

# Critical Dialogue

**The Politics of Art: Dissent and Cultural Diplomacy in Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan.** By Hanan Toukan. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021. 336p. \$90.00 cloth, \$30.00 paper. doi:10.1017/S1537592722003899

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What can a careful analysis of local art scenes tell us about politics at the local, regional, and global scales? Quite a lot. Hanan Toukan's *The Politics of Art* explores the complex nexus of dissent and counterhegemonic cultural production and their entanglement with foreign arts funding. How is political dissent shaped and represented by artists who lack access to established arts markets? Might local art scenes work as sites for political dissent and counterhegemonic cultural production? Internationally funded nonprofit and nongovernmental art organizations seem to think so, and thus in recent decades they have poured funding into local arts scenes as part of larger civil society and democracy development aid agendas. Toukan explores these processes as windows into the politics of dissent, presenting macro-analytical insights that are then brought down to the micro level through the cases of Jordan, Palestine, and Lebanon.

The book is organized into two parts of three chapters each, plus an introduction, conclusion, and “intermezzo” to connect the macro analysis of the first part with the micro analyses of the individual studies of the art scenes in Beirut, Amman, and Ramallah. Part I provides the historical political context for the eastern Mediterranean region, as well as theoretical discussions of the workings of power. It explores the increasingly vibrant art scenes funded by foreign and local nonprofit and nongovernmental organizations since 9/11 and asks whether cultural diplomacy has shaped counterhegemonic cultural praxis and its aestheticization in contemporary art. Although political meaning is constructed through cultural production, Toukan shows how two competing conceptions of contemporary art reveal political tensions over art's meaning: art may be a critical voice and a counterhegemonic production, but it might also be a “space for cooptation and compromise, as post-colonial nationalism or else as the effect of a Westernized liberalism” (pp. 33–34). Toukan unpacks the concept and meaning of cultural diplomacy for both the senders

and receivers of funding, revealing a multifaceted process of international cultural politics. Here the author connects these process of cultural diplomacy—a lexicon that includes public relations, public diplomacy, cross-cultural exchange and collaborations, cultural cooperation, and so on—with evolving foreign development aid agendas, showing how power works in cultural production: the “invasiveness” of this language of diplomacy, exchange, and collaboration “renders funders and fund recipients oblivious, unwittingly or not, to the fact that the funding of cultural production is always an instrument of power, even if it is intercepted by local actors”; that is, even if they are not mere “passive dupes” (p. 42).

The two remaining chapters in part I show how aid to nonprofit and nongovernmental organizations brought about the “professionalization” of the field of cultural production and the changing perspectives of different generations of artists. This professionalization took the form of instructing local artists and art organization directors precisely how they should organize in ways that reflected Western organizational practices—valuing and advancing transparency, accountability, sustainability, gender equality, and so on. One telling quote from the director of an arts organization in Beirut captures both these directives and the funding recipients' frustrations in trying to implement them:

First, they told us to “network,” and we began to work around this idea, forging partnerships with others in the region and elsewhere, hopping on flights to France and Egypt to learn how to run our own organizations back home. Then they changed their mind and decided what we needed was “capacity building,” then there was the frenzy of “institutionalization,” which we attended to by setting up nominal boards and announcing positions, etc., and now, finally we have arrived at art “spaces” or “informal” art schools. If you have not noticed, they are the hottest thing in town right now (quoted on p. 77).

Toukan then shows how different generations of artists have differing views not only on diverse forms of foreign intervention but also on the role of art in dissent and counterhegemonic production. She divides these generations broadly into two: the 1967 generation, for whom questions of Arab nationalism and anti-imperialism are paramount, and a post-1990s generation, for whom dissent is no longer focused so narrowly or uniformly on specific issues and whose interdisciplinary art is political

through its process and the political dissent that it reflects, rather than “doing” dissent through art. The newer generations are at once more radical but also more diverse in how they understand and engage regional and global process, practices, and counterparts. Many public discussions in these countries frame questions of foreign funding for art as either “with or against.” Those who accept funds are accused of being enticed by the West and thus betraying nationalist commitments, thereby becoming willing participants in Western cultural imperialism, regardless of whether the funding was conditional or not. Local artists always insist that funding is unconditional and does not affect the art they create, and yet the funding priorities of the donors unquestionably have an impact.

