Democracy and Autocracy

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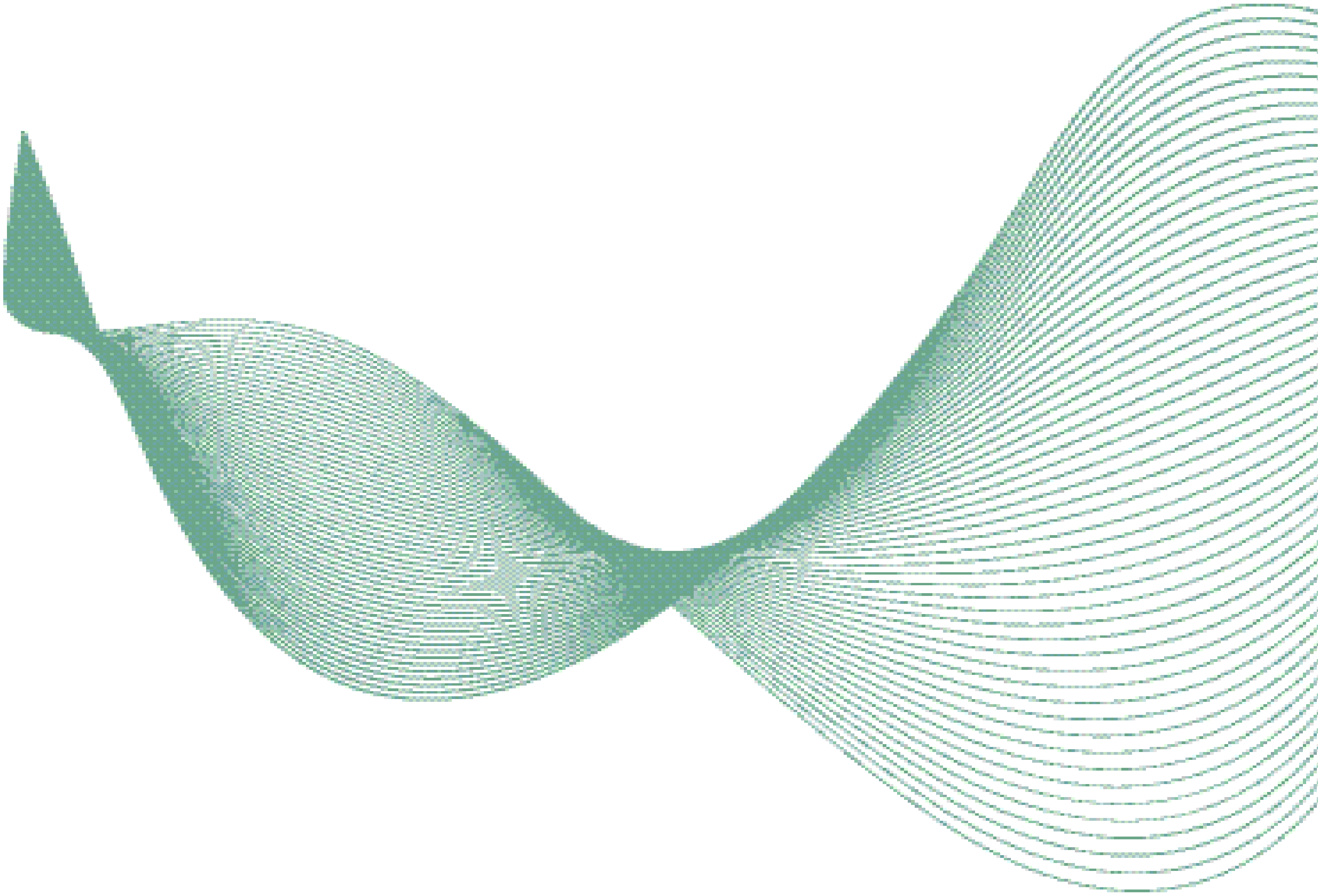
“Making Sense of the Arab State”



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Editor's Introduction

Loay Alarab*, University of Michigan*

On May 27th, 2023, an Egyptian soldier was killed in a "shooting incident near the border strip in Rafah," located in the Israel-besieged Gaza Strip. While the Egyptian Armed Forces promised to investigate the shooting, the circumstances surrounding the soldier's death remain unknown.[1] This followed months of protests in Egypt against Israel's war in Gaza and the closure of Gaza's only Palestinian-controlled crossing, the Rafah crossing. Egypt responded by arresting over 123 people and has received "complaints of sexual assault and other abuses in police custody against some detainees."[2] Similarly, Bahrain has cracked down on protests detaining "scores of participants...including children" who were protesting both the state's normalization efforts with Israel as well as the latter's war in Gaza.[3] Elsewhere in the Arab World, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) allegedly deported a student who yelled 'Free Palestine' during a graduation ceremony and practiced a "shocking level of censorship" against Palestine solidarity protests at the UN's COP28 Climate Change Conferece held in Dubai.[4]

These conferences are set against a backdrop of large Palestine solidarity protests in Yemen, Jordan, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Tunisia, and Morocco, all demanding an end to Israel's military campaign in Gaza and pressuring the Arab states to bring about its termination. Yet, Arab states' responses have been limited to public statements and appeals to international organizations, far from the demands of their citizens for political and economic sanctions against Israel and even the United States. Such sanctions are not unprecedented; OPEC enforced an oil embargo on states that supported Israel in 1973, including the USA. A common sentiment heard amongst Arabs, during waves of protest both in the past year and broadly since 2011, is that their government does not represent the people.

This issue presents contributions from the just-released *Making Sense of the Arab State* (University of Michigan Press). As previewed by the book's editors, Steven Heydemann and Marc Lynch, its authors investigate how Arab governments have acquired their varied institutional and ideological characteristics. Toby Dodge expands Bourdieu's notion of the "disaggregated state" to explain how competitive arenas in the Iraqi state shape its institutions and relations to citizens. Lisa Anderson explains how Arab states have increasingly turned to business enterprises as governance models instead of emphasizing national identity or religious loyalties. Bassel Salloukh uses Gramsci's notion of the "integral state" to explain the perceived absence of the post-civil war Lebanese state among its citizens. In the book exchange, Hesham Sallam explains the unexpected rise of classless politics in post-Nasser Egypt, while Sofia Fenner complicates the concept of co-optation in her study of oppositions in North Africa. One theme that emerges throughout the newsletter is that unexpected forces have made Arab states take their current shape.

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[1] Al Jazeera. (2024, May 28). *Shooting between Egyptian, Israeli personnel near Rafah Kills One Egyptian*.
[2] Amnesty International. (2024, August 16). *Egypt: Release protesters and activists detained over Palestine Solidarity.*
[3] Human Rights Watch. (2024, January 2). *Bahrain: Repression of pro-Palestine protests.*
[4] Gambrell, J. (2023, December 9). *Protests at COP28 restricted by "shocking level of censorship" in host country UAE.* PBS. Harb, M. (2024, July 10). *University student who yelled "free Palestine" reportedly deported as UAE weighs Israel-Hamas war.* AP News

What kinds of government structures can respond to Arab citizens' needs? How do we explain the contemporary relationships between Arab states and Israel in the face of widespread opposition to normalization among Arab populations and their sweeping solidarity with Palestine?[5] What sources do we rely on, and what kind of political claims and governing visions emerge from these sources? In my work, I approach such questions by focusing on the lives, actions, and narratives emerging from and surrounding women fighters involved in anticolonial struggles in the Arab region between 1950 and 2000. Rather than centering the state, I see the formation of postcolonial Arab states as a major limitation to creating governance structures that represent the will of the people who pushed for an end to colonial rule. Instead, women fighters such as Zohra Drif, Leila Khaled, and Souha Bechara show us how non-state groups and communities, particularly those that were peripheral to the state-making process, were at the forefront of creating networks and infrastructures with the capacity to respond to varying social, economic, and political needs.[6] While these women were located in Algeria, Palestine, and Lebanon, respectively, they were involved in a process of world-making that encompassed the whole Arab region. Their theorizations of the relationship between gender and the state have much to offer contemporary Arab social and political movements.

Like Salloukh's piece in the newsletter, I situate my work as part of decolonial knowledge production that takes Arab women fighters as a starting point to theorize the relationship between gender, militancy, political violence, and national liberation. I focus on the discourses surrounding the figure of the fighter, specifically the woman fighter, and the rhetoric they produce among political parties, grassroots movements, and civil society actors. The figure of the woman fighter troubles assumptions about the relationships among militancy, violence, gender, and national liberation. Looking at the present moment, I examine how the political subjectivities embodied by many grassroots movements, especially those with a social justice orientation, are at odds with those of Arab women fighters.

The contemporary situation of Arab states doesn't offer much hope for a future where governments represent their citizens' needs. The Gulf states, namely Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia, rely heavily on non-citizens with weak labor protections for their economic output. Gulf states have increasingly become carceral states, imprisoning political, social, and economic dissidents and almost completely banning protests.[7] Egypt has similarly banned protests while suffering from overcrowding in its prisons for almost a decade, despite building dozens of new detention facilities under President Abdel Fatah al-Sisi's rule.[8] Several other Arab states, such as Syria, Iraq, Sudan, Somalia, Yemen, Libya, Lebanon, and Palestine, have been the subject of imperial wars, invasions, occupations, religious conflict, protests, and local elite competition that are closely intertwined with limited state capacity.

Thinking with Arab states means taking seriously the political norms and claims that have allowed these states to take their current shape. While an older generation of scholarship on the Arab world and anticolonialism highlights the categories of secularism, Islamism, and Communism as well as unsuccessful wars against Israel, more recent scholarship has troubled such a telling of history. Older narratives have made it hard to identify an ongoing Arab anticolonial movement in their overemphasis on moments of defeat. However, contemporary scholarship must take seriously the fighter as a way to understand national liberation, violence, and militancy. Following El Shakry, there is an urgent need to rethink peripheral intellectual traditions, militant movements, and figures as part of a broader anticolonial Arab tradition, one that is an "ongoing process and a series of struggles rather than a finite event."[9] To do so is to refuse to see anticolonialism in the Arab world as on pause, reversed, futile, or unable to bring about material changes for the Arab masses.

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[5] al-Markaz al-'Arabī lil-Abhāth wa-Dirāsat al-Siyāsāt. (January 9, 2024). *Arab public opinion about the Israeli War on Gaza.*

[6] See Bechara, S. (2003). *Resistance: My Life for Lebanon. Catapult; Drif, Z. (2017). Inside the Battle of Algiers: Memoir of a Woman Freedom Fighter.* United States: Just World Books.; Khaled, L. (1973). *My People Shall Live: The Autobiography of a Revolutionary.* London: Hodder and Stoughton.

[7] See Iskander, N., & Iskander, N. N. (2021). *Does skill make us human?: Migrant workers in 21st-Century Qatar and beyond.* Princeton University Press; Khalili, L. (2021). *Sinews of war and trade: Shipping and capitalism in the Arabian Peninsula.* Verso Books; Walia, H. (2021). *Border and Rule: Global Migration, Capitalism, and the Rise of Racist Nationalism.* United States: Haymarket Books.

[8] See Human Rights Watch. (2023, February 28). *Egypt: Release Prison Population Figures.* Marae, Rida. (2022). *The Social and Economic Cost of Egypt's Prison System.* Arab Reform Initiative.

Making Sense of the Arab State: A Research Agenda

Steven Heydemann, *Smith College*; ***Marc Lynch*****,** *George Washington University*

For scholars of the Arab world, the state remains an overwhelming and dominant, and yet elusive, unsettled, and unsettling presence. Since mandatory and then independent states emerged in the Arab world in the aftermath of World War I, theorizing the Arab state has been a central preoccupation for generations of regional specialists. The gravitational pull of the state is not surprising. As a product of war, imperial collapse, and colonial impositions—intertwined with local political struggles and crudely grafted onto an international order in which norms of state sovereignty favored some pathways while foreclosing others—Arab states have long challenged received wisdom about what states are and how they form, develop, and become organized. They have complicated our understandings of how states relate to regimes and to societies. Their formal borders have often fractured the boundaries of existing communal identities, while their internal demarcation from society has often remained ambiguous.

