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COVER Ramlat Bulaq. (Mahmoud Khaled)
It is easy to be rendered speechless, or cast into despair, by the sheer enormity of the conflagration in today’s Middle East. At year’s end in 2014, more than half of the countries this magazine covers were embroiled in wars within their borders or nearby. The Saudi-led assault on Yemen launched in March brings that proportion to over three quarters. The retrograde political forces in the region—authoritarianism, paranoid nationalism, ethno-religious chauvinism—are on the rise, while democrats and defenders of human rights are in prison or in exile. One ray of hope is the framework for an agreement between Iran and the West over the Islamic Republic’s nuclear research program, but thus far that development merely dims the prospect that bombs will fall on still another regional capital.

Mainstream coverage resorts to exceptionalism to explain the sorry state of affairs, with allegedly ancient sectarian hatreds, or Islam itself, often identified as the factors that make the Middle East uniquely prone to violent explosion. This trope is not new, of course, but it was powerfully reinforced by the September 11, 2001 attacks, the aftermath of the US-led invasion of Iraq and now the phenomenon of the Islamic State, or ISIS. Somehow the Middle East is always seen more clearly the more distant the mirror.

But the recent past is far more relevant. The Arab uprisings of 2011 uncovered a cauldron of tensions that had simmered for decades—the suppression of participatory politics, the chasm between rich and poor, the erasure of minorities, and others. In Iraq the lid was already lifted with the 2003 invasion, which is only one example of how external intervention stirred the pot. It cannot be a coincidence that the most war-torn countries today—Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen—once had some degree of socialist orientation, or were in the Soviet orbit, and so were subject to Western subversion. Two of these states were reclassified as “rogue” in the 1990s, the pretext for more punishment. The regimes survived through tyranny so brutal that the societies became black boxes even to themselves. Recall as well the effort expended to stunt the growth of pan-Arab nationalism, as well as the Saudi campaigns to spread Wahhabi ideas and, later, blunt the impact of the Arab uprisings. The appearance of ISIS and other crises are very much part of the neoliberal era, when the authority of nation-states as governing bodies and autonomous economic entities is eroding. All that is left of the post-colonial state-building project, in many places, is the military and some sense of national identity.

And one does not have to look too far back to find historical parallels outside the region. The collapse of the Soviet Union marked another occasion when the sudden disappearance of autocracy led to social upheaval, war, rehabilitated strongmen and redrawn borders. This last process, as the fighting over Ukraine shows, is incomplete. The antithesis of severe repression is the evisceration of order.

It would be a grave mistake, however, to view the region solely through the lens of war and peace. That is how one forgets that, though the first two decades of the twenty-first century Middle East are a time of extremes, most people in the region do not inhabit any extreme. That is how policy decisions in, say, Washington are reduced to a false choice between, say, ISIS and restoration of the status quo ante or “Iranian-backed rebels” in Yemen and “stability” policed by the House of Saud. That is how US arms deliveries to Egypt resume at the nadir of authoritarian reconsolidation there. And that is how the majority of Middle Easterners are routinely left out of deliberations about their collective future.
For 20 years leading up to the uprisings of 2010–2011, Egypt and Tunisia suffered the ill effects of neoliberal economic reform, even as the international financial institutions and most economists hailed them as beacons of progress in the Arab world. For ten years preceding the revolts, workers and civil society organizations led a burgeoning protest movement against the liberalizing and privatizing trajectories of the Mubarak and Ben Ali regimes. Then came the uprisings, which brokered the possibility of not only new political beginnings but also alternative economic programs that would put the needs of the struggling middle, working and poorer classes first and at least constrain, if not abolish, the privileges of a deposed ruling class.

In Egypt, labor activists, journalists, NGO researchers and even a few government officials and capitalists eagerly shared their ideas for what should come next. Their visions fell into four broad categories, from left to right: citizen-led social democracy, democratic state-led development, top-down state-led development and return to the status quo ante. The citizen-led proposals were not based on any particular ideology, but were thoughtful and became increasingly detailed even as the arena for frank public discussion shrank. These proposals could form an integrated people's program if there were a democratic elected government in Egypt committed to carrying them out. In Tunisia, democracy is muddling through with leadership inherited from the old regime, with many good ideas for economic change percolating upward, as in Egypt, but no coherent vision for how to construct a progressive alternative.¹ In both cases, the default setting is the restoration of neoliberalism with an inclusive mask.

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Progressive Voices

Labor’s resistance to privatization and liberalization had been surging over the decade prior to the Egyptian uprising of January 2011, coming in waves that rose to tsunami level just as the more middle-class, but equally militant, political movement came to a head with the occupation of Tahrir Square. But neither the military government that took over after Hosni Mubarak’s overthrow nor the government of elected President Muhammad Mursi was responsive to the needs of labor or the “occupy” movement, and street and workplace action resurged in 2012 and 2013. After a full around the buildup of the Tamarrud movement and the military’s ouster of Mursi, labor actions began to mount again. Amid 1,420 protests in the first three months of 2014, involving at least 100,000 workers across many services and industries, Prime Minister Ibrahim Mahlab’s government was at loggerheads with the labor movement. After another low ebb during the presidential election, the protest wave crested again when the new government refused to consider labor’s demands. There were 94 labor protests in October and 111 in November of 2014. In response, the minister of manpower, Nahid al-’Ashri, backed by the prime minister, accused independent trade unions of being “the largest problem in the labor market, as they…hinder work, leading to the deterioration of the Egyptian economy.”

The movement’s demands, some specific to particular sectors but many common to all, had been put forth under previous governments, starting with Mubarak, but were never satisfactorily or respectfully dealt with. Egypt’s lack of a functioning democracy, especially no freely elected national assembly (the parliament was disbanded by court order in June 2012) and the media clampdown in 2013–2014, meant that workers had no means of influencing public policy except job actions.

First and foremost, workers in independent professional syndicates and labor unions called for a new labor law, something vaguely promised in the constitution of January 2014. This law should recognize the right to organize in unions chosen by the workers themselves (as opposed to the state-dominated monopoly of a single trade union federation) and the right for those unions to bargain collectively. It should also enforce respect for the right to strike and to engage in other forms of peaceful protest in order to pressure employers to bargain. From August 2013, this right was being denied, and arrest and violent treatment of organizers, strikers and protesters became commonplace. The campaign regarding the labor law was stone-walled into 2015, with the investment minister announcing that a new law’s consideration would have to be postponed until a new parliament is convened. Meanwhile, elections were put off again until an undetermined future date.

Second, workers demanded improvements in their economic wellbeing. Everyone from textile workers to postal carriers to doctors wished to see a legally binding and universally enforced minimum monthly salary. They insisted that it truly be a base salary, designed to cover the actual cost of living and keep up with price inflation. As of January 2014, Mahlab’s government had simply implemented the preceding government’s proposal, a minimum gross income of 1,200 pounds (about $200), including not only wages but also variable components like incentives, all before deductions for tax, insurance and pension. This minimum gross income was granted only to those employed directly by the government—less than 18 percent of the labor force—and not to employees of public-sector enterprises that are managed separately or the private sector. In addition, workers sought universal coverage for health and other forms of social insurance and for retirement pensions not tied to permanent employment in a single enterprise.

Third, workers demanded investment from public and private employers and an active role for themselves in modernizing their industries and services, raising production and improving efficiency, and they argued for the reinstatement of thousands of laid-off employees. Public transport workers pointed out that in a country where the streets are choked with private vehicles, 2,000 allegedly obsolete buses, out of a total of 4,700, were taken out of service in 2005 but only 600 were replaced by 2013. The spinning and weaving factories in Mahalla al-Kubra were operating at 40 percent of capacity, with one sixth the number of workers employed there a decade ago, working with aging equipment and shortages of raw materials under what workers viewed as corrupt and ineffective management. Public-sector doctors argued for government spending on health care to be raised from 4.5 percent of the annual budget to the international standard of 15 percent for middle-income countries. Workers wanted to see companies such as Tanta Flax and Oil that had been privatized illegitimately revitalized as public-sector enterprises, as stipulated by court order, with their own participation on managing boards. In March 2014, Tanta Flax workers reentered the factory and tried to restart production on their own. One important motive was to restore the purchase of raw flax produced by farmers who depended on the income. The authorities cut off electricity to the plant and sent in police to expel the uppity trespassers. Meanwhile, economists working at NGOs, at independent unions and as journalists were proposing a plethora of good ideas for how to rebuild the economy with active citizen participation. These economists were supportive of not only civil and human rights, as defined by the UN Development Program, but also labor rights, including the right to work and to belong to freely chosen labor unions, as defined in international conventions, most of which Egypt had signed onto under Mubarak.

One overarching proposal, coming out of exacting analyses by NGOs such as the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR), is for total transparency in both current and developmental budgeting. The goal is to have all components of budget construction available free of charge online, and composed in such a way that they can be understood by the public. In a democratic polity, there would be parliamentary

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committees overseeing and discussing the budget for their constituents’ benefit, as well as unfettered media coverage of the debates. This process would require a free press and a freely elected parliament in which all parts of society are represented. Once a budget was approved, complete transparency would enable groups to monitor and evaluate its execution and results. Although the IFIs claim to promote transparency and accountability in governance and claim to consult with civil society, they continue to negotiate with governments behind closed doors. In 2012, an NGO, the Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights, had to sue the Mursi government to publish the proposed budget for the following fiscal year, which it had worked out in secret with International Monetary Fund consultants, at a time when popular resentment of both the IFIs and the government was rising.

Complementary proposals addressed how to finance the national budget to provide the most socially beneficial outcomes. Most argued that it was not necessary to borrow abroad, because the required revenue was available domestically—through progressive taxation and subsidy reform. A genuinely progressive income tax, with the exemption level raised to $18,000 (about $3,000) per year, plus taxes on capital gains, real estate, mergers and acquisitions, and financial transactions could have provided enough revenue in 2011–2012, for example, to surpass the much-discussed (but not yet realized) IMF loan of $4.8 billion. Other suggested revenue sources included collection of tax arrears from wealthy capitalists, estimated at 66 billion pounds, and pursuit of tax evaders, which could recover an estimated 126 billion pounds.

In parallel, arguments were made for reducing or eliminating subsidies to privileged businesses, including luxury tourist resorts and real estate developers, domestic and foreign firms in the cement, fertilizer, iron and steel, ceramics and aluminum industries that sell their output to the domestic market for prices higher than in international markets, and exporters that received subsidies for illegitimate reasons, this last item valued at 3 billion pounds in 2011–2012. The conversion of bakeries and brick kilns, transport vehicles and microbuses to natural gas engines would have yielded savings of 75 billion pounds out of the 110.5 billion actually spent subsidizing petroleum products and electricity in 2011–2012. In addition, Egypt could claim a one-time compensatory payment of foregone taxes on depleted oil and gas reserves that had been extracted and sold by international companies to the world market at significantly higher than the $17 per barrel contract price that Egypt had been receiving. Renegotiation of export prices of natural gas to Turkey, Spain, Jordan and elsewhere to match international market prices would bring in an additional 15 billion pounds each year. These sweetheart deals were made by Mubarak’s government to enrich cronies or entice foreign capital.

Other NGO proposals for Egypt arose out of critiques of World Bank and other IFI-led projects, regarding the negative impact on the “built environment” and the environmental and social damage inflicted on communities without adequate compensation. They also came in reaction to government plans for “urban development” that privileged a few large would-be buyers over the current inhabitants, even if the latter have clear-cut legal title. The alternative proposals are for environmentally sound affordable housing and public infrastructure that allow communities to stay intact with better public services. An EIPR review of World Bank projects in Egypt as of 2014 finds that the familiar neoliberal approach still prevails, with growth led by the private sector in providing public services and creating new enterprises, and with unemployment, poverty and the spread of the informal sector treated as unfortunate negative externalities to be dealt with in separate programs. EIPR argues instead for a rights-based approach that puts the latter set of problems squarely at the center of economic policymaking.

As outside creditors imposed conditions for further austerity, popular resistance arose to not only the cutbacks but also the implied loss of economic integrity and the concomitant and apparently permanent indebtedness. Activists in Egypt and Tunisia argued for the cancellation of the “odious” portion of the debt incurred by the Mubarak and Ben Ali governments for the purchase of unneeded military or “security” equipment or for the personal enrichment of the regime and its cronies. The demand was reiterated loudly when the World Social Forum convened in Tunisia in March 2013. Cancellation of “odious” debt would reduce the interest costs that eat up a significant part of the annual budget in each country and contribute to fiscal and current account deficits.

An alternative to outright debt forgiveness is to turn the debt into aid for development projects. For example, a left-wing member of the Tunisian parliament led a delegation to the European Union to argue for a Marshall Plan-type program with a focus on domestic development, including agriculture. Proposals to target agriculture in Tunisia, and especially farmers’ rights, food security and rural community needs, have come from critics of World Bank programs there, where development loans were wasted, as well as from Tunisian labor and NGOs.

Other proposals tailored to Tunisia tackle the unruly problems of unemployment and dramatically uneven regional development. One economist proposed an “employer of last resort” program to be phased in over a six-year period, building on the country’s pre-existing “solidarity network” of small-scale bank lending and the national Solidarity and Employment Funds (all founded in the 1990s). With plenty of needs to be met, especially in rural areas, in fields as diverse as alternative energy, low-cost housing, education and health care, over 400,000 people could be employed by the end of six years, with a wage bill at that point of 2.74 percent of GDP, or less than 10 percent of the national budget. The multiplier effects and demonstration effects would thus contribute more to economic growth than the program would cost.
A more comprehensive proposal for Tunisia is a version of the social market economy. The proposal posits an analogy between Sweden in the 1930s and Tunisia today, when unemployment, poverty and regional disparities were high and public services were poorly developed, among other similarities in the international and natural environments. During that period, Sweden managed to develop an admirable model with high national standards and an enforceable and society-wide social contract, accompanied by decentralization of administrative and fiscal responsibility to spread the benefits of growth in an inclusive and equitable manner.6

The labor movement is as active in Tunisia as in Egypt, and there have been many strikes since the uprising that protested economic conditions and public policy. Organized labor has a less confrontational relationship with the post-uprising government than in Egypt, however. Independent trade unions are legal in Tunisia and newer ones, some affiliated with the Islamist party Ennahda, quarrel with the largest and most influential federation, the UGTT. The UGTT played a critical role when it joined the uprising in January 2011. It then worked with the main employers’ organization, UTICA, and a group of opposition parties, to conduct protracted, but ultimately successful, negotiations to get the elected, but unpopular, Ennahda-led coalition government to step down in favor of a more socially neutral transition government that could oversee the writing of a new constitution and election law.

The new constitution was approved in January 2014, and presidential and parliamentary elections were held later that year, providing a peaceful “transition” to a new government but no new policies. While its political role is important, the UGTT is active in promoting its members’ interests and able to bargain with the government directly over the society-wide minimum wage, which was raised in 2013. According to representatives of the Tunisian Association of Economists and the economic adviser to the UGTT, however, Tunisia still lacks the vision and political will for an overarching program that can incorporate social negotiations into rebuilding the economy, leaving organized labor and the unorganized bulk of the working class and informal sector in unresolved tension with employers and the government.

In Egypt, social conflict was more overt than in Tunisia and remained intractable in early 2015. Unlike Ennahda in Tunisia, the Islamist government elected in 2012 did not form a governing coalition and was less subtle in asserting sole command over all aspects of society and economy. As unpopular as in Tunisia, that elected government was forced from power by the Egyptian military, which proceeded to appoint a government that was equally uncompromising.
and increasingly brutal. Subsequently, civil society organizations, progressive economists and organized labor were repressed and their proposals and demands for reform went unheard. Whereas political stability and reduced uncertainty were secured through peaceful compromise in Tunisia, they were imposed by a restoration of authoritarian rule in Egypt, but in both cases without a program for inclusive and sustainable development.

**Democratic State-Led Development**

UN agencies have mounted critiques of neoliberalism as “growth without development” since the early 1990s. Their view is that liberalization, privatization and austerity entail widespread human costs without the promised trickle-down benefits. These agencies, working separately or in tandem, have produced finely honed proposals for alternatives, close to the “social market” model made famous by the Scandinavian countries, overlapping but not coterminous with the bottom-up proposals of the labor movement, NGOs and economists described above.

These programs stress the need to balance private and public-sector economic activity. They would keep some neoliberal reforms, for example, staying open to foreign trade and productive foreign direct investment. What they add is careful regulation and fair negotiation to ensure benefits to the developing country, such as technology transfer, backward and forward linkages into the domestic economy, contracted limits on the retraction of invested capital, and labor and environmental protections. They argue that integration into the world economy would be more equitable and provide more bargaining power if it were based on cooperation among equal Middle Eastern and North African partners—not, as it is now, between wealthy patron states from the Gulf and supplicants from the diversified but poorer neighbors, like Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia.