A short “intermezzo” summarizes part I and serves as a transition to part II, shifting from theoretical debates about power and the contours of the macro-structural dynamics of the region to the micro level to explore how these factors play out in the individual art scenes and in local politics in Beirut, Amman, and Ramallah. The chapters are illustrated with images of artists, as well as their art, giving the reader a clear sense of how the cases are distinct given their local political context but are also interconnected, given the escalation of cultural diplomacy funding after 9/11 and again after the Arab uprisings.

With deep knowledge of the local art scenes and the politics of the three cases, Toukan’s analysis is both sweepingly historical and global in scope and intimate at the local scale. It explores questions of nationalism, belonging, regional and international connections, post-coloniality, and affect. *The Politics of Art* is an important and original contribution to the growing body of literature that examines politics and political dissent in spaces and places outside either formal institutions or the field of contentious politics. It matters that we find politics in these places, not to romanticize resistance—a pitfall that Toukan adeptly avoids—but because understanding where and how dissent emerges, is expressed, and is reflected is central to understanding how art and artists can—sometimes unwittingly but sometimes not—play a role in the reproduction of the very forms of power that they seek to challenge. Toukan brings this tension out beautifully in her examination of how the art scenes evolve in part in tandem with broader processes and values of neoliberalism.

The book has much to say about many political issues, but the discussion of neoliberalism is particularly interesting in its departure from analyses that focus on neoliberal economic reforms as austerity, privatization, and opening markets to foreign direct investment. Instead, Toukan shows how neoliberal values have shaped all forms of foreign development funding, including cultural diplomacy. Beginning in the 1990s but particularly in the aftermath of 9/11, the foreign funders of arts and the artists who received funding were

both increasingly constrained by “neoliberal culture” (p. xii): an almost obsessive focus on individualism and entrepreneurialism translated into the aforementioned “professionalization” of both the directors of art centers and artistic practice itself. Cultural production was increasingly discussed as a “product” that could circulate on global platforms, rather than “seeing art as embedded in and part of critical discourse at the local level, even if it was still part of global capital flows” (p. 7). Some cultural producers recognized and reflected critically on this language and emphasis; yet Toukan reminds us that economic and political systems still encompass us, “even when we’re sure they haven’t because we believe we dissent from them in our creative expression of resistance” (p. xii). Still, the work of the new artists during this period was radical in conceiving of cultural production as an opportunity not only or even primarily to express or reflect political dissent but also to alter and reshape the meanings and spaces of the urban built environment. Their interdisciplinary art worked as an alternative form of political engagement and expression of dissent that operated outside formal politics, producing localized occasions to engage with global flows of ideas and praxis of cultural production.

This raises a question about the political effects of cultural production beyond the art scenes themselves. Were the funders entirely wrong in believing that support for cultural production might foster democratic values and desires for broader political or cultural change? I would have liked a more direct answer to the question about whether these three art scenes work as sites for political dissent and counter hegemonic cultural production, particularly given the neoliberal cultural turn Toukan describes so vividly. Likely, we see effects that are both counterhegemonic while also working to reproduce the status quo politics. Relatedly, how do artists engage with more traditional forums for expressing opposition and political dissent, from political parties to other forms of activism? I know of several Jordanian artists in Amman who were very active in women’s rights protests, leftist political parties, and so on, so I wonder what those patterns might look like comparatively.

In sum, *The Politics of Art* is beautifully written and engages the relevant literatures from mainstream debates to more critical thinkers from the Frankfurt School to Rancière and Foucault. Written without jargon, the book is both theoretically sophisticated and accessible. The three chapters on Beirut, Amman, and Ramallah are particularly engaging, giving voice to their artists and their work in ways that bring the theoretical contributions to life while illustrating the similarities and differences between the local contexts. The book will be of interest not only to larger debates not only on cultural production but also on the diverse

effects of neoliberalism, political dissent, the politics of urban space, and foreign development aid.