Arab states exhibit unusual variation in state capacity, modes of governance, institutional formations, and processes of adaptation and change. From the perspective of internal security, Arab states seem unfathomably strong, built for absolute domination over civil society and pervasive surveillance and control of the public sphere. But from the perspective of effective governance and development, they seem shockingly weak, unable to provide the essential functions which might attract foreign investment or unlock robust and equitable economic growth. Even more puzzling, Arab states perform the appearance of many common attributes of stateness but demonstrate distinctive patterns of effectiveness in actually delivering on state functions, from services and public order to the symbolic, performative, and spatial attributes through which states traditionally manifest themselves in and through societies. Arab regimes certainly embrace globalized attributes of stateness as affirmations of their sovereignty and legitimacy, yet Arab states often defy expectations of stateness that are widely held not only among social scientists but, as chapters in our volume show[1], among Arab societies as well. What is more, they do so in ways that differ from the patterns observed in other postcolonial regions of the

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[9] El Shakry, Omnia. (2015). ""History without documents": The vexed archives of decolonization in the Middle East." *The American Historical Review 120, no. 3;* See also Idris, M. (2022). The Location of Anticolonialism; or, Al-Afghānī, Qāsim Amīn, and Sayyid Qutb at the Peripheries. *Critical Times, 5(2), 337-369.*

[1] Heydemann, Steven, and Marc Lynch (Eds.). *Making sense of the Arab State.* University of Michigan Press, 2024.

Global South, manifesting characteristics—strengths and weaknesses, presences and absences, effects and affects—that arguably set them apart.

Making Sense of the Arab State (MSAS), published by the University of Michigan Press, features authors who begin from diverse theoretical starting points to address a common set of questions about the state, questions that should interest readers from across the field of comparative politics. The result of a long-term working group of the Project on Middle East Political Science (POMPES), the volume presents research that helps to advance new comparative vernaculars in the study of the Arab state and bring them into sustained conversation with state literature developed in other global and regional contexts. Chapters range widely in their underlying theoretical concerns as illustrated in the newsletter contributions here by Lisa Anderson, Toby Dodge, and Bassel Salloukh—but they all share an interest in questioning what the Arab state is and what it is not. We began with a relatively open-ended common agenda: to explore the varieties of stateness in the Arab Middle East and thus open possibilities for new approaches to longstanding questions of broad comparative interest concerning the interplay of states, regimes, and societies.

Our interest in such questions reflects widely shared concerns among Middle East comparativists about the limits of state theory to account for trajectories of state development in the Arab world. First, the book examines the question of the distinctiveness of Arab states, asking what combination of historical, institutional, strategic or cultural features might make the Arab state a meaningful category for comparative analysis. Second, building on theorists such as Michael Mann and Nazih Ayubi, we examine the disconnect between the overwhelming strength and presence of the state in some areas and its enfeebled or disinterested absence from others, a degree of asymmetric state capacity which stands as a distinctive feature of this region. Third, we highlight the importance of what we label "regimeness" in explaining trajectories of state formation and state transformation over time, emphasizing the weight of regime preferences in how Arab states have come to be organized. Finally, inspired by theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu, Joel Migdal, and Timothy Mitchell, we explore the Arab state as an expression of, and as deeply embedded in, societies, and the "state effect" through which it is experienced by citizens. We thus attach particular importance to stateness as a direct expression of social structures—a "state as society" perspective—or as an arena through which societal forces structure their relations and competition.

Comparativists looking at the Arab Middle East have long been particularly struck by the ubiquity and resilience of authoritarian regimes. With the recent collapse of Tunisia's ten-year democratic interregnum, the Arab Middle East—extending from Morocco in the west to Iraq in the east—has resumed its standing as the only world region never to experience a successful, sustainable transition to democracy. We trace this grim distinction in regime type to particular pathways and forms of state development. Several chapters in the volume (Heydemann, Anderson, Raymond Hinnebusch) trace long-term processes of state development and map these onto transformations in patterns of authoritarian governance. Hinnebusch draws on a rich tradition of historical sociology to explain why Middle Eastern states took the forms they did. Anderson and Heydemann's chapters highlight the centrality of ruling regimes in the construction and maintenance of dynamic forms of autocratic rule, and their crafting of states designed to serve their own survival in power over other objectives.

Decades ago, Nazih Ayubi famously analyzed the Arab state as neither strong nor weak but "fierce," with an overinvestment in security services but poor developmental outcomes and low ideological hegemony. Ayubi's vision informs our approach to how Arab states exhibit *asymmetric institutional capacities*—a condition that Heydemann's chapter takes as its starting point. These capacities are higher in domains such as the capacity to surveil, coerce, and contain the populations they govern and lower in others, including innovation, rule of law, or the capacity to foster inclusive economic and social development. It is evident, as well, that large domains of governance in the Arab world fall outside the state and operate through regime-controlled but non-state mechanisms that work in tandem with state institutions. Understanding the organization of asymmetric state capacity, Heydemann argues, requires expanding the scope of our research to encompass domains in which regimes have intentionally allocated state functions to non-state mechanisms and domains in which regimes have intentionally withheld the development of state capacity. The key questions, then, focus on understanding the organization of asymmetric state capacity, the regimes that control them, and patterns in the co-construction of state and non-state modes of governance. Thus, Lynch's chapter draws on James Scott's approach to legibility as a feature of stateness, along with new research on digital authoritarianism, to explore the adaptive use of new technologies to surveil and regulate populations. He shows that while the digital revolution has turbocharged the ability of states to surveil and render legible its citizenry at scale in unprecedented ways, this massive and sudden increase in state capacity has been applied towards repression and regime survival imperatives far more than it has towards improved delivery of services, economic development, or even responding to the COVID-19 crisis.

Several of the chapters seek to broaden the lens of analysis to view the state within society. Each in their own way direct attention to the political, social, and economic factors that bind states and societies in the everyday production of politics in Arab cases. Salloukh and Dodge see the states they study (Lebanon and Iraq) in part through their absences, as citizens grapple with states that seem simultaneously omnipresent and nonexistent. Their chapters force us to see states as arenas as much as actors, structuring politics but not determining their outcomes. Dipali Mukhopadhyay uses the case of Afghanistan—like Iraq, a country whose politics have been indelibly marked by American intervention – to take this problematic to its extreme. She explores a context where regime preferences in the organization of very limited stateness were nonetheless decisive in structuring the political, social, economic, and spatial contexts, while actors struggled to advance competing conceptions of stateness and bargained over the terms of their relationship with state authorities. Dan Slater's call in the book's conclusion to move beyond state strength and weakness has particular relevance for the study of the Arab state.

Heydemann's chapter brings many of these puzzles into focus. While popular views of the Middle East tend to assume a dominant, overdeveloped Arab state, claims of state weakness and failures of governance are remarkably commonplace in both academic and practitioner literatures on the Middle East. The deficiencies of Arab states were routinely used to explain the mass protests that swept the region beginning in 2011, with calls to enhance stateness in order to improve governance and deliver benefits to citizens offered as a response. Such claims are echoed in comparative research programs on modernization, political development, and the conditions associated with the rise of developmental states, including work that explores why such states have not emerged in the Middle East, and in practitioner literature on failed states and state fragility in the Arab region. Much current research on the Arab state thus fits neatly within a conceptual and theoretical landscape saturated with claims about conditions that contribute to weak and ineffective state institutions in general and the weakness and fragility of the Arab state in particular.

Pushing back against these claims, Heydemann argues that the capacity of Arab regimes to effectively reconfigure elements of authoritarian governance as conditions change is central for an understanding of the state of the Arab state. Simply put, if states are so weak, if state institutions are so ineffective, if governance is so poor, how did the majority of Arab regimes survive the 2011 uprisings, the largest wave of mass protests in the region's modern history? How can we explain the extraordinary continuity of regimes, which in Arab republics such as Algeria, Syria, and Egypt are now in their sixth or seventh decade of rule, even though they consistently produce suboptimal social and economic outcomes? Heydemann argues that rather than trying to account for state weakness— with weakness defined in developmentalist terms as the dependent variable— it is more productive to ask a simple, straightforward question: How can we explain the configurations of state and non-state institutions that deliver governance in the Arab Middle East today? Or, more simply, how did the Arab state get to be the way it is?

We argue that answering these questions, and understanding rather than simply observing the asymmetries in state capacity, require us to distinguish between the state and the regimes which sit atop them – and to fully recognize what it is those regimes *want* and *can get* from the states they control. Assessing whether collapsing social services, ineffective governance, the impoverishment of the middle classes, or rampant corruption represent failures of the state depends on whether ruling regimes intended to try and address those problems. Heydemann's chapter shows how predatory ruling coalitions contribute to asymmetric stateness, an uneven distribution of state capacity, and governance that expresses the survivalist priorities of ruling elites. What appear to be deficiencies in stateness, from this perspective, may actually be instrumental adaptations for regime survival. This allows us to offer fresh insights into some of the core questions of the state, including the conceptualization of state strength and weakness, the degrees of embeddedness of the state in society, and the "state effect" through which citizens directly experience the state.

For those who see the state in the Middle East as weak, such patterns are often explained as the unintended outcome of failed state-building projects by regimes that embraced developmentalist logics. In this view, moreover, informal governance is often seen as a cause of developmentalist failures. Challenging this explanation, Heydemann focuses on the role of ruling elites in the formation of asymmetric stateness. His chapter treats institutional configurations—combinations of state and non-state modes of governance—as the expression of regime preferences about how best to ensure their stability and survival. The state institutional configurations we see in the Arab Middle East today reflect how regimes view the purposes of the state and how the region's autocrats thought –and still think – about the imperative of resolving the principal challenges confronting any autocrat: mitigating challenges from within ruling coalitions, from external adversaries, and from below.

All three challenges were acute in absolute terms during the early phases of MENA's postcolonial state building and institutional development, perhaps even in relative, cross-regional terms. They were amplified for Arab regimes by the distinctive permeability of the Arab state system: the extent to which Arab societies and politics were subject to intense, transregional flows of ideas and political movements that rejected the legitimacy of both states and regimes. How to address these challenges provided the principal impetus that shaped the state-building strategies of ruling elites, giving a rationality and intentionality to configurations of stateness in the Middle East that are rooted in survivalist rather than developmentalist logics. In short, the strategic choices of regimes are most heavily influenced by survivalist criteria and – to the extent that we care about intentionality – should be evaluated by that standard.

The survivalist preferences of ruling regimes have had a decisive influence on trajectories of state development in the Arab Middle East, in three principal ways. First, postcolonial rulers in the Arab Middle East viewed state development as a means to strengthen regime-ness above all: to consolidate regime power, mitigate threats, control the extraction and allocation of resources, and produce the continuity of their rule. Developmentalist outcomes were seen as a means to these ends. Second, these rulers— the immediate predecessors of those who hold power today in most Arab countries— deployed the allocation and development of state capacity instrumentally to advance regime interests. Stateness was extended or withheld based on criteria reflecting the survivalist preferences of rulers rather than those associated with economic and social development. Third, rulers viewed citizenship as transactional and segmented and treated legitimacy as a contingent outcome of transactional relationships that defined and organized state-society relations. State development was used to ensure the quiescence and loyalty of citizens. It provided mechanisms to manage and contain possibilities for social mobilization from below while structuring and restructuring the boundaries of political and economic inclusion to favor privileged categories of citizens and marginalize others.

This transactional-instrumental view of stateness led Arab rulers to pursue flexible, adaptive, and plural strategies of state development. As Arab political economies took shape, these strategies led to what Steffen Hertog calls segmented market economies, with rigid "insider-outsider" divides that are deeper in the Arab world than in any other region. At times, rulers asserted the exclusive authority of the state in Weberian terms, both internally and externally. At other times, they cultivated non-state frameworks of rulemaking and governance, often exploiting formal institutions as sites within which non-state, personalistic, and clientelist practices were grafted onto and interwoven with formal bureaucratic rules and procedures. Consistent with postcolonial experiences of state building in other regions, Arab ruling elites adopted developmentalist ideologies that expressed inclusionary conceptions of economic and social rights yet managed access to such rights on a contingent, transactional basis. The result, Heydemann claims, is the distinctive configurations of asymmetric stateness that define the Arab state as we see it today.

