About the London Middle East Institute (LMEI)

The London Middle East Institute (LMEI) draws upon the resources of London and SOAS to provide teaching, training, research, publication, consultancy, outreach and other services related to the Middle East. It serves as a neutral forum for Middle East studies broadly defined and helps to create links between individuals and institutions with academic, commercial, diplomatic, media or other specialisations.

With its own professional staff of Middle East experts, the LMEI is further strengthened by its academic membership – the largest concentration of Middle East expertise in any institution in Europe. The LMEI also has access to the SOAS Library, which houses over 150,000 volumes dealing with all aspects of the Middle East. LMEI’s Advisory Council is the driving force behind the Institute’s fundraising programme, for which it takes primary responsibility. It seeks support for the LMEI generally and for specific components of its programme of activities.

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The aim of the LMEI, through education and research, is to promote knowledge of all aspects of the Middle East including its complexities, problems, achievements and assets, both among the general public and with those who have a special interest in the region. In this task it builds on two essential assets. First, it is based in London, a city which has unrivalled contemporary and historical connections and communications with the Middle East including political, social, cultural, commercial and educational aspects. Secondly, the LMEI is at SOAS, the only tertiary educational institution in the world whose explicit purpose is to provide education and scholarship on the whole Middle East from prehistory until today.

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Dear Reader

Hassan Hakimian, Director, London Middle East Institute

This is our magazine’s last editorial note and it comes to you with a combined sense of sadness and pride. Sadness because – like all good things – it is coming to an end, and pride because it comes with a strong sense of achievement for a small, specialist magazine that has endured so long and fulfilled so much over its impressive lifetime.

The current series of The Middle East in London started with an overhaul and redesign soon after I took over as the Director of the LMEI. The February-March 2011 issue brought a new look, form and structure to the magazine after it had already been established as a unique outreach resource by my predecessors (Robert Springborg and Sarah Stewart, the Director and Deputy Director of the LMEI, respectively, and Sahar Taghdisi-Rad and Anabel Inge, the magazine’s Coordinating Editors). A signature publication of the Institute, from the start it mirrored the breadth of the Institute’s life and transformation.

I will be stepping down from the directorship of the LMEI in late summer after nearly ten years and will be retiring from SOAS after almost twenty years of service in total. This gives SOAS an opportunity to assess the Institute’s future and consider the option of bringing it inhouse to mirror SOAS’s other regional institutes. After casting it with a new remit and scope, a new head of LMEI will take over. The future of the magazine can be hopefully revisited at that stage with the priorities and constraints facing the new Institute in mind.

To commemorate the richness and diversity of the magazine, this issue is a special, retrospective one: a selection of past contributions has been republished in one hopefully memorable single volume. Given the breadth of choice – both in quantity and quality – making a selection was no easy task and one imbued with both pleasure and pain: pleasure given the depth and breadth of available material, and pain in having to be harsh in limiting choice to one piece per issue (while six or seven others were equally good contenders). Each piece has been reprinted as in original without any alterations.

The magazine’s endurance and evolution over the years owes an enormous debt to so many supporters and well-wishers. A satisfying project of this nature is, however, above all the story of a common journey enriched by so many companions onboard – past and present.

The Editorial Board, who gave their wisdom and experience both widened the span and scope of the magazine and made light of a foreboding task for me as the Director of the Institute with limited resources dedicated to keeping the magazine afloat; writers and issue editors whose labour of love produced the rich content; readers whose continued encouragement kept us going; and last but not least, the brilliant staff – Louise Hosking, Vincenzo Paci, Valentina Zanardi and Aki Elborzi – whose team spirit and perfectionism was second to none.

Each issue has owed its increasing attraction and appeal to Megan Wang (Editor) and Shahla Geramipour (Designer). Their dedication, creativity and professionalism are etched into every page of the magazine from cover to end.

I hope what you have in hand is an apt reminder of this story and one whose sweet memories will last for years to come. A good cause to celebrate with this rich – retrospective – issue.

£4
Looking back, I can still remember – in vivid detail – the first full issue of *The Middle East in London* that I was responsible for. After sending dozens of emails, coordinating several rounds of edits with the Issue Editors and writers, spending hours hunting for suitable images (and pondering the legalese of copyright law), debating the uses of colons and semi-colons and pouring over proofs until my eyes blurred, I finally held a hard copy in my hands and felt a sense of accomplishment. All of the disparate pieces – the emails, the text files, the tracked changes, the photos – had, through some combination of collective will and luck, come together on time. I held the issue with some small sense of wonder and thought ‘I helped make this’. And then, of course, I noticed a typo.