**Response to Jillian Schwedler's Review of *The Politics of Art: Dissent and Cultural Diplomacy in Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan***

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— Hanan Toukan

I will start by saying that Schwedler's thoughtful query about whether the funders were wrong in assuming that art may have indirect implications for how politics is conducted gets at the heart of the book's main concern. It relevantly asks us to think about whether and how artistic production can at all influence the atmosphere and rhetoric in which politics plays out. I do not think that the funders I studied in the book were entirely wrong in thinking that support for cultural production might foster democratic values and desires for broader political or cultural change. To some extent their investment in what they deemed "progressive" art revolved around questions of memory, trauma, and gender and sexuality that were being expressed in new art forms and exhibited in new sites like urban public spaces and community art spaces located outside museums and galleries. These productions that posed as a counterculture to *national* art cultures played an important role in exposing more locally attuned audiences to the global, as opposed to national, conversation around art practices.

But at the same time funders and their associated local art and culture organizations propagated the idea that, for art to be critical in the "right way," it could not engage with traditional aesthetic forms, such as painting and sculpture, and that it had to be highly conceptual and even theoretical, plugged into a global network of artists, and able to converse in a certain contemporary art language, aesthetic form, and vocabulary (mostly in English) that could reach a more global audience. One very good example is how funders in this period directed their support to video art because it could be packaged more easily and it was deemed a more fathomable art form for many Western audiences. The funders that I included in my study had a clear-cut way of thinking about how democratic values and specifically liberal democratic ones are to be instilled in people. This was a far cry from how the movements for revolutionary social and political change in the region in late 2010 pan out today, just as Schwedler affirms in her work on protests in Jordan. Change, as we are witnessing it, is messy, uncomfortable, and volatile. In these contexts, new meaning and significations are produced that funders could not and arguably did not want to predict. Cultural funders sought a slow transformation of social and cultural values in Jordan, Lebanon, and especially Palestine that reflected their larger political agendas of supporting regimes that were diplomatically tied to Western and

especially US economically extractive and security-laden policies in the region. And art reflected that politics, to the extent that much of the works that I discuss in the book circulated and promoted discourses about change that reflected critical attitudes toward domestic social values deemed regressive and a product of authoritarian nationalism—and yet were not a simultaneous radical critique of the structures of neoliberal capital that promulgated many of these values through the uneven distribution of resources that it entailed.

Today, however, there is a rising body of younger, artists, thinkers, revolutionaries, and indeed prisoners of conscience who are actively working together to cut across the class lines that, during the 1960s to 1980s, divided activists' and artists' ways of thinking and relating to cultural production. As implied in Schwedler's second question, this generation of postrevolutionary artists has yet to be studied. What we do know is that artists today—not just in the visual arts but also in music, literature, and dance—are insisting on locating their works and their politics in a place that distances itself both from Arab nationalist discourse in the arts on Palestine Arabism and from imperialism, by way of a more robust and relevant critique of the materiality that governs their lives through the inequitable and indeed violent liberal capitalism in which most Arab regimes are invested. In that sense, because these political discourses are more inclusive and very much aimed at toppling the neoliberal capitalist economy, older female activists and artists may find common ground with their compatriots who are younger members of the post-2011 generation, even if they do not use the same language and tools to express their dissent. I am grateful for Schwedler's close reading of my text and the engaging questions she poses.

**Protesting Jordan: Geographies of Power and Dissent.**

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In her sweeping new book, *Protesting Jordan: Geographies of Power and Dissent*, Jillian Schwedler highlights the centrality of protest to the perpetual cycle of making and unmaking state power in Jordan. Taking geography, time, and space as the key nodes by which protest and power have historically unfolded in relation to each other, Schwedler demonstrates how dissent has never been an anomaly in a country that has and continues to be mostly seen and related to as an "oasis of stability" in a turbulent region of the world. As she painstakingly reveals through an analysis of the temporal and spatial dimensions of demonstrations, dissenting voices, and rebellion against the status quo,

protest is historically constitutive of the country's very social fabric, its built urban environment, the global and regional security network it is linked with, and its political imaginaries. By extension, this constitutive element, so bound up with geographies of local, regional, and global entanglements, affects the way the regime fashions its own identity and its strategies of coercion in response to the opposition it faces.