Chapters in the volume explore these and related issues from a wide range of theoretical starting points. Hinnebusch's chapter traces long-term processes of state development and incorporation into the international system to explain transformations in patterns of authoritarian governance. Anderson adopts a comparative-historical and regional perspective to trace the growing interest among Arab ruling elites in treating states as enterprises, replacing the noise and dissonance of politics with the dispassionate logic of the firm, anchored in family dynasties. Schwedler and Yom show how popular protests and challenges in Jordan reinforce stateness even as they seemingly challenge its performance. Dodge and Salloukh direct their attention to the blurry boundaries between state and society, portraying the state as an arena for the competition of social, economic, and political forces, and for the everyday production of politics. Lynch explores the effects on state capacity of the adaptive use of new technologies to surveil and regulate populations. Slater's conclusion encourages us to think beyond the categories of state weakness and state strength to undertake more wide-ranging comparisons that encompass the heterogeneity of both analytical perspectives and of stateness itself.

Making Sense of the Arab State therefore seeks to serve a dual function: to bring together and reframe decades of research by Middle East specialists, and to put that research into sustained dialogue with the broader universe of comparative politics. Our focus on the historical specificity of the development of Arab states should facilitate comparison with the experience of other postcolonial regions. Our discussion of asymmetric state capacity resonates with research in a wide range of other contexts and should help to advance those comparative perspectives. Our emphasis on regimeness, and the survivalist preferences of the ruling coalitions which seized control of Arab states, should direct attention to the similarities and differences with regime coalitions in other regions. And our focus on states and societies, including the conceptualization of the state as arena and the discussions of how challenges to the state help to produce and reinforce stateness, should enrich theoretical approaches to stateness more globally. We hope that this forum, and the book from which it draws, helps to inspire such cross-regional comparative theorizing.

The 'Business of Government': The State and Changing Patterns of Politics in the Arab World[1]

***Lisa Anderson**, Columbia University*

Compared to Arab rulers in the 1950s or even 1990's, today's governments are fighting over different stakes, deploying different arsenals, and measuring success by different standards. The early post-independence battles were about the configuration of states, which gave way to Cold War struggles to sustain the stability of regimes. Today's competition reflects new contests over the instruments and beneficiaries of government policy. These are not just new players but they have new purposes and powers.

In the Arab world, as elsewhere, the realms of power and authority often extend far beyond the limits of what we think of as strictly political and administrative institutions. The modern state is but one, relatively recent, way of organizing politics. The United Nations' "principle of sovereignty of all its Members" (UN Charter, Art. 2) in which each member is to be "a peace-loving State...able and willing to carry out the obligations contained in the Charter", (UN Charter, Arts. 2, 4) is both politically powerful and patently fictitious. Many UN Members are not peace-loving, nor able or willing to, for example, promote "universal respect for, and observance of, human rights..." (Art. 55). Social scientists who deploy the conceptual framework of the state to examine politics regularly acknowledge that states vary in strength, capacity, success, legitimacy, and many other dimensions, but fail to consider that at some point differences in degree may signal differences in kind.

These differences are illustrated in three modern eras of contestation about, over, and beyond the polity in the Arab world. In the first decades after independence, the principal focus of contention in the Arab world was definition and control of the state bequeathed the region by imperialism. In the latter quarter of the twentieth century, the emphasis shifted to stability, represented by regime longevity. By the time of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, stability was abandoned in favor of regime change—often framed as "democracy promotion"—

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[1] Parts of this essay appeared in Lisa Anderson, "Shifting Patterns of Arab Politics," *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs, no 44*, Winter 2022.

and the uprisings of the Arab spring less than a decade later sealed the fate of many long-lived regimes. What followed represented the culmination of decades of neo-liberal enthusiasm for the market and its putative promise of a prosperous future: the business enterprise now supplements and increasingly supplants both state and regime as the unit and standard of authority. This turn to the market, which was encouraged internationally and embraced by governments across the region, redefines the relationship of rulers and ruled: once the state's citizens, then a regime's clients, today's denizens of the Arab world are competitors for government attention, accountability, and access.

In the early post-imperial years, when memories of European control were still fresh, political debates within the Arab world centered on the shape of the post-colonial order: how much of the legacy of European rule would survive? Thanks to its demographic weight, cultural influence, and charismatic President Gamal Abd al-Nasser, Egypt played a major role in the region. Nasser's embrace of pan-Arab nationalism reflected and sustained the era's characteristic tension between revolutionary nationalism and state sovereignty that characterized the era. From the toppling of European-imposed monarchs in Egypt, Iraq, and Libya, the wresting of Algeria from France, the creation (and dissolution) of the United Arab Republic, and the repeated (and failed) efforts to liberate Palestine, the region was convulsed in existential argument about the shape and authority of states.

With the Arab military defeat and loss of territory to Israel in 1967, the heady ambitions to redraw the European map of the region gave way to more modest efforts simply to secure its borders. The withdrawal of the British from their last possessions east of Suez and the independence of the small Gulf states in 1971 marked the end of formal European control, and by the end of the decade the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty signaled the triumph of state interests over Arab nationalist ambitions. Continuing commitment to the scaffolding of the international state system on the part of great powers fortified boundaries but did not require that these states be devoted to preserving public order or serving the public interest (Guazzone & Pioppi 2009).

Indeed, over the succeeding decades, as control of territory was secured and international recognition assured, regime stability took precedence over state-building. The global superpowers, settled into a Cold War détente, prized predictability and supplied client regimes with foreign and military aid to ensure policy continuity and regime stability. The availability of increased oil revenues, among both the oil producers and their regional allies, also supported stability. After decades of military coups, there was no regime change in the Arab world in the thirty years between the oil price increases of 1973 and the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. Orderly succession upon the death of rulers in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Morocco and Syria, illustrated the investment in regime continuity across the region.

Yet this stability obscured important changes in the dynamic of politics; it represented not only the surrender of earlier nationalist aspirations but the abandonment of more conventional state-building. Autocratic rulers relied not on the popular support of citizens but on financial subsidies from external patrons, which they used to create and sustain clienteles, shifting from appeals to citizens—appeals that might have produced demands for greater freedom or better services—to claims for allegiance based on ethnic and religious solidarities. This deliberate and often cynical tactic to evade accountability to a broad-based citizenry quickly escaped the control of the regimes, however, as such identities proved at least as effective in mobilizing opposition as support. By the 1980s, regimes were challenged by Islamist and sectarian mobilization as groups based on networks of religious affiliation and ethnic kinship proliferated, providing aid and solace in communities where the state administration itself was weakening.

With the end of the Cold War, the decades-old bargain of international aid for domestic stability seemed in jeopardy. Many of the regimes of the region, particularly but not exclusively those led by military officers, turned to "securitization" of once civilian functions (Korany et al. 1993; Ammar 2013). After the United States launched what was to be called the "Global War on Terror" in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the incentive to construe virtually all political opposition as a security threat was further enhanced, as regimes secured external support to confront domestic opponents, especially if they could be portrayed as Islamist (Anderson 2004).

The human costs of regime stability were reflected not only in war casualties and refugee counts. Not only had conflict raged across the region—Lebanon's civil war and the Iraq-Iran war, for example—without any discernible impact on the regimes, but by the 1990s population growth and economic stagnation had also conspired to erode previous decades' gains in health, education, and employment across the region. The post-Cold War era saw little improvement as neo-liberal policy prescriptions discouraged large-scale government investment in social welfare provision. By the turn of the century the Arab world had among the lowest adult literacy rates in the world and the region's economies had stagnated: the reliance on oil and neglect of labor-intensive sectors amplified scandalously high unemployment, especially among the young. The Middle East had become what Thomas Piketty and his colleagues called "a pioneer region in terms of extreme inequality" (Alvaredo et al. 2019, 19).

It was in this context that the uprisings of 2010-2013 broke out. The governments were taken by surprise, an indication of how detached they had become from the preoccupations of their putative charges, and the initial response to the popular disturbances was confused. Many governments—and some of their opponents—resorted to by-then tired reliance on sectarianism to frame expressions of popular discontent despite its irrelevance to the calls for bread, freedom, dignity, and social justice. Civil disobedience and protest in Bahrain were characterized as Shi'a rather than popular; the post-uprising presidential elections in Egypt eventually turned on a contest between the military and the Muslim Brotherhood; the Syrian regime quickly rallied Alawi allies to battle protesters; Yemen slid into civil war characterized by claims of Iranian support for Shi'a rebels.

Within a few years, however, many of the efforts to capture popular support by reference to the early nationalist commitments or to religious and sectarian loyalties had been abandoned. As governments struggled to regain the upper hand in battles with their own people, a new emphasis appeared, the product of the previous decades of both neo-liberal hostility to the state and growing disenchantment with profligate regimes: the polity as business enterprise. The rousing revolutionary nationalist or the patronage-dispensing sectarian leader were giving way to the business leader promising customer service and shareholder value. As Muhammad Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the ruler of Dubai, himself a prominent advocate of this new approach, wrote: "today's leaders are not the same as yesterday's. Today's leaders are the silent giants who possess money, not the politicians who make the noise… the babble of politics and its messy entanglements [are] of little benefit to us in the Arab world" (Al Maktoum 2019, 46). By 2020, in a spectacular indication that neither nationalist pride nor religious allegiance defined the new political landscape, the UAE and Israel signed what were known as the Abraham Accords, a move that opened the door to Israel's normalization of relations not only with the UAE but also Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco.

What was the logic of the newly emerging regional dynamic? The neo-liberal foundations of globalization were presented as a new opportunity to reframe political authority, bypassing both states and regimes—the "babble of politics"—for an entirely new notion of governance, modelled on the modern multinational corporation. As the ruler of Dubai argued, "maybe the time has come for [the Gulf Cooperation Council or the Arab League] to be overseen by leaders, managers, businessmen, heads of industry and entrepreneurs instead of foreign ministers" (Al Maktoum 2019, 43). The ruling families of the Gulf were among the most eager proponents of the retreat of the state and the restructuring of regimes as they adopted the watchwords of the global private sector, positioning their countries as nimble, entrepreneurial, and innovative. They were not merely ruling dynasties but family-owned business empires with vast multinational holdings. Indeed, soon after assuming his responsibilities as crown prince, Mohammed Bin Salman of Saudi Arabia was described as the "CEO of al Saud Inc" (Kanna 2011, 139).

The Gulf rulers were hardly alone in accenting finance, entrepreneurship, and investment. Many regional governments seized the initiative to drive economic investment that they had once left to crony capitalist allies, including a number of what are conventionally understood as military regimes. In fact, militaries across the region were increasingly embracing more assertive roles in the economy while they retreated from their security responsibilities. The military establishments of many countries in the Arab world had slowly but perceptibly forsaken the duties associated with the armed forces of states or the praetorian guards of regimes. Both domestic policing and foreign defense were increasing outsourced to other countries, the United States in many instances, and to private security contractors, both foreign—the American Blackwater Security Consulting and Russian Wagner Group being notorious examples—and domestic, such as Egypt's Falcon Group.[2] Partly as a result of the erosion of their traditional roles, partly because of the lure of enterprise as the locus of political authority (not to say wealth), the military establishments grew increasingly involved in the economies of their countries, and officers increasingly constituted a "military party" concerned to protect their privileges (Picard 2012).

The importance of Gulf investment projected Gulf domestic economic and political practices onto the larger canvas of the region. The growth of foreign direct investment originating in Gulf countries created transregional webs of connection between governments and private entrepreneurs, particularly as the business community in the Middle East moved into finance. In the Gulf, members of the ruling families routinely sat on the boards of major financial and commercial enterprises, ensuring alignment of the interests of the economic and political elite. When political intervention became a priority of the rulers, as after the 2011 Arab uprisings, such links permitted "economic statecraft." As Young suggested of post-2013 Emirati investments in Egypt, "it remains to be seen whether the profit motive or the state power motive will dominate. There are early indications that the state is willing to scale back investment promises and commitments via commercial engagement when the profit motive is disappointing" (Young 2015).

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[2] Peter Singer, "The Dark Truth about Blackwater," October 2, 2007; Victoria Kim, "What is the Wagner Group?" March 31, 2022.

In part as a hedge against commodity market volatility—and as a response to the expected "energy transition" in countries dependent on hydrocarbon revenues—many of the countries of the region managed sovereign wealth funds. Of the world's top fifty sovereign wealth funds, twelve were in the Middle East, including Egypt's, at number 46.[3] These funds often partnered with international private funds that typically made investments in relatively risky ventures such as technology firms, entertainment companies, and real estate projects, as befit funds responsible not to citizens, but to shareholders (Young 2019).

