

EDITORIAL FOREWORD

This issue of *IJMES* opens with a special section on the Arab uprisings of 2011. For the first feature of the section, titled “Reflections: Middle East Studies at the Barricades,” we asked scholars from different disciplines to provide brief reflections on how the events might or should change scholarship on the region, or the questions that scholars ask. The contributors responded with a range of suggestions for future scholarship and a variety of critiques of past scholarship. We will not attempt to summarize these critiques here. Instead, we would like to play devil’s (or scholar’s) advocate, by pointing to a few ways in which past scholarship on the Middle East *has* produced insights for understanding the unfolding events.

This became clear to us, sometimes in unexpected ways, as we compiled a list of past *IJMES* articles and book reviews for a special section on the journal’s website titled “Spotlight on the Revolution” (<http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayJournal?jid=MES>). Our aim was not to engage in the debate over whether “Middle East scholars” might have “predicted” recent events but rather to bring together writings that could help shed light on some of the forces currently at work in the region. Not surprisingly, we found a range of diverging opinions and analyses related to many of the themes observers have deemed causally pertinent: the dynamics and implications of the region’s so-called “youth bulge”; the effects of new media and its connection or lack thereof to democratization; and the history and future prospects of authoritarianism, neoliberalism, and popular democracy movements.

The collection of articles offers numerous analytical insights for thinking about the uprisings while reflecting the diversity one would expect of any scholarly discussion. For example, various scholars have produced analyses over the past two decades linking democratization to the adoption of neoliberal economic policies in many Arab states since the 1970s, though they have used radically different forms of reasoning to do so. Some have hoped that political and economic forms of liberalism would be natural companions, while others have argued that oppositional democracy movements were likely to emerge—or were already in the process of emerging—as neoliberal policies increased income inequalities, removed safety nets, and dissolved the social contract between authoritarian rulers and the populace throughout the region.¹ Theories linking neoliberalism to democratization, whether positively or negatively, were prevalent enough in the literature that by the middle of the last decade scholars of the region were criticizing one another on the grounds that the democracy movements had not materialized and the frameworks would thus need rethinking.²

Some of these familiar lines of disagreement appear in the “Reflections” section, and new ones show signs of emergence. Nobody disputes that the protesters have been demanding democratization; on that score, their message could hardly be clearer. But when it comes to formulating their economic motivations, the most common interpretations are not only different but also flatly contradictory. Some have interpreted the uprisings as a demand *for* free-market economies, while many others have read them as protests *against* neoliberalism. Like the earlier debates over whether and how neoliberalism might lead to democratization, this difference probably has much to do with whether scholars themselves believe that neoliberal policies alleviate or exacerbate the kind of economic distress that all seem to agree is an important factor in the uprisings.

Another area of divergence relates to the role of Islam in the protests. Few observers would argue that the uprisings were sparked or have been led by Islamist movements, though the role such movements will play in more open elections is uncertain. Most of the contributors to “Reflections” seem to sense a historic shift in the dominant political idioms and forms of mobilization in the region. But they differ notably on what the shift means, with some suggesting that it marks a turn away from Islamic and toward more secular forms of politics and others arguing that it invites a reevaluation of the Islamic/secular (and the religious/political) binary.

The second feature of the special section is an *IJMES* roundtable, “Rethinking the Study of Middle East Militaries,” organized by Yezid Sayigh. As has become increasingly clear, militaries have exerted an important influence on the direction and outcome of the democracy movements, and this influence has been different, in both degree and kind, in every Arab state. This observation does nothing to undermine the agency of the popular movements that succeeded—with breathtaking speed—in toppling decades-old authoritarian regimes in Tunisia and Egypt and of those that now pose serious threats to other regimes. Indeed, it is equally clear that military responses to the uprisings have been shaped, often day to day, by the power and social dynamics of the popular movements. But much remains to be understood about these varied responses and their connection to each military’s history and to its relationship to the state, foreign powers, the economy, particular social groups, and the broader society. The roundtable contributors examine these dynamics and some of the challenges that will face democracy movements and democratically elected governments in working with military structures inherited from authoritarian regimes.

The issue features six research articles and one review article. The first three articles, grouped under the title “Islamic and Secular Authority,” look at diverse forms of Islamic authority in the 20th and 21st centuries, some in relation to secular state authority and all in relation to sex or gender. Morgan Clarke and Marcia Inhorn examine Shi‘i legal debates around reproductive technologies in the context of an ethnographic study of Lebanese Shi‘i men attending fertility clinics. From this creative vantage point, the article engages with scholarly debates about the dominant institution of religious authority in Twelver Shi‘i Islam: the *marja‘iyya*. Focusing on the affective dimensions of the relationship between *marāji‘* (clerical sources of authority) and *muqallidīn* (their lay followers), the authors argue that it is one that has to be “carefully managed by both *marja‘* and *muqallid*” and that religious authority in this context is not “a power to command from above but rather the capacity to serve as an ethical resource for those in need.”