Traversing multiple periods in the modern history of Jordan, Schwedler unravels how "the Ottoman, British and Hashemite efforts to impose authority were not met with *sporadic* rebellions, repression and accommodation but with *sustained* resistance and proactive efforts to shape those imperial and colonial projects" (p. 23; my emphasis). This approach emphasizes the Jordanian people's sustained efforts to participate in determining the fate of their country, despite also being concerned with how the regime survived disruptions, thereby challenging views of a society often framed as having been co-opted by regime politics in a top-down project of nation-building. Schwedler takes the people—the youth, the workers, the activists, and the intellectuals who speak out—rather than just the state as central to the political in Jordan. Her approach is in line with a growing body of works on the politics of the Middle East emerging after the outbreak of the Arab uprisings in late 2010.

One of Schwedler's two novel contributions is her proposition that the tribal constituencies that supposedly form the regime's core in Jordan are neither static nor unified. Rather they are driven largely by regional and domestic security, military, tribal, agricultural, and regional and international foreign trade and investment dynamics that intertwine with the built environment and its affective manifestations. As she rightfully observes about the years since the eruption of the Arab Spring, an increasing number of East Bank Jordanians "have dared to cross that 'red line'" and brazenly criticize the king (p. 2). These dynamics, as she demonstrates through rich ethnographic material, an interpretive methodology, and archival research, are experienced by protesters and manipulated by the regime in multiple ways during tense political moments. Schwedler asks, "How did the regime's supposed support base become the source of its loudest and harshest critics?" (p. 4). To answer this question Schwedler embarks on a study that ties political protest to the politics of urban space in a dialectical relationship that makes them constitutive of one another, which is her other equally novel contribution.

In chapter 1, Schwedler discusses the myriad ways of understanding protest in Jordan, which she posits as "dissent externalized even if done without hope of affecting change." She continues, "Perpetrators need not be part of an organization or movement. Demonstrations, riots, marches, strikes, and sit-ins are all familiar forms of protest. Passivity can likewise be a form of protest, as can boycotting

or not showing up" (p. 6). In subsequent chapters the author "zooms" in and out of multiple geographical locales and historical periods to make her argument. Together these chapters illustrate that, by focusing on the results of a demonstration or its repercussions, we may be missing a very important dimension of how politics happens or, rather, how, where, and why change eventually comes, when and if it does. This proposition counters the common understanding that the Arab uprisings were a failure because they ended not with regime change but with replacement of one authoritarian system by another.

In chapter 2, "Transforming Transjordan," Schwedler uses what she refers to throughout the text as "spatial imaginaries" to bring into view various political subjects in the Transjordanian territory before and during the British-led Hashemite colonial project. In the process the chapter moves from the boundaries of modern-day Jordan to show how politics today is directly influenced, if not shaped, by protesting voices and their spatial manifestations in the past. In chapter 3, "Becoming Amman: From Periphery to Center," the focus is on how the historically small town of Amman became the capital of Transjordan and subsequently Jordan. During that period, protests were shaped by and responsive to both the topography of the land and the colonial spatial imaginaries that translated into the planned and ordered capital that the colonial project of the British and the Hashemites envisioned. The city and the forms of protest subsequently grew in parallel with the British-Hashemite plan to shape a public space responsive to infrastructure, trade, and security that they could control: "by the 1930s then the rebellions of the early 20th century had given way to street demonstrations as a means of claim-making toward the regime" (p. 73). In the period of rising Arab nationalism and Nasserism between the 1950s and 1970s, a relatively planned and ordered capital that became easier to control came into being.