In fact, the accent on business and the adoption of the role of investor on the part of governments created claims on them based less on citizenship or even clientelism and more on "the idea of getting a fair return on one's share" (Beaugrand 2019, 59). How such "shares" were determined and how "fair" returns should be calculated were increasingly complicating and even superseding rights-based claims on governments. In fact, in a revealing observation, Mohammed Bin Salman, crown prince of Saudi Arabia, described the legal framework of Neom, a new development on the Red Sea that was to be the centerpiece of his visionary future of the country:

> He said that in a place like New York, there's an inconvenient need for laws to serve citizens as well as the private sector. "But Neom, you have no one there," he said, omitting mention of the tens of thousands of Saudis then living in the area. As a result, regulations could be based on the desires of investors alone. "Imagine if you are the governor of New York without having any public demands," MBS said. "How much would you be able to create for the companies and the private sector?"[4]

An "ambiguous 'tiered system' of economic, political and social rights" that permitted creating value for investors without attending to "public demand" was taking root across the region, even in countries far less reliant on migrant labor than the Saudi Kingdom (Jamal 2015, 602). Various kinds of exceptional jurisdictions and privatized enclaves operating under special legal regimes, profiting and protecting their investors, were appearing from Morocco to Iraq. From special economic zones, self-contained "techno-cities" and science parks, gated residential communities, offshore cruise ships to labor compounds and private islands, such enclaves provided a regional and even global class of wealthy entrepreneurs with bespoke legal regimes, including not only tax exemptions but dispute arbitration rather than the jurisdiction of national courts, and private security in lieu of the local police. Wherever there was foreign investment, there were local partners, agents, and representatives looking for shares of the wealth—and governments prepared to accommodate them.

Saudi Arabia had ambitious plans not only for Neom but for the country's capital, Riyadh[5], and dramatic efforts to create investment-ready enclaves were widespread. In Jordan, for example, "an archipelago of specialized economic enclaves" had been developed across the country. With enthusiastic backing by the United States, European Union, and World Bank, "Aqaba was to become an 'extra-territorial city,' a shining "symbol of a forward-looking country that wants to play a role in the new global economy" (Martinez 2022, 143-4). Egypt's new administrative capital was similarly marketed as business-friendly. As part of Egypt's Vision 2030, the new capital was being built halfway between Cairo and Suez, with all of the national ministries in a dedicated campus, twenty-one residential districts, several thousand schools, a technology and innovation park, nearly 700 hospitals and clinics, 1,250 mosques and churches, a 90,000-seat football stadium, 40,000 hotel rooms, a theme park four times the size of Disneyland, and a new international airport.

From the vantage point of the denizens of these "symbols of forward-looking countries," gated communities with private security and special economic zones with exclusive jurisdiction, the purpose of government had shifted from securing independence or safeguarding stability to ensuring the ease of doing business. In this context, the Abraham Accords were merely a smart business arrangement; the Jewish state was understood as neither a nationalist state nor a sectarian regime but just another business-friendly enclave of technology transfer, investment financing, and technological innovation.

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[3] "Top 100 Largest Sovereign Wealth Fund Rankings by Total Assets," accessed August 10, 2022.

[4] Vivian Nerein, "MBS's $500 Billion Desert Dream Just Keeps Getting Weirder," July 14, 2022.

[5] Vivien Nerien, "Saudi Arabia Wants Its Capital to Be Somewhere You'd Want to Live," December 16, 2021.

The appeal of this new approach to governance in the Arab world—the promise of socially tolerant, economically prosperous illiberal autocracy—was considerable for those who expected to benefit. It shared the "techno-optimism" of Silicon Valley, where companies from Facebook to Amazon transformed social life by making communication and commerce easier and more convenient, all the while creating vast invisible stores of surveillance data and fast-growing disparities in wealth. Still reeling from the Arab Spring, many governments were "converging on a model that combines authoritarianism with a…more liberalized social space, and an invigorated private sector. It might be called the 'GCC consensus,' but its practice reaches from Tunisia to Jordan and beyond."[6]

The designers, promoters, and beneficiaries of this new pattern of Arab politics were optimists. As Yousef Al Otaiba, the United Arab Emirates' long serving ambassador to Washington, put it, "We're trying to approach longstanding issues with a completely different lens… essentially going from analog to digital…We are in the very, very early stages of re-imagining what the Middle East looks like and how it operates."[7] Yet, even in these very early stages there were disquieting signs. During the COVID pandemic, wealth inequality in the Arab region grew dramatically, with the richest 10 percent of the population controlling more than 80 percent of total regional wealth by early 2022. The region had many more millionaires and their average wealth had increased by 20 percent since 2019, while the bottom half of the population saw its wealth diminished by one third.[8] As the pandemic receded, there was little evidence that the pace was slowing. The first two years of the Abraham Accords saw significant economic activity. The United States Institute of Peace opined that "the bilateral hope and promise" had borne fruit, including a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) signed between Israel and the UAE in May 2022 (Kurtzer-Ellenbogen 2022).

The challenge to this model of governance was the question of those in the interstices, outside the enclaves. There were millions of people in southern Tunisia, across Libya, in Palestine, Yemen, Syria, Lebanon—and, as we have seen, Gaza—who, absent the resources to be investors, shareholders, customers or even employees, seemed to be little more than inconveniences to these governments. Across the region, government neglect was already taking its toll in areas outside the favored enclaves.

And the left-behind were keenly aware of the disparities: as one resident of a provincial town in Jordan protested, "Ma'an is poor and ignored. The rich can't make money there so the state doesn't give a shit about it, except when it revolts. Otherwise, they are happy to let Ma'an rot."[9] With growing investments in security and 'urban renewal,' governments—from Bahrain's destruction of the Manama's Pearl Roundabout, to Egypt's renovation of Tahrir Square in Cairo, to Jordan's fencing of Amman's Fourth Circle—were attempting to make protest more difficult. This suggested that even episodic efforts to draw the attention of governments to the concerns of citizens were going to be more difficult. That did not, however, mean that those interests did not exist, festering below the glittering ambitions of the business-minded governments. New kinds of government will no doubt produce new demands for attention, accountability and access.

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Understanding the Disaggregated Iraqi State in Comparative Perspective

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Between May 2021 and March 2023, as part of a larger collection of wide-ranging elite interviews for my current research project on the rebuilding of the Iraqi state after 2003, I spent several hours separately interviewing three of the most senior members of the post-2003 ruling elite still alive and resident in Baghdad. Each was representative of a dominant political party in the post-Saddam political system, with each of those parties claiming to represent a major ethnic or religious group.[1] Beyond the rich insights the interviews provided, the overbearing tone and conclusions from all of the interviewees were profoundly negative. The three individuals had long been active in opposition to Ba'ath Party rule, an activism that not only forced them into exile but put their lives and those of their families in direct and repeated danger. Each had occupied senior roles in their respective political parties and had gone on to serve in the highest echelons of the state as it was being rebuilt after the invasion. Against that background, all three thought that the system they had risked their lives to create had failed. All three placed the blame for the failure of the system they established firmly on the political parties they had worked for. It was, they all agreed, the parties that had driven Iraq into its current dire circumstances.

How do we understand the myriad failings of a state that these three senior politicians had played a central part in building? In a wider, historical perspective, how do we conceptualize the Iraqi state, both after regime change but also as a postcolonial state, from its formation in 1920, through the thirty-five years of Ba'athist rule leading up to the US-led invasion, and then later attempts to rebuild a reformed and democratic political system in its wake? This conceptualization needs to recognize the postcolonial critique of Eurocentrism and seek to avoid it by building a comparative model of the state that is not based upon the negative comparison of the state in the Middle East or wider Global South to an allegedly more coherent or developed European model. My approach to building this conceptual model of the state, placed at the center of my chapter in the edited volume, *Making*

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[1] Confidential author interviews carried out in Baghdad between May 2021 and March 2023.

Sense of the Arab State (MSAS), is developed by deploying insights from the work of Michael Mann, Bob Jessop, and especially Pierre Bourdieu. It conceives of the state as composed of a series of competitive fields—bureaucratic, political, coercive, and economic—that have been ideologically reified to give the impression of a coherent, agential whole. Any actual coherence that exists between and within these competitive fields is gained through shifting balances of power between competing elites. This model certainly captures the Iraqi state after 2003, built as it was by a disparate but highly competitive group of formerly exiled political parties, driven by fear that a renewed Ba'athist authoritarianism could return to oust them, once again, from the country. However, I argue that it can equally be applied to the Iraqi state before regime change, under Ba'athist rule, and beyond that to the state in the Middle East and across the wider world.

Disaggregating the State

This model of the disaggregated state, developed from the work of Mann, Jessop, and Bourdieu, eliminates the neo-Weberian focus on the autonomy of the state from society, seeing it instead as a "strategic field," a competitive set of arenas where elites struggle to obtain dominance over a fractured set of state institutions (Jessop, 2008; Mann,1988; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). This approach certainly draws attention to the role of senior civil servants, along with other competitors for power, but instead of autonomous rule enforcers, civil servants become another set of players in the ongoing struggle for power. The state is understood to be continually shaped by struggles across the whole of society. Within this analytical framework, states are shaped by the different groups competing against each other at any given moment. As one group attains dominion over others, albeit temporarily, the outcome is institutionalized within the state, delivering some degree of coherence and stability or a "higher-level crystallization" (Mann, 1993, 75-80).

It is Bourdieu's field theory that adds analytical precision to this conception of the disaggregated state. For Bourdieu, competition within any society takes place in autonomous and self-regulating fields. Competitors in each field are united by a shared logic, the rules of the game, and a common understanding of the stakes involved. As Bourdieu states: "Each field has its 'fundamental law,' its *nomos*: principle of vision and division" (Bourdieu, 2000, 96). These "principles of vision and division" dictate the terms under which competition takes place in each field and what is being fought over. The players within the fields are trying to amass different forms of capital — economic, coercive, and social capital — to use in their struggle for dominance which comes from the ability to organize and benefit from networks or group action (Bourdieu, 1986). People and groups also compete over the most important capital: symbolic capital, the power to determine the analytical units used within any field to construct shared meaning (Bourdieu, 1991).

Iraq as a Disaggregated State

When seeking to apply this model to the state in the Middle East and beyond, Iraq offers an empirically diverse case study. In a comparable way to states across the region, the Iraqi state greatly expanded its institutional capacity, both bureaucratic and coercive, from 1968 until the mid-1980s. However, like other regional states, this expansion stopped in the mid-1980s, due in Iraq's case to the spiraling costs of the Iran-Iraq War (1980–88). Capacity within the state's various fields went into steep decline from 1990 onward, as Saddam Hussein's decision to invade Kuwait placed Iraq under some of the harshest sanctions in diplomatic history. International isolation ended in 2003, with the US-led invasion and then the restructuring of the state.

The bureaucratic field of the state, which the United States inherited when its invasion forces seized Baghdad in April 2003, had been subject to a sustained and strategic deinstitutionalization under the last decade and a half of Ba'thist rule. In the aftermath of the invasion, the occupation authorities—the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) under the leadership of Ambassador Paul Bremer—sought to transform the state that they had seized. However, along with being largely ignorant about the state and society they were interacting with, CPA policymaking was beset by a series of competing aims and objectives. On the one hand, the CPA was determined to replace what it perceived as an overbearing totalitarian state with a minimal neoliberal one, reconstructed along neo-Weberian lines with autonomous institutions and an independent civil service watching over a new ruling elite. On the other hand, the CPA became quickly dependent on a small group of formerly exiled political parties that wanted to use an informal consociational system to divide the state up between themselves in the name of ethno-sectarian "balance." Finally, as levels of politically motivated violence rose, the imposition of some form of sustainable order in the coercive field, to facilitate the exit of US troops, became the dominant goal.

These different objectives, especially the tension between US diplomats and the formerly exiled heads of the major parties, were largely mediated through a series of extended negotiations that stretched from 2003 to 2006. These established the new political system and shaped the institutions of the state. The negotiations encompassed the formation of the Governing Council in July 2003, the first post-regime-change cabinet that September, and the drafting of a new constitution in 2005. This period included the formation of two national governments after the first and second national elections of January and December 2005. It was in the first three years after regime change, dominated by these five events, that Iraq's new political system was built. In the language of Mann, it was through these ongoing negotiations (with their conflicts and concessions) that a new polymorphous state was built and a post-invasion balance of forces was institutionalized within the bureaucratic, coercive, and political fields, crystallizing the agreements reached within the higher levels of the state.