In restoring a balance between the public and private sectors, after two decades of a shrinking, increasingly irresponsible state and growing crony capitalist domination of economic policy, the UN agencies recommend industrial policy to diversify economies and develop new comparative advantages, to revive agriculture and to shift to green energy. The state is to resume the provision of investment in infrastructure, including agriculture, and in education and health care, but not to invest in direct production of non-public goods and services. The latter can be provided by a competitive private sector (free of crony capitalists), under a clear, fair and simplified regulatory system that encourages business formation in productive sectors that generate employment and that is willing to invest in neglected regions of the country. Such measures would help regional economies break out of the rentier-society trap that virtually all have found themselves in.
A fundamental requirement is that the public sector be accountable and responsive to the citizenry, with full transparency in budgeting and allocation of resources. A matching requirement is that private business play by a new set of rules, in which they pay their fair share of taxes and ensure decent working conditions. Another match is made between the citizenry and private business paying into a fairly enforced system of progressive taxation on income, property and capital gains, as opposed to regressive sales and value-added taxes, while social security (such as pensions and unemployment compensation) and wage protection is extended to draw in workers and entrepreneurs from the informal sector and to restructure the safety net for the poor and unemployed. Furthermore, each country needs to ensure a society-wide minimum wage that is a “living wage,” and to have labor laws that respect the rights of workers to organize independent unions, to assemble freely and to strike.

This new set of rules would have to be negotiated through dialogue among social groups to settle their differences, including representatives of labor and civil society. A critical difference between the IFIs and the UN programs is that the former see unemployment as mainly a supply-side problem, that is, the fault lies with workers who are unqualified for the jobs that exist in the private sector, whereas the latter see it mainly as a demand-side problem, a consequence of two decades of “investment” choices that favored energy-intensive industries or industries that created low-quality jobs in export production, real estate and trade. While the IFIs are promoting the “entrepreneurship” avenue of small and midsize enterprise as the vehicle for job creation, the UN position is that such development is good, but that society cannot depend solely on the pursuit of profit by firms, no matter how small, to solve its problems. Thus government’s job in overseeing these reforms is to ensure that investment is “pro-poor,” by deliberately focusing on rural, underserved regions with high unemployment and high poverty rates and by using “active labor market programs” to stimulate labor-intensive activities.

**Corporatist Industrial Policy**

Careful research on how Tunisia became a “neoliberal” star revealed that its successes relied on a foundation of state-led development in industry and investment in human development, layered over not with a big jump to liberalization and privatization, but with gradual reform and limited integration with the international economy controlled rather tightly from the top. This success then undermined itself with the turn toward cronyism and the neglect of productive domestic investment needed to generate decent employment, deficits that became increasingly obvious in the years before the uprising.

Without wishing to constrain the development of capitalism, some Egyptian economists have considered that the neoliberal era went too far in curbing the responsibility of the public sector and put too much faith in a private sector that provided insufficient productive investment to generate employment and slid too easily toward cronyism. The former acting director of the Economic Research Forum, Samir Radwan, for example, concluded a review of Egypt’s Competitiveness Report in 2006 with recommendations for a comprehensive industrial strategy to be implemented by the National Competitiveness Council, which would “bring together Egypt’s private and public sector, along with civil society leaders to form a common vision and unify action…. It would set priorities, provide advice to the government and monitor progress, making recommendations based on the latest data, the best expertise and the insights among Egyptian experts from many parts of society.” While this idea sounds more promising that pure neoliberalism and overlaps in significant ways with the UN visions, it puts the onus of policymaking on top-down leadership, not necessarily democratically chosen, and is not sensitive to the needs of labor or voices from the bottom.

Another exemplar of this point of view is Ahmad Galal, who began in the 1990s to consider whether Egypt might benefit from an East Asian-style industrial policy, perhaps like that of South Korea. (These days the comparison is more likely to be made to Malaysia.) Galal was a member of the group of economists and business leaders that formed a think tank in the 2000s, the Egyptian Center for Economic Studies (ECES), which sought to redress some of the excesses of neoliberal reform in order to restore domestic investment, productivity growth and employment. Galal served as executive director of the Economic Research Forum from 2007 to 2013, when he joined the Mahlab government as finance minister for about 18 months.

During his time in public office, Galal pursued a practical Keynesian strategy of using public investment in infrastructure to jump-start the economy and generate employment, with mixed results. He was opposed to the fiscal restraints that the IFIs were pushing Egypt to adopt, but tried to deal with the pressure to reduce universal subsidies for food and energy by appointing a deputy to figure out how to make the program for conditional cash transfers more effective and efficient, that is, to target subsidies to the poor who need them and who will, in exchange, send their children to school and use preventive health services. Galal left government after the cabinet shakeup under President Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi in February 2014, and was replaced by a veteran of the Mubarak regime who was engaged in negotiating directly with the IMF at that time.

Putting the best face on the Sisi regime’s economic program as of March 2015, one could argue that it is a form of state-led development. Its elements include several grand development projects, including a second Suez Canal, a new capital city built from scratch to the east of Cairo, desert land reclamation for corporate agriculture, and 100,000 housing units, at least some to be “affordable,” to be built by the UAE government-backed firm Arabtec Construction on land “donated” by the army. The
dominant element in these and other plans is the pursuit of foreign direct investment, as illustrated by the much-hyped investment conference at Sharm al-Sheikh over the weekend of March 13–15, 2015. The participants included high-level representatives from 20 countries, at least 200 firms, and the World Bank and IMF, the last represented by Christine Lagarde herself. The biggest and firmest deals that came out of the conference were with foreign energy corporations. With the explicit, even glowing, approval of the IFIs and Western powers, there are many more promises of deals to come. The prominence of Gulf-based private capital in these arrangements, and Egypt’s continued dependence on financial aid and loans from the governments of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates are accepted as necessary and beneficial props.

Some of the less glowing aspects of this “program” have been the subject of a number of studies by NGOs and controversy in the Egyptian press, despite the regime’s efforts to control the media. For example, British Gas is to resume investment in exploration and extraction of natural gas from the Western Desert and Mediterranean offshore fields. While Egypt has undergone an energy crisis for several years with shortages of natural gas, British Gas intends to liquefy much of its output and resume exports on ships leaving from its offshore terminal near Alexandria. At the same time, Egypt will import gas from Israel, through the very same pipeline it used to export gas to Israel in a contentious arrangement in the 2000s. Due to the same natural gas shortage, and over the vociferous objections of the health, tourism and environment ministers as well as environmental activists and the doctors’ syndicate, the government agreed in the spring of 2014 to allow energy-intensive industries like the producers of cement (mostly owned by foreign capital) to import and burn coal as their major fuel stock. The latter is just one example of the exoneration and welcome-home of the Mubarak cronies known as the whales of the Nile.

Additional blessings for both domestic and foreign capital come from the generous incentives in a new investment law and reductions in tax rates on profits that were announced just before the conference. Another gift was the declaration of a law in mid-2014 prohibiting third-party legal challenges to deals negotiated by the government with private investors or contractors.

A March 22 ECES statement on the investment conference suggested that it could optimize the beneficial effects if eight criteria were met. Four of these are strictly economic and conform to IFI recommendations. They are continued fiscal consolidation, promoting small-firm participation in the mega-projects and nurturing an Egyptian middle class, streamlining government regulation of business and combating corruption, and reforming financial market regulation to promote savings and private investment. Four other stipulations address issues of social justice in a modest way. They include using public infrastructure investment and incentives in the new investment law to spread private investment to the impoverished and neglected hinterlands, vocational training for labor to hone skills needed by private employers, availing youth of opportunities for social mobility with improved education and health services, and “reforming the labor market laws to boost the creation of decent jobs and enhancing social dialogue to improve working conditions and productivity.”

The Empire Strikes Back

Leading representatives of the World Bank, IMF and other IFIs, the G-8 “developed” economies, the wealthy Gulf nations and other “donor” development agencies held a war council at Deauville, France, in May 2011, in response to their blindsiding by the Arab uprisings. It is apparent from a reading of the Interim Strategy Notes of the World Bank Group from May 2012 that the Deauville partners were desperate to get ahead of the “transition curve” in what they labeled the “Arab countries in transition,” and that they were frightened by the hostility and mistrust of Tunisian and Egyptian respondents, especially representatives of labor and civil society.

Over the next two years, the World Bank and IMF proceeded to generate reams of research papers “explaining” why the uprisings happened. They were shocked—to discover that corruption, nepotism and cronyism had come to prevail in countries that they had praised to the skies as recently as 2010 for their neoliberal reform efforts, and bemoaned the endemic problems of poverty, unemployment and burgeoning informal sectors that these culturally petrified Arab regimes had neglected to address. This “research” output appears to be a massive campaign to outflank critics of neoliberalism and the earnest protesters themselves by taking command of the production of knowledge about the “causes” of the uprising and thereby winning legitimacy to take command of the programmatic solutions.

The Deauville allies’ overarching aim is to salvage the fruits of neoliberalism and to use their financial resources to garner the cooperation of the post-uprising governments of Tunisia and Egypt (Islamist, non-Islamist, elected, non-elected, no matter) and to restore the dominance of capital, whether domestic or foreign. Fiscal austerity and reducing budget deficits—that is, shrinking the role and scope of the state—are still at the top of the agenda, followed closely by liberalization—the streamlining of bureaucratic procedures and regulations to encourage investment—and privatization, now taking the form of governments contracting out projects to private companies and creating public-private partnerships to provide public services. Small and midsize firms are to be provided with credit access and technical advice, as they are the agents that will restore growth,

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Reexamining Human Rights Change in Egypt
Heba Morayef

There is much critical self-reflection among human rights defenders in Egypt. Most of them believe they underestimated the challenges of the post-Mubarak era, in particular the determination of counter-revolutionary forces. Activists thought that street protest would keep the pressure on the authorities, leaving time to reform laws and state institutions. The fact that independent human rights organizations survive in today’s Egypt is itself a small victory.

Over five tumultuous years in Egypt, the independent human rights community moved from a fairly parochial role chipping away at the Mubarak regime’s legitimacy, one torture case at a time, to media stardom in 2011, and from fielding a presidential candidate, who won over 134,000 votes, in 2012 to facing closure and the risk of prosecution two years later.

Much has been written about the role of political activists and the labor movement in the uprising that ousted Husni

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Mubarak, yet there has been little study of the role of the human rights community. The lack of attention is surprising, given the longevity of human rights institutions and the ubiquitous presence of human rights defenders in the media after Mubarak fell. Perhaps the human rights community made scrutiny seem superfluous with its very deliberate self-promotion aimed at enhancing perceptions of its power and influence. Yet if one looks beyond this self-aggrandizing narrative, there is much to study in the resilience of small organizations that managed to survive 30 years of authoritarian rule.

In the late 1990s, students and others in their early twenties looking for political means of revolt had only three options: the Muslim Brothers, the odd protest about Palestine or Iraq, or human rights advocacy. Existing opposition political parties held little attraction for younger Egyptians, who saw them as stale and ineffective. Human rights activism was one of the few subversive avenues open to non-Islamists.

Yet it was not the human rights community as a collective that planned and mobilized the January 2011 protests that grew into the uprising, although several rights defenders were involved on an individual basis. Was the lack of collective action the ultimate failure to make systemic change happen, a reflection of the limited ambitions human rights defenders accept when they agree to lobby a repressive government? Did that reformist approach end up granting legitimacy to the regime?

No, because the independent human rights community in Egypt maintained a focus on police abuses that cut to the heart of Mubarak’s police state. As long as the Nadeem Center was reporting on torture and death in custody and the Hisham Mubarak Law Center was defending Islamists and workers on wildcat strike in Mahalla al-Kubra, the state’s hatred for these organizations was assured.

Throughout the 2000s, the human rights community played a supporting and enabling role in political activism and protest. The leadership and much of the staff of human rights organizations came from the Egyptian left and were organically intertwined with groups like Kifaya, which rose to prominence in 2005 calling on Mubarak to retire without handing down the presidency to his son. The Front for the Defense of Egyptian Protesters, formed in 2008, dispatched human rights lawyers to do battle with local prosecutors, trying to secure the release of arrested protesters, publishing their names and publicizing any ill treatment, and coordinating the provision of material support. In 2009–2010, meetings and training sessions of the April 6 youth movement in solidarity with workers were often held at the offices of the Hisham Mubarak Law Center. Ending torture was the rallying cry of the We Are Khalid Sa’id group and the unprecedented demonstrations that a new generation of activists held over a three-month period in Alexandria and Cairo in the summer of 2010.

Human Rights Advocacy in the Mubarak Era

Egypt’s human rights community has existed since 1985, the date of the establishment of the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights. The independent human rights community in Egypt, though too limited in scope and impact to be called a movement, is comprised of around 19 organizations, which are members of the informal Forum of Independent Egyptian Human Rights NGOs. Membership in that coalition, which issues joint statements, is a reliable indicator of the extent to which an organization is willing to confront state abuse.

These organizations worked to tell the story of the systematic police abuse that Mubarak wanted to keep hidden, to counter the regime’s narrative of political reform moving hand in hand with economic reform, by showing the protection from accountability that security services enjoyed. In Mubarak’s last decade in particular, human rights groups stuck to “naming and shaming” because it worked. If they could create enough media attention around a particular case and a big enough headache for the regime, it would become easier to get the detainee released or, once in a while, compel the state to sacrifice a police officer to the prosecutor. The groups also relied on strategic litigation and advocacy with third governments as forms of pressure on the authorities.

Mubarak’s policy, for the most part, was to allow Egyptian human rights NGOs to operate outside of the scope of the law. Keeping the NGOs in a gray zone worked well: They remained under constant threat of closure or prosecution and, at the same time, the government could point to their existence as evidence of space for dissent. Organizations registered as civil companies, law firms and, in the case of the Nadeem Center, which provides psychological care to victims of torture and sexual abuse, a clinic. For the genuinely committed, this arrangement provided freedom to do real human rights work, such as monitoring and documenting abuses by the police. But it left organizations open to cyclical crackdowns. Prosecutions of Hafez Abu Saada in 1998 and Saad Eddin Ibrahim in 2001 served to remind the human rights community how vulnerable they were.

Like any other political organization, human rights groups had to live with heavy surveillance and harassment from the Interior Ministry. This unwanted attention, along with constant smears in the press, meant that no wealthy Egyptian would fund a human rights organization for fear of reprisal against business interests. Human rights groups were therefore completely dependent on foreign funding for survival. Many of the most serious groups made deliberate choices about who they would accept funding from, refusing to take money from the US or British governments on foreign policy grounds, and preferring funds from foundations or a Scandinavian government wherever possible. Yet this discriminating approach did little to mitigate the reputational damage associated with accepting foreign funding.

The dependence on foreign funding, combined with the “naming and shaming” tactic, made it easy for the
government to defame human rights groups. The groups stood accused of carrying out the agenda of the donor, usually the United States, and more often of being actual agents of a foreign power.

Egyptian human rights groups have struggled with questions of local legitimacy since their inception. Using the international human rights law framework to articulate local demands for change has meant an inherent dialectic between the local and the international. It has opened human rights groups to allegations of undermining local culture or religion as well as being handmaidens of Western imperialism. Rights lawyers and researchers would constantly integrate translation of rights discourse into locally relevant language about political and socio-economic struggle. Women’s rights activists, in particular, had to struggle against religious and cultural rejection among parts of the population, but those who worked on religious minorities and freedom of expression faced problems as well. Mubarak’s rote attack on human rights advocacy was something like, “Let’s put bread on the table first, and then we’ll talk about human rights.”

The work on socio-economic rights by the Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights, in particular the ruling on the minimum wage they obtained through litigation, or the work of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights on the pricing of pharmaceuticals, went some way toward countering the stereotype of rights groups that put no priority on social justice issues. But the state media machine was much stronger than independent voices at the time and its narrative dominated.

Independent newspapers like al-Misri al-Yawm and al-Shorouq covered some of the human rights groups’ activities and eventually assigned a journalist to the “civil society” beat. But, other than that, coverage appeared only in English-language local papers such as the Cairo Times or the occasional foreign newspaper. There was limited interest in the Western media in human rights in Egypt because, for the most part, the topic lacked a big-picture news angle.

All of these circumstances meant that the human rights community had limited clout. They were engaged in a continual tug of war with the regime to push back red
The same happened later in the year, as the No to Military Trials campaign became more visible and the media grew braver in covering abuses by the military. The even more technical question of why trials of civilians in the Egyptian military justice system were inherently unfair became a perennial thorn in the side of the Mubarak regime. And when change came, it used rights-based language.

A Moment of Power

The 2011 uprising suddenly brought human rights center stage in public discourse, which human rights defenders found themselves with new power to shape. The killing of 846 people over three days in January 2011 meant that public anger focused on calls for accountability, justice for the victims and police reform. Demands such as ending the state of emergency were repeated everywhere by protesters and pro-revolution politicians, many of whom probably could not have explained the provisions of the law or why it mattered. Thus did the human rights community succeed in making a very technical question into a powerful slogan. The killing of 846 people over three days in January 2011 meant that public anger focused on calls for accountability, justice for the victims and police reform. Demands such as ending the state of emergency were repeated everywhere by protesters and pro-revolution politicians, many of whom probably could not have explained the provisions of the law or why it mattered. Thus did the human rights community succeed in making a very technical question into a powerful slogan.

The human rights community experienced an unprecedented moment of power in early 2011. They were sought after by the media, in particular the influential evening talk shows on Egyptian TV, where one could watch ruling generals calling in anonymously or prime ministers being dressed down by novelists and resigning the next day. People like Khalid ‘Ali, Gamal Eid, Bahey el-Din Hassan, Hossam Bahgat and Ahmad Raghib became fixtures on the talk shows.