In chapter 4, Schwedler explores the technique of spatial and rhetorical repression by the regime in the aftermath of the 1970–71 violence of Black September. Before transitioning to Jordan's arguably authoritarian form of neoliberalism and the "democratization" reforms that began with the *Habbat Nisan* riots of 1989, Schwedler meticulously describes the shaky grounds on which the regime responded to the Palestinian armed insurrection of 1970. The project of "Jordanization" that the regime embarked on "elided critical distinctions between terms conventionally taken for granted in some of the scholarly literature on Jordan, such as 'East Bank', 'tribe,' and 'Bedouin'" to describe traditional regime supporters (p. 98). This elision became significant with the neoliberal reforms first introduced by King Hussein in the late 1980s in response to the government's lifting of subsidies on basic goods. The grievances driving the revolt cut across class, tribal, clan, geographic, and ethnic lines, and "much of the worst violence took place between East

Bank protesters and East Bank-staffed security forces” (p. 110).

Chapter 5, “An Ethnography of Place and the Politics of Routine Protest,” is an immersive ethnographic exploration of routine protests occurring in the built environment around the Kalouti Mosque located in affluent West Amman. It conceptually frames the mosque as a site of study of state-sanctioned protesting against the peace treaty signed with Israel precisely when no protests are going on. This framing probes us to think about how Jordanians, like scholars, often take for granted the *mise-en-scène* of protest signs and voices that routinely disrupt the capital’s urban landscape: people often indifferently work around the inconvenience of security vehicles and cordoned-off areas where small businesses are located. This reveals how the appearance of criticism of Israel’s illegal occupation works to reinforce state power even as it seems to disrupt it.

The tone of the book becomes more urgent in chapters 6–9. These evocatively written chapters reflect the intensity of the harsh repressive techniques aimed at silencing the mushrooming labor protests and tribal violence in the country today. Schwedler shows that several years before the Arab uprisings began, dissenting voices in Jordan were already agitating against the brutal effects of endemic corruption that were compounded by the regime’s neoliberal economic policies. Focusing on a new generation of protestors who could be seen and heard in new spaces in the early 2010s, including virtual spaces, the chapters detail the significant spatial and temporal innovations that activists resorted to in response to the increasing militarization and securitization of public and private space. The opening up of the country to regional and international real estate investments and security cooperation under King Abdullah II reduced the visibility of long-established sites of protest by creating material obstacles to protests in the built environment. Schwedler depicts a crescendo of dissenting, disenfranchised voices in virtual and physical sites that are being squeezed by a regime that wants to appear open to dialogue yet believes it needs to maintain a semblance of stability to enable the capital flows from US and Gulf security arrangements that it needs to survive.

One voice that is arguably invisible in the text is that of women. We know that women do engage in protest, but I found myself wondering what form this protest takes. Specifically, how do women engage in resistance to challenge the conventional narratives of state-making in Jordan, which are largely male dominated, and when and where do they most feature in protests? Women’s protests in Jordan on issues such as the nationality law, which prevents them from passing down citizenship to their children if they are married to a foreign man, and against femicide, honor crimes, and other forms of violence against women are used and manipulated by the regime as bargaining chips with conservative forces in the country

in a glaringly visible pattern. Although women do not dot the urban landscape of the city in the way some of the protests that Schwedler focuses on do, sit-ins by feminist activists in front of courthouses and other government buildings are increasingly common. As Nicola Pratt (*Embodying Geopolitics Generations of Women’s Activism in Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon*, 2020) argues, women were also present in the making of the state during the Mandate period, during the turmoil of Arab nationalism in the 1950s and 1960s, and especially in the aftermath of 1989 with the lifting of martial law.