Bremer, as head of the CPA from May 2003 to June 2004, was initially dismissive of the leadership of the seven political parties that became the dominant voice of the Iraqi exiles.[2] However, from the formation of the Governing Council onwards, it was these parties that formed Iraq's new governing elite, and it was the intense competition between them, in each of the state's fields, that shaped the state. This competitive dynamic corresponds to the "state as society" approach that runs throughout MSAS.

Iraq's political system dictates that the most intense intra-elite negotiations take place after every national election, which happened twice in 2005, in 2010, 2014, 2018, and 2021. Within the political field, most of the political parties were united around what Bourdieu would label a *nomos*, a "principle of vision and division." This was formed by a common ideological commitment to *Muhasasa Ta'ifia*, a rough system of informal consociationalism, which uses a sectarian understanding of Iraqi society to justify the division of state power and resources among the ruling elite (Dodge, 2020). This ideological and instrumental agreement facilitated the newly elected parties' dominance over the various fields of the post-2003 state.

Every four years, during the painstaking negotiations that result in the formation of governments of national unity, the state and, more importantly, its resources, are redivided among the parties. The outcome of these negotiations means the state, in and of itself, has little or no coherence, with the cabinet functioning as the only formal arena for mediating disputes and attempting to work toward some form of common approach. The major agreements that continue to shape this process were reached in the aftermath of the January 2005 elections. The first was to divide the three most senior offices of state—the presidency, the premiership, and the speaker of parliament—between parties that claimed to represent Iraq's three major ethno-sectarian communities. The Islamist Shi'a parties claimed the office of prime minister on the basis that they represent Iraq's largest ethno-sectarian community. The two parties that claimed to speak for the Kurds—the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan—took the presidency, with the disparate forces rallying the Sunni vote being allocated the office of parliamentary speaker.

Of far greater importance was the second agreement reached after the 2005 elections: to divide all government ministries among the numerous parties that competed for and won substantial numbers of seats in national elections, again in the name of ethno-sectarian "balance." This informal consociationalism allows these parties to utilize the budgets and payrolls of the ministries they are awarded, through contract and employment fraud, to fund their political activities (Dodge and Mansour, 2021).

It is these largely informal agreements among Iraq's newly empowered governing elite that mediated their competition and collaboration. They have had a profound impact on the state's bureaucratic field. This process started with the US-led coalition's implementation of aggressive de-Ba'thification in May 2003. This removed anyone who had been in the top four levels of the party from government service as well as prohibited anyone who had been a party member from occupying the three most senior levels of the civil service. The implementation of the policy removed 41,324 civil servants, out of a total of between 850,000 and one million, in the first month of its operation. This created the space for the new ruling elite to place their members in the senior ranks of every state institution (Sissons and Al-Saiedi, 2013). From 2006, in the aftermath of the second set of national elections, the appointment of senior civil servants was brought into the *Muhasasa Ta'ifia* system, thus delivering control of the bureaucratic field to the dominant party leaders while also regulating their competition.

A similar but less regulated competition can be detected in the coercive field. The struggle to dominate Iraq's coercive field was accelerated in the aftermath of regime change by Bremer's decision to disband the Iraqi army in May 2003, making 400,000 soldiers unemployed (Dodge, 2012, 37-38). By February 2004, in the face of a growing insurgency, the US occupation sought to rectify its own initial mistake in two ways. First, it sought to accelerate and expand its program for rebuilding the Iraqi armed forces. However, as Iraq's armed forces were rapidly rebuilt, the dominant political parties competed to insert so-called *dimaj* officers into the senior ranks of the military. These political appointments were senior personnel from party-affiliated militias. As such, in a comparable way to the senior civil servants inserted into government ministries, the *dimaj* officers owed their allegiance to the dominant political parties that positioned them within the chain of military command. Such placements undermined the barriers between the army and societal actors or any independence within the chain of command.

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[2] The seven key parties were the Kurdistan Democratic Party, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, the Iraqi National Congress, Iraqi National Accord, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, the Islamic Dawa Party, and the Iraqi Islamic Party.

The second way the United States sought to rapidly reestablish the capacity of the Iraqi security forces was through the wholesale integration of members of the Badr Brigades—the Shi'a Islamist militia that had recently returned to the country from Iran—into the armed forces it was busy reconstructing.[3] This covert US policy, designed to give resource to its allies among Iraq's new ruling elite in their struggle to dominate the coercive field, led directly to the widespread politicization and fracturing of Iraq's new armed forces.

The collapse of Iraq's armed forces in 2014, in the face of the Islamic State's advance on Mosul, gave a clear indication of how the ongoing struggle for control of the coercive field had fractured any remaining coherence in its command, control, and *esprit de corps*. Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, during his two terms as prime minister (2006-2014), had set out to individually tie senior military commanders to him personally through favoritism and promotion (Dodge, 2012). By early 2014, in the face of the Islamic State's military campaign, Maliki acknowledged the lack of coercive capital possessed by the formal institutions of the Iraqi state.[4] However, instead of reversing his previous policies and embarking on security sector reform, he set about re-empowering and then utilizing the more informal coercive capital possessed by the Shi'a Islamist militias, including Badr, Kata'ib Hezbollah, and Asaib Ahl al-Haq, allied with him in the National Alliance coalition (Mansour and Jabar, 2017).

Once Mosul fell to the Islamic State, Maliki accelerated this process, announcing on national television plans to provide weapons and equipment to citizens to fight the militants. Maliki set up a formal organization, the Commission for the Popular Mobilization Forces (Hay'at al-Hashd al-Shaabi), to give financial and symbolic capital to the militias (Mansour and Jabar, 2017). In the months and years that followed the fall of Mosul, these militias used the economic, social, symbolic, and coercive capital given to them by their role in the fight against the Islamic State to increase their size but also their dominant position in Iraq's political and bureaucratic fields.

In Iraq today, government expenditure now funds the militia members' wages, their organizational capacity, and their arms purchases. Attempts to constrain the power of key militia groups have proven impossible, as these forces benefit from the state's financial and symbolic capital and have the power to challenge other government forces they are in competition with.

A close examination of the major militias currently operating in Iraq will highlight the permeability of any analytical division between state and non-state actors in the coercive field. The three dominant militias, Badr, Kata'ib Hezbollah, and Asaib Ahl al-Haq, for example, do not sit in opposition to the Iraqi state or pose a direct threat to it. Instead, they are major competitors within the state's coercive field, along with other members of the ruling elite. They have access to the financial capital of the state and benefit from any symbolic capital that accrues to the state. Like the rest of Iraq's political elite, they are competing to maximize the resources and power they can extract from the state.

Conclusion

The Iraq state, like all states, is best conceptualized as a series of competitive arenas or fields. Within each of these fields, various members of a fluid ruling elite compete with each other to gain domination. This competition is ongoing and shapes the state's individual institutions and their interaction with Iraq's population. The coherence of the state depends on two things: first, the balance of power among these competing elites, and second, the degree of consensus they manage to achieve.

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What We Talk About When We Talk About the State in Postwar Lebanon

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When I walk the streets of Beirut and see cars parked on sidewalks or double-parked on street corners and driving in every possible direction, pedestrians crossing intersections as if they are running for their lives through a firing range with street crossings doubling as targets for speeding cars, sidewalks colonized by illegal cafes armed with the omnipresent espresso machine, and that informal militia labeled "valet parking" with a Roman emperor's ultimate power to decide if and where you can park your car no matter what the law says – I wonder, where is the Lebanese state? Lebanese generally blame the state for all ills, even when it rewards them materially or they purposefully ignore state rules and regulations. This kind of political ethnography is deceiving, however, because the postwar state is at the heart of a range of political, economic, biopolitical, discursive, and performative practices that serve to incentivize and reproduce a particular type of sectarian politics and consent while precluding the emergence of viable organizational and ideological alternatives.

But what are we talking about when we talk about the state in postwar Lebanon? How do we conceptualize the state and its relation to society and a range of social actors straddling state and society? What picture of the state do we subscribe to when we label the state in Lebanon weak or absent, or when we demarcate analytical boundaries between the state and non-state actors, between the state and society, the private and the public realm, the formal and informal sector, or when we contest these labels? What are we talking about when we make claims about the centrality of the state apparatus in the production and reproduction of sectarian subjectivities and control of gender and sexual differences, or when we consider the state a site for the production of political economic relations and their social, organizational, and ideological forms?

My chapter in the edited volume *Making Sense of the Arab State* (MSAS) takes up the challenge of theorizing the postwar state in Lebanon while suspending the European model of state formation and state building as a point of both analytical departure and critical comparison. I wanted to liberate myself from a picture of the Arab state rooted in a neo-Weberian conception, i.e., a coherent state able to penetrate and control society through an autonomous centralized bureaucracy and violence monopoly in a given territory. For as Gurminder Bhambra (2016) contends, the modern state possesses a specific history, one where colonialism, both in Europe and the Global South, plays a constitutive role. Moreover, a conception or image of this modern state derived from the historical contingency of the European experience of state formation cannot "escape temporality," such a state being "a historical product of a particular, culture-specific location: Europe, central and Atlantic—not Latin America, not Africa, not Asia" with its own "archaeology, architecture, structure, organization, and overall makeup" (Hallaq 2013, 25 and 36).

As such, this chapter is an attempt to theorize the state in postwar Lebanon as it actually exists, without having to anchor it to the hegemonic western European model of state formation. On this alternate view, whatever political formations exist are a product of colonial history and elite choices at critical junctures (Salloukh 2024) rather than a product of "various absences and failures" (Getachew and Mantena 2021, 373). This chapter is also part of a larger effort to articulate a mode of decolonial knowledge production (Mignolo 2007) that can show how scholarship from the Arab world can serve as a site for theory production rather than uncritical consumption (Bishara 2023 and 2024). Finally, the chapter can also be read as a political economic critique of everyday discourse about the state in Lebanon. It is an attempt to explain why so many Lebanese casually ignore rules and regulations and yet blame the state for the lawlessness that ensues.

To understand the postwar Lebanese state, I turned to the political theory of Antonio Gramsci, using his conceptual apparatus to theorize Lebanon as a variation of the "integral state" described in the *Prison Notebooks* (1971). However, my use of the concept necessarily entailed a measure of "analytical stretching" (Getachew and Mantena 2021, 365) of Gramsci's original insight. In thinking about Lebanon's postwar state, I wanted to join those scholars who are "thinking in a Gramscian way about the present" without "rigidly 'applying' Gramsci's concepts" (Morton 2007, 208; Morton 2013; see also Bayart 2009; Chalcraft 2021; Salem 2021; Gilbert and Williams 2022). Gramsci deployed the "integral state" to theorize Western European liberal states in the nineteenth century, their transformations in terms of mature class structures, and the growth of civil society in advanced capitalist contexts. By contrast, I deployed the term in a different context: to theorize the postwar Lebanese state so as to reflect an alternative process of state formation and historical trajectory in the Global South, one producing different state institutions, class fractions, and social formations (Bilgin and Morton 2002; Morton 2007). In this case, private elite interests expressing different class fractions operate not by defining the ethical content of the state in civil society, nor by organizing consent on the cultural terrain of civil society. Instead, these interests overlap directly with state structures. This deliberate stretching of Gramsci's conceptual toolkit served to capture how the postwar political economic elite — representing an alliance of class fractions — placed the state's fiscal and monetary policies at the service of capital accumulation. These elites also worked to integrate substantial social constituencies into the postwar order using sectarian clientelist incentives. This, in turn, provided the material conditions to secure a level of sectarian ideological consent that precluded the emergence of viable political alternatives in the postwar era. The operations of the postwar integral state also truncated the terrain of civil society on which alternative organizational formations — whether trade unions, professional syndicates, or non-sectarian parties with substantial followings — could organize to subvert the ideological hold of the sectarian system.