**Lesson 1: typos happen**

Six years later, the typos still haunt me. I adopted methods to theoretically keep them at bay – read the text out loud, read it from the end to the beginning, change the font, avoid staring at any one article for too long – and endeavoured to treat each one as a learning opportunity, to determine why it happened and how it went unnoticed. At some point it felt as though all this accomplished was to ensure that every new typo was just that, ‘new’ and thus unnoticed by my methods of detection.

**Lesson 2: the writer and the editor are a team**

Of course, my job involved more than just trying to spot and correct typos. As an editor I had to be cognizant of the fact that sharing one’s writing is an act of courage, that writing can be a deeply personal and intimate experience. Maintaining the author’s unique lens and voice was very important to me, but I also had to keep the reader in mind: will they know what this means or is the significance unclear without more exposition? Would cutting a sentence here lessen its impact or make it more forceful? Does changing this word affect the whole tone of the article? It can be tricky business and hearts can be bruised. Ultimately my suggestions were geared towards achieving one very simple goal: publishing an article worthy of pride. And from where I’m sitting we hit that goal, over and over, issue after issue.

**Lesson 3: our collective will gave the magazine form**

I say ‘we’ but in many ways my role in all this was but a small one. A lot of collective effort went into planning issues: Editorial Board meetings were called where themes were solicited and authors had to be identified; individuals were enlisted to be Issue Editors; contributors, artists and galleries were contacted; (too many) emails were sent. The magazine’s Editorial Board, Dr Hassan Hakimian and his team, Louise Hosking, Vincenzo Paci and Aki Elborzi, the magazine’s designer Shahla Geramipour, our volunteer Issue Editors, our writers and the galleries and artists that worked with us all helped to make the magazine a reality.

To all of you, thank you. It has been an honour and a privilege to work alongside you. I hope that when you hold a copy of this issue in your hands you feel that sense of accomplishment and wonder and think to yourself ‘I was part of this story too’. Just please, please don’t tell me if you spot a typo.

Megan Wang is Editor of *The Middle East in London*. *She has a Master’s degree in Muslim Cultures from AKU-ISMC*

*I hope that when you hold a copy of this issue in your hands you think to yourself ‘I was part of this story too’*
Economic sanctions debunked

The use of economic sanctions to achieve international political objectives has been on the rise in the past century. Since WWI, sanctions have gained increasing pertinence in the complex world of conflict between nations, which has been traditionally viewed in binary terms of war and peace. The MENA region has been home to many sanctions, often acting as the testing ground for some of the ‘harshest sanctions in history’. 

In the 1990s, the world saw on average more than seven sanctions annually (totalling 67 between 1990 and 1999). Two-thirds of these were US unilateral sanctions, and during the presidency of Bill Clinton alone it is estimated that around 40 per cent of the world’s population (2.3 billion in total) were subject to the wrath of some form of US sanctions. 

Currently, the US has nearly 8,000 sanctions in place worldwide – with Iran by far the harshest state target of these sanctions. Russia too has sanctions against Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine and China uses them against Japan and the Philippines over maritime disputes. The great majority of sanctions are indeed imposed by large countries against smaller nations. It is thus fanciful to expect Luxembourg to impose sanctions against Germany or San Marino against Italy! 

Multilateral sanctions introduced under Article 41 by the United Nations Security Council too have been on the rise. Since the 1960s – when arguably the most successful sanctions played a key role in dismantling the apartheid regimes in South Africa and Rhodesia – a total of 30 UN sanctions have been levied against states and non-state entities such as Al-Qaeda, the Taliban and, more recently, the so-called Islamic State. 

Despite their growing incidence, the ‘success’ rate of sanctions has been at best questionable. In one of the most comprehensive studies examining some 170 sanctions in the 20th century, Hufbauer et al in 2009 concluded that only one-third of these succeeded in attaining their stated objectives. Another study by Robert Pape in 1997 put the same rate at less than 5 per cent. 

