


Throughout *Inventing the Middle East*, the reader encounters the voices of people from the Gulf only through the distorted echoes of European sources. Although Egypt, the Wahhabis, the Ottoman Empire, the sultans of Oman, the shaykhs of the Arabian coast, and Qajar Persia all surface in this wide-ranging analysis, the author mainly works with British archives. She aptly demonstrates how much can still be drawn from the colonial library by successfully giving the Gulf its proper place in the historiography of the region. But one cannot help but wonder how a fully connective history of this terraqueous environment might read if it drew upon Wahhabi chronicles, Ottoman archives, Egyptian sources, Qajar documentation, potentially surviving local oral traditions, and nature itself: its scorching summer heat, its dangerous rocky outcrops at sea, its foreshore where contacts were made, and its underwater and underground wealth.

Ultimately, in *Inventing the Middle East*, Crouzet delivers a highly readable and methodologically sound account of how the British envisioned and shaped the Gulf from the 1780s to the early 20th century. The book carefully deconstructs the highly hybrid political and legal architecture that resulted from the interactions between the most powerful empire of the late 19th century and local stakeholders. On these grounds, the book will be of interest to historians and students from a wide range of specialties, from Near Eastern studies to global history.

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Tunisia's Modern Woman: Nation-Building and State Feminism in the Global 1960s

Amy Aisen Kallander (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021). Pp. 280. £75.00 hardback. ISBN: 9781108845045

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Since the outbreak of the Arab uprisings more than a decade ago, there has been growing scholarly interest in the politics and history of modern Tunisia. The reasons are obvious. After all, Tunisia was the birthplace of the Arab spring which started with the self-immolation of a street vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, an event that inspired millions of Arabs across the region to rise en masse against long-standing autocratic regimes. Afterward, Tunisia remained the only country in the region where both electoral democracy and gender equality seemed to be heading in the right direction. Up until the constitutional coup of Kais Saied in July 2021, Tunisia was hailed an outlier in the region, with its state-sponsored feminism receiving particular attention as one of its most enduring, and positive pre-authoritarian historical legacies. While Tunisian state feminism has recently gained attention and been the subject of careful critique from both Tunisian feminists and academic scholars alike, there has been a noticeable lack of studies that situate postcolonial Tunisia and its historical project of state feminism within the politics of postcolonial nation-building, national liberation movements, and Cold War politics. Amy Kallander's *Tunisia's Modern Woman* fills this important gap by placing Tunisia's state-sponsored feminism and the role it historically played in the state-led postcolonial national modernization process firmly within the 1950s and 1960s global and regional contexts.



The book is original in terms of its theoretical argument, scope, and methods. Its theoretical scope is ambitious and wide-ranging, covering different sites in which modern womanhood in postcolonial Tunisia was politically and discursively framed by the regime to serve broader goals of national development. Rather than treat state feminism in Tunisia as a set of laws and politics that were unevenly applied to Tunisian women depending on their class position, Kallander takes a novel approach: she does not dismiss the historical project of state-sponsored feminism entirely as top-down and directed, but rather shows how versatile and contradictory its outcomes were. Using an impressive array of primary sources gathered painstakingly from several Tunisian archives, the author unearths the complex articulations of women's rights in postcolonial Tunisia, and the central role that women's emancipation played in national state-building. Using Arabic and French language resources unearthed from the digital archives of 1960s state-affiliated women's magazines, the vast collections library of the Union of Tunisian Women (UNFT), and the policy reports prepared by Tunisian postcolonial bureaucrats and academics who were tasked with implementing state-led policies in areas key areas of governance including rural poverty alleviation, population control, family planning, and third-world women alliances during the Cold War period, Kallander demonstrates how the creation of a new postcolonial subjectivity, that of the modern Tunisian woman, was framed within an international context of US-led liberal ideals, allegedly aimed at bringing about women's emancipation. Kallander devotes significant parts of the book to unpacking this vision of women's liberation in postcolonial Tunisia, revealing how the state's feminist policies were inspired by a US-backed liberal strand of feminism, which, ironically in the end, reinforced women's roles as wives, mothers, and daughters of the nation, reproducing the nationalist pre-independence rhetoric of women's rights. What postcolonial Tunisian state feminism achieved in reality was linking women's liberation to progressive modernity as a central political ideal, a link that, as Kallander shows, makes Tunisia not that different from other countries in the region, and the third world at large; throwing the notion of Tunisian regional "exceptionalism" into question.