The point of stretching Gramsci's original insight is to expose ourselves to a new image of the postwar state in Lebanon, one free from the binaries of weak/strong, state/society, private/public sphere, state/non-state actors, and the formal/informal sectors associated with the neo-Weberian image of the state. This new image or conception of the state liberates us from the weak state image of the postwar state, as well as Joel Migdal's (2001) otherwise useful "state in society" approach. I argue in the chapter that both approaches fail to account for 1) the central role of state capture in the making of the postwar order through the production of new social formations and material interests and their concomitant ideologies, and 2) the kind of limited political and organizational responses that transpired after the overlapping fiscal, financial, and socioeconomic collapse following the unprecedented October 2019 popular protests—the *thawra* (revolution) as most Lebanese labelled it. I also argue in the chapter that immaterial performative theories of the postwar state tell us little about how political-economic elites captured the state on behalf of capital accumulation, clientelist redistribution, and those seeking to produce ideological consent, as well as how these forces shaped post-collapse dynamics.

The chapter thus surveys three very different pictures of the state in Lebanon: first, the so-called weak state picture and its critics; second, the immaterial and its limits; and third, the integral state, highlighting the material, ideological, and organizational dimensions of the postwar order on the road to the current social and economic collapse and its management. I argue that these three pictures represent different claims about the state and imply different conceptions of the relation between state and society.

The weak state picture—with its emphasis on how much the state in Lebanon falls short of the neo-Weberian ideal—is caught up in a largely binary image of the relation between the state and society, one that cannot account for postwar political-economic dynamics. Moreover, critiques of the weak state thesis, whether based on accounts of mediated statehood, hybrid security, or hybrid sovereignties, despite their welcome corrections, do not go far enough in theorizing the transformations in the postwar order that have produced the integral state. Consequently, either they abstract the state to a level that ends up ignoring the material underpinnings of political dynamics, and thus fail to explain the causes of and reactions to the country's political economic collapse after 2019, or they gloss over the violence and distortions that come with hybridity.

The immaterial picture confirms just how much the state as dominant idea has become entrenched in the everyday practices and affections of the Lebanese, even though they may imagine it differently. But this approach is of little utility to understanding the material and social relations that went into the making of the postwar order and is so essential to an explanation of the causes and management of the post–October 2019 collapse. Instead, a picture of the integral state captured by the postwar political economic and financial elite — and producing its social, political, ideological, and organizational forms — helps us explain not only the causes of the current fiscal, financial, monetary, and socioeconomic collapse but also the dearth of viable political, organizational, and ideological alternatives.

Far from reifying, underrating, or abstracting the state, then, this Gramscian way of thinking about the state in postwar Lebanon foregrounds the state as part of a complex web of "social relations and material interests that constitute a social . . . order" (Bilgin and Morton 2002, 69). The distortions of the postwar period, from systemic corruption, lack of accountability, everyday lawlessness, and "the habitualisation and internalization of [sectarian] social practices" (Morton 2007, 171) to the "predatory pursuit, or rush for the spoils, of wealth and power," are all theorized as part of a mode of governance that has less to do with state weakness, absence, or failure and more with "a mechanism of social organization" through which political power is disseminated and wealth redistributed" (Bilgin and Morton 2002, 74), one that served to reproduce sectarian modes of political mobilization, organization, and consent at the expense of alternative types.

But how can we bring back the anthropology of everyday practices into this analysis? To do so, I close the chapter with a scene from Ziad Rahbani's 1993 dystopian play *Bikhsous el-Karame wel-Sha'b el-'Anid* (*About Dignity and the Stubborn People*). In this scene, after someone tries to exchange a defective new radio but is shot for no reason, citizens who otherwise casually ignore the law start voicing their outrage at the absence of the state: "*ma fi dawle*" (there is no state), they start shouting, complaining about the state's inability to protect them. Then suddenly one of them shouts, "*ma fi sha'b*" (there is no citizenry), only to be cynically informed by the reporter covering the scene that this "competition" is scheduled for another day.[1] Rahbani's play was meant to be a warning of the dystopian future awaiting a postwar society structured on lies, lawlessness, consumption, contradictions, and superficiality. When Lebanon's socioeconomic and financial unraveling commenced in late 2019, this dystopian play proved hauntingly prophetic.

Originally set very early in the postwar years, but more prescient some two decades later, the above short scene in Rahbani's brilliant play reverses the blame game between *el-dawle* and *el-sha'b*: to escape accountability, the political-economic elite abstracts the state and blames it for its absence and corruption while all along leveraging its fiscal and monetary policies for the purposes of accumulating capital and manufacturing the 'social relations and material interests that constitute' the postwar order.[2] This abstraction effect (Mitchell 2006) is intensified through initiatives that straddle the private/public and formal/informal sectors. In turn, most people internalize this abstraction but accept to play by the incentive structures produced by the postwar state. Strategic social formations have thus gained a currency peg that makes possible a life of *uber*-consumption; fuel, medical, and food subsidies; a bloated public sector; tax evasion; informal service providers; permeable borders for all kinds of smuggled products; uncollected custom duties; and a range of other direct or indirect benefits. Even the lawless scenes with which both this article and my chapter open are a deliberate governance strategy deployed by those who have captured the postwar state but do not want it to act like a state, because they want to perpetuate its abstraction and the foundational myth that only sects protect their members. Corruption and impunity from everyday lawlessness at the base insulate those at the top from accountability. They camouflage the dense sinews of the integral state that straddle the private and the public, the formal and the informal. These sinews have only grown more robust in the aftermath of the overlapping fiscal, financial, and socioeconomic collapse after the 2019 protests. In fact, it is at these times of acute and transformative crisis that the postwar state as a different kind of integral state becomes most visible. That the overlapping postwar political, economic, and financial elite have not only survived the financial, fiscal, and socioeconomic collapse of the past four years but also managed it in a way that entrenched their power underscores the integral state's durability and ability to shield the perpetrators of this collapse from accountability and prosecution, even as they claim that the state is weak, absent, and corrupt.

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[1] See the scene at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8xvwSjfKh3Y at 15:50 minutes.

[2] I owe this formulation to Ibrahim Halawi.

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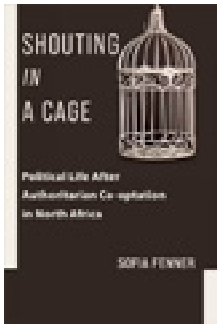
Author Exchange



Shouting in a Cage: Political Life After Authoritarian Co-optation in North Africa. *By Sofia Fenner. New York: Columbia University Press, 2023. 280p. Paperback.*

Review by Hesham Sallam, Senior Research Scholar, Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law, Stanford University.

Drawing on the experiences of Morocco's Istiqlal and Egypt's Al-Wafd parties, *Shouting in a Cage: Political Life after Authoritarian Co-optation in North Africa* by Dr. Sofia Fenner is a novel intervention on opposition co-optation in nondemocratic settings. The book theorizes the role of discourse and narrative in shaping the political fortunes of co-opted oppositions, while underscoring the theoretical and empirical limitations of the very concept of co-optation.

The book critiques conventional conceptions of co-optation for collapsing two distinct outcomes, namely incorporation (of an opponent into a system) and neutralization (of the incorporated opponent) (56-57). Built into these conceptions is the assumption that incorporation necessarily leads to neutralization. An incorporated opposition, the argument goes, puts down its daggers in return for regime-sponsored benefits (e.g., legal recognition or parliamentary seats), or because the incentive to challenge the ruler diminishes upon incorporation (58-59). The histories of Al-Wafd and Istiqlal, however, show that incorporation did not stop these parties from challenging authoritarian incumbents, even at times when they benefited from the political status quo (62-63, 72, 192-194, 204-206).

If incorporation does not, by definition, lead to neutralization, what accounts then for the increasing irrelevance of Istiqlal and Al-Wafd after their incorporation? The devil is in the discourse, the author argues (88). It is not that these parties capitulated to the status quo or lost their appetite for dissent; it is that they lost the discursive battles they faced following their incorporation.

The decline of the two parties, Dr. Fenner explains, is rooted in the "Romantic narratives" they deployed to justify the contradiction that incorporation brought into plain sight: professing a democratic agenda while also participating in an undemocratic system (139). To resolve this paradox, two parties claimed that their short-term participation, with all its problems, limitations, and sacrifices, was part of a long-term struggle for democratic change.

Bracketing the sincerity of these narratives (92-93) (after all, how often do sincerity and politics ever mix?), the book shows that the Romantic narrative suffers from "systematic limitations" when weighed against the "transactional narrative" (103). The latter denotes the counterclaim that incorporated parties have struck deals with the regime, agreeing to participate in its absurd political theatrics in return for various inducements.

Factual validity aside, the Romantic narrative always loses. Why? Because of its inherent disadvantages. It asks the audience to suspend judgment until the end of the story, on the promise that the ending would eventually vindicate the narrator from all past charges of hypocrisy and opportunism. Put simply, the Romantic narrative can neither be falsified nor verified in the present; the observer must 'wait and see.' The transactional narrative, on the other hand, asks much less of the observer, specifically, believing in "the existence of secret, unobserved transactions" between the regime and the opposition (106-107). For the outside observer, such transactions can never seem too far-fetched, partly because politics by its very nature is rife with quid-pro-quo behavior that can easily pass as negotiations, deals, or bargains (75-76, 150-151).

As the transactional narrative carries the day, incorporated parties lose their credibility and find themselves isolated from their natural constituents and former supporters, who no longer take them seriously. Istiqlal and Al-Wafd were neutralized, not because rulers tamed or bribed them into silence, but because people lost faith in them and their narratives (77). Therefore, whenever the two parties voiced demands for change in recent times, tragically, neither the ruling elite nor the public listened to them or took note of their dissent; they were, in effect, "shouting in a cage," per the book's apt title (88).

Thus, *Shouting in a Cage* adds depth to our understanding of the role of opposition parties under authoritarianism, bringing to light the impossible choices they face. It also draws attention to the theoretical and substantive significance of "holdover parties" like Istiqlal and Al-Wafd, or "those created by non-regime actors prior to the onset of incumbent authoritarian rule" (51).

The book is commendable in its reliance on a wide range of sources documenting Istiqlal and Al-Wafd's experiences, including interviews with Al-Wafd and

Istiqlal leaders and activists, and participant and ethnographic observation. The result is a book that thoroughly explains the workings, meaning, and effects of opposition co-optation. Each chapter is a beautifully narrated set of stories, annotated by thought-provoking discussions of their theoretical significance; each story is a dent in the established wisdom about opposition parties in non-democracies. For example, while familial ties within parties are often viewed as a patrimonial vulgarity detrimental to political organizations, the book shows that family (both literal and symbolic) was key to Istiqlal's and Al-Wafd's survival in the face of authoritarian adversity (159).

Shouting in a Cage's centering of the discursive dimensions of co-optation resonates outside of North Africa. It inspires deeper dives into the systematic limitations of any political discourse adopting a 'reform-from-within' agenda, whether in authoritarian or democratic settings. More importantly, it reminds us that the success of co-optation in neutralizing opponents ultimately depends on the reaction and interpretation of its audience. And the book's major plot twist is that we, as scholars, are part of the audience to the extent that our research plays a role in adjudicating between the abovementioned Romantic and transactional narratives (115, 212). Although *Shouting in a Cage* could have done more to unpack the implications of this finding, it leaves open a set of introspective questions scholars will likely debate after reading this book. For example, in what ways has the dominance of rationalist approaches in comparative politics privileged our receptiveness to transactional narratives of opposition co-optation, thereby sidelining other interpretations? And if researchers are in fact actors in the plot of co-optation, how can we navigate the ethical challenges of studying political movements presently engaged in discursive battles, in which interpretation is a matter of political survival? Or can we ever?

Response from Sofia Fenner

In a time when skimming abstracts and flipping straight to regression tables has become the norm, it was a pleasure to read *Classless Politics* closely. It is even better, and more humbling, to have my own work read so closely. I am particularly grateful to Dr. Sallam for highlighting the book's closing provocation: the idea that we as scholars are not only describing co-optation but also participating in it. What does that have to do with disciplinary practices in political science—and how are we to move forward?

I have two modest suggestions. First, it is always better to be aware of the political consequences of our work than oblivious to them. We can learn to attune ourselves to how our work interacts with the world around us. Too often, comparativists see themselves as outside the dynamics they study, "objective" observers whose conclusions will never trickle back into "the field." At worst, we parachute in without contextual knowledge and do harm; at best, we believe our work is too theoretical, jargon-laden, or niche to matter to anyone. Yet even physicists—the ideal-typical "hard scientists"—have figured out that observing phenomena changes them. Many important political processes have a discursive component, so writing and speaking about them will never be a mere observation; it will always be an intervention, too. Our first step is simply to recognize that we and the people we study are all doing politics together.