How did women’s issues and women themselves feature in Schwedler’s fieldwork? Granted, Schwedler’s focus is protest in the context of the built environment, and women outside the capital are not visible in the way they may be in the capital, even today. But how does that fact affect the outcome of the research? If protests are a means of entering into dialogue with the state in Jordan and women are not featured in many of the public protests, how are we to understand their relationship to the state in the context of contentious politics? I wonder how we may apply a feminist methodology to understand protest politics in urban sites where it is men who are mostly visible. Is the virtual space, which she engages, a more emancipatory one in that sense? How do we use the gender variable to understand the lived experience of activists so that we do justice to the complexities of social life in contexts where women (or other marginalized groups) have not appeared en masse in routine protests? Finally, what about Schwedler’s own positionality as a woman researcher in a male-dominated site of research? After all, Schwedler provides a wonderfully novel, dialectical, bottom-up, and interdisciplinary way of reading a history of Hashemite state-making that has largely been written by men. How then did her positionality affect her research results, if at all?

### Response to Hanan Toukan’s Review of *Protesting Jordan: Geographies of Power and Dissent*

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— Jillian Schwedler

Hanan Toukan’s thoughtful reading of *Protesting Jordan* captures the book’s main theoretical interventions and its substantive new empirical material on politics in Jordan. I particularly like how she describes the tone of the analysis becoming “more urgent” in the last four chapters; I had not thought in those terms, but it is an apt description as the state tries ever new techniques to silence dissent from among its traditional support base—constituencies whose protests it cannot violently repress. As Toukan notes as well, the aim of the book reaches far beyond Jordan and the Middle East to suggest new theoretical lenses for understanding protests and contentious politics, as well as formal state institutions—indeed, I argue that we need

to consider these topics together, rather than in largely compartmentalized literatures.

I was surprised, however, by the comment that “one voice that is arguably *invisible* in the text is that of women” (my emphasis). Toukan notes that I do discuss women’s participation in protests, but that I fail to address what form it takes. She further states, “Women are not featured in many of the public protests” and “women have not appeared ... en masse in routine protests.” Yet, *Protesting Jordan* shows just the opposite. It is true that women are far less prominent in protests that challenge the official narrative about state-making, but they are present at many of those events. Concerning the “form” of women in protests, I offer many detailed discussions. I show, for example, how women who were initially mixed with men at the Kalouti protests later moved to the front to directly confront the gendarmerie/riot police. Particularly when photographers are present, protesters believe that the police will be less likely to use violence when women are on the frontlines (pp. 138–43). I discuss how women in the Day Wage Labor Movement came up with the idea of mounting an overnight protest in the capital and that they outnumbered male protesters at that event. Local activists later erected a tent to shelter the female protesters overnight, a move that recognized female agency as protesters but reinforced the idea that even protesting women need protection (pp. 153–54). I show how women participate in all the labor protests and discuss the spatial dynamics and protest repertoires of women protesting over citizenship rights (p. 196) and honor crimes (pp. 126, 182, 208). I also discuss Pratt’s research on women’s activism during the mid-twentieth century (pp. 78–80). In addition, I show how when the Islamist groups mount protests, they cordon off a separate area for female protesters, maintaining that space as a male-

free zone even as it moves as part of a march (p. 175). In most protests, however, women both veiled and unveiled are simply mixed among the crowds. Two photographs show women-dominated protests, one from the 1960s (p. 87) and one from the 2000s (p. 142). And although women-dominated protests are less common outside the capital, I show that they do exist, particularly in the many protests against the arrests of family and neighbors that are held outside jails (p. 181).

These forms of women’s protest might not have been readily visible to Toukan because I consciously chose to integrate women in protests throughout the analysis, rather than cluster them together in a distinct section. That choice clearly comes at the expense of highlighting these dynamics. For that reason, one of my current article projects brings the gender and spatial dynamics of protest front and center in a comparative article that extends beyond Jordan to consider protests across the globe.

As for my positionality, being a Western, white female researcher has mostly afforded me more access rather than less, because I am able to gain access to women activists and women-only protests, as well as those that are mixed or male dominated. I feel largely ignored at protests—even by the police—with the exception being government intelligence agents (*mukhabarat*) who take videos of protests on their phones and attempt to note the names of those present. Although many protests are indeed male dominated, my fieldwork has not felt like a male-dominated site, particularly given the large number of female activists, photographers, and journalists present at most protests. I am grateful, however, for Toukan’s invitation to think more systematically about the gender question and will do so in my coming article.