today, observance of the event has spread to more than 200 cities worldwide. The backlash these students endure—which is also racialized—highlights their own precarity as young, un/underemployed, debt-ridden persons.

Canary Mission, for instance, is a website dedicated to maligning BDS supporters in order to jeopardize their professional prospects. While the website is a fascinating exposé of the flaccid arguments made against the BDS movement, the targeting of young undergraduates is a blatant attempt at exploiting precarity. The majority of the targets are Arabs who play leading roles in chapters of Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) and anti-Zionist Jews involved in groups such as Jewish Voice for Peace. Yet the website's grouping of these diverse students in common cause counterintuitively breaks down stale identity stereotypes associated with the Arab-Israeli conflict.

## Students and Faculty, and Forms of Solidarity

As one student explained to me, such sinister attacks on vulnerable undergraduates are of deep concern. But the student emphasized that in spite of the threats—or perhaps because of them—more tenured faculty were backing the

of the Black Lives Matter movement demonstrates these connections. After a year of high-profile police killings of black youth across the US, in 2015 black undergraduates at the University of Missouri protested incidents of racism on campus and demanded the resignation of the university president, Tim Wolfe. Members of the school's football team joined the protests at a critical moment, threatening to boycott the team's activities until Wolfe quit. Had he not done so, the team would have forfeited its next game at a cost to the school of more than

campus campaign. “We have faculty supporters from gender, Africana, Jewish studies [and even some] from political science.”<sup>4</sup> The student quoted one faculty member who was “tired of being cajoled into complacency.” The student noted that professors have a unique ability to influence other students. “Students will listen to professors. They have power, yes. But they also know a lot! So it’s good to have them at events.” Over 1,000 faculty have denounced Canary Mission’s efforts at blacklisting students and other BDS supporters.

Such outside targeting of undergraduates who support BDS goes hand in hand with the efforts of university administrators and academic staff who oppose the movement. Fordham University, for example, recently banned its campus SJP chapter. Faculty, too, have been pressured. One tenured professor at a midwestern university relayed that an associate dean cautioned against hosting educational events on campus or sharing information on social media that indicated sympathy for the Palestinian cause. The faculty member was boldly (and falsely) told: “You don’t have academic freedom as representatives of this university.”<sup>5</sup> That statement exemplifies what has been called “the Palestine exception” to free speech and academic freedom.

For the more precarious academic workers, this environment has created a phenomenon of self-censorship, which is most common among young scholars, as Lara Deeb and Jessica Winegar document in their 2015 book on anthropologists of the Middle East.<sup>6</sup> One contract faculty member from a west coast university spoke to me about this phenomenon: Being on temporary contract has meant limiting BDS work to behind-the-scenes organizing of educational events with invited speakers and participating in closed research workshops on Palestine.<sup>7</sup> Tenured faculty took the public lead, what this person called “being the shield” and being “prepared to take the heat” to protect the precarious. In other words, faculty who have greater job security work to create space for more precarious BDS supporters on campus.

These efforts have forced a renewed reckoning with the social complexity of precarity, particularly how it is often racialized. The racialization stems in part from the underrepresentation of minorities at universities in cities with large populations of color. As the aforementioned undergraduate noted, minority black students “have historical and material reasons not to feel safe” on campus. Put differently, precarity is etched into their mere spatial presence. Yet when students of color express grievances about racial exclusion, the student noted, their concerns are seen as exceptional instances, not as indicators of the overall campus climate.

One tenured faculty member interviewed for this article came from a university whose student population is less than 10 percent black, but whose surrounding urban population is approximately 50 percent black. As much as precarity is embedded in a minority’s campus presence, structural racism is a critical cause. As one faculty member emphasized, the roots of systemic underrepresentation need to be tackled head on, in part by “blending research and activism to speak

to marginalized communities.”<sup>8</sup> One tactic was to launch a lecture series that included black and indigenous activists as keynote speakers. The deep links among race, precarity and activism highlights an intricate matrix of political and social injustices that feed off one another.

## Racialized Precarity, Activism and the Academy

A few years ago, a junior academic of Arab background who works on the Middle East was on the job market. Having received several accolades, the scholar applied for a position at one of the most prestigious universities in the world. The search committee was near unanimous that this person was perfect for the job. But an administrator who objected to the candidate’s politics on Palestine vetoed the committee’s recommendation. In a discussion of the incident, the candidate was keen to clarify two points.<sup>9</sup>

First, though it stung to suffer economic violence for political views, the candidate did obtain another tenure-track position. “I know lots of people who have played key roles in BDS and don’t have much visibility...and have gotten prestigious [academic] jobs. It’s normal.” Despite a more public record on BDS, this candidate ultimately received multiple job offers that came with glowing assessments of academic contributions, with no comment on political allegiances. The scholar added that the occasionally hysterical concern that BDS activism will limit professional advancement is unhelpful. “Why the fuck are you freaking out? Half the time if you don’t have an Arab name they don’t check.... [If you do], they think they should check to see if you’re ‘radicalized.’”