Effective or failed, popular or feared, a wide gap separates the perspectives of the targets from those imposing these sanctions. In general, senders have to provide legitimacy for their actions in the court of international public opinion.
**Trump’s withdrawal from the Nuclear Deal in 2018 has given Iran’s hardliners a new lease of life, claiming their distrust of the USA was well placed and pushing back against President Hassan Rouhani**

In which their perspectives arguably dominate.

In general, the imposition of economic sanctions has been accompanied by seven misconceptions or fallacies that have arguably emanated from the hegemonic perspective of the imposing nations. These have tainted our understanding of the rationale and effectiveness of sanctions and need to be debunked.

First, sanctions are justified as gentler and more humane alternatives to war. But this underrates the potential role of international diplomacy in conflict resolution as well as the indiscriminate violence associated with sanctions against the targets. In reality, many sanctions do not supplant wars; on the contrary, they pave the way for wars as witnessed by the thirteen-year long Iraqi sanctions (1990-2003), which culminated in the US invasion of the country in 2003. Under present circumstances too, destabilising Iran by sanctions or military threat is set to make the entire region more dangerous than ever.

A second argument is that ‘if sanctions are hurting, they are working’. But this overlooks both the choice of the metric for ‘success’ and runs in the face of evidence which suggests sanctions hurt large swathes of the ordinary population even when essentials like food and medicine are officially excluded. Sanctions stymie economic growth, stoke price rises through import compressions and currency crises, and undermine production and output by fuelling capacity underutilisation, if not outright failure of enterprises leading to mass layoffs and unemployment.

Third, sanctions are deemed to be smart and impact in a targeted fashion. But in reality, comprehensive economic sanctions act as collective punishments squeezing out the middle classes and imposing a disproportionate burden on the lowest, most vulnerable, income groups. These are arguably the victims of the very evil regimes sanctions are designed to punish. This is effectively like taking aim at the passengers of a bus with a delinquent driver in control, hoping that the threat to the passengers will lead the driver to blink first! No wonder why some commentators have likened economic sanctions to ‘weapons of mass destruction’, ‘murder’ and ‘carpet bombs’!

Fourth, sanctions are justified by some as a way to uphold and promote human rights. This too runs contrary to the evidence, which suggests that civil society entities and NGOs are generally the primary losers in the post-sanctions era. Authoritarian regimes seize on the opportunity afforded by sanctions (which they project as aggression and ‘economic warfare’) to claim legitimacy in their defence of ‘national interest’.

This is how Trump’s withdrawal from the Nuclear Deal in 2018 has given Iran’s hardliners a new lease of life, claiming their distrust of the USA was well placed and pushing back against the centrist administration of Hassan Rouhani. Similarly, the earlier sanctions against Saddam Hussein’s Iraq led to the wholesale destruction of civil society there, helping to stoke the identity politics and sectarianism that continue to bedevil Iraq and the wider region.

Fifth, sanctions are deemed necessary and effective for regime change. This is probably the weakest point in the litany of arguments in favour of sanctions. Sanctions have a poor record in bringing about regime change, as attested to by the longevity of sanctioned regimes in several countries such as Zimbabwe, DPRK, Cuba and Myanmar. Even the blockade imposed on Qatar by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt since June 2017, has led to a significant rallying of the population behind the Emir and boosted his popularity.

Sixth, sanctions are said to weaken the targeted governments. But by worsening the business and investment climate, economic sanctions take their toll primarily on the private sector. If anything, power becomes more centralised and concentrated as governments increasingly control supplies of strategic commodities.

Finally, sanctions are supposedly effective in containing nuclear proliferation. Their record here, too, is demonstrably poor. Since the Non-Proliferation Treaty entered into force in 1970, four countries have acquired nuclear weapons: Israel, India, Pakistan and North Korea. Three of them did so while under sanctions.

Ultimately, the success or failure of economic sanctions depends on whether they bring about regime change or change a government’s behaviour. Given the prevailing misconceptions about their rationale, it is not surprising that economic sanctions so often achieve neither goal.

An earlier version of this article was published by the Project Syndicate website (https://www.project-syndicate.org/) in May 2019.

Hassan Hakimian is Director of the London Middle East Institute and a Reader in the Department of Economics at SOAS. He was President of the International Iranian Economic Association (IIEA) and is Series Editor for the ‘Routledge Political Economy of the Middle East’

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IRanian artist, Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, pioneer of abstract mirror-work, dies at 96.

Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, who burst upon the international art scene at the age of 83 with a one-woman show at New York’s Guggenheim Museum, combined Persian mirror-mosaic (aineh kari) and reverse-glass painting to create sculptural avant-garde geometries of dancing, fractured light. The New York Times described her as a ‘key actor in the worldwide development of abstract art,’ and the Barbican catalogue for a group show curated by Rose Issa in 2001, notes, ‘Farmanfarmaian is surprisingly the only artist who explored the potential of [Iran’s heritage] mirror and glass as her main media.’

Monir (as she is commonly known) led a life that was itself a mosaic of migration and revolution. Born in Qazvin in northwestern Iran, during WWII she moved to New York for art school and worked at the department store, Bonwit Teller. There she designed the signature lavender violet that for decades graced its shopping bags and also met Andy Warhol, who was designing shoes for the store. The two became close; he later visited her in Tehran and kept one of her mirror balls on his table.

Returning to Iran in 1957 with her second husband, Abol Bashar Farmanfarmaian, an international lawyer and descendant of the Qajar dynasty, she travelled the country amassing an important collection of coffee-house painting and Turkoman jewellery. Their home hosted many international artists, including Frank Stella and Robert Morris, and as she mischievously told Bahman Kiarostami in his 2008 documentary, Monir, she painted a scene of huge nudes on the floor of the pool in her garden, which visitors could see from the window of the plane as they landed in Tehran.

In 1966, visiting the Shah Cheragh Mosque in Shiraz, with its mirrored walls and central dome reflecting in constellations of light the pilgrims’ movement below, Monir had an epiphany; her work thenceforth used thousands of cut pieces of mirror, tessellated over minimalist structures of wood and metal – triangles, polygons, hexagons, circles – the dazzling, often interlaced shapes bridging the worlds of Islamic mysticism and modernism. ‘My inspiration has always been the public art’, Monir told the curator and art historian Hans Ulbrich Obrist in Interview magazine, later published in his monograph, Monir: Cosmic Geometry (2011).

The 1979 Revolution saw Monir return to New York, where she set up a studio in her apartment and, like M.C. Escher, drew by hand what today is more commonly rendered by computer – complex algorithmic variations of line, interlocking and merging, creating the illusion of depth and movement. A prolific artist, she also produced collages, cabinet-of-curiosity memory boxes and delicate reverse-glass paintings. But when, in 2004, the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art and the Niavaran Cultural Centre invited her to return for a retrospective – partnered with Frank Stella – showing for the first time since the 1979 Revolution the collections from the museum’s stored holdings, she couldn’t resist.

It was a trip that led eventually to her full-time return to Iran – and her subsequent heady rise to international prominence. One of her first big commissions was for the Victoria & Albert Museum, to inaugurate the Jameel Gallery of Islamic Art in 2006. The timing was propitious. To the newly wealthy Gulf Emirates seeking to establish themselves on the cultural stage through the platform of modern Islamic art, Monir must have seemed heaven-sent. Being an Iranian woman with a significant artistic reputation who produced abstract work, she soon became a featured artist of the The Third Line Gallery in Dubai, her output expanding – even as she moved into her eighties – to include monumental sculptural pieces.

In 2015, the Fundacao de Serralves, in Porto, Portugal mounted a comprehensive retrospective, ‘Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian: Infinite Possibility’, which travelled to New York’s Guggenheim, making her the first Iranian woman artist to be featured in a solo show at the museum. Yet, when asked how difficult it had been to achieve recognition in her art, Monir’s answer spoke volumes: ‘It was less difficult being a woman than being an Iranian in these political times.’

Monir was an artist of many firsts, though perhaps most poignant was the dedication by the Islamic Republic of Iran of the Monir Museum in 2017. Housed in a Qajar building in the old palace gardens of Negarestan in Tehran, its significant collection of her work is testament to her ability to soar above the constraints of gender, exile, politics, and prejudice – and bring the beauty of light to art.

Roxane Farmanfarmaian, teaches modern Middle East politics at the University of Cambridge. Her publications include Blood and Oil: Memoirs of a Persian Prince and War and Peace in Qajar Persia. She is the niece of the artist, Monir.
C
turies ago, the Arab 'Republic of Letters' was convinced that poetry was the 'Diwan' of the Arabs, meaning the register of their deeds, the chronicle of their events. In poetry, so the 9th-century littérateur Ibn Qutayba claimed, the Arabs laid down all the information worth transmitting to posterity. It is a vision of the social role of poetry that takes a long time to die out and still enjoys a certain popularity in the Arab World and well beyond.