This day in the sun was not just Mubarak-era “naming and shaming,” however. Under Mubarak the most effective way to apply pressure on the government was via the international media or third governments, in particular the US. Those who saw an over-emphasis on “naming and shaming” criticized the practice because of a sense that human rights organizations had failed to invest in constituency building. In 2011, it was far more effective to lobby political party heads who were meeting with the military, and to jump on every media opportunity to talk about transitional justice and security sector reform, than to waste one’s time meeting the long stream of foreign officials who wanted to visit Tahrir Square and “talk to the youth.” In an age of social media, when followers and retweets are easily totted up, it is no exaggeration to say that human rights activists were among the most important shapers of opinion. This time, however, they could speak with the certainty of a constituency among street protesters at their backs.

In Egypt, being on television bestowed new political status on human rights activists and facilitated better access to politicians and decision-makers. In those first six months, when the government and even the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) wanted to convey at least the appearance of responding to protester demands, the powers that be also for the first time opened their doors to human rights leaders. Ministers started to invite human rights defenders to meetings to discuss new draft laws. In an internally controversial move, four directors of human rights organizations also met with Murad Muwafi, then head of intelligence. SCAF leaders sat with delegations from international human rights organizations—Gen. ‘Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi with Amnesty International and Maj. Gen. Muhammad al-‘Assar with Human Rights Watch. Instead of arresting, smearing or ignoring the human rights defenders, the state had to pay attention to them as political actors in their own right. This moment, however, only lasted as long as the military felt pressure to deliver reform measures to deflect public anger.

By June 2011 things began to change. Gone was the time when renewed protests in Tahrir Square would force the military to allow the investigation of Mubarak and his referral to trial to go forward. The military had come to understand who the protest leaders were and believed it knew how to contain them. The SCAF went on the
The attacks were particularly vicious because the handful of human rights organizations had failed to consolidate the constituencies they had acquired in earlier months, although many of them had restructured to gradually move in that direction. Ahmad Raghib, for instance, founded the National Community for Human Rights, a membership organization seeking to build branches at universities. The Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights and the Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights opened regional offices, which had been impossible under Mubarak.

In July 2011 the cabinet, under the guidance of International Cooperation Minister Fayza Abu al-Naga, set up a fact-finding committee to investigate civil society organizations receiving funding for human rights and democracy promotion. The report submitted by security agencies to that committee, in addition to listing every independent human rights organization in Egypt, formed the basis of the 2012 NGO trial, which ultimately put only US organizations in the dock. That report is still alive and is the basis for three travel bans imposed on staff of the NGO Egyptian Democracy Academy.

**Surviving State Onslaught**

In February 2011, state TV hosts accused protest leaders in Tahrir of being foreign agents working to destabilize the country, inspiring satirist Bassem Youssef to launch his first episodes on YouTube. He laughed off the pathetic attempts by a flailing state to deny the power of people in the square. But in 2014, when the Sisi regime turned its attention to the rights community, there was no Bassem Youssef and nobody was laughing. The legal gray zone they operated in and their dependence on foreign funding kept the rights community in a vulnerable position, and in the aftermath of the coup, they were easy prey for a hyper-nationalist state discourse. The attacks were particularly vicious because the handful of independent rights groups were among the very few non-Islamist voices in Egyptian politics that criticized the mass killing and arrest of protesters linked to the Muslim Brothers.

In retrospect, the human rights community was perhaps too wrapped up in the opportunities for policy work in early 2011, when they were drafting proposals for police reform and discussing freedom of information laws with the government. There should have been an equal, parallel emphasis on movement building, but the mistake was to assume that there was time. Human rights leaders barely slept in 2011—they had to run their organizations, oversee the work of lawyers representing victims in the police trials around the country and respond to meeting requests from government officials, political party heads and diplomats who wanted policy recommendations. They had to ensure that new abuses by the police and military were being documented, all while educating themselves on comparative transition experiences to learn how to deal with a set of issues they had never faced under Mubarak.

There is much critical self-reflection, and some self-flagellation, going on today within the human rights community. There is consensus that human rights defenders underestimated the challenges of the post-Mubarak era, in particular the activity and determination of the counter-revolutionary forces. Perhaps because of romantic notions of people power, a sense that the tide of history that was on their side for once, rights activists and other pro-revolution political forces in Egypt thought they would have time to reform state institutions and legislative structures. Perhaps one clear lesson learned was the need to institutionalize whatever possible in the first heady months when public sentiment generated momentum and there was political will within the regime to appease protesters with a set of reformist measures.

It was no mean feat, though, that 172 police officers faced trial on murder charges in 2011. Interior Ministry officials still talk of that trauma and its effect on haybat al-shurta, the special status and immunity the police enjoyed under Mubarak. Their bitterness partly explains what sometimes seems petty personal reprisal against activists associated with the 2011 uprising, most of whom are imprisoned today. Above all, the security agencies are intent on preventing a repeat of the uprising.

The long-term impact of the January 2011 uprising will only become clear as the years pass. It is unclear how long the Sisi regime can enforce mass amnesia and pretend that the uprising was directed only at particular personages and not at the bankruptcy of the entire Mubarak-era political and economic system. But Egypt has not gone back to where it was. The rights crisis is the most serious the country has ever faced, in terms of the sheer number of Egyptians killed with impunity, the length and number of detentions, and the ideological positioning by a judiciary that formerly was the sole check on the security forces’ prerogatives. Human rights groups find themselves with few allies and very limited access to a subservient media.

Today, the fact that independent human rights organizations still exist is a small victory in and of itself. To exist as a human rights community means not just to protect the offices but also to confront the regime by documenting and condemning the most serious abuses and getting the word out. Survival was difficult. It took substantial courage for staff to go to the office after the government’s November 10, 2014 ultimatum, when rumors were circulating of arrest warrants for nine high-profile rights defenders. Saner voices within the regime apparently won that round of argument, convincing the hardliners pushing for raids and prosecutions that those measures would be damaging to the government’s image at a time when it is seeking to attract foreign investors and tourists. In early 2011 there were dozens of civil society initiatives for political reform, almost none of which are still in operation. So perhaps there is a level of comfort in the resilience of these organizations, the dedication of the human rights defenders who work for them and their capacity to endure.
Walking through the alleys of Ramlat Bulaq, an old working-class neighborhood in northern Cairo close to the banks of the Nile, I encountered an 11-year old girl playing in front of her house with other children her age. She stopped me and said, “Do you know ‘Amr, the man who was killed? He used to get us candies. They said he was a criminal but he was not. He was angry because of ‘Ammar’s death.” I knew she was referring to ‘Amr al-Buni, a local youth shot by police in the course of this district’s long struggle against the encroachment of wealthy developers backed by the Egyptian state.

Bulaq is a name derived from belaq, an old Egyptian word that means anchorage. The area of Ramlat Bulaq was integrated into the expanding Cairo of the early twentieth century when two pashas built factories. For decades, everyone in the neighborhood worked in the factories and workshops along the corniche. An open green space separated the industrial zone from the railway to the immediate north and from the houses to the east. Today the four-acre neighborhood is home to about 600 families.

The neighborhood began a transformation in 1996, when an investor decided to erect high-rises on this prime riverside real estate. The factories were removed in favor of the huge Nile City Towers, which house commercial offices, a hotel...
and a shopping mall. Since the Towers opened in 2001, the owners have continued to buy up plots of land in Ramlat Bulaq, forcing the sellers to tear down their homes before they leave. Dangerous snakes lurk in many of the garbage-strewn plots.

Land surveys show that the Nile City Towers took up six meters more than allotted from the street on the eastern side. This expansion caused the first dispute with Ramlat Bulaq residents. For some time a woman named Nasma had operated a kiosk behind the factories and workshops. In 2009, the Cairo municipality demolished the tiny shop, accusing Nasma of taking the six-meter space. She sued, arguing that her kiosk had been built much earlier than the Towers. Nasma refused any kind of negotiation. She died in a mysterious car accident, which everyone in the neighborhood assumes is related to her case.

The backdrop to the current troubles is the 2011 uprising that unseated President Husni Mubarak. Before the uprising, Faris, a young man living in Ramlat Bulaq, drove a truck for one of the biggest construction companies in Egypt. “During the revolution,” he says, “on the day when the police disappeared from the streets, the day of rage on January 28, we were at home. We saw groups of thieves passing by in the main street. They looted the Arcadia mall about 150 meters from here. We, the families, young men and women, decided to protect our neighborhood and the Nile City Towers, as we were afraid of being accused of the thefts. That same week, the Nile City administration thanked us. The security manager called some of us, and asked us to work as guards. Some of the women got other jobs in the Towers. We were getting very good salaries.”

Seventeen months later, on June 28, 2012, a series of fires broke out in Ramlat Bulaq. Because the houses are small and attached to one other, the flames spread quickly. The residents asked the Nile City Towers to help extinguish the blazes by giving them access to the building’s water pump. The last fire happened that July, after the Towers had changed its head of security. When residents ran to ask the Towers for water, the administration said the person with the keys was not there. Four houses burned to the ground, and 15 families lost their shelter. Fifteen people were injured, and a 4 year-old child, ‘Ammar, died. It was this death that upset ‘Amr al-Buni.

Faris continues the story: “In June and July 2012, our salaries were later than usual. It happened as well in August. ‘Amr al-Buni was one of the young men who had been a security guard since January 2011. The morning of August 2, he went to the Towers to ask the security head why salaries were late. The tourism police refused him entry, and one policeman threatened to shoot him. The minute ‘Amr turned around to leave, the policeman shot him in the back, and ‘Amr fell dead. We heard the shots and ran to see what was going on. ‘Amr’s
uncle was one of the first to reach the scene. He is an old man. He found ‘Amr lying in his own blood, and tried to carry him off to help. The policeman shot him in the leg as well. All the youth gathered, and began to fight the police in front of the Towers. Central Security Forces and police surrounded the place. A number of cars parked in front of the Towers caught fire. For four or five hours the fight continued. The police shot a number of us, though we were only throwing stones. That night and in the following nights, they arrested 51 young men, some of them with severe bullet wounds.”

After the clashes, human rights organizations volunteered to defend the detainees. Lawyers from the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights and the Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights released statements to clarify what had happened. In January 2014, the 51 detained men were sentenced to prison terms of three to 25 years. No one was punished for the death of ‘Amr al-Buni or the serious injuries to the other youths.

The Ramlat Bulaq residents fared better on other fronts. In 2012, they discovered that the prime minister, the Cairo governor and the Informal Settlement Development Fund had announced confiscation of additional neighborhood land in the June 20 Egypt Gazette. The residents sued, and in August 2013 a judge overturned the decision. In March 2013 a resident found a master development plan for Ramlat Bulaq envisioned by the Informal Settlements Development Fund and the municipality. Four more towers were to be built in the north along the railway, displacing all the families. In response, on April 7 residents and activist allies organized a march from their neighborhood to Maspero, the state radio and television building, to call for transparency regarding the project, in addition to freedom for the detainees. They succeeded in halting construction.

In the meantime, the grassroots visions for the future of Ramlat Bulaq appear in everyday practices. To improve the neighborhood, residents are painting houses, sharing water and planting trees in empty plots. Everyday activities are not clearly divided between working and socializing. Women sit in front of their houses or head down the street to chat with others. Older men do the same. Vendors—women and men—sell their wares in the streets. In the evening after work, younger men hang out in those same spaces, talking, smoking and listening to music.

The decisions to transform Ramlat Bulaq, whether in the 1990s or today, have been top-down, with no consultation with the residents. Since July 3, 2013, laws prohibit strikes and demonstrations. But the residents have not given up their aspiration to participate in the upgrading of their neighborhood. They have knocked on the door of the new Ministry of Urban Renewal and Transformation, with whose officials they are still in negotiations.
Some Days Before the Day After

Omar Dahi

Soon after the Syrian uprising began, think tanks and working groups started planning for “the day after” the regime of Bashar al-Asad. The plans are not inherently flawed, but they are investments in a future that is becoming more distant by the day. One reason is the intransigence of the Syrian regime; another is the constantly compounded humanitarian emergency. But there is a third reason that is less commonly acknowledged—and that is the role of the Syrian opposition.

The conflict in Syria has entered its fifth year, with no end in sight. There is no shortage of visions, however, for what Syria should look like after the fighting is over.

Within two years of the 2011 uprising, large international institutions and smaller think tanks, university seminars and working groups had produced at least five major documents laying out prescriptions for post-conflict Syria. Representatives of the opposition to the Syrian regime were officially involved in at least two of these efforts, some of which were sponsored by the Friends of Syria—a group of 11 nations, including the United States, formed in response to the Russian and Chinese veto of a UN Security Council resolution condemning the Syrian regime for its violent suppression of the initial peaceful uprising and its crimes in the ensuing civil war.

The participation of the Syrian opposition in these conferences poses something of a paradox. It is a truism that a main
reason for the persistence of the conflict is that the opposition has failed “to provide an alternative” to the continued rule of President Bashar al-Asad and his regime that could convince the bulk of Syrians to switch their loyalties. How can it be that an opposition so invested in post-conflict and transitional visions has supplied no alternative to Asad? Exploring this paradox may shed light on aspects of the Syrian conflict that are not properly understood.

Descent Into Darkness

If few anticipated a popular uprising in Syria, fewer still predicted that the country would subsequently descend into a humanitarian nightmare. By early 2015 an estimated 210,000 people had been killed in the fighting, and upwards of 840,000 wounded, meaning that 6 percent of the population is either dead or maimed as a result of the conflict.1 The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs puts the number of internally displaced persons in Syria at about 7.6 million, and the number of officially registered refugees outside the country's borders at 3.9 million. Roughly half of the pre-war population, therefore, has been uprooted from their homes. Inside Syria, according to the Syrian Needs Analysis Project, the most severe crises appear to be in Aleppo, al-Raqqa, Rif Dimashq and Dayr al-Zawr, because these provinces are under siege, subject to severe bombardment, controlled by militias, hard to reach and/or home to very large numbers of internally displaced. The casualty and displacement figures do not capture the full extent of the misery. Average life expectancy has fallen from 75.9 to 55.7 years, a loss of 20 years over a four-year period. By the end of 2014, four of every five Syrians were living in poverty, and almost 65 percent in extreme poverty, meaning that they were unable to secure the food and other staples necessary for survival.2 Education is in catastrophic decline. According to the Syrian Center for Policy Research report, the Syrian people are living in a “terrible state of exception, estrangement and alienation with a massive social, political chasm dividing them from those involved in violence and the institutions of violence.” Since 2012, the category of “those involved in violence” has encompassed not just the regime’s regular armed forces, but paramilitary organizations of all ideological stripes and political allegiances. In addition to government-sponsored militias such as the National Defense Forces, the war has seen the rise of armed Kurdish groups; extremist Sunni Muslim organizations, starting with Jabhat al-Nusra, the al-Qaeda affiliate, and ending with the Islamic State or ISIS; the Syriac Military Council fighting on behalf of Assyrian Christians and Jaysh al-Muwahhidin of the Druze; among others. Syria has also been infiltrated by brigades of Shi’i irregulars from Iraq, such as ‘Asa’ib Ahl al-Haqq and Liwa’ al-’Abbas, as well as Hizballah units from Lebanon.

In retrospect, the year 2012 was decisive in creating the present catastrophe. There were foreign elements embroiled in Syria before that date, fighting for and against the regime, but until early 2012 the dynamics of the Syrian conflict were largely internal. The regime had beaten down the peaceful movement that started around March 2011 and spread to many parts of the country. Partly in anger at the repression, partly in appropriation of weapons pumped in from the outside and partly in anticipation of still greater military assistance, namely from the West, the opposition decided to take up arms. This decision—militarization—had three main effects. First, it dramatically increased the rate of death and destruction throughout the country. The death toll in the first five months of the uprising, from March-July 2011, was already high at 1,715. Over the next five months from August to December, as more and more street protesters became armed people, the number of killed rose to 3,130, and to 7,517 over the subsequent five-month period, according to the Violations Documentation Center in Syria. By mid-2012, the monthly casualties were almost in excess of the total in the entire first year of the uprising. Militarization gave the Syrian regime a free hand to unleash its full arsenal of indiscriminate weaponry. Second, the opposition’s shift to a war footing prevented large sectors of Syrian society from participating in the struggle to unseat Asad and his entourage. Contrary to common belief, the initial uprising was not exclusive to provincial towns and the countryside. The capital city of Damascus, in fact, was also the site of early demonstrations, which continued, off and on, for almost a year.3 The regime’s overwhelming strength in the city, coupled with the alienation of many Damascenes from the trajectory of the uprising, was a big reason why these protests did not develop further. There is no way to be sure, but it is possible that had the uprising stayed peaceful more and more people would have been emboldened to take to the streets. Third, and perhaps most fatedly, the advent of armed rebellion placed much of the opposition’s chances in the hands of those who would fund and arm the fighters. Militarization was the main conduit by which Turkey and the Arab Gulf states—under cover of the exiled Syrian opposition—hijacked the movement inside Syria. When the nucleus of the Free Syrian Army was crushed in Homs at the end of February 2012, the regime was on the verge of extinguishing the uprising. It was then that the jihadi groups were unleashed.

Close observers could see the writing on the wall. An International Crisis Group report released that March warned that the emerging dynamics could set in motion a destructive cycle of violence that would be too complex for any one side to stop.

Even if the regime can survive for some time, it has become virtually impossible to see how it can ultimately prevail or restore normalcy. It might not fall, but it would become a shadow of itself, an assortment of militias fighting a civil war.... Gulf Arab countries have said they are prepared to [arm the opposition] and may have begun; it is probably unrealistic to stop them. But this, too, could plunge the nation even
deeper into a bloody civil war without prospects for a resolution in the foreseeable future, and almost certainly trigger counter-steps by regime allies, thus intensifying the budding proxy war.¹

Further away from the ground, the warning signs were missed or purposely ignored. In US and European policy circles, the talk was not of how to arrest the descent into darkness but of how to manage the “transition to a post-Asad Syria.” This transition was treated as a fait accompli almost as soon as President Barack Obama said the words “Asad must go” in August 2011.