The second step is to examine the unsightly roots of our belief in scholarly detachment. Here Edward Said has something to remind us: try as we might to think of "Western scholarship" and "local politics" as essentially unconnected, the reality is that they have always been intertwined (sometimes to catastrophic effect). When I began my research in Morocco, I was struck by how many of my party interlocutors mentioned John Waterbury's 1970 book *Commander of the Faithful*, a problematic classic of English-language scholarship on Moroccan politics. *Commander of the Faithful* was translated into French and Arabic, of course, and the Arabic version was banned in Morocco. That ban gave the book an aura of facticity and expanded its reach and influence. Walking the streets of Rabat, I saw Arabic translations of Hegel for sale on the sidewalk. Egyptian academics whose books I devoured were up to date on political science literature in several languages and would nostalgically cite Duverger and Dahl. That any of this surprised me reveals an assumption that societies under study are only objects of scholarship, never participants in it. Those of us who study places and people foreign to us are especially prone to such assumptions, but they suffuse the discipline as a whole. Even people studying their home communities are trained—disciplined, really—to view "the field" as somehow unable to theorize itself.

What does this mean in concrete terms? There are excellent works—*Classless Politics* among them—that can serve as models for political awareness and engagement with local scholarship. Indeed, many comparativists would jump at the opportunity to do these things better. The problem is that they are not equipped to do so. In most cases, language skills are a prerequisite for this kind of work; neither *Classless Politics* nor *Shouting in a Cage* could have been written without them. But graduate students who need to learn a new language struggle to do so on top of substantive courses, expanding quantitative methods requirements, and ever-higher job market expectations. The relative scarcity of qualitative methods courses (Emmons and Moravcsik 2020) leaves most political scientists unable to work rigorously with discourse—or distinguish a case study in conversation with local scholarship from one that is not. Methodological pluralism, where it exists, looks increasingly like a choose-your-own-adventure novel, with interpretive and historically-minded scholars on a completely different track than their colleagues. But broad graduate training and transnational scholarly engagement are important for everyone, not just disciplinary misfits. Both our books use unusual methods to explore classic comparative politics questions. We want to be in conversation with mainstream political science. Pull up a chair and join us.

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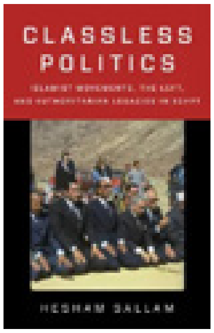


Classless Politics: Islamist Movements, the Left, and Authoritarian Legacies in Egypt. *By Hesham Sallam. New York: Columbia University Press, 2023. 472p. Paperback.*

Review by Sofia Fenner, Assistant Professor of Arabic, Islamic, & Middle Eastern Studies, Political Science, Colorado College.

At first glance, *Classless Politics* might seem to be telling a story we already know: how Islamists benefited from Egyptian president Anwar al-Sadat's tacit support in the 1970s. First glances, however, can be misleading: the story Dr. Hesham Sallam offers here is not the one we think we know. Through a subtle, persuasive analysis backed by impressive historical evidence, *Classless Politics* shows that Sadat's policies were not just a temporary boon for Islamists. Instead, they ushered in a comprehensive reorientation of Egyptian politics toward issues of national identity and away from class-based demands.

Too often, accounts of Left failure in Egypt and the region echo the same complaint: Why can't the Left just do a better job? Why can't they try harder to connect with mass constituencies or build party organizations? Sallam moves beyond these frustrations; "to be sure," he writes, "leftists made a variety of poor choices... but the deck was stacked against them" (197). It was Sadat's policies of "Islamist incorporation" that stacked that deck. As he tried to shed Gamal Abdel Nasser's distributive commitments, Sadat faced a growing class-based backlash. To counter economic discontent, he encouraged Islamist activism, especially on university campuses, while cracking down hard on leftist student organizing. Though he eventually soured on Islamists, stung by their rejection of Camp David, the damage was already done.

Sadat's decision came during, and constituted, a critical juncture in Egyptian politics. The agency he exercised set in motion path-dependent processes that were difficult to undo. Most important of these was the revitalization of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). Sallam astutely reminds us that the MB of the early 1970s was on the verge of collapse, worn down by repression during the Nasser years. Sadat never intended to rescue the Brotherhood, but that is precisely what happened. Just as the political system opened enough for opposition groups to exercise some influence, the MB was thrown a lifeline: an influx of campus activists with real organizing experience. Moreover, the revitalized MB was not a legal political party. It remained outside state control, preserving a degree of autonomy that would turn out to be crucial.

Leftists, meanwhile, were not so fortunate. Student activists faced brutal repression in the 1970s, making underground autonomous organizing impossible. They struggled to connect with older leftists; the latter were perceived as untrustworthy, having dissolved their communist parties to join Nasser's Arab Socialist Union (ASU). In an especially valuable contribution, Sallam traces how these older communists were tempted and neutralized by joining the ASU's secret Vanguard Organization (VO, chapter 4). Already regime creatures, they spent the 1970s building legal leftist parties—foremost among them al-Tagammu—that were dependent on the regime.

That dependence, and the Brotherhood's autonomy, set the two groups on different trajectories. Running as independents and on other parties' lists, Islamists won seats in parliament and used them to "crowd out" distributive concerns by raising identitarian issues (215-245). Meanwhile, the MB built an effective organization by screening members and obscuring its internal workings from the regime—two things legal leftist parties could not do. Al-Tagammu found itself vulnerable to regime interference and infiltration. The more Islamists attacked them, the more leftists came to see the Islamists, not the regime, as their primary enemy (262). Al-Tagammu pushed back by countering Islamists' identity politics with their own, settling on the economic front for the "lowered ceilings" of an increasingly neoliberal regime (262). The increased salience of religion activated divides within leftist groups; this process of "splitting" tore them apart and left them ineffective advocates for economic justice (265). These processes continued through the 1990s and 2000s and, in devastating ways, set up Egypt's 2011 transition for failure.

One of the book's strengths is its acknowledgment of two realities: first, that opposition groups do have some agency, even under authoritarianism; and second, that that agency is seriously constrained by *longue durée* dynamics. It therefore resists the tendency to overstate dictators' control and rejects the presentism of so many post-Arab Spring analyses. It is also an Egypt specialist's Egypt book. Sallam's desire to understand Egypt's contemporary human catastrophe runs throughout the text, from its dedication to its last page. Even those familiar with the case will find much that is new, and all readers will be enlightened by Sallam's genius for identifying and interpreting historical vignettes. His deep engagement with Arabic-language scholarship should be the standard by which all case-based work is judged.

Indeed, the book is so evocative of the place and people it describes that some readers will long for a broader perspective. How do changes in formal politics influence—or reflect—dynamics out in society? The argument that Egyptian politics has come to focus on issues of religious identity rather than class is persuasive. But outside the halls of parliament and the pages of opposition papers, Egypt remains a society riven by class differences. In the run-up to the 2013 coup, concerns about the Brotherhood dripped with classism and class anxiety. MB voters, in many imaginations, were poor and uneducated, easy prey for the material and religious appeals of the Islamists. These poor people were "sheep" who simply could not be trusted to make responsible choices, and therefore the country could not become a democracy. Discursively, class was wound through the identitarian showdown that set the stage for the coup. What might that tell us about how social class persists—or becomes an identity—as formal politics change? As Sallam so powerfully demonstrates, Egypt still has lessons to teach us. I join him in acknowledging that what we learn will come far too late for far too many.

Response from Hesham Sallam

I would like to thank Dr. Sofia Fenner for her thoughtful and generous review of *Classless Politics*. I am particularly grateful for the depth of her engagement with the book and the important points she raised.

I agree with Dr. Fenner that the continued prevalence of class divides in Egyptian society, especially after 2013, is a critical issue that warrants pause and reflection. I view it as a central element of the puzzle the book tackles, namely the recurring misfit between formal national politics on the one hand and salient social conflicts that permeate people's lived experiences on the other. After all, the book is broadly concerned with how "classless politics" can emerge and persist in class-ridden societies—a trend that Dr. Fenner's useful characterization of post-2013 Egypt amplifies to a great degree. Even before 2013, popular demands for redistribution and social justice were pronounced in contentious politics and waves of protest movements in Egypt. Their presence in elite-led national politics, however, was almost consistently faint and did not hold the same sway one would have expected in the Egypt of the January 25 Revolution, the Egypt of 'bread, freedom, and social justice.' Egypt, as the book notes, is certainly not an exception to this global trend, wherein class, despite its (arguably growing) visibility in society, is often sidelined in (or distorted by) national politics. Egypt's experience does not offer a universal answer to this puzzle (nor do I assume that such a universal answer exists). The book, however, tries to highlight lessons for understanding the roots of this phenomenon in authoritarian settings in developing economies—lessons that could be useful for theory-building efforts that embrace the principle of equifinality and that recognize the value of contingent generalizations.

What can the book teach us about post-2013 Egypt? My general inclination is to err on the side of modesty, largely because there are so many aspects of Abdel-Fattah Al-Sisi's Egypt we are still trying to make sense of (not the least of which is Sisi's own discourse). That said, I do believe that the support that Sisi received from large swaths of the left immediately after the July 3, 2013, coup cannot be isolated from the left's historical trajectory as drawn in *Classless Politics*. Post-2013 politics illustrated the living legacy of the "cultural left" that arose in the 1990s and that helped successive governments articulate nationalist critiques of Islamist movements. That same cultural left was playing a similar role in post-coup politics. A related issue is the power that nationalist discourse has enjoyed within the Egyptian left for the past several decades—power that, as the book shows, was reinforced by the enduring effects of Anwar Al-Sadat's Islamist incorporation policies. These trends provide context for understanding why numerous leftist leaders rallied behind military-centric nationalism in the wake of the 2013 coup.

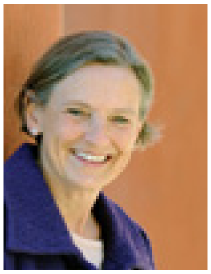
Finally, I would like to register my strong agreement with Dr. Fenner that Egypt has plenty of lessons to teach. Many such lessons hold relevance not only for scholars of MENA politics, but also, as the contributors of this issue suggest, for scholars of authoritarianism and comparative political development more broadly.

Joint Commentary from Sallam and Fenner

Our books share a fundamental contention: understanding present politics requires us to take history seriously by studying the evolution of politics over long periods of time. In a sense, they are Arab Spring books; we wrote them as the consequences of Egypt's uneven opposition landscape unfolded outside our windows and in the browser tabs we could not stop refreshing. Yet both books came to focus on the 1970s, locating the roots of contemporary dynamics in a tumultuous moment of political change half a century ago. Had we taken al-Wafd and al-Tagammu's failures as a result of their choices in the 2000s or 2010s, we would have missed our central puzzles entirely. Only with historical perspective could we ask how al-Wafd was neutralized, or why al-Tagammu never became an umbrella organization for Egyptian leftists. It is the *evolution* of these organizations, we realized, that demands attention. Though we both wished certain actors had made different choices between 2011 and 2013, we came to understand that those choices had been shaped over time. Authoritarianism plays a long game, intentionally or not, privileging some opponents while disadvantaging others and leaving organizations with scars that last long after the regime has (purportedly) fallen.

Organizational evolution is important, we argue, but it is neither a fixed outcome variable nor an equilibrium. The methods best suited to studying evolution are historical, and historical methods demand more than cursory case studies covering several decades. We both found that working with primary sources enriched, challenged, and sharpened our analyses. Oral history interviews, party platforms, memoirs, parliamentary records, and newspaper editorials did not provide simple answers, however. They often conflicted with one another, requiring us to interpret and mediate among them. We learned to treat discourse as an arena for politics, not a plausibility check for preconceived hypotheses. These were our dissertation projects, and though we received little formal training in historical methods, we were supported along the way by advisors and peers who valued interdisciplinarity and getting the cases right. We wonder whether today's graduate students will be supported in producing similar work.