This is so even though prose writing has long carried the torch, first predominantly as short stories, later – and by now mainly – as novels, and literary criticism has claimed, ever since the interwar period, for prose literature (now mainly the novel) the role of this Diwan of the Arabs. It is narration, storytelling, so the argument runs, that is needed to come to grips with the riddles of our times, not the awe-inspiring verbal juggling of poetry. It is a red thread that is needed, not the free associations of images.

In brief, we no longer live in the age of poetry but in the age of the novel. The death of the novel has not been a favourite topic of Arabic literary criticism in the same way as it has in the West.

Thus, the novel is, at present, the literary genre between Morocco and Iraq, between Oman and Syria. For a long time, maybe from the beginning of the 20th century, it was the framework of the ideological battle of Arab nationalism versus nation-state nationalism and anti-colonialism. The rise of the novel, in the Arab world as elsewhere, is intimately tied to, or at least advanced, by the development of nation states in the area during the first half of the 20th century.

There was, to be sure, prose writing before that, first attempts to tie up Arabic fiction with modern international (i.e. Western) literary developments – in terms of style and genre as well as in terms of content. One of the very first examples is the story Alas, I am not European (1860) by the Syrian-Lebanese Khalil al-Khoury, making fun of certain social groups who, in their attempts to be more European than the Europeans themselves, fail miserably and even make themselves look ridiculous. There followed a long series of prose works built on folktales or translations and/or adaptations of Western novels and short stories. Their purpose was, in addition to keeping up with the Europeans, didactic and entertaining.

An important step in the evolution of modern fiction in the Arab world came with the formation of nation states, a development closely connected with anti-colonialist struggles. In different varieties and shades and with time differences due to disparate stages of development, this can be observed in many Arab countries, first and foremost in Egypt (where it has

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been particularly well studied) but also in Iraq, Lebanon and – first in French, later in Arabic – in the North African countries under French domination. Literature took over the national task – formulated by umpteen authors, critics and literary circles – to present ‘realistically’ what were considered the particularities of a people, a nation and a region. Individuals were shown embedded in their society or in confrontation with it, including the fight as individuals or groups for their daily bread and against the occupying force. Literature, thus, became an illustration and a means of propagating national identity as formulated at the same time by politicians, cultural activists and historians.

There was, to be sure, behind the attempts to articulate a national identity strong social and political criticism in the works then produced, but the style almost exclusively followed the model of European Realism and Naturalism insisting that the literary work was a true mirror of lived reality and implying that this reality could be appropriately narrated ‘as it is.’

Realism of this kind, of an art that mirrors the so-called reality the way it is, avoiding anything that is not ‘real’ or ‘possible’, was eventually complemented or, indeed, pushed somewhat aside in order to make conventional ‘realist’ writing just one kind of several. This happened during and following the time of the big upheavals in the Arab world during the 1950s, the 1960s and the 1970s when shock waves ran through the whole region, upsetting generally shared and propagated certainties – political, social, cultural.

Simultaneously with this ‘diversification’ of Arabic prose writing mainly in the 1960s, a widening of the acquaintance by Arab authors with international novel and short-story writing could be observed including the debates about the nature and function of literature: Jean-Paul Sartre and his idea about littérature engagée became en vogue, as did Ernest Hemingway’s short and concise sentences. Franz Kafka’s Kafkaesque atmosphere became known and has been applied, not unsurprisingly, to Arab circumstances ever since, as has William Faulkner’s polyphony following the translation of his The Sound and the Fury by the eminent Palestinian novelist Jabra Ibrahim Jabra in 1961.

Now style and content multiplied. Reality was no longer considered to be a fixed state but became as variegated as the narrative forms developed to reflect on it. Topics ranged from the particular and the local to the general and the universal, from the detailed description of village life to the mythological treatment of human existence, touching upon social, political, cultural, ecological, religious and other questions and not infrequently drawing on stylistic and topical elements from the rich tradition of centuries of Arabic writing.