Post-Conflict Recovery

Over the last 25 years, an industry of peacebuilding and post-conflict economic recovery planning has burgeoned with buy-in from governments, aid agencies and non-governmental organizations. The impetus for associating peace with economic recovery came from frustrations with the existing apparatus for helping countries back on their feet after war or regime change. First, it became evident that exclusive attention to “transitional justice”—truth, reparations, criminal prosecutions and institutional reform—was inadequate in places that had suffered massive loss of life, destruction of property, displacement and polarization along lines of ethnic or religious identity. Second, it dawned on international experts that the “political” and “economic” realms are not easily separated. The famous illustration of this idea came in a 1994 Foreign Policy article by Alvaro de Soto (senior political adviser to the UN secretary-general) and Graciana del Castillo (a senior UN officer and professor of economics at Columbia University). In this piece, the co-authors stressed that “political, economic, social, environmental and security/military problems should be addressed jointly and coherently.” To indicate the folly of doing otherwise, de Soto and del Castillo used the metaphor of a patient lying on the operating table, a curtain running down the middle, as unrelated surgery is performed on the left and right sides of the body.³ Third, practitioners in the peacebuilding field came to realize that the problem was not just a lack of coordination between the political peacekeepers and the stewards of economic recovery, such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, but also the very substance of those institutions’ policy advice. What was considered sound economic policy in Washington circles in the early 1990s—austerity, balanced budgets, deregulated private sectors—was in fact damaging to the prospect of keeping the peace as well as to the project of building a new state. The legitimacy of the state, according to the critics, did
not come simply from democratic elections but also from delivery of social services and programs that the population needed and demanded. Assuming that outside aid dries up over time, the state must learn to make do with domestic revenue, such as taxes, but the capacity of the state to collect taxes depends on citizen perceptions of the state’s ability to provide services and generate economic development. In what is termed the post-Washington consensus literature on post-conflict situations, there is tremendous focus on building credible institutions or, as some put it, getting the rules of the game right.

The study of post-conflict economic aid is another growth industry. Post-conflict assistance has grown to be as much as 15 percent of official development aid worldwide, with over $100 billion pledged in the 1990–2005 period. Every major multinational organization, including the UN, the World Bank, the IMF, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, and the International Labor Organization, has its own corpus of research and writing about what happens when peace accords trigger substantial flows of aid. It was no surprise, then, that Syria gained immediate attention on this front, with institutions from near and far releasing studies of various length.

Some of the most significant documents are those produced by the Clingendael Institute (Netherlands); the Legatum Institute; the Day After project co-sponsored by the US Institute of Peace and the German Institute for International and Security Affairs; the Syrian Economic Task Force, a sub-group of the Friends of Syria; and the UN ESCWA’s National Agenda for the Future of Syria. Though sometimes formulaic, the substance of the recommendations reveals the extent of the learning attained over the years. Many of the post-conflict visions are benign or in fact quite useful. They stress local economic development, for example, and the need to preserve the public sector rather than embark on across-the-board downsizing and purging a la deaatioth in Iraq.

The Clingendael document, Stability and Economic Recovery After Assad: Key Steps for Syria’s Post-Conflict Transition (2012), is a self-described “power” study focusing on the nature of political competition or armed conflict, its material bases, and the possibilities of defusing conflict and paving the way for peace. It takes note that the black markets and criminal networks that arise in wartime are a threat to post-conflict stability. The Legatum Institute study is co-authored by Ashraf Ghani, the former World Bank official who is now president of Afghanistan, and Clare Lockhart. It purports to distill lessons from previous conflicts in order to address four different post-Asad scenarios. The Clingendael and Legatum documents are meant to supply general policy advice rather than blueprints or road maps. The Day After, the Syrian Economic Task Force and ESCWA, on the other hand, aim to make concrete policy recommendations. Unlike Legatum and Clingendael, these projects also claim to be providing a forum for Syrians and giving Syrians ownership of the outcomes. The Day After, in particular, lists intellectuals and activists prominent in the Syrian opposition in its executive committee and working groups.

Many of the documents—like others published by multinational institutions—are marked by the obsession with “good governance” that has replaced the Washington consensus fixation upon liberalization, privatization and deregulation. As Jonathan Goodhand has noted, “good governance” is not about “getting the prices” right but “getting the institutions” right by promoting pluralism, civil society and other types of institutional reform. The problem is that such idealized “rules of the game” eschew engagement with messy local politics.

These documents are not inherently flawed, but they are investments in a future that is becoming more distant by the day. One reason is the intransigence of the Syrian regime, of course; another is the constantly compounded humanitarian emergency. But there is a third reason that is less commonly acknowledged—and that is the role of the Syrian opposition.

**With Friends Like These**

The Syrian opposition has played the vision game of its own accord and without the help of Western hosts. The main would-be visionary was the Syrian National Council (SNC) formed in Istanbul in the fall of 2011. In April 2012 the Friends of Syria recognized the SNC as representative of the Syrian people, and the following March the body was granted Syria’s seat in the Arab League. On March 27, 2012, the SNC published a National Covenant for a New Syria, calling for a democratic, pluralistic, civil state; human rights and freedom of belief; full rights for women; national rights for Kurds and Assyrians; and restoration of the Golan Heights to Syrian sovereignty.

That liberal-sounding platform, at least, was what the “international community” saw. Even as it professed these goals, however, the SNC was actively helping to make their realization impossible on the ground, chiefly by pushing the militarization of the uprising. More and more Syrians came to see the SNC and its Turkish and Gulf backers publicly embracing pluralism, while in fact facilitating the rise of fanatical forces, and minimizing or dismissing their crimes. Some of the newly prominent jihadi militias on the opposition side went so far as to claim the right of takfi, or the prerogative to excommunicate other Muslims and make it religiously permissible to kill them. The takfiris were forthright in their sectarian hatred of ‘Alawis, Shi’a, Christians and other religious minorities in Syria.

Liberal-minded opposition intellectuals were put to the test at this critical juncture. Some, such as ‘Abd al-‘Aziz al-Khayyir, spoke out against the prevailing trends. Al-Khayyir was a member of the National Coordination Council, an opposition body that had remained independent of Turkey, the Gulf states and the West and therefore was demonized as much by the SNC as by the Syrian regime. People like al-Khayyir and Haytham Manna’, the former head of the Arab Human
Rights Council, were vociferous in warning of the corrosive impact of militarization, including the rising danger posed by takfiri groups. Others, however, including most of the liberal members of the SNC, wavered. Fearing complete military defeat at the hands of the regime, they stood by silently as the takfiri groups emerged. Many took rhetorical refuge in a Syrian exceptionalism—“Syria is not Iraq; Syria is not Lebanon”—insisting that Syrian society is not and cannot become sectarian. This notion was a healthy counter to the essentialist reading whereby the uprising and all subsequent events were wholly sectarian in cause, but it ignored the course of events and downplayed the openly expressed animus of groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra. It was also a misreading of history: Sectarianism in Lebanon and Iraq is not an essential feature of those societies, either. As in Syria, it was produced.

The opposition’s duplicity regarding the rise of extremists was disastrous. Aside from its contribution to the death toll, it sent a message to many Syrians that the opposition simply wanted to take power, regardless of the consequences, and that the promises of a pluralistic, democratic state based on citizenship were empty. By refusing to acknowledge sectarian crimes, claiming that all evidence thereof was fabricated by the regime to scare minorities, the opposition lost credibility among many Syrians and, eventually, in world capitals. The divisions in the country were reinforced, as a large segment of the population was thrown back into the arms of the regime.

No one can say for sure if the Syrian uprising could have turned out differently—and, if so, how. Any movement forward, however, must acknowledge that the ferocity of the fighting has split the Syrian population so badly that no one side can claim to represent the entire country. It is also essential that the entire truth of what took place, the atrocities of both the regime and the opposition, be known. Careful documentation of the calamity could be the cornerstone of an anti-sectarian, pluralistic state project based on citizenship. Absent such a thorough airing, what will instead emerge in Syria is what psychologist Johanna Vollhardt terms “exclusive victim consciousness”—each social group will believe that their suffering was the worst, to the extent of denying the anguish of others. The process starts, however, not by envisioning the future “rules of the game” but by addressing the game itself.

Endnotes
2 Ibid.
5 Alvaro de Soto and Graciana del Castillo, “Obstacles to Peacebuilding,” Foreign Policy (Spring 1994).
7 I owe Samer Abboud a special debt of gratitude for bringing some of these projects to my attention as part of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Beirut Center’s Syria Economic Reconstruction Roundtable meetings, which took place in Beirut in 2013 and 2014. During 2014, I was a consultant with UN ESCWA’s National Agenda for the Future of Syria Program.
Can Art Cross Borders?  
Qalandiya and the Problem of Tanzir

Kirsten Scheid

“We are not just talking culture and art for the sake of having a vision (lil-tanzir), holding exhibitions irrespective of who comes or doesn’t. To the contrary, we have a mission!” At the press conference in Ramallah on October 21, 2014 for the second edition of the Qalandiya International Biennale (QIB2), impassioned organizers responded to a pointed question about the role art could have in protecting Palestinian identity and overcoming Israeli oppression. The spokesperson, Jack Persekian, proclaimed that naming the biannual Palestine art event for the infamous checkpoint in the Israeli separation wall could transform the barrier into a bridge. Specifically, he argued that art put forth a vision of another Palestine, a historical one built from cosmopolitan connections and a present one constructed from transnational cooperation. He added that organizers had already enacted the vision of being “one body,” filling in for each other when restricted from moving between the 12 sites, 13 organizing institutions and 14 exhibitions that comprised this expansive festival. Yet lurking behind the impressive numbers and clever tactics was the shared anxiety that it was nothing more than “lil-tanzir,” for sake of having a vision.

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QIB2 was a massive event, spanning 24 days and bringing together the works (and usually bodies, too) of 118 artists from 23 countries, locating artwork across historical Palestine. It centered physically and spiritually around Qalandiya checkpoint. Checkpoints stratify Palestinians into classes of “differential mobilities,” and, as Helga Tawil-Souri showed in 2011, though taken from globalization’s security toolkit, they exclude Palestinians from globalization by blocking their movement and locking them into diminishing arenas of interaction.

A year later, in October 2012, the first edition of the Qalandiya International Biennale was launched from the village town hall neighboring the checkpoint’s terminal. It re-rooted globalization in the checkpoint and contested the immobility regime with new types of connectivity. Specifically, it incorporated the fourth edition of the Riwaq Biennale (co-organized with Riwaq Center for Architectural Conservation), which in 2009 had stretched from Italy (where it inhabited a pavilion in the Fifty-Third Venice Biennale) to the Occupied Territories. The QIB project thus perpetuated a particularly Palestinian practice of what Chiara De Cesari calls “anticipatory representation, the performance or prefiguration of an institution that does not yet fully exist.” In this case, it was an anticipation that countered the extant institution, the checkpoint, the separation wall and the immobility regime they enact.

QIB2’s anticipatory representation started with the event’s name. First, although now associated with the central West Bank checkpoint, Qalandiya was the name of an international airport that was located on the plain outside the village of the same name until 1967. Second, the word “biennale” is itself a bridge. Persekian, speaking Arabic, explained that it is an English word that originated in Latin, passed through Italian with the founding of the famous Biennale di Venezia, and now arrived here as a “Palestinian appropriation” in a tradition of art flows. If in its quotidian usage it invokes “the division, closure and diaspora that has happened to Palestine and Palestinians,” as Persekian put it, “the name also provides the opportunity to think historically” and reclaim that address for cosmopolitan connection. Thus, “Qalandiya Biennale International is a bridge to and from Palestine,” Persekian summarized, and in this spirit, the event included shows in parts of Palestine such as Jerusalem and Haifa to which, they knew, Palestinian audiences mostly could not go. Israel is stingy with the green-colored, biometric identification cards that West Bankers must carry to be allowed to cross the separation wall. (Palestinian citizens of Israel carry blue cards; holders of foreign passports can cross without extra documentation.)

Indeed, the organizers’ “mission” pitted people against art, not just border control. At the reception following the press conference, gossipy banter about the works to be viewed at the October 24 opening of the Jerusalem show was interwoven with updates about the ever changing procedures at Qalandiya checkpoint (“Does everyone have to get off the bus and walk through the ‘cattle queues’ or only green card holders?”) and commiserations about personal permit status (Iyad did not have a permit so he could not attend; Inass had finally gotten one and wanted to go even if she could not find child care). Transportation trumps all else. No sooner had I started making get-to-know-you small talk with Marion, a French researcher with “institutional” status who was to be my ride to Jerusalem, than I found myself yanked from the conversation by my friend Mirna, who had secured us another ride, on the condition that we leave right then. End of art event.

Transportation shaped viewing, too. In a subterranean gallery the next evening, I had just started scrutinizing Benji Boyadjian’s delicate watercolors of Wadi al-Shami when the ever conscientious Mirna arrived in a panic: Marion was staying in Jerusalem for the night. No more return ride to Ramallah. We looked around the art crowd and tried to remember who had which identity documents. Instantly everyone became “green” or “blue” according to the color of his or her card. When we finally found someone who would be returning to Ramallah in her private car but already had three passengers, we had to convince her that if we squished and ducked we could all fit and still evade Israeli traffic police who would gladly fine her or worse for exceeding the three-passenger limit. Ironically, the watercolors I was unable to see were said to document a valley that will soon be destroyed to create a ring road around Har Homa settlement, another infrastructural innovation that will aid Jewish-only travel and obstruct Palestinian traffic from Bethlehem to Jerusalem.

Several artists could not attend their own openings at QIB2. Yazid Anani, a West Bank-born professor of architecture at Birzeit University and a curator of international repute, still had not received, three days prior to a film screening he had organized to occur in Jerusalem, the Israeli response to his application for a permit to attend it from his base in Ramallah. His chances, this time, looked good. Khaled Hourani, an artist world-renowned for his participation in the 2012 Documenta biennale (in Kassel, Germany), on the other hand, already knew he would not be permitted to attend his show in Haifa. He had sent his digital print, Shuhadaa Street, to the newly opened Arab Culture Association for a collective exhibition called Manam (Dream). When the buses gathered at 3 pm in Ramallah to provide free transportation to Haifa, Khaled did not bother to show up. For him Qalandiya was still, primarily, a checkpoint.

For Australian artist Tom Nicholson, the problem of Israeli border control was the exact opposite of Hourani’s. When Nicholson arrived at his art installation in Jerusalem, his work, Comparative Monument, was still in the custody of Israeli customs authorities. The work consisted of a book, or rather 500 copies of a book, which were to be stacked into a monumental sculpture in the Old City’s Khalidi Library to commemorate the uncanny convergence of Australian and
Palestinian experiences of colonialism. Visitors would be encouraged to take away one copy each, helping the monument disappear. Only a 2.5 by 4-meter vinyl negative photograph of tree branches had arrived. It served as a backdrop for the artist’s emergency reconceptualization of his work as a performance piece, to be verbalized. Perhaps the audience ended up giving the piece more attention than they might have under normal circumstances, because it took Nicholson 20 minutes, with simultaneous translation, to describe the pages and images audience members were meant to touch and see, to retell the book’s story. The absent monument instead became, in dog-tired Turkish curator Başak Şenova’s description, “a very unfortunate and obligatory collaboration with the [Israeli] customs.”

Majdal Nateel, one of the ten winners of the Young Artist of the Year Award, found herself in a more difficult situation. In addition to production funds, this Award program gives selected artists six months of support through a series of “encounters” in which the curator and the ten artists listen to lectures, discuss readings and brainstorm. “Everything happened online,” explained Viviana Checchia, the Award competition curator in her opening speech, “because mobility, as you know, is quite an issue here.” As a resident of the besieged Gaza Strip, Nateel could not attend any of the curatorial meetings. To include her in the process, Award organizers developed an elaborate online platform with PDFs of readings, a video chat room and an interactive blog. Eventually, however, the planned works needed to materialize in a single space that could join them with an audience, Ramallah’s newly renovated Municipal Theater. Yet the border confining Nateel to Gaza is even tighter than the one around the West Bank: Not only was Nateel turned back at Erez checkpoint, the northern exit from Gaza, but so too was her artwork.

Nateel’s planned installation, titled Without Coffins, included pale yellow rectangular pine boxes, lying at random angles. It referred to the mass graves in which the bodies of Palestinian resistance fighters killed and kept by Israelis are buried until they become useful for political trading. The engraved metal numbers on such boxes are the only feature identifying who lies within, and these numbers cannot be deciphered without the Israeli...
registry, which is classified state information. In 2008, several of Nateel’s relatives were killed and are now kept in such mass graves. The other half of the installation, mounted on a facing wall, comprised faintly reprinted martyr photographs, tinged in yellow and overlaid with miniature text providing personal details. The charge of Nateel’s artwork arose from the disjuncture between the bureaucratic boxes and the homemade prints, for it was with such photographs and their obsessive, introverted script that Nateel’s family lived and mourned unremittingly in the absence of bodies.