Turning to another kind of modern Islamic authority, Ellen McLarney's article examines the work of mid-20th-century Egyptian scholar Bint al-Shati' as epitomizing "a new kind of Islamic intellectual" who became a "popular authority" on Islam without being trained in religious disciplines. Through close readings of Bint al-Shati's texts—and building on feminist theories of the social and sexual contracts and on recent scholarship on Islamic public spheres—McLarney argues that literary writing played an important role in the construction of such a sphere in Egypt: *adab* (literature) was central to the *ādāb* (ethics) of the "emergent Islamic awakening." Gendered constructions were key to this process, as "the middle-class values of the public sphere" were articulated as Islamic "through specific images of the private sphere, gender, family, and the household."

McLarney's argument that "private" definitions of religion in 20th-century Egypt "served less to relegate religion to the margins than to secure its place in public life" resonates with some of the themes in Mona Hassan's article on female preachers in contemporary Turkey. Hassan examines the significant recent increase in female preachers employed by the Turkish state and argues that their work is disrupting "sociocultural assumptions of the male voice as the exclusive voice of official religious authority." Yet the authority that these preachers acquire through their association with the secular state is often in conflict with "the principally charismatic" forms of female authority in nonstate-affiliated Sufi orders and Islamic movements. The increase in state-sponsored female preachers roughly coincides with the rise of the AKP (Justice and Development Party) to power, but Hassan asserts that the explanation for the phenomenon is more complex and in some ways is consistent with the republic's historical efforts to "supervise and encourage what is understood to be the correct form of religion."

Although Hassan downplays the role of the AKP in her article, this issue's review essay, by Alev Çınar, is a useful companion to it and to this issue's Islam/secularism theme more broadly. The *IJMES* editorial office has received a veritable flood of books focusing on the rise of the AKP to power in Turkey, and Çınar examines five works that she calls a "representative sample" of this literature. The most immediately striking aspect of these studies, as Çınar points out, is the radically different terms they employ to describe the AKP's basic outlook and constituency, including "Islamist," "Islamic," "secular," "passively secular," "liberal," "conservative," "neoliberal," "elitist," "bourgeois," "resource-poor," "top-down," "bottom-up," "democratic," "authoritarian," and "antidemocratic."

The final theme of this issue, and the focus of three research articles, is "Ottoman Urban Space." The articles all deal with conceptions of public and/or private space in Ottoman urban contexts at particular historical moments. Toufoul Abou-Hodeib raises some themes similar to those of McLarney's article—notably, the relation between *adab* as literature and as manners in new constructions of public and private space—but focuses on a different context, Beirut at the turn of the 20th century. Abou-Hodeib's analysis centers on the "material aspects of the home," arguing that for both Muslim and Christian intellectuals in this period, the home "not only *signified* a social standing but also played a role in recasting and articulating class differences." She utilizes a recurring theme in local discourses of domesticity, that of *dhawq* (taste)—and draws on Bourdieu's theories of the relationship between taste, class, and material culture—to show how Beirut intellectuals "attempted to translate abstract notions of class, 'oriental' difference, and civic duty into a daily praxis revolving around taste."

The article by Nazan Maksudyan moves us from private to public urban space in the late Ottoman Empire, examining the emergence of “vocational orphanages” (*islah-hanes*) in cities throughout the empire starting in the 1860s. She shows how this “new educational and disciplinary institution” for orphan, refugee, and poor children enacted Tanzimat conceptions of reform, both by “removing unattended children and youth from the streets” and by attempting to mold them “into skilled and productive laborers.” In doing so, it contributed to the production of “order and discipline in the urban space, redefining the borders of obedience and disobedience, security and danger, progress and decline.”

The final article, by Yaron Ayalon, examines Ottoman conceptions of urban public space a century earlier, focusing on the state’s efforts to rebuild Damascus after a series of devastating earthquakes in 1759. In contrast to projects carried out by contemporary western European governments after similarly destructive natural disasters (and also to what Maksudyan sees as Ottoman state approaches to urban space by the 1860s), the mid-18th-century Ottoman effort to rebuild Damascus did not aim to reshape relations between state and subject by constructing new forms of public and private space. Ayalon concludes that Ottoman sultans in this period regarded natural disasters “as opportunities to enhance their authority and prestige rather than to challenge existing spatial arrangements and social conventions.”

The theme of space recurs throughout this issue, perhaps reflecting what some have called the “spatial turn” in the scholarship. It is most obvious in the articles grouped under “Ottoman Urban Space” but plays an important role in the other three articles and reappears in the book review groupings. As several contributors to the special section suggest, space has also been at the heart of the recent Arab uprisings, with protests organized in virtual space on the Internet and carried out in squares such as Tahrir, which have been occupied by demonstrators in efforts to carve out public space for political protests. The uprisings may invite a rethinking of notions of public and private space and of viable places for political action.

Beth Baron and Sara Pursley

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¹For a discussion of this literature, and a development of the latter argument in the context of the bread riots and accompanying demands for democratization that appeared in many Arab countries during the 1980s and 1990s, see Larbi Sadiki, “Popular Uprisings and Arab Democratization,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 32 (2000): 71–95. See also Asef Bayat, “Activism and Social Development in the Middle East,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34 (2002): 1–28.

²See, for example, Pete Moore and Bassel Salloukh, “Struggles under Authoritarianism: Regimes, States, and Professional Associations in the Arab World,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 39 (2007): 53–76.