The scope of Kallander's research is one of the major strengths of this book. Rather than analyzing state feminism only in terms of laws, policies, and institutions related to women and gender relations in Tunisia, she mixes an institutionalist analysis of laws such as the 1956 Personal Status Code (PSC), and institutions like the UNFT (chapter 1), and state-led programs such as family planning and population control (chapter 2) and rural poverty reduction (chapter 3), with a discursive and cultural analysis of women's fashion trends and consumerism (chapter 4), and national ideals of romantic and sexual relations (chapter 5). The last two chapters greatly enrich the book's overall analysis as it relies on cultural products and artifacts from novels to magazines to advertisements, to paint a detailed picture of Tunisian state feminism as a living experience that shaped the lives of women from all walks of life throughout the 1960s. It is here that the multitude and the variety of women's narratives and experiences presented in the book combine to show the contradictions of Tunisia's state-led feminist policies, which often failed to bridge the class division between urban middle-class women, the main beneficiaries of state feminism in Tunisia, and their low-income rural counterparts.

Tunisia's Modern Woman stands out in terms of how it brings together global, national, and local histories to carefully scrutinize Tunisia's state-sponsored feminist project and its effects. The book makes two major contributions to the scholarly literature on nation-building and state feminism in the context of the Cold War. First, it demonstrates the major role that the United States played, both financially and ideologically, in supporting Tunisia's state feminism as part of its global quest for influence during the Cold War. This American influence on Tunisia had hitherto rarely been investigated thoroughly and explains much about the liberal ethos of Tunisian state-sponsored feminism. Second, the book demonstrates the contradictions resulting from this liberal American-inspired feminism, and how it was subverted in small but meaningful ways by a diverse group of


Tunisian women actors, ranging from elite academics who acted as intermediaries between the state and rural women, to fashion and society magazine editors who were entrusted with creating a new national discourse on gender roles, sexuality, and dress codes. The author shows how Tunisian feminists' and academics' engagements with third-world decolonial feminist networks and alliances allowed them to influence key aspects of Tunisian state feminism and create pockets of socially and economically conscious local feminist politics against the grain of both the liberal feminist ethos espoused by the state elite, and the conservative nationalist discourses on women's role in the family, market, and society.

One point that needed more elaboration in this otherwise excellent work was the ways in which alliances with third-world transnational socialism at that time influenced some of the Tunisian state's feminist policies and pushed it more to the left. While I generally agree with the author's characterization of Bourguiba's Tunisia as firmly part of the democratic liberal American camp during the Cold War, many of its national subsequent programs on rural poverty, education, and family planning were inspired and influenced to a great extent by prevailing third-world socialist state-led development strategies and transnational decolonial alliances. This central contradiction in Tunisian history needed to be explored more fully, especially in relation to state-led poverty alleviation campaigns and family planning programs and the ways they influenced rural women. Nevertheless, this does not take away from the importance of this book, which is highly recommended to scholars working on transnational feminism(s), postcolonial state-building, and the often-neglected role of Cold War politics in shaping third-world modernizing projects during the second half of the 20th century.

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The Right Kind of Suffering: Gender, Sexuality, and Arab Asylum Seekers in America

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The Refugee Convention of 1951 affirms the right to seek asylum for any person who “owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of [their] nationality and is unable or . . . unwilling to avail [themselves] of the protection of that country.”¹ But what, exactly, constitutes a “well-founded fear”? How is fear determined by government authorities adjudicating asylum claims? And how does an asylum seeker convey the right kind of suffering to ensure a positive outcome for their request for refuge?

¹ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees,” accessed 25 July 2023, <https://www.unhcr.org/media/convention-and-protocol-relating-status-refugees>.