It was this trend that led to the still ongoing debate about the position of contemporary Arabic prose between European import and autochthonous narrative traditions, the latter consisting of a huge treasure of both scholarly writings and popular literature. There are authors thoroughly imbued with this tradition, and others deliberately neglecting it, and there are many in between. And they all do what novelists all over the world do: to sense, not unlike a seismograph, tremors in their world and present them in one of the great variety of forms and styles internationally available enriched by the local or regional narrative traditions. To speak about THE Arabic novel, implying similarities in substance and style beyond the Arabic language, would certainly not or no longer seem appropriate. Too different are the works of Arabic literature produced between Iraq and Morocco, between Oman and Syria. There are novels on cities and others on villages; novels that try to remain on earth and others that carry away into realms of fantasy and absurdity. Human ‘reality’, in the Arab world as elsewhere, goes much beyond traditional and unifying ‘realism’.

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Asghar Farhadi’s cinema: a family torn apart

_Everybody Knows_ (2018), in the same vein as world famous Iranian director Asghar Farhadi’s seven other movies, is a social family drama with an emphasis on concealment and what remains unsaid. On the occasion of her sister’s wedding, Laura returns with her children to her native village in the heart of a Spanish vineyard. But unexpected events disrupt her stay and resurrect a past long buried.

In most of his films, Farhadi focusses on young, middle class couples torn between tradition and modernity, between the past and the future. By using significant indices – such as a lack of warm colours in clothes and set design and the selection of desaturated colour palates to set the tone and atmosphere of his films – Farhadi reveals a cold relationship between the couples in his movies. The couples also display few gestures of love or affection, and few comforting words are exchanged.

No matter which geography he chooses, from Tehran to Spain, stopping by Paris, betrayal, lying and secrets are the leitmotifs of the Farhadian style. He pushes these themes so far that the form embraces the substance, the first becoming a tool for the establishment of the second. Ellipsis is one of Farhadi’s favourite narrative techniques, which puts the spectator in a situation of uncertainty until he decides to reveal a truth.

In _Everybody Knows_ the spectator discovers more information as the story progresses; a character reveals a secret to another character and at the same time to the spectator, or important information is divulged through a secretive conversation between two characters.

Ellipsis is one of Farhadi’s favourite narrative techniques, which puts the spectator in a situation of uncertainty until he decides to reveal a truth.
In the beginning of the film, a young girl, Irene, who is later the victim of a crime, discovers that her mother, Laura, and a family friend, Paco, were lovers in their youth. Later, Laura reveals to Paco that Irene is his daughter and informs her family that her husband has been unemployed for more than two years. Even more shocking is the discovery of a kidnapping plot, information that the filmmaker withholds from the audience until the very end of the film.

**Women despite men**

In all of Farhadi's movies, women try to do something to change the problematic situations the couple finds themselves in, despite the refusal of the men. In *Fireworks Wednesday* (2006), Mojdeh follows her husband to find out if he is unfaithful, and in the process she gets hit by him; meanwhile, the mistress is the one who finally ends the relationship, despite her lover's pleas. Rouhi, the housekeeper feels compelled to testify to the loyalty of her employer, despite his doubts, in order to save the couple's relationship. In *About Elly* (2009), Sepideh repeatedly lies to save a situation, starting with the beginning of their journey where she lies to the owner of the villa about Elly and Ahmad's relationship. Finally, it is for one of her lies that Sepideh gets violently hit by her husband. In *A Separation* (2011), it is Simin who decides to leave her husband; and later, Simin also tries to fix a tricky situation by attempting to pay the caretaker that her husband, Nader, shoved out the door and onto the stairs. The caretaker, Razieh, who is responsible for looking after Nader's elderly father, and her husband also have a similar Farhadian relationship: Razieh works without the knowledge of her husband in order to pay his debts. She is also ultimately the one who makes the decision not to accept money from the well-to-do Simin and Nader, because she is no longer sure that the loss of her baby was due to Nader's mistreatment of her.

In *Everybody Knows* Laura, played by Penelope Cruz, like all other women in Farhadi's movies, seems to be a passive woman. Nevertheless, she is the one, despite her husband's refusal, who decides to reveal a very important secret to save her daughter from kidnappers. Revealing to Paco that Irene is his daughter, she puts him in a moral dilemma. She asks him to sell his land to pay the kidnappers. In Farhadi's cinematographic structure, women always find ways out of the defined ethical frames to save the situation and in the end, men, by choosing the ethical ‘right way’, settle the situation.