Meet the Authors



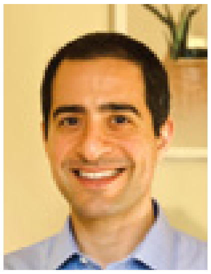
Lisa Anderson is Special Lecturer and Dean Emerita at the Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA). She served as Provost and then President of the American University in Cairo for five years between 2008 and 2016 and is now the Principal Investigator for a commission supported by the Carnegie Corporation to develop guidelines for the conduct of responsible, ethical and constructive social inquiry in the Middle East and North Africa.

Toby Dodge is a Professor of International Relations in the Department of International Relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science. He works on the role of the postcolonial state in the international system, with Iraq as a case study. He is the author of *Iraq; from war to a new authoritarianism* (2012) and *Inventing Iraq: the failure of nation building and a history denied* (2003) and the editor of four books on Middle East and West Asian politics. He has published papers in *The Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding, Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism, Nations and Nationalism, Historical Sociology, The Review of International Studies, International Affairs* and *International Peacekeeping*.

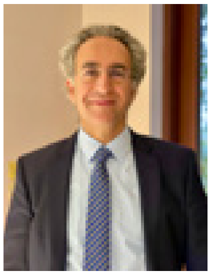
Sofia Fenner is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Colorado College. Her research concerns state-society relations and opposition dynamics in authoritarian regimes. She is the author of *Shouting in a Cage: Political Life after Authoritarian Co-optation in North Africa* (Columbia UP, 2023) and co-author, with Michael Albertus and Dan Slater, of *Coercive Distribution* (Cambridge UP, 2018).

Steven Heydemann holds the Janet Wright Ketcham 1953 Chair in Middle East Studies at Smith College, with a joint appointment in the Department of Government. He is also a nonresident senior fellow in the Center for Middle East Policy of the Brookings Institution. From 2007–15 he held a number of leadership positions at the U.S. Institute of Peace in Washington, D.C., including vice president of applied research on conflict and senior adviser for the Middle East.

Marc Lynch is Professor of Political Science at The George Washington University, where he directs the Elliott School of International Affairs Middle East Studies Program, and director of the Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS). His most recent books include *Making Sense of the Arab State* (Michigan), *The One State Reality* (Cornell), and *The Political Science of the Middle East* (Oxford).



Hesham Sallam is a Senior Research Scholar at Stanford University's Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law, where he serves as Associate Director for Research and Associate Director of the Program on Arab Reform and Democracy. He is author of *Classless Politics: Islamist Movements, the Left, and Authoritarian Legacies in Egypt* (Columbia University Press, 2022) and coeditor of *Struggles for Political Change in the Arab World: Regimes, Oppositions, and External Actors after the Spring* (University of Michigan Press, 2022). He is coeditor of *Jadaliyya ezine*. Sallam received a Ph.D. in Government (2015) and an M.A. in Arab Studies (2006) from Georgetown University.



Bassel F. Salloukh is Associate Dean of the School of Social Sciences and Humanities and Professor of Political Science at the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies. He is the recipient of the International Studies Association's 2024 Global South Caucus for International Studies Distinguished Scholar Award. He is Editor-in-Chief at *Middle East Law & Governance*, Member of the Council, American Political Science Association, member of the Arab Political Science Network's Advisory Committee, the Project on Middle East Political Science Advisory Board, APSA MENA Politics Section's Workshops Planning Committee, APSA MENA Workshops Steering Committee, and APSA MENA Newsletter Editorial Board.

Guest Editor

Loay Alarab is a PhD candidate in the Department of Political Science at the University of Michigan. Loay works in the field of political theory with a specific focus on Arab political thought. Loay studies Arab anticolonial women fighters, attending to the relationship between militancy, political theory, gender, national liberation, and political subject formation.

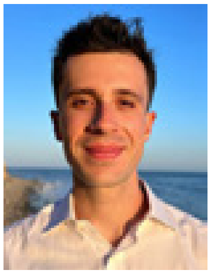
Editorial Team

Executive Editors

Dan Slater specializes in the politics and history of enduring dictatorships and emerging democracies, with a regional focus on Southeast Asia. At the University of Michigan, he serves as the Director of the Center for Emerging Democracies and the James Orin Murfin Professor of Political Science. Previously, he served for 12 years on the faculty at the University of Chicago, where he was the Director of the Center for International Social Science Research, Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science, and associate member in the Department of Sociology.

Rob Mickey is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Michigan. His research focuses on U.S. politics in comparative and historical perspective. He is interested in the country's belated (as well as incomplete) democratization by the 1970s, its current democratic backsliding, and the place of racial conflict in each. He is now at work with David Waldner on a book-length study of America's Reconstruction in comparative perspective with other postwar efforts to construct democratic polities and diverse economies in societies dominated by labor-repressive agriculture. He is also exploring the historical legacies of mid-20th century urban racial conflict for America's contemporary policing with Jake Grumbach and Daniel Ziblatt.

Managing Editor



Adam Fefer is research coordinator with the Center for Emerging Democracies. He manages the *Democracy and Autocracy* Newsletter and Freedom House fellowship program. Adam has a Ph.D. in Political Science from UC San Diego. His research focuses on democratic change, ethnic conflict, and power-sharing, with a geographical focus on the Horn of Africa and South Asia.

About *Democracy and Autocracy*

Democracy and Autocracy is the official newsletter of the American Political Science Association's Democracy and Autocracy section (formerly known as the Comparative Democratization section). First known as *CompDem*, it has been published three times a year since 2003. In October 2010, the newsletter was renamed *APSA-CD* and expanded to include substantive articles on democracy, as well as news and notes on the latest developments in the field. In September 2018, it was renamed the *Annals of Comparative Democratization* to reflect the increasingly high academic content and recognition of the symposia.

Section News

From the Journal of Democracy

The October and July 2024 issues of the *Journal of Democracy* cover important democratic developments across the world — in Africa, the Americas, Europe, Latin America, and South and Southeast Asia — as well as key themes ideal for the classroom such as populism and polarization, democratic backsliding, and multiracial democracy. October highlights include China's Age of Counterreform by Carl Minzner, The Power of Liberal Nationalism by M. Steven Fish, and How to Prevent Political Violence by Rachel Kleinfeld and Nicole Bibbins Sedaca. Among the many July standouts are Who Decides What Is Democratic? by Adam Przeworski, When Democracy Is on the Ballot by Michael Ignatieff, and Misunderstanding Democratic Backsliding by Thomas Carothers and Brendan Hartnett.

Since its inception more than three decades ago, the *Journal* has closely followed democratic developments in the Arab world. Following is a selection of recent essays on Arab states as well as three classic pieces from just before and after the Arab Spring.

Hesham Sallam, "The Autocrat-in-Training: The Sisi Regime at 10" (January 2024)

> Egypt's general-turned-president has spent lavishly, cemented the military's political and economic control, and, afraid of suffering Mubarak's fate, become increasingly repressive. But with crushing inflation and everyday people suffering, is Sisi losing his grip?

Christopher Davidson, "Gulf States and Sharp Power: Allies to Adversaries" (January 2024)

> The UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar are spreading their influence across borders. A new dangerous chapter between the Gulf monarchies and the West has begun.

Sean L. Yom, "Kuwait's Democratic Promise" (July 2023)

> This Arab state is different. It is far more liberal than any other Gulf kingdom, and it may even have a path, with much trial and effort, to becoming the region's first democratic constitutional monarchy.

Sarath K. Ganji, "The Rise of Sportswashing" (April

2023)

The staggering global popularity of soccer makes it a prime target for regimes that worry about the negative press they get for their undemocratic practices. The Gulf monarchies have led the way in getting into the wide world of sports as a means of cleaning their image.

Kanan Makiya, "Iraq's Mafia State" (April 2023)

Although Saddam fell twenty years ago, the politicians who have come after him still think like Baathists. But a new generation has begun making itself heard. It believes in Iraq as a nation and it understands democracy as more than a source of spoils to be divided among groups.

Marsin Alshamary, "Iraq's Struggle for Democracy" (April 2023)

Iraq today is more of a democracy than most people think, but still less of a democracy than it could be. While its future is uncertain, one thing is not: It will be determined by Iraqis.

Adria Lawrence, "Why Monarchies Still Reign" (April 2023)

Oppositions in monarchies don't have to stage revolutions to win freedom: Monarchies are as compatible with democracy as they are with autocracy. The challenge for those who would remove a king is not to fall for the promises of reform that never come.

Tarek Masoud, "The Arab Spring at 10: Kings or People?" (January 2021)

A decade ago, Arab peoples stood up and sought to replace their rulers with a more democratic political project. But Arab autocrats have a project of their own. Can the people gain ground in the struggle for self-government, or will their rulers bear it away?

Plus a few classics from the archives:

Alfred Stepan and Juan J. Linz, "Democratization Theory and the "Arab Spring" (April 2013)

In light of the "Arab Spring," how should students of democratic transition rethink the relation between religion and democracy; the nature of regimes that mix democratic and authoritarian features; and the impact of "sultanism" on prospects for democracy?

Mark Tessler, Amaney Jamal, and Michael Robbins, "New Findings on Arabs and Democracy" (October 2012)

The second wave of the Arab Barometer reveals strong and steady support for democracy in the Arab World but a deficit in democratic culture.

Larry Diamond, "Why Are There No Arab Democracies?" (January 2010)

Democracy has held its own or gained ground in just about every part of the world except for the Arab Middle East. Why has this crucial region remained such infertile soil for democracy?

Michael Albertus (University of Chicago) recently published the following articles:

Albertus, Michael and Schouela, Noah. (2024). "When Economic Redistribution Backfires Politically: Theory and Evidence from Land Reform in Portugal." *Journal of Politics.*

Albertus, Michael and Schouela, Noah. (2024). "Fascist Legacies of Mobilization and Co-Optation: Evidence from Democratic Portugal." *Comparative Political Studies*.

Paula Clerici (Universidad Torcuato Di Tella-CONICET, Argentina) will be at Tulane University for spring semester 2025 and was awarded the Visiting Mid-Career Research Fellowship at the Center for Inter-American Policy and Research (CIPR).

Paul Kenny (*Australian Catholic University*) recently published the following article:

Baturo, Alexander, Paul D. Kenny, and Evren Balta. "Leaders' experience and the transition from populism to dictatorship." *Democratization* (2024): 1-24.

Ahmed Ezzeldin Mohamed (*Toulouse School of Economics*) recently published the following article:

> Mohamed, Ahmed Ezzeldin. "From Cooptation to Violence: Managing Competitive Authoritarian Elections." *Journal of Conflict Resolution, vol. 0*, 0: 1–30 (2024).

Lynette Ong (*University of Toronto*) was awarded the Distinguished Professor of Chinese Politics at the University of Toronto.

Public Opinion Quarterly published a special issue on "Public Trust in Elections," edited by Nicholas Kerr (*University of Florida*), Bridgett A. King (*University of Kentucky*), and Michael Wahman (*Michigan State University*). It contains 18 separate articles on the causes and consequences of electoral trust around the globe.

Tricia Yeoh Su-Wern was appointed as Associate Professor of Practice in the School of Politics and International Relations at the University of Nottingham Malaysia and will begin on 1 October 2024

Maya Tudor (*Oxford University*) was promoted to Professor of Politics and Public Policy, Blavatnik School of Government. Maya also published the following articles:

> Maya Tudor and Adeel Malik. (2024). "Pakistan's Coming Crisis." (with Adeel Malik). *Journal of Democracy.*

> Maya Tudor (2024). "Re-defined Indian-ness and the decline of India's democracy" in *The Troubling State of India's Democracy*. University of Michigan Press.

Rollin F. Tusalem (*Arkansas State University*) recently published the following article:

> Tusalem, Rollin F. "Citizen Perceptions of Crime and Their Effect on Support for Illiberal Democratic Rule: Evidence from the Philippines." *Asian Survey* (2024): 1–30.

Julian Waller (*George Washington University & Center for naval Analyses*) recently published the following book with the University of Michigan's Emerging Democracies book series:

> Nathan J. Brown, Steven D. Schaaf, Samer Anabtawi, and Julian G. Waller. *Autocrats Can't Always Get What They Want: When and How State Institutions Realize Autonomy under Authoritarianism*. University of Michigan Press, 2024.

Kurt Weyland (*University of Texas, Austin*) recently published the following article:

> Weyland, Kurt. "Concept Misformation in the Age of Democratic Anxiety: Recent Temptations and Their Downsides." *World Politics 76, no. 3* (2024): 594-637.