Although this work of art never made it across Erez checkpoint, it did materialize for the Young Artist of the Year Award opening in Ramallah. Aided by the “virtual proximity” that had developed through the online forum, the curatorial staff and fellow artists located the necessary planks and plaques in Ramallah and constructed the piece anew. Ultimately, Nateel’s piece did not only address the issue of missing coffins and unending grief. Nor did it simply give the audience—in Ramallah’s large municipal theater—the chance to participate in the politics of loss. Colleagues who could reach the designated exhibition space became Nateel’s body and mind. They thereby expanded her corporality, invisibly inserting themselves to make visible Nateel’s grappling with grief and mourning. The installation’s boxes and prints were first substitute commemorations for the many bodies that could not reach their Palestinian families. Now they were made by bodies that substituted for one that could not be there, in a sense reversing the Israeli process of delocalizing and decorporalizing Palestinian resistance fighters and regular Gazans.

Another day, another book; same border, new imprint. On the evening of October 25 a small group of artists, curators, professors and college students gathered at the International Art Academy-Palestine in Ramallah to attend a discussion of the Arab Studies Journal’s spring 2014 special issue on “Cultures of Resistance in Palestine and Beyond.” Two of the contributors were present to debate the connection between culture and resistance, theater scholar Rania Jawad and curator ‘Adila Laidi-Hanieh. Alia Rayyan, director of al-Hoash and organizer of the event, opened with an apology that she was unable to make copies of issue available to the audience, because they had been “delayed.” The speakers thought to make do with PDFs of the issue’s table of contents projected onto a large screen. But suddenly, when Laidi-Hanieh tried to recall a point about culture Yazid ‘Anani had made in an interview in the same issue, she looked up to find ‘Anani sitting in the front row. He had surreptitiously joined the audience. His permit to travel from Ramallah to Jerusalem for his film screening had been denied. As it
happened, that meant he could stand in for the missing journal in Ramallah. He later heard about the screening from his “international friends,” who had been the only ones who could make it across Qalandiya, ever the checkpoint.

Persekian’s turn of phrase, “lil-tanzir,” derives from the Arabic word nazara, to view. It invokes theory, philosophy and imagination—ways of seeing that are not based in substance. It points to the painful ambiguity of having vision in a place where the translation of idea into practice is vulnerable to interference. Enabling structures either do not exist or are actively pitched against the effort. Anticipatory politics requires something substantive to sustain the anticipation. Otherwise it disintegrates into sheer frustration. Tanzir’s trivializing connotation is especially poignant in relation to art, whose capacity to exist we generally credit to sheer vision. QIB2 raised a host of questions about the relationship of art to Palestinian reality and especially the immobility regime. Art is supposed to provide a vision of an alternative world, but exactly how does that vision relate to this world? If art does not cross borders, how can it provide a vision, for whom, and is it just a vision? Even as they participated, people wondered if the festival would transcend the injustices of the checkpoint regime or exacerbate them.

Lil-tanzir: the anxious expression resounded in my mind while I eyed the silk scarf draped around the neck of Mieke, an “international” I met at QIB2’s opening reception. What had turned my head was Mieke’s explanation to admirers that the scarf showed a refugee camp, but when I looked I saw, I thought, a jaguar print. The transformation was tickling, and troublesome. Could a refugee camp become a high design element? It seemed perverse. In a good way? Mieke had recently left human rights advocacy to represent Disarming Design, a new design label based in the West Bank but targeting international markets. It, too, was participating in QIB2. She commented that she had not really left her old field, but her new one “helps to make Palestine sexy, to create a political environment that makes it easier....” Her voice trailed off. I asked how the label was creating a market, and how it would export. Mieke agreed it was a problem. As was printing, when there are no high-quality printers in the Occupied Territories, and getting silk, which is not a local product. So what was the point of having this ability to re- envision the world? Just to see how far art could get from reality? Foresight becomes shortsightedness when it stumbles over troublesome issues of logistics.

Rather than asking if Qalandiya is or is not a bridge, is or is not a checkpoint, maybe we are better served with the following set of questions: How do we make sense of artwork that gets snagged at borders? Do we focus on the maker’s intent or the obstructer’s intent? Doing the former prizes the agency of the artist but overlooks the necessity of materialization for art to have impact. Doing the latter trains
the focus on the guardians of power and ignores the potential of creativity to transform. Pitting the two against each other serves a tale of art overcoming boundaries, but that tends to erase the general problem of the border and all the material forms that cannot surpass it.

Closure and checkpoints are such a consistent part of Palestinian experience that Helga Tawil-Souri has argued that they constitute the core features of Palestinian existence wherever Palestinians go. If Qalandiya the checkpoint is so central, literally at the heart of Palestinian existence, then Palestinian art cannot cross it and get to some other side. And what good is it for Palestinians to represent themselves to the world in art if they have no rights, including the right not to be artists, not to express themselves peacefully, the right to be evaluated for the merit of their political cause and not for how it is put forth? The cleverness and originality of Palestinian art is laudable—with its special relationship to audience, space, notions of visibility and viewing, and so on—but one should not celebrate the fact that “Palestinians get to do art” as an alternative to their attaining other rights of expression and mobility. It is crucial to avoid the danger of insinuating that if Palestinians made art that was good enough, it could cross for them, and effectively replace their rights with arts.

Yet if the Qalandiya in QIB2 was not exactly a bridge, it was not just a part of the separation wall, either. Recall Şenova’s ironic interpretation of Nicholson’s spoken monument as a form of “collaboration.” It seems that QIB2 reveals how art produces struggles over materiality that render visible unexpected aspects of Israeli dominance and Palestinian resistance. In observing the Israeli imprint on Palestinian art it is clear that the work produced does not belong entirely to the intentions of the artists or the border guards. Howard Becker introduced actor-network theory to the study of art in order to shift the focus from genius intentions to social facilities or skills that make a society capable of producing art. He defined an “art world” as “a network of people whose cooperative activity, organized via their joint knowledge of conventional means of doing things, produces the kind of artwork the art world is noted for.” The problem with Becker’s model was its reliance upon shared conventions. When society is the subject of struggle, when conventions are a point of contention in the quest to define what the meaning of society will be, studying how art transforms can shed light on how certain ideas may gain traction, may become handles for thinking through quandaries particular to their place.

Consider again Khaled Hourani’s digital photograph. If Israeli “collaboration” is deemed part of the artwork, Hourani’s absence becomes integral to its overall presence. The 170 x 90 cm digital photograph on aluminum, titled Shuhadaa Street, towered over visitors to Manam, the Haifa exhibition organized by Rula Khoury to examine the dreams of Palestinian individuals, which, she holds, have been tinged by memories and longings for Palestine. For his “dream,” Hourani contributed a reproduction of a warning sign on the main road in his native Hebron, Shuhada’ Street, at the spot where, according to a 1997 agreement, Palestinian-controlled territory meets Israeli-controlled territory. In fire-red and blazing white, the bilingual sign warns those passing through which military power is “in control” on which side. Thus it brings out an intimate opposition between Hebraophones and Arabophones, because although each side of the double-faced sign speaks to both, speakers of only one language can feel safe on either side. Such signs exist throughout the Occupied Territories, but they are moot in Israeli-controlled Haifa. Yet in Haifa, where the audience would include Hebrew-speaking Arabs from that city with conflicted connections to Arab identity and the West Bank, the sign put visitors on the spot: Figure out which side addresses you. On which side will you feel properly warned, and on which will you recognize yourself as the threat? Ironically, Shuhadaa Street worked more fully in Haifa, where almost all viewers would actually read both languages, than the original does in Hebron. Its presence in the artist’s unwilled absence resonated with the identity category many Haifa Arabs also must inhabit to remain in their family’s homelands—“present absentees.”

The problem with Persekian’s opening proposition—that art, and with it Palestinians, can cross borders—is the inherent suggestion that, for Palestinians, there is another side to reach. But borders and checkpoints are constitutive of contemporary Palestinian experience, given seven decades of an Israeli occupation that only tightens each year. And they are even more fundamental to the idea of art and the world that has developed since the eighteenth century to promote this aspect of human production. The art world is all about categorizing, ranking and issuing passes. If it is truly an instance of anticipatory representation, QIB2 must be an occasion for rethinking how art relates to people and relates people to each other. Artists, audiences and even artworks could not get to the event’s designated sites. Yet crossing was not completely stopped. People and objects responded to their immobilization with curious forms of shape shifting and self-refashioning. The results force us to ponder the relationship between visibility and materiality, between having a vision and having something visible.

Author’s Note: Portions of this essay first appeared in Anthropology Now.

Endnotes

1 This term is Chris Harker’s. For a discussion of the social frictions that result from this ranking, see Harker’s “Student Im/mobility in Birzeit, Palestine,” Mobilities 4/1 (2009).
4 Tawil-Souri, op cit.
The Responsibilities of the Cartoonist

Khalid Albaih is a political cartoonist “from the two countries of Sudan,” in his words, who is now based in Qatar.

His drawings appear at his Facebook page, entitled Khartoon! in a play on the name of the Sudanese capital. Katy Kalemkerian and Khalid Medani spoke with him in Montreal on November 9, 2014, and conducted a follow-up interview by Skype after the January 2015 attack on the offices of the French magazine Charlie Hebdo, notorious for its regular caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad in degrading or humiliating poses. A longer version of this interview appears at merip.org.

You’ve been represented as an “Arab spring” cartoonist, though you were doing political art before the uprisings began. What are the advantages and disadvantages of that branding for your art?

In terms of art and politics, there are always fashions that come along. The “Arab spring” was something the whole world could relate to, because it was in the news so much, and a lot of people just wanted to jump on the bandwagon. I was part of that marketing, which was good for me and my art and good for the cause, as well.

I’m trying to bridge the gap between East and West. Even if I feel I’m taken advantage of sometimes, or if I’m taking advantage of the system—in either case it’s good because people actually get to see something from the region by an artist who was affected by what happened. People need a story.

It’s good to get attention for “Arab spring” work, because later there will be attention to my other work, about Sudan. If somebody likes my page or follows me in social media, they’ll see the things on my page about “Arab spring” countries, but at the same time they’ll learn something about Sudan. I’m trying to get as much as possible from the media bonanza, and at least to get the young generation who are following my work to understand things from our point of view, not the point of view that gets channeled through their media outlets.

What themes are particularly important in your work?

I try to talk about the things that are new and alien to Sudanese society, things we didn’t grow up with but are happening now because of what happened since 1989 when Bashir came to power. A lot of things changed in the social grid, such as women’s dress—women used to wear the thobe (a full-body wrap) and now they wear hijab. It’s hard for me to talk about local subjects in Sudan because I’m outside the country. But I try to talk about things that I know about generally, things like women’s dress, racism between the tribes, the whole Afro-Arab situation. They’re huge issues but I try to tackle them with a little bit of humor. That’s why in my Sudan cartoons I always use two Sudanese characters, to show something we’re talking about, like me talking to a friend of mine.

For example: “Are we Arab or are we African?” This question has been asked a billion times. In my original cartoon, one of the characters says, “We’re both Arab and African,” which is like saying, “I don’t want to hear about this any longer.” And that’s what I want—to move on with our lives. A Sudanese person will get it, but an Arab might think, “Yeah, they don’t know if they’re Arab or African.” Others might think, “They’re African. Why is he asking this question?” There’s a lot of conversation that follows that cartoon. [In a second version of the drawing, Albaih rendered the response as gibberish with a note saying “answer removed out of sensitivity to readers’ feelings,” his way of saying that few have “moved on” from the question. –Eds.]

In terms of international issues, what I always want to talk about is Palestine. This issue is not the root of our problems, but certainly it’s one of the biggest problems that we have. If we resolve the Palestine-Israel situation, a lot of other things will get resolved because of this feeling of injustice that we have. The anger doubles every time you watch the
news. “The Israeli government did this to Palestinians, a 10-year old was arrested...” These things fuel something inside you. And it really hurts me that a lot of people take it for granted, like it’s a closed case: Israel will keep doing this, and they’ll never be questioned. As if it’s a boring subject, so let’s move on.

Some of your cartoons are not about the Arab world at all. Can you tell us about the international dialogue that your cartoons bring about?

I don’t like it when people say I’m based in Qatar because people automatically attach me to that country. Not that there’s anything wrong with Qatar, but I think I belong online. My work is online. And online, it’s a village. You read about everything.

So I work on everything that’s trending, and I try to do cartoons on things that don’t relate to the Arab world in any way, because I will get views from other countries, and maybe I’ll get them to change their minds about a certain situation, whether it’s Palestine and Israel or Sudan. When I say, “We are one. We are like you. I share your thoughts,” maybe they will do the same. For example, I did a cartoon about Chavez when he died, and a lot of Venezuelans were talking to me about it online. It’s good to have that diversity. I’m trying to connect everyone because everyone needs to know, not necessarily in detail what the problems are, but to know that there’s a problem here, and it should be solved. We’re all one, trying to fight the man, basically, the corrupt politicians.

This is a funny story: I went with my teenage sister-in-law, Aya, to pick up an American girl at the Doha airport. They’d never met before. The girl was a guest on an exchange program who was staying in Qatar for a week. In the car, she and Aya started talking about television shows, the trending subjects on Twitter, who they follow on Instagram, as if they’d known each other for years. This is globalization. Before, Aya and this girl would not have had anything at all in common. Now with the Internet, they have everything in common. They watch the same shows; they’re on the same social media. That’s why I use a lot of pop culture. We take it for granted because it seems normal; everyone is on the Internet. But it’s beautiful that there’s no wall any longer.

Many now say that the uprisings failed, that the role of social media was overblown, and that in the aftermath we’ve gone back to even...
stronger authoritarianism in some Arab countries, and all of this violence in others. What do you say to them?

Well, I don’t think it’s an aftermath, because I think we’re still going. It’s too early to pass judgment. The youth movements are still there; the political parties newly formed by young Egyptians are still working. I don’t think we can neglect 200 years of authoritarianism. What we’re going through right now is another step of the revolution. Yes, a lot of people are in jail now for trying, but they’ll continue.

In this day and age, citizen journalism has become one of the most important things for any current event, because you get it from the person on the ground. Of course a lot of people started using it for certain political agendas, but there are honest ones out there. The Internet is good, but it’s also full of junk. You have to do research to find out what you should read and what you shouldn’t.

If you type in, “Aliens exist,” you’ll get 100 million articles saying aliens exist, and if you substitute, “Aliens don’t exist,” you’ll get 100 million more saying they don’t! So it’s about what you want, really. If you’re looking for people saying it’s the start of the revolution, you can follow that path. If you want to say, “No, it’s all a game, it’s all a conspiracy. We’re going to go back to how we were, and there is no hope,” you can do that as well. But my personal preference is to follow the optimistic path.

Do you feel a personal responsibility to keep the momentum going?

Yes, and it’s a lot of pressure. People take what I say personally. Sometimes when I do a cartoon, people say, “No, I don’t agree. This is wrong. You shouldn’t say this.” OK, we can discuss it. I’m not saying I’m right and you’re wrong because I know better. I definitely don’t know better. I’m not a professional. I’m a person who draws cartoons and happens to have a following. So I’m open to discussion. But that feeling of social responsibility is what wakes me up in the morning.

What does your art say about race and racism? And is it fair to say that you don’t focus on issues of gender in Sudan as much as you could?

I work a lot on racism because it’s a real problem. It’s why we are two countries right now, divided.

I have a cartoon with two Sudanese guys who look exactly alike. Each one is calling the other ‘ab (slave). I have another cartoon where one character is labeled “Arab tribes in Darfur”
and the other “non-Arab tribes in Darfur.” They look exactly the same.

Gender is something about Sudan that I was proud of. Women were educated, part of the conversation in the family, not neglected or weak. Of course, I don’t know what it was like in the job market, but in society, I think women were very empowered. Many activists were women, strong women who had been to jail.

I did a cartoon called “'Azza of Yesterday, 'Azza of Today” (‘Azza zaman wa 'Azza hassi). People used to call Sudan 'Azza, likening the country to a proud woman. And that’s what I always saw: Women were proud of who they were, very ambitious, with no limitations, at least in the capital where I grew up. So that’s ‘Azza zaman, and ‘Azza hassi is a beaten-down woman with a shaved head sitting behind bars, because what they do to women activists these days—lock them up, shave their heads, rape them and throw them in the street. Sudan has gender equality when it comes to violence, I guess!

I love the pictures of Sudanese women walking at the front of the protests against 'Abboud in the 1960s or Numayri in the 1980s, wearing the white thobe and carrying signs. Those are images that make you think, “Wow, I wish these days would come back.” Streets were clean, women were wearing the thobe and protesting, and nobody touched them. 'Abboud gave up power after the killing of two students.

Now many more people die in a week and nobody cares. Some of them are women. One was an engineer and she got shot. So that situation is terrible, but I think our biggest problem is racism.

You haven’t given up on linking northern and southern Sudan even after the 2011 referendum created the new state of South Sudan. Why is that?

I was very proud as well that Sudan was known as the biggest country in Africa. I have two uncles who are married to southerners, which doesn’t happen a lot. It’s very strange in Sudan to have southerners living with northerners normally. But that was my family. They were my cousins. We grew up with them, and there was no racism. And a lot of my family as well used to be merchants in the south, and they speak Dinka.

I see the frustration, I see the racism and I put myself in their place, thinking, “Why would I want to be a part of this nation? I want to be a first-class citizen in my own country, rather than fight for my rights as a second-class citizen in someone else’s country.” So I understand why the southerners left.