Second, the distinctly racial component to anti-BDS backlash stands on the shoulders of stereotypes of good and bad Arabs and Muslims in Western societies. Steven Salaita, a scholar of Palestinian origin who has produced critiques of these racist discourses, was attacked for his blistering tweets about Israeli apartheid. More than merely condemning the purportedly “uncivil” tweets, Salaita’s detractors sought to delegitimize his scholarly interventions exposing racism and settler colonialism. Anti-Zionist Jews who criticize Israel in their academic work and/or back BDS—in the process overturning received wisdom about “Arab” and “Jewish” positions on the conflict—have also been attacked individually.<sup>10</sup>

Race complicates precarity by highlighting how labor policies, while the driving force behind certain economic realities, are complemented by other forms of political attack. In other words, agents working on behalf of political-economic dominance and maintaining the status quo deploy multiple means of fending off threats. One white graduate student, concurring that high-profile Arab scholars who make their politics known are often targeted, suggested that race is a critical reason why white academics who engage in campus activism are more tolerated.<sup>11</sup> “They can do this work within the white savior complex.... If you make it into academia, chances are you’ll be white. [BDS activism] is not upsetting



to colleagues because they like the idea of white people saving minorities and reproducing that complex.” This student recognized the connections between precarity, labor, race and Palestine, citing the importance of campaigns like Block the Boat. In that effort, activists and dock workers prevented the largest Israeli shipping company, Zim—which is deeply involved in the Israeli military-industrial complex—from docking and unloading cargo in Oakland.

## Whose Racialized Precarity?

While race, precarity and activism together highlight different forms of social injustice, their intersections also offer potential for forging new and renewed solidarities, including support for BDS and its organizers. But not all movements that challenge precarity are inclusive. At times, as one graduate student said, the rhetoric that spotlights precarious academic labor

separates out privileged, educated, white people as this point of crisis in labor in the university today. As opposed to building connections between what is happening with adjunct labor and the service workers on campus today...who are precarious workers but are not called precarious workers.<sup>12</sup>

The word “academic,” this graduate student noted, is used in a “coded way to separate out those who do the intellectual work on campuses and those who do other work on campus.”

The observation suggests a missed opportunity to take up the causes of food service workers and cleaning staff, those who make the university function and are demanding living wages and equitable working conditions. Some exceptions to the missed opportunity include the food service workers’ strike at Harvard University in late 2016 and the ongoing battle by cleaners at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London to end the outsourcing of their work to a private company. In both instances, the service workers garnered considerable support, notably from undergraduate students, that contributed to their gains in political power.

Zach Schwartz-Weinstein situates service work at universities within a long labor history. He highlights the same dynamics that exist in the academy, namely, the enmeshment of political economy and race. The 2016 case of the Yale service worker Corey Menafee, rightly apoplectic about persistent imagery on campus glorifying slavery (and the university’s historical association with and benefits from it), is an important example of how racism’s logics are not exclusive to the community of scholars.<sup>13</sup>

Those individuals most vulnerable to precarity will likely again be driving efforts to fill gaping holes in social justice solidarity. Graduate students will increasingly grapple with their student-worker identity and its associated political responsibilities. An embrace of student-as-laborer comes with a need to blunt academia’s elitist vortex-like forces that seek to twist its matter

into class formation, in the process bucking the university’s racialized hierarchy of labor, now a component of its lifeblood. Students need not accept the illusion of a faultlessly progressive labor movement; Big Labor’s flawed politics are well known, such as UAW, as the parent union, working to nullify BDS resolutions passed by its graduate student locals. Big Labor’s own shortcomings contribute to growing evidence of a reverse political flow, that is, the strength of social justice movements like BDS educating Big Labor and unions in an effort to inform and ultimately shift their sometimes parochial progressiveness.

For instance, another graduate student actively involved in a union suggested that promoting the BDS movement works on behalf of organized labor. The pro-BDS position of this student’s union resulted in a significant uptick in membership and “helped our union become stronger.”<sup>14</sup> BDS, in that sense, was “influential.” That a transnational solidarity movement concerned with the human rights of Palestinian Arabs is a litmus test of a labor union’s progressive politics is, for one thing, an endorsement of grassroots social movement building and education across other spaces—including black and indigenous struggles, for example. Such solidarity also helps to explain why academics who lay claim to progressive politics and build careers off marginalized and oppressed communities like the Palestinians are recognizing that their political inaction amounts to tacit acceptance of a morbid and untenable status quo.

## Resolution Politics as Way Station

Academics are responding in part through their representative associations. A number of academic bodies have succeeded in passing BDS resolutions; others have failed (but are persisting) and still others are proceeding cautiously. Part of the challenge in these efforts concerns how BDS resolutions expressing institutional solidarity are crafted. Juliana Hu Pegues has considered the language of the BDS resolutions passed by the American Studies Association, the Association for Asian American Studies (AAAS) and the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association. All three decry the reinforcing structures of imperialism, racial oppression and settler colonialism, but Hu Pegues notes that the language of each resolution could go further in addressing how these intersections create “capacious” understandings of solidarity and resistance.<sup>15</sup> She notes, for example, that the AAAS missed an opportunity to highlight how Asian migrant labor was used to facilitate native land dispossession while building hegemonic liberal histories of American citizenship.