But for me, it’s a dream to have some sort of unity—federal or something—because we’re one country in the end. Not just because of the geographical borders, but also because of the ties that we have. It was a beautiful culture for both of us. Reuniting would help us get rid of the racism problem, and help all of us economically. That’s why I work a lot on South Sudan as well, because I don’t see it as a separate country. I still see it as my country. When I write something, I say I am “from the two countries of Sudan.” I am from the two countries of Sudan, and I want it to become that way again.

Could you say more about how your upbringing influenced your work?

As I said, I have South Sudanese cousins, and that’s very rare. In the same family, I also have Islamists and communists. We all lived together. My Islamist uncle was 'Abd al-Rahman Suwar al-Dhahab. He was president for one year in 1986. He is considered the most decent Arab president, because he actually gave up power willingly to a democratically elected government. My other uncle is Babiker al-Nour, who was leader of the Sudanese Communist Party and led their coup in 1972.

My dad always said, “Family is family. We all have their own views, when it comes to politics, and so be it.” That was amazing to me, because that is how it should be. Here are southerners and northerners, communists and Islamists, in the same family. Nobody talks about it, but I do because I want to make a point: They all lived together and they were happy. What happened? It could be a normal thing, but it’s not, so what happened? Why aren’t we like that now?

These are the things that influenced me. Politics was not a cause of violence. Politics did not cause these people not to be a family anymore. Race did not cause these people not to be a family anymore. A big part of what I do is searching for that home that had this harmony. I want that home back.

What do you think happened to that model of ideological and sectarian, even ethnic and racial, coexistence?

First of all, it’s a problem of neglecting the other. As soon as you say, “I am the only person in the right here,” things will fall apart. And especially when you say, “I know more than you because I’m closer to God,” that’s really a problem. It’s the selfishness of this new regime. It’s selfish to say, “We are right, and everyone else is wrong.”

It dismantled my dream and many others’ dreams. I could be optimistic because I saw and heard all those things as a child, but you know, even if all these things were in my head, I want them to be true, and I think they can be.

That’s why these people have been in power for 25 years, by doing everything that harmony is not, fighting harmony as much as they can. Not on purpose, of course—they think they are doing the right thing, but they’re neglecting everybody else. They think they are doing what God asks of them. It’s just like communism in Russia. They thought they were giving power to the people, but in the end they ended up killing the people. They had concentration camps filled with people who had opinions different from theirs. And this is what’s happening now in the Arab world. If you’re
a Muslim Brother, they don’t want to hear you. Two years ago, if you were with the other regime, they didn’t want to hear you. “I’m right. You’re wrong. Get out of here, or I’ll be violent”—that’s what creates the problem. That’s what creates ISIS, fundamentalism, racism, all of these things.

Based on your interactions with youth movements, do they want democracy, in the grand sense, or are they driven by local grievances?

I think they just wanted change. Some of them didn’t even know what they wanted after that. They would’ve settled for the easiest thing, for these people to leave. Some of these kids were 21 years old, so they were born (and some died) under the same president. Most of them were not involved in a political party or any sort of traditional opposition formation.

In Syria they were singing! I remember in the first videos that came out of Syria, they were singing that they wanted change. Look now. Nobody can sing, because these presidents are selfish and neglect other people. So I don’t blame the protesters totally. I blame the Western world for supporting the uprisings at times when it was convenient and not supporting them when it was not in their interest. It’s everybody’s fault, really.

Everybody’s wondering why we have angry people slaughtering each other. It’s because of the injustice that’s
happening! When someone has grown up with nothing, all he asks for is change, and then his brother gets shot in front of him, you can’t expect that person not to seek revenge. If you’re in Afghanistan and drones hit a wedding, killing 33 people, and there’s not a word about it on the news, of course you’re going to get pissed off and fight America, whether you’re a secularist or an Islamist. You only know that America took down the Taliban, and now they are killing people with no regret. It’s a scream for help, from my point of view. Just like I’m screaming for help with my cartoons, these people are screaming for help with their guns.

You don’t need to be into politics, or know anything about gender equality, or know anything about racism, to know that the status quo is killing you. You feel that you don’t have a future. Unemployment in Sudan is unbelievable—same in Egypt and Syria.

You probably have as big a Western audience as you have in the Arab world. What is the difference between those audiences? Is there a problem with the way that some of them see your art?

I reach out to Western audiences because I think Western audiences control our fate. They have democracy, and we’re asking them to help us by electing the right president, and by taking part in protests and stands against injustice in the Arab world.

But a lot of Westerners see my work as an attack, especially if I do something about Israel, as with the last Israeli attack on Gaza. I was doing a cartoon a day about that, and there were really interesting discussions in the comments section. Even Israelis who have a really different point of view, it’s great to understand where they come from. Because we don’t know where they come from. I personally had no idea where they come from. They believe that this is their land, but there’s a lot of social structure around that belief. There were generations who lived there since 1948 and before. Now they see it as their country and they’re willing to fight for it.

Sometimes the Western audience is a bit racist, or think that we blame them for everything, or want the West to help us all the time, and when the West does, like in Iraq, we blame them for what happens. I get that comment a lot. I don’t have to reply many times—I’m not that good at writing—because other readers will post long paragraphs explaining the history. Imagine a conservative person, or a person who doesn’t know the history of the region, and what he learns. It’s amazing.

How do you reach out to an Arab audience as well as a Western one?

I try my best to simplify what I’m talking about to the fullest. I try to come up with one striking image that says something. Because I work on social media and people are mostly on their mobile phones, I really try to make it striking. I don’t use much language because I don’t want people to think, “Well, this is something related to Arabs so I’m not going to understand.” I try as much as I can to use images, and a lot of pop culture. Sometimes I try to be shocking, to shake people out of their comfort zone, with the intention that they will want to follow up to know more. “Why is he doing that? What does that mean?”

Political cartoons are in the limelight with the Charlie Hebdo incident. What are your views on the bounds, if any, on freedom of speech?

Freedom of speech is a must—and it’s personal for me as a Muslim cartoonist who can only work online in order to say what I want to say. At the same time, we should mind what we say.

We have a responsibility as cartoonists to say whatever we want to say but at the same time to respect others. It’s all about respect, rather than stating an opinion, at a time like this, when the world is divided and everybody is angry. Do I, as a political cartoonist, really want to widen the gaps? Or do I want to bridge the gaps, and talk about what we have in common?

I get this line all the time from Westerners: “We make jokes about Jesus all the time, and it doesn’t matter.” I think that’s a very selfish view of things. What you think is funny, other people might not. Why are you forcing your modernism, or whatever you think it is, on other people? If you respect their opinion, you can talk about the Prophet Muhammad and Islam in ways that make people think, rather than anger them.

I talk about religion all the time in my cartoons. But there’s a certain point where it can become vulgar and even hateful. A lot of cartoonists need to meet deadlines, so they do what I call lazy cartooning that feeds stereotypes: An angry man with a beard is a Muslim. A woman in a niqab who’s oppressed by her husband is a Muslim woman.

I totally condemn what happened at Charlie Hebdo, but I’m not a fan of Charlie Hebdo. Their way of doing things is very aggressive. If their point is to make 1.6 billion people angry, they really get it across.

You were invited to participate in a “Je Suis Charlie” cartoon festival, and you declined.

When I first saw the news, I was really upset and shocked. First of all, why now, after all this time? My second reaction was that it could have been me or a friend of mine who was shot. People in this region get killed for a lot less. Then I started thinking about the families in Europe who would be accused, and the whole post-September 11 attitude toward Arabs, Muslims and anybody who looks different. So I drew a cartoon and it went viral: The world

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Palestinians and Latin America’s Indigenous Peoples
Coexistence, Convergence, Solidarity
Cecilia Baeza

Palestinians have found an ally in the indigenous peoples of Latin America. Over the last decade, indigenous movements have been among the most vocal supporters in the region of the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination. Bolivia’s Evo Morales, the first self-identified indigenous president in Latin America since colonization, has broken off diplomatic relations with Israel, endorsed the boycott, divestment and sanctions movement, called Israel a “terrorist state,” and denounced Israeli “apartheid” and “genocide in Gaza.” No other Latin American head of state has gone so far in supporting the Palestinian cause.

Underlying this empathy is the deep resonance of Palestinian struggles against loss of territory, state repression, colonialism and racism with the same struggles on the part of Latin American indigenous peoples. The concept of resonance goes deeper than drawing an analogy. As Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink point out, “the construction of cognitive frames is an essential component of transnational networks’ political strategies.”

Comparisons in “cognitive frames” do not necessarily make sense in all respects, but they do function to render distant events meaningful. This process—identified by Robert Benford and David Snow as “frame bridging”—can have a pedagogical dimension (to make a problem more comprehensible to a target audience) as well as a political one (to build new alliances). The linkages between the Palestinian and Latin America’s indigenous causes have both dimensions. The reverberations of the Palestinian cause among indigenous peoples are the product of a political convergence built on the ground by indigenous and Palestinian movements in Latin America, which is home to an estimated half-million people of Palestinian descent, the largest such population outside the Arab world.

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Encounters

Arab emigration from Palestine to Latin America started in the late Ottoman period, with predominantly Christian immigrants from Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Tayba and Ramallah arriving as early as 1870. The nascent European tourism in the Holy Land created a boom in demand for religious handicrafts, and a new class of merchants emerged in these towns, especially Bethlehem. These merchants first sought to expand into Europe, particularly France, but “Amrika” rapidly became the new Eldorado. Once in Latin America, Palestinian traders understood they had to diversify their wares, and they started to peddle everyday products house to house. Traveling the roads often led them to rural communities. Some of these areas were experiencing unprecedented economic growth thanks to the increased agricultural exports allowed by the advent of railways. Most of these communities, however, continued to suffer from a scarcity of retail trade.

Over time, Palestinian middlemen began to settle in rural areas where indigenous people made up the majority or a significant plurality of the population. One son of immigrants from Bethlehem, Chahfik Handal, was born in 1930 in the town of Usulután, the capital of a rural region culturally marked by the Lenca, an indigenous people of southwestern Honduras and eastern El Salvador. Handal went on to become a leader of the Salvadoran guerrilla Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front or FMLN. Similarly, Palestinian immigrants in Peru first settled in Cusco, a predominantly Quechua region in the south of the country, whose commercial revival coincided with the development of railroads. By 1905, those immigrants reached 469 in 1920.

While the Palestinian immigrants were generally less numerous than European settlers, they often played a crucial social and economic role. In fact, poor rural communities could only welcome the Palestinian peddlers, who introduced flexible, informal credit that allowed low-income families to discover a series of previously inaccessible products, including local and imported manufactures. The Palestinians often worked hard to win indigenous customers, for example by learning a few words of the indigenous languages. In Peru, according to many accounts, some of the Palestinians even learned Quechua before Spanish. In doing so, the Palestinians disturbed the logic of hacienda stores, the equivalent of company stores, and one of the institutions through which landowners exerted paternalistic control over tenant laborers. Indigenous peasants usually ran up large debts at these stores, adding an element of debt peonage to tenant farming arrangements. Competition from Palestinian peddlers contributed to the hacienda stores’ gradual decline and helped indigenous communities to overcome their commercial and financial dependence on large landowners. It is important to stress as well that Palestinian immigrants differed from European settlers in their relation to land: Palestinians had not left their country to take up farming in Latin America. Land was not a subject of litigation between Palestinian immigrants and indigenous communities.

Of course, class, gender and race framed Palestinian immigrants’ relations with indigenous and mestizo peasants. Within the span of two generations, as the Palestinian merchants and their descendants accumulated wealth, class differences became a major barrier. The worst case of conflict comes from Honduras: Miguel Facussé Barjum, a second-generation Palestinian from Bethlehem, is one of the wealthiest men in the country and the owner of Grupo Dinant, a palm oil company. Dinant is associated with the killings of more than 100 peasant farmers, most of them of indigenous roots, and appears to be involved in a virtual terror campaign to ensure control of a large swath of land in the Lower Aguan Valley near the Caribbean coast. By contrast, ethnicity and race were vectors of both estrangement and mutual understanding. Endogamy was particularly strong among the first generation of Palestinian immigrants, who often married within the community or brought wives from Palestine. Arab families tended to be somewhat prejudiced toward not only indigenous and mestizo people, but also criollos (“whites,” or Latin Americans of confirmed Spanish descent). Like middleman minorities elsewhere in the world, Palestinian immigrants in Latin America put a premium on discipline, education and willingness to work long hours—qualities they associated with Arabs and not with the rest of society. This kind of cultural bias, however, was harmless compared to the discrimination endured by Arab immigrants and indigenous people, especially during the period 1880–1930, at the hands of the criollo elites. The criollos widely shared a European-inspired racialism that considered all non-white people suspect and undesirable. The abuses, exploitation and denial of rights faced by rural indigenous communities were undoubtedly much worse than what confronted Arab immigrants. Nevertheless, the fact that both groups were categorized as racially undesirable by criollos created a de facto sympathy between them vis-à-vis the elites. While not common, intermarriage did occur among people of Palestinian and indigenous descent. Fuad Chahin Valenzuela, a Christian Democrat in the Chilean parliament, is the grandson of a Palestinian immigrant and a Mapuche peasant.

Shared Concepts

Several scholars have pointed to similarities between the fates of indigenous populations in the United States and Arabs native to historical Palestine. The ideological justifications for dispossession—Manifest Destiny in the US case, and “a land without a people for a people without a land” in the case of Zionism—have been grounds for particularly eloquent comparisons. Elias Sanbar recognized in both ideologies the “same inspiration drawn from the Bible, the same speech about the Promised Land and the new Eden..., the same relation to the indigenous people, which they do not seek to dominate or exploit but hope to see leave.” Both
Manifest Destiny and Zionism combined millennial religious prophecy with the modern ideas of progress or a “civilizing mission” as justifications for displacing the native populations. According to Steven Salaita, the settler ideologies share more than a mere resemblance: “Their mimesis is not merely parallel, but confederated. Zionists drew inspiration from American history in colonizing Palestine, and American history also shaped the outlook of American leaders toward the Near East.”

The connection between Zionism and the colonization of Latin America has been explored far less often, although many features of US frontier history are present in Latin American history as well, especially during the period 1880–1930. In these years, white oligarchies rode sustained economic growth based on the export of commodities to accelerate the dispossession of indigenous peoples. The parallels between the Palestinian and Latin American indigenous experiences are more contemporary than historical. State repression, racism and the murder of indigenous persons by non-indigenous settlers, militias or police are still burning issues in many Latin American countries. Indigenous lands are under multiple pressures from agribusiness, mining and logging companies, and projects to build dams and oil and gas pipelines. Many of these activities open indigenous territories to (legal and illegal) settlement by colonists.

While indigenous peoples in Latin America have suffered almost constant oppression over the last 150 years, with violence peaking during the military dictatorships, their political organization around ethnic cleavages only became noteworthy in the 1990s, with the emergence of prominent indigenous movements in Ecuador, Bolivia, Guatemala, Mexico and Chile. Indigenous peoples represent around 15 percent of the Bolivian population, 41 percent of the Guatemalan, 25 percent of the Ecuadorian, 13 percent of the Mexican and 5 percent of the Chilean. At this time, some of the indigenous organizations began to invoke the issue of Palestine, mainly with reference to concepts of indigenousness, colonialism, dispossession and racism. The similarities between Latin American indigenous and Palestinian struggles are not total, of course. The nature of Israeli occupation, the militarization of the Palestinian movement, and the international dimension of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are but three obvious differences. Moreover, the majority of Latin American indigenous organizations do not seek to establish independent states but ask for local political autonomy and advocate for constitutional changes recognizing the “pluri-national” character of their countries. Even in Chile, where some activists want to establish an independent Mapuche state, separatists are in the minority. What gives the Palestinian issue such a powerful resonance among indigenous movements is the way that Latin American states have labeled these movements as “terrorist” and the inspiration of Palestinian resistance that is internationally known and has perdured despite hardship.

Chile’s indigenous Mapuche movement is a case in point. According to official statistics, there are more than 600,000 Mapuche in Chile. Mapuche organizations claim the figure is far higher, and often quote from the 1992 census, which put the total at 928,000. With the return of democracy to Chile in 1990, Mapuche organizations renewed their claims on parts of the Araucanía through street demonstrations, land occupations and, on rare occasion, arson at the private property of forestry companies and large landowners. Successive governments—whether right or center-left—have failed to resolve the issue, opting for repression that has only exacerbated conflict. The heavy police presence in many Mapuche communities in the region—a military occupation in the eyes of some—has ratcheted up the violence. During police raids, Mapuche are often beaten or shot with rubber bullets. Several Mapuche militants, such as Alex Lemun, Matías Catrileo and Jaime Mendoza Collio, have been killed in clashes with security forces. Other murders include the cases of Rodrigo Melinao Licán, who was found dead in the rural area of Ercilla, about 160 feet from the main road where the police regularly patrol, and José Mauricio Quintriqueo Huaiquil, who died after being run over by a tractor while he and other Mapuche were occupying a farm. The Chilean state has deployed an “anti-terrorism” law against Mapuche activists that permits extended pre-trial detention, anonymous witnesses and longer sentences. This highly contentious law, drafted under constitutional changes recognizing the “pluri-national” character
the rule of Gen. Augusto Pinochet, is almost uniquely applied in Mapuche cases. After years of harsh criticism from international human rights organizations, the Michelle Bachelet administration has taken steps to reform the law, but many Mapuche activists remain in prison.

If one adds the fact that Chilean security forces often carry Uzi submachine guns and Tavor TAR-21 assault rifles, both made in Israel, the parallel with the plight of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories is obvious. Pedro Cayuqueo, a journalist and director of the website Mapuche Resistance, calls his people “the Palestinians of South America,” a phrase that has been adopted by several activists. In July 2014, with the Israeli assault upon Gaza underway, Cayuqueo tweeted maps depicting the shrinkage of Mapuche land since 1540 with the words: “How would you feel? No, it is not Palestine. It is Wallmapu.” The clear reference was to the famous maps of Palestinian land loss since 1948. It was a way to highlight the seriousness of the Mapuche issue to a Chilean population that is often indifferent to the fate of its indigenous population. The comparison was all the more effective because Chile is the Latin American country with the largest Palestinian diaspora.

From Resonance to Mobilization

Since the mid-2000s, Palestinian and indigenous organizations in Latin America have begun to support each other by regularly staging joint events, including protests, informational events, exhibitions and music festivals. The beginning of the second intifada in September 2000 triggered the reactivation of Palestinian diaspora organizations, which joined Latin America’s renewed landscape of social movements. In Chile and Bolivia, where this political convergence is particularly strong, it is not unusual to see Palestine solidarity protests called by both Palestinian diaspora organizations and indigenous movements. At first, this alliance may seem odd given the gaps in wealth and social status. But dialogue is made possible by the lack of historical animosity and the middle-class student or leftist leadership of the most active Palestinian movements. Dozens of activities have taken place in each country, building new social networks with many common memories and emotions.

Popular culture has picked up on the trend. In “Somos Sur” (We Are South), a single released in June 2014, Chilean rapper Anita Tijoux and her Palestinian counterpart Shadia Mansour pressed the two demands for independent statehood. In an interview with Rolling Stone, Tijoux said, “The movements of global resistance, whether in Latin America, Africa or the Middle East, are fighting against the same patrons of violence who have repeated themselves throughout history. What this means is that many of these groups share similar demands. We are asking for a free Palestine in the same way as we are asking for an independent Wallmapu in Chile, without police control.”

In Bolivia, solidarity with Palestine has both a grassroots and a high-level dimension since the 2006 election of Evo Morales, the first indigenous president in the country’s history. The Palestinian community in Bolivia is tiny. A first wave of immigration came at the beginning of the twentieth century, and a second, mostly Muslims, in the 1970s. Ayman Altaramsi, a Gaza-born doctor, is currently the representative of both the Palestinian and Muslim entities in the country. The question of Palestine has nonetheless become a major component of Bolivian foreign policy. The government broke off diplomatic relations with Israel in January 2009 in condemnation of that round of bombardment of the Gaza Strip. On December 17, 2010, Morales announced that his country would recognize Palestine as an independent state with the 1967 borders. Since then, several cooperation agreements have been signed between Bolivia and Palestine. Finally, in protest of the 2014 Israeli assault on Gaza, Bolivia renounced its visa exemption agreement with Israel amidst the strong language from Morales. The fact that Morales is of Aymara origin is not enough to explain these gestures—Bolivia’s incorporation into the left-leaning ALBA regional economic and diplomatic bloc, and its strong desire to assert autonomy vis-à-vis the US, are other factors. But Morales’ self-identification and pride as indigenous clearly contributed to his interpretation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Within a century, relations between Palestinian immigrants and indigenous peoples in Latin America went from coexistence to active solidarity. The Palestinian cause echoes loudly in indigenous struggles in Latin America. Indigenous peoples have not been erased from the Latin American map. More active and mobilized than ever, they have begun to make strides toward changing their condition. Several countries, including Colombia, Guatemala and Ecuador, have introduced significant changes in their respective constitutions in order to reflect this new status. Most of the alterations are meant to increase indigenous political representation, recognize their cultural rights (in particular with regard to language) and grant limited autonomy on ancestral lands. The most sweeping changes occurred in Bolivia: Its 2009 constitution defines the country as a pluri-national state and recognizes indigenous rights as a transversal dimension in the whole document. Indigenous languages, symbols, ethical principles, land rights, and political and judicial systems are enshrined in the text. While most indigenous peoples still suffer from social exclusion, their battle for full citizenship has brought them to prominence as a new social and political actor. Their solidarity with Palestinians is not tinged with melancholy or despair, but suffused with hope and resistance.

Endnotes
2 Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow, “Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment,” Annual Review of Sociology 26 (August 2000).
5 Cuche, p. 97.
The Politics of Iran’s Satellite Era
Turkish Serials, Safety Valves and Youth Culture

Rebecca Joubin

“O
nce,” the Iranian comedian Mehran Modiri notes, “our marital relationships were formed over long distances. An Iranian man would explore the world abroad with his father’s money. When the money ran out, he would suddenly miss home-cooked gormeh sabzi and ask his family to send him a pure Iranian bride, so innocent she has seen neither sunrise nor sunset.” Today, Modiri continues, Iranian marriages are long-distance even when the couple is in the same room: “The husband is on Facebook while the wife watches Turkish serials. He might be 90 years old, and she’ll be on Instagram. He orders out for dinner, but she’s on a diet. The children are away at nursery school. Whenever the couple yearns for each other, they make an appointment.”

Such jibes pepper “Married Life,” a two-part installment of Modiri’s 2014 miniseries Shukhi Kardam (I Was Joking), which along with numerous other DVDs of sinema-ye khunegi, or home cinema, was sold at grocery stores and newstands throughout the country. In part two of “Married Life,” a husband is cooking in the kitchen as his wife tears up watching the Turkish serial Harim-e Sultan (The Sultan’s Harem). The husband catches on fire and spins around in pain, but the wife angrily dismisses his pleas for help. She is glued to the screen, where Sultan Suleiman is whispering to his preferred wife that she is his life.

Such Turkish tales of romance were an immediate hit among all segments of the population, in the capital of Tehran as well as the provinces, when they first appeared in Iran around 2011. One of the inaugural serials, ‘Ishq-e Mamnu’
The government also touts Iranian youth in northern Tehran, they can yield a black-and-white picture wherein a liberalizing society is constantly resisting the designs of a reactionary, religious state. That picture erases important differences of opinion within the Islamic Republic itself, as shown by the uneven government reaction to the proliferation of satellite dishes. Moreover, debates about public morality in Iran do not simply pit the state against society. The Turkish serials are a case in point. One often hears liberal-minded Iranians echo the concerns of conservative clerics, though many others do not share them or have a different set of anxieties. Some, in fact, think the state tolerates the Turkish serials as a form of soupape, a commonly used term taken from the French soupape de sécurité (safety valve): The television dramas and the culture wars they engender divert attention from real and pressing problems of Iranian society, particularly those of youth. Indeed, popular state-produced serials gloss over socioeconomic ills and instead push forgiveness and reconciliation as key to deterring divorce and safeguarding the sanctity of marriage. Yet it would be simplistic as well to argue that the divides within the Islamic Republic with respect to marital and romantic norms among youth merely mirror divides in society. The dire socioeconomic realities of Iran do not allow many youth to emulate the ideal model of love and marriage propagated by state media. All this suggests that the reasons for the failure of the state’s Islamization project are complex.

Satellite Craze

Officially, satellite dishes have been banned in Iran since August 1994, when the Majles promulgated a nine-point law on the subject. But there has long been a deep divide within the Islamic Republic, with hardline officials determined to block out “un-Islamic” external cultural influences and reformist elements seeking only to regulate them. According to film critic Hamid Naficy, ad hoc enforcement made the state appear ambivalent about the law, encouraging citizens to defy it. The state still cracks down periodically, removing dishes from rooftops, but the days of rigorous policing are over. It is commonly agreed among Iranians that the turning point came after the disputed presidential election of 2009 and the Green Movement insisting that Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had stolen a second term in office. That August, to deflect popular anger, the arch-conservative Ahmadinejad allowed the introduction of Farsi 1, a satellite channel that offered Latin American telenovelas dubbed in Persian. These shows could not compete with the state-run Iranian film and serial industry, but soon other satellite channels, such as Gem and River, came online and the Turkish dramas became all the rage.

Ironically, as the state has allowed the satellite offerings to proliferate, a sort of moral panic has emerged among those same conservative forces that perceive Iranian youth as being in particular danger of corruption. These hardliners chafe at the themes of erotic love and betrayal in Turkish serials. They are particularly enraged by the widespread interest in Harim-e Sultan, since Suleiman I sought to expand the Ottoman domains at the expense of the Safavids then ruling Iran. The conservatives point out that the Turkish president himself, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, criticizes Harim-e Sultan for portraying the sultan as a lascivious man who spent most of his time in bed. In the drama’s initial season, during Ahmadinejad’s second term, several translators of the serial were jailed. Upon release, many of them escaped to Thailand, Malaysia and Dubai, where the dubbing now takes place despite the official ban. Yet, even as they fret over the prominence of beautiful women in Harim-e Sultan, whose episodes continue to run on satellite channels, state-run media outlets admit that Iranian viewers are also enticed by the serial’s high production values, the closeness of Turkish and Iranian culture, the historical storyline and the lack of censorship.

In response to the satellite craze, and to mollify the restless urban youth who are perceived to keep it going, the government has built new cinema complexes and launched new television networks. The government also touts Iranian cultural production to divert attention from the Turkish imports. State media features breathless headlines like “Iranian Serials Empty the Streets of Turkey,” but the target audience is clearly at home. New shops have popped up throughout Tehran and the provinces to sell the Iranian-made films and miniseries.
On December 3, 2013, the Iranian miniseries Ava‑ye Baran (Baran’s Sobs), directed by Hossein Soheili Zadeh, became an overnight sensation. In this 40-episode drama, which aired through the following January, the title character Baran’s father Taha is wrongly convicted of drug trafficking in Turkey. Baran is left in the custody of her uncle, Nader, who, along with his wife Zivar, abuses Taha’s trust and steals his niece’s inheritance. Baran runs away and joins a group of street children. When Taha returns after 20 years in prison, Nader and Zivar seek to hide their deception. To diffuse the tension, Nader turns the television to the satellite channel showing Harim‑e Sultan. As the opening credits roll, Nader tells Taha that these programs have corroded the soul of Iranian families. “Zivar is hooked all day long, and then accuses me of betraying her,” Nader says nervously. Ava‑ye Baran, which shed unusual light on the plight of street children, got lavish coverage in government-affiliated periodicals. One magazine, Madaran, indulged in wishful thinking that the serial might replace satellite TV in Iranians’ viewing preferences. But the question remains as to the true intent of the government.

Harmless, Harmful, A Waste of Time

Iranians of various classes interviewed for this article were divided about the government’s agenda vis-à-vis satellite TV, as well as the effects of the Turkish dramas on the country’s youth. Some, like Roshan, a middle-aged actress who dubs foreign serials into Persian, insist that the Turkish products are nothing more than soupape. This practice, she says, began during President Mohammad Khatami’s first term after the July 1999 student protests in Tehran threatened the political order for the first time in years. The protests were peaceful; it was the police and paramilitary Basij who got violent, trashing dormitories and tossing several residents out windows. Nonetheless, hardliners in the Islamic Republic blamed the disturbances on Khatami’s tolerance for dissent, calling for new restrictions on the press and eventually shutting down several reformist newspapers. To calm the population, Roshan continues, Khatami’s Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance allowed for the introduction of more satellite channels. Later, she says, the Culture Ministry staffers by Ahmadinejad played the same game, but to appease a different constituency. The arch-conservatives outlawed Harim‑e Sultan in an outward appearance of outrage at the telenovela’s decadence, thus pleasing their pious voter base, but allowed the serial’s translators to escape so that its fans could keep on blowing off steam, too. As for the serials themselves, Roshan believes they are harmless. “These telenovelas aren’t pushing for freedom. They’re about affairs and betrayal, moral corruption we already have in our own society. Our youth enjoy
They prefer dating. Some say these changes are due to satellite Turkish serials, he says, “It’s too much, too fast. For our youth, Tehran’s Modern Art Museum. From a family of artists, Turkish shows because of the flamboyant love stories. They have a harmful impact.” Payman, a business administration student, is against satellite television in general. “I’m religious, but I don’t want you to think that I’m with this government.” He continues, “Turkish serials have a horrible impact on our society. ‘Ishq-e Mamnu’ was all about marital betrayal, and I have firsthand experience as to how this harms our youth. My cousin and her husband were the first in our family to bring satellite television into their home. She ended up having an affair with her husband’s best friend, and then she came home one day and found her husband in bed with another woman.”

Mina, in her mid-twenties, struggles for financial survival. She works in a nail salon seven days a week and cares for a cousin and her husband were the first in our family to bring satellite television into their home. She ended up having an affair with her husband’s best friend, and then she came home one day and found her husband in bed with another woman.”

Vita, who directs a modeling agency and pushes the women who work for her very hard. The first episode of season one ends with a model committing suicide during a reception at Vita’s home, leaving a coded message in lipstick on the mirror. The second season makes explicit reference to devil worship, through the character of Farhad, a confidant of Vita who kills anyone who stands in his way. “To be continued,” the last episode concluded, but it was not. Many Iranians believe that the government forced a sudden cast change for season three (starring Mehran Modiri and with a seven-month delay), from the French verb parasiter le signal (jam the signal), but Iranians simply say that the government “sends out parasites” to disrupt the reception of satellite dishes. The expression reflects the widespread perception that these electromagnetic waves are causing illnesses among the public. The government does indeed make a concerted effort to jam the signal of programs deemed politically dangerous. While it is hard to prove a connection to health effects, reformist media outlets have reported increases in dizziness, deafness, cancer, birth defects and infertility in both men and women.7

Akrım, a working-class woman in her late thirties, watches over two elderly sisters in an upper-class neighborhood. Of ‘Ishq-e Mamnu’, she complains, “There is no doubt that these shows influence us. Now betrayal is all over the place. I recently heard about a husband who went to court to complain that his wife was involved with another man. When the wife and her lover insisted that the husband was lying, the police beat him up.” At the same time, Akrım concedes, the serial’s story taught the valuable lesson that an older man should not marry a young girl.

According to Pari, a documentary filmmaker and student of Abbas Kiarostami in her early thirties, Iranian youth cannot speak freely about politics but they feel free to experiment in relationships. She has been married for six years but does not want children until she has built her career. “Before I married, I dated and went to parties. Now I’m married, and I still go to parties.” Pari contends that, with the age of marriage rising, the government is concerned that many couples are having no more than one child. (Under Ahmadinejad, the government was known to make disbursements of 1 to 3 million tomanos (approximately $330–990) to help young men and women who wished to get married. It is commonly believed that this monetary aid no longer exists due to economic crisis.)

The Turkish serials are a waste of time, Pari says. As a girl she watched the American soap opera The Bold and the Beautiful, which aired in English and thus had a limited audience. She laments the fact that serials are now dubbed in Persian so that everyone, including small children, can tune in. But Pari cites government censorship of Iranian serials as the reason why so many people watch the Turkish dramas. She refers to director Hamed Anqa’s Qalb-e Yakhi (An Iced Heart), a serial that never aired on television but was released on DVD in 2011. Qalb-e Yakhi is all about being consumed with revenge. The first two seasons revolve around Vita, who directs a modeling agency and pushes the women who work for her very hard. The first episode of season one leaves a coded message in lipstick on the mirror. The second season makes explicit reference to devil worship, through the character of Farhad, a confidant of Vita who kills anyone who stands in his way. “To be continued,” the last episode concluded, but it was not. Many Iranians believe that the government forced a sudden cast change for season three (starring Mehran Modiri and with a seven-month delay),
whose storyline did not in any way follow what had gone before. Despite controversy, very little was written about the changes in the press.

A quick tour of Tehran video stores confirms the main dividing lines in the debate over Turkish telenovelas. There is Rami, who runs a small, independent DVD shop on Vali Asr Street, selling both censored and uncensored versions of Iranian films. He also identifies government interference in Iranian serials such as Qalb-e Yakhi as the reason many watch the Turkish programs. According to Rami, many of his customers are disgruntled that Mehran Modiri is distributing Shukhi Kardam when he never completed his previous series. Most of Rami’s clients ask for foreign films. In his shop, from which both Western and Iranian pop music emanates, Rami keeps listings for 20,000 such movies, including recent Hollywood offerings, among them Woody Allen’s Blue Jasmine. He also has cartoons, such as Tinkerbell, in both censored and uncensored versions. He sells Iranian-made pop music as well as the output of popular California-based Iranian singers like Googoosh, Dariush and Andy. He spends much of his day downloading new music and films, and boasts of finding banned items for his clients, including the Turkish serials.

On the other hand, there is the Soroosh Video Shop, also on Vali Asr Street, which refuses to sell Turkish serials since they are officially forbidden. This shop cooperates on projects with Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting, and many see it as state-sanctioned. Soroosh sells 30–50 serials and films per day—at the standard price of 3,000 tomans ($1) per DVD—with a constant stream of customers asking for the latest release. In conformance with the law, the owner says, Soroosh only sells made-in-Iran pop, nothing from “over there” (an taraf), referring to the bustling music industry in Los Angeles. Turkish serials were once popular, he goes on, but now they are all reruns, so Iranians are watching miniseries made at home.

**Marriage in the Magazines**

The hubbub over the Turkish serials is but one index of the Islamic Republic’s concern to revitalize the Islamization project, in its conservative and other guises, and particularly with regard to marriage and the family. Kiosks of cities and provincial towns are filled with state-controlled magazines that offer a wide range of advice to singles and young married couples. Much of the advice is rooted in traditional conceptions of gender roles, but there are nuances that reflect intensified conflict within the political order as well as the reality that one income is no longer an option for many households.