In March 2016, the National Conference of Black Political Scientists passed a remarkably powerful resolution boycotting Israeli academic institutions. The “whereas” clauses include explicit reference to the “negatively impacted working conditions of Palestinian scholars,” due to the occupation, as well as US “funding of Israeli militarism” that is “robbing Black communities of desperately needed reparations” and has

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“hamstrung the Palestinian economy causing premature deaths and astronomical incarceration rates.”<sup>16</sup> Hu Pegues might take issue with the resolution’s failure to mention indigenous grievances, such as land defense struggles exemplified by the ongoing fight against the Dakota Access Pipeline. But the resolution clearly points to intersections of political economy and race, including black-Palestine solidarity efforts, particularly the high-profile campaign, “When I see them, I see us.”<sup>17</sup> The resolution further highlights that enmeshed political geographies are increasingly understood as such, the ground on which scholar-activists long have been calling for political solidarity to be built.

The increasing number of political interventions by concerned members in various institutions—from undergraduate student organizing to student-worker labor unions to academic associations—are having a positive effect. The taking up of BDS has implicitly and explicitly attacked the fear that underpins the effectiveness of backlash against precarious academic workers. Through scholarly, informed and rigorous analyses of history and its contemporary relevance to persistent injustices, senior scholars who endorse BDS are creating protected spaces for young scholars grappling with their precarity and their ethical responsibilities to the region they study.

Students and faculty together deploy varied strategies to sustain these spaces

and advance the movement. These strategies are grounded in a common analysis, one recognizing that the genealogy of race and precarity at the university continues to shape the form and practice of campus activism. Put differently, a circuitous line can be drawn from the racialized conditions under which precarious academic labor was established within the political economy of the university, to the embrace of BDS by increasingly precarious academic workers. As the movement grows, its natural allies are other movements that criticize, even excoriate, the university’s agenda that claims to be apolitical and is anything but.

Progressives and activists, operating in this exhausting political moment, might be tempted to create a hierarchy of the precarious that prioritizes academic laborers below other injustices—black communities facing down structural racism and state violence; indigenous communities protecting their land from further defilement; undocumented migrants seeking safe shelter; and Palestinians demanding equal rights and an end to occupation and apartheid. But renewed solidarity is much more powerful than discrete, ranked struggles—a solidarity that troubles conventional spatial boundaries, and one that is viscerally offended by the circulation and organized logistics of injustices between home and abroad. Endorsements and resolutions by organizations and associations must insist

on a broadened solidarity, at the very least as an ethical marker and a key component of re-educating the deliberately misinformed. Rather than label such efforts as ivory tower moralizing, scholars and activists must explain critically how and why the political status quo was constructed, and how the increasingly successful and inspiring solidaristic response can be shored up and pushed forward. ■

## Endnotes

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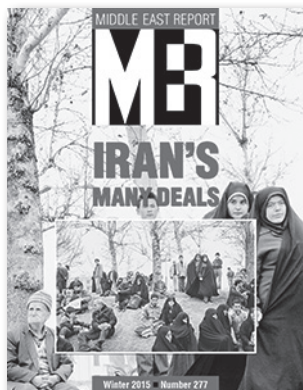
17 See: <http://www.blackpalestiniansolidarity.com>.

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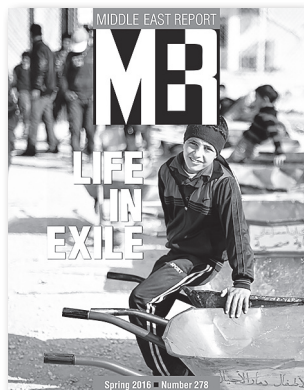
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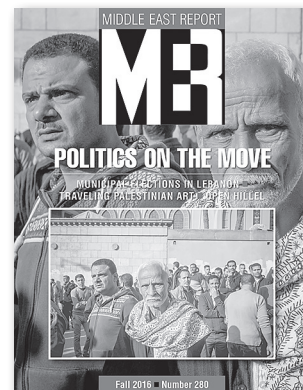
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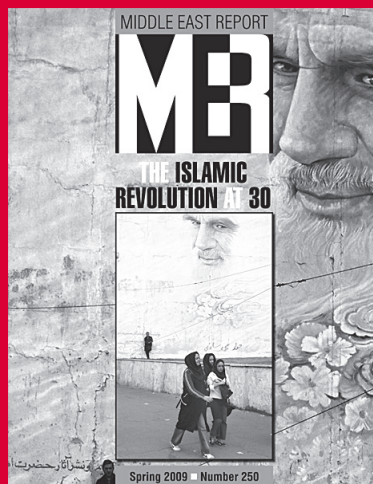
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