Working women are thus a major subject. In a short section entitled “Hefaz va Hejab,” Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, successor to Khomeini as Leader of the Islamic Revolution, predictably enjoins such women to cover themselves at all times lest the moral chaos of the West infiltrate Iranian society. Still, he writes that men and women must spend time together at

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work if Iran’s problems are to be solved.8 A smiling photograph of the Leader often appears in magazine columns, in an apparent attempt to project a softer, more empathetic image for the hardliners. There are many examples of strong women presented in these magazines. One spread spotlights Fatema Daneshvar, a mother of four, who runs a company and is active in local politics. Daneshvar decries the fact that from childhood girls are complimented on their beauty and boys on their intelligence. Girls should not grow up believing that only looks are important, she says, but should be taught to value self-reliance and to set reasonable life goals. She nonetheless laments that the age of marriage is rising due to inflation and unemployment. Struggling parents are unable to save to help their children marry.9

Khamenei penned another short paragraph avowing that it is the government’s responsibility to stop the “rampant, destructive spread of divorce.”10 And, indeed, a whole realm of advice in the magazines instructs couples in the art of marital bliss, and promotes the same images of working women found in state-sanctioned serials. In these shows, women work as teachers, doctors, lawyers and engineers, yet those portrayed as most successful are those who find a superb balance between the office and duties as wives and mothers. Those who fall short of achieving this balance are heavily criticized.

When a woman works all day, then comes home to cook, clean and care for children, paying attention to her marriage may be the last thing on her mind, one columnist writes. But if she makes time for her husband, she will discover that the relationship has improved. The writer advises women to think of the husband first. “If he forgets to do something, don’t pick on him. Give him the benefit of the doubt. Perhaps he forgot to do the dishes because he was distracted by work-related problems.”11 Another author recommends that women organize their time better and—divorce being a particular danger for working mothers—that women work only part-time.12 On the other hand, a columnist argues that women are stronger, kinder, and more patient and efficient than men in an effort to show that women can indeed do it all.13 Still another piece, which sees nurturing children as natural to women and not to men, nonetheless pushes fathers to share the burden of child rearing, teaching them how to bottle-feed rather than getting jealous of their wives’ time with the infant.14

Much of the advice is less hierarchical and husband-centered than one might expect, with one article advising couples to listen, forgive and exchange gifts in order to maintain love in the marriage. Neither partner should boss the other around or have unfair expectations of the other. Statistics are adduced to prove that couples who never fight have the highest rate of divorce. This same columnist, in an attempt to make parental responsibility less gendered, instructs both husbands and wives to pay attention to the children and to each other.15 Similarly, another writer who pushes for more active fathering admonishes both members of the couple to put family first, rather than work, to talk about their day, to eat and have fun together, and to avoid raising their voices.16

This tangle of advice, in any case, may be tangential to the real problems of Iranians under 30, whatever their notions of gender relations and morality. Recent Iranian television shows document the growing resignation of the youth generation with black humor. In the third episode of Modiri’s Shukri Kardam, a father asks his son why he does not marry. The son, staring at his computer screen, replies that perhaps he can think of marriage in 20–30 years—he needs to save up first. The father thinks his son’s frustrations are overblown. “If life is so bad,” he mutters, “then just kill yourself! In our time, we had the courage to kill ourselves.” At that, the son cries out and throws himself out the window. His father, nonchalant, remarks that even the screams of his own generation were more moving. In another scene, a 21-year old woman tells a news anchor she had aspired to become a doctor but left her studies. It seems that her parents were divorced and remarried, and now they pay more attention to their new children. She weeps as the interviewer says, “And so, to get attention, you want to become addicted to drugs and turn yourself in to the police.” Perhaps suicide is the best option, he says, and the young woman throws herself in front of a car.

What should be made of this harsh moralizing? Is Modiri consciously echoing the conservatives’ critique of a spoiled youth generation? Is he simply playing it safe with the censors? Rather, Modiri’s sketches indicate a third possibility—that he is truly concerned about the disintegration of the institution of marriage. His previous miniseries have been imbued with coded indictments of government repression and corruption, but here he blames Iranian youth for their own problems. Contemporary Iranian discourse about public morality is not polarized into liberal and conservative camps, but arrayed on a spectrum and shot through with contradictions.

Endnotes
1 See, for example, Shahram Khosravi, Young and Defiant in Tehran (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007). For a critique, see Norma Claire Mortuzzi, “Paradise Lost, Gone Shopping,” Middle East Report 245 (Winter 2007).
3 Ibid., p. 345.
5 Interviews for this article were conducted in Tehran during the winter of 2014. To protect the identity of my informants, I have changed all names.
6 Khosravi, pp. 140-141.
7 Small Media, Satellite Jamming in Iran: A War Over Airwaves (November 2012).
8 “Hefaz va Hejab,” Khanevadeh (January 2014).

“There are no good men among the living, and no bad ones among the dead.” In the simplest sense, this Pashtun proverb is similar to the common injunction not to speak ill of the departed. In the course of Afghanistan’s long civil war, Anand Gopal writes, the saying has acquired a metaphorical meaning as well: No one is to be trusted. All alliances are temporary. The sole imperative is survival.

It is easy to see, after reading this trenchant account of Afghan life since the 2001 US invasion, why Gopal chose such a grim phrase for his title. Gopal began reporting from Afghanistan for American newspapers and magazines in 2008. In his book, he avoids official or “expert” sources almost entirely, instead telling the story of the war through the memories of three main Afghan characters, none of whom produce the narrative that the war’s propagandists want Americans to hear. Rather than making progress, however stubborn, toward a goal, each protagonist takes a path of dizzying ups and downs that ends, at best, in precipitous uncertainty.

One subject, Mullah Cable, was a roaming Taliban enforcer who acquired his nickname for the cord he used to whip uncooperative locals. “You could sleep with the doors open,” he says in justification of the Taliban’s ruling techniques. When US bombs start to fall in 2001, Mullah Cable flees the front lines and, eventually, abroad. He works odd jobs in Karachi, Pakistan and carves marble figurines in Shiraz, Iran before making a cautious return to Kabul in 2002. There he finds chance success as a cell phone repairman, but runs afoul of the new Afghan police when they come demanding protection money. The police destroy his stall, and he rejoins the resurgent Taliban. By the end of the book, he is missing and presumed dead.

Readers meet Jan Muhammad, a former captain of mujahideen who battled the Soviets, languishing in a Taliban dungeon. News of the US invasion springs him from jail and, thanks to tribal ties with Hamid Karzai, soon to be elected president, he quickly becomes governor of his home province of Uruzgan. Jan Muhammad grows wealthy supplying land, workers and convoy guards to the US military—and opium to drug traffickers. He winds up $2,000 for the safe passage of every supply truck headed to the US base in Tirin Kot. He is also now dead. When, inevitably, the US abandons Afghanistan, and whether the Taliban endure or not, warlords are likely to jostle for advantage as the mujahideen did after the Red Army withdrew.

Heela’s story might seem to provide precisely the woman-friendly happy ending that Washington wishes for. As Gopal shows, however, the war in Afghanistan follows its own logic, one that resists “grand designs” and one that has not come close to running its course.

—Chris Toensing


The essays in *Why Yemen Matters*, though written prior to the stunning takeover of much of the country by Ansar Allah, otherwise known as the Houthis, provide an excellent primer on the political and economic crises that underlie those still unfolding events. The authors were among others who participated in a British Yemeni Society conference in early 2013.

For anyone who wants to read just one article on Yemen, I would suggest starting with editor Helen Lackner’s 26-page introductory overview to this volume. Lackner, who has worked on Yemen for some 30 years, and lived there off and on for about half that time, provides cogent and comprehensive account of political developments over
that period along with a good overview of social structures and the economy.

Lackner also contributes one of two chapters on Yemen’s water crisis, the other being an extended and revised version of Gerhard Lichtenthaler’s 2010 article in *Middle East Report* 254, “Water Conflict and Cooperation.” Lackner traces the evolution of the crisis and inadequate responses since 1990, and Lichtenthaler spotlights initiatives within Amran-area tribal communities to establish community self-regulation of drilling and pumping.

Two articles are especially germane to 2015 developments. Marieke Brandt’s essay on the government’s use of tribal militias and other irregular forces rather than the army in the Houthi wars details how the feuds this strategy generated eventually backfired as initially neutral northern tribes increasingly supported the Houthis. As the conflict became more brutal, she writes, the codes limiting tribal conflicts “came to be ignored (as did the norms of the Geneva Conventions),” which she attributes in part to “sectarian elements” and the internationalization of the conflict. Laurent Bonnefoy tackles the role of Islamists—the “catch-all” Islah party with its links to “both traditional and modern civil society organizations” as well as aspects of the “understanding” between the former government of ‘Ali ‘Abdallah Salih and what became al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

Another pair of articles looks at the dynamics of southern separatism. Particularly useful is Noel Brehony’s essay on the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY), which joined with the northern Yemen Arab Republic in 1990 to form today’s Republic of Yemen. In developing his theme of formation of a southern Yemeni identity he reviews the internecine struggles in the PDRY leadership but also notes the establishment of a unified legal and administrative system, access to education, and social equality (especially of women) as well as, on the negative side, “mini-Stasi” security services courtesy of the former German Democratic Republic. Regarding the preponderance of the young among southern protesters, Brehony observes that “few have direct memories of the real PDRY.” Susanne Dahlgren takes on the aspirations of southern Yemeni youth in her article. Their parents, she writes, “have told them about life in the relatively secure times that prevailed in the South before unity, when everybody had a job and there was no corruption.” As a result of this “imagined fairness” the youth she met in Aden understand their human rights to include work, “not just any job—they believe they are entitled to a job in the civil service.” Dahlgren goes on to detail the discrepancies between these aspirations and the state’s existing as well as likely capacities.

Migration has long been a feature of Yemeni society, but in recent decades the dynamics of migration have changed radically, as several articles in this volume demonstrate. Hélène Thiollet’s title, “From Migration Hub to Asylum...
Crisis,” nicely captures the shift. In centuries past Yemenis settled in Southeast Asia and East Africa, and in industrial times in steel towns in Great Britain and the United States. Escalating oil revenues starting in the 1970s led to massive emigration to Saudi Arabia and other Arab states in the Gulf. Around 10 percent of united Yemen’s total population lived abroad in 1991—more than 54 percent of the active population. ‘Ali ‘Abdallah Salih’s apparent support for Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990 led to an even more rapid “migratory shock” as hundreds of thousands of Yemenis were forced home from oil-exporting states almost overnight. Crises in the Horn of Africa led to huge numbers of migrants and asylum seekers coming to Yemen—nearly half a million just since 2006. Some, relying on human traffickers, come to Yemen intending to cross into Saudi Arabia, but many more end up staying in Yemen despite deteriorating conditions. Marina de Regt examines the particular situation of Ethiopian women married to Yemeni men and their mixed-descent daughters.

In addition to Sheila Carapico’s contribution, “Yemen Between Revolution and Counter-Terrorism,” *Middle East Report* has a strong presence in the form of numerous citations to authors and articles going as far back as 1971 (Brehony cites a 1971 MERIP interview with PDRY leader ‘Abd al-Fattah Isma’il).

—Joe Stork
Continued from page 33.

and the fundamentalists are pointing at the same person. The world is accusing him of being a fundamentalist, and the fundamentalists are accusing him of being with the infidels. The person in the middle, someone who looks like me, is saying, “I’m just a Muslim.” The message is: “I’m not with you, and I’m not with you.” I felt better when that was widely published, because it made me realize that a lot of people feel that way, and a lot of people understand the message, especially in the West.

As for the “Je Suis Charlie” thing, like I said, I never liked the publication. The festival happened immediately. There were publications, as well, full of anything that had to do with Charlie Hebdo. People started making money off of it, with T-shirts and so on. It became kind of a business in the end.

I hated that the festival and publications were called “Je Suis Charlie”—the name should have been more inclusive. Yes, Charlie Hebdo is part of what we’re fighting for, but not all of it. We should include people who are fighting for freedom of speech but don’t want to be associated with that publication. As it happened, it became the same thing that I have fought against for a long time: “You’re either with us or against us.” You’re either Charlie Hebdo, or you’re with the savages—all this name calling.

The commodification is quite striking.

People sold loads of shit, and donated the proceeds to Charlie Hebdo. Look at how many copies Charlie Hebdo sold as well—I don’t want to be part of that! Why doesn’t the money go to organizations that promote freedom of the press? Friends of mine, cartoonists in Holland, showed me a “Je Suis Charlie” book. All of our cartoons are in there, but nobody got paid for it! I sent them an e-mail, and they didn’t even reply.

And what about the cover that Charlie Hebdo did after that? They are doing the same thing. Nothing’s changed—not the fundamentalists, not the terrorist organizations, and not Charlie Hebdo.

They could have flipped the script, for example, by asking Muslim cartoonists to do something for the cover, or running something that says, “We are all the same, we are all angry at what is wrong.” Instead, the message was: “You’re angry about what we do, so fuck you and fuck the 1.6 billion Muslims who are mad!” You don’t have to be a fundamentalist to be angry about those drawings—just about any Muslim is. Hardly any of us react violently, though, which is exactly the point: Out of the 1.6 billion Muslims in the world, only two people carried out an actual attack.

So the Charlie Hebdo people are just as stubborn as the fundamentalists, blinded by one thought: “You are offending me, so I’m going to keep doing the same thing.” It’s never going to end.

How have you observed the Arab Muslim world reacting to these cartoons?

Respect is a big part of our lives, rituals that go back thousands of years, even some that are pre-Islamic. The Prophet was depicted in a lot of old manuscripts, so it’s not the fact of visual depiction, but the way it’s done. Everyone is upset—you will meet no Muslim who will laugh at this cartoon.

And think about the places where people rioted and burned tires. These are countries already in turmoil if not embroiled in war—Libya, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sudan. In countries that are more stable—the Gulf states, Lebanon, Morocco, Algeria—none of this happened.

In Sudan, I spoke to some people who look at the situation by asking who is oppressing us right now. It’s the president, Omar al-Bashir, who’s been president for 25 years. Who supports this president? The Western powers. What else did the Western powers do? They created Israel, they invaded Iraq and Afghanistan, where hundreds of people die every day and nobody gives a shit. Those who lack information and education, who basically have the same mindset of the Westerners who participate in anti-Islam marches, think that the West just wants to kill us all. A person I spoke to in Sudan said, “They took everything—the oil, Palestine, everything. They degraded Muslims after we had an age of enlightenment. Now we have nothing. We are ruled by dictators. We don’t have proper health care or education or any of the things that we used to have—not even our dignity. And we have no heroes except the Prophet Muhammad. And now they want to do this to the only thing we have left.”

Who is this man going to tell his kid to be like when he grows up? Bashir? Sisi? Nasser? They’re all killers, and all corrupt. The only pure person is the person who gave them religion, the only thing that they know, because they have no access to anything else, neither to books nor to decent schools. The only information that they have is the Qur’an. The same people that took the oil, invaded countries and have the drones are making a mockery out of the only hero they have left. Of course, these people are going to be angry, and some of them are going to join crazy terrorist organizations.

I’m not condoning what happened, but these are the reasons why these things happen. The two French kids who carried out the attack did it because they were living as second-class citizens.
create jobs and mature into the whales of the future. In parallel, education is to be reformed to train workers with skills to match private employers’ needs, while labor markets are to be made more “flexible” to increase employment. That is, once workers in public-sector jobs face lowered wages and lose their job security and pensions, they and other workers will be forced to compete for jobs in the presumably expanding private sector. Reducing the budget deficit and rationalizing government spending requires the eventual elimination of general subsidies for energy and food, and the substitution of welfare payments (which can be found online with some assiduous searching) is arrogant and condescending, but the essential message is the same. The Deauville pact members are going to conquer the “important structural challenges” and “long-running structural deficiencies” in “Arab countries in transition” and guide the new governments on the path to “modern” economies, following Western models of higher education and relying on Western technology.10 The arsenal of weapons includes technical advice, for example on how to set up a VAT system and how to target subsidies to the deserving, along with outright bribes from the Gulf states and loans from everyone else. The loans go to diverse local projects that the lenders, often the International Finance Corporation, administer and monitor to assure that the desired results are forthcoming. The recurring hand wringing about debt notwithstanding, these procedures will keep Egypt and Tunisia perpetually in hock, as has been the case since the 1980s. The poor will always be with us, but we will give them both fish to eat and poles to fish with, while the rights of labor go ever unattended and the regimes of 2015 make satisfactory, if halting, “transitions” to democracy and free enterprise.

Endnotes
1 The ideas were shared at meetings with the author in Egypt in June 2012, June 2013 and May 2014, and in Tunisia in March 2015. A list of these meetings is available upon request.
7 Examples of this work are: International Labor Organization, Rethinking Economic Growth: Towards Productive and Inclusive Arab Societies (Geneva, 2012); UN Development Program, Arab Development Challenges Report 2011: Towards the Developmental State in the Arab Region (Cairo, 2013); and UN ESCWA, Arab Middle Class: Measurement and Role in Driving Change (Beirut, 2014).
9 Norhan Sherif, Heba Khail and Harem Zayed, Above the State: Multinational Corporations in Egypt (Cairo: Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights, 2015).
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