**The unbearable weight of the family**

In *Everybody Knows*, the heavy weight of family relationships and the unsaid secrets over the years is depicted from the first frame. But more than the images, it is the soundscape of the film that is witness to the unfolding revelations: from the ticking of a clock (suspense), to the too early ding-dong of a bell (the announcement of a ceremony that will go wrong), to the roar of a drone flying over a wedding party (the overbearing gods that dictate the fate of mortals), to the thunderclap that precedes the vibration of a telephone (the devastation of a mother who reads a message confirming her greatest fears), to the creaking of a poorly oiled door that resonates in a deserted house (the loneliness of a man who sacrificed his existence). It is this soundscape that communicates to the audience the heavy atmosphere of the story and indicates the taboos that will soon blow up.

The sound obeys a well-defined rhythmic strategy, encapsulating thriller moments while pointing out the emptiness of the images that scroll on the screen. Because emptiness is perhaps precisely the subject of the film, Farhadi insists on the emptiness of the small epiphanies in the family reunions: the outraged mind of a parent who tries to make a child laugh, the exaggerated dance of a party-goer who amuses the gallery, and the embraces of a family that is gradually going to break apart over unresolved old conflicts.

**The invisible threads of social classes**

The triggering event of the story, the kidnapping of a girl in the midst of a bourgeois wedding celebration, shakes the superficial harmony on screen. The euphoric snapshots of siblings celebrating the wedding are juxtaposed with the faces of onlookers contemplating, without joy. Thus, Paco (Javier Bardem, the true hero of the film) initially suspects his emigrant employees of being behind the abduction, not by purely racist reflex but by asking the perverse question ‘What if...?’ before being himself violently brought back to his social origin (he is the son of a servant) by the patriarch of the family.

**The final word**

*Everybody Knows*, in addition to the usual themes of Farhadi's cinema, such as differences in social classes, depicts the complete deterioration of the foundations of the family. The grandfather of the family, an elderly man, is a lonely man who is hated by the entire village. Over the years he has lost his fortune due to gambling. The new groom of the family and his young wife hate their family. Laura's husband is bankrupt and unemployed. Paco sells his vineyard, his only possession, and his wife may be leaving him. And finally, the joyful Irene is turned into a beaten and traumatised girl. Three generations mistreated by the script reveal allegories of an ailing past, present and future. Insisting on symbols and objects (the clock, a door tossed by the wind), Farhadi depicts a tragic thriller which laboriously gives flesh to fate.

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Asal Bagheri has a PhD in Semiology and Linguistics, with a specialization in Iranian Cinema. She's the author of the thesis Men & women relationships in post-revolutionary Iranian Cinema: Directors’ strategies and semiotic analysis. Her forthcoming book, which will be published in French, is entitled Feelings, Love and Sexuality: the Cinema's Dilemma in Islamic Republic of Iran.
Having completed an MA in Palestine Studies at SOAS in 2018 and written a dissertation on the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, I was keen to visit the land. So, in October, I spent eight days there under the auspices of the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions (ICAHD), together with 20 other international volunteers.

We spent four days helping to build a community centre in the village of Bardala, in the north of the Jordan Valley. We worked under the guidance of a farmer, an activist in the Jordan Valley Solidarity Campaign. The centre of the village is in Area B (under Palestinian municipal control but overall Israeli military control) but the outskirts and neighbouring villages are in Area C (under direct Israeli military rule).

The community centre is to serve as a meeting place for the inhabitants of several villages. None of these villages has a school. There was one once, but it was demolished by the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) on the grounds that it had not been granted a permit: in Area C, which includes most of the Jordan Valley, no wells can be dug and no new structures built (houses, schools or medical clinics) without the permission of the Israeli ‘Civilian Administration’ (in practice, the military). According to UN statistics, permission is very rarely granted.

Farming is the main source of income for the village of Bardala, which has rich, fertile agricultural land capable of growing vegetables such as aubergine, tomato and cucumber. But it requires a reliable supply of water. The Jordan Valley has plentiful supplies of water (from the river and springs). However, control of the water supply gives Israel control over the Palestinians, as the following examples demonstrate. Israel has reduced the village’s water supply. Occasionally they cut it off completely. In fact, on 17 September, a month before we arrived, Israeli forces moved in with three military jeeps and two bulldozers to cut off the

Arrests, interrogations, demolitions and harassment. A lack of water and access to education. Mike Scott-Baumann describes life under occupation
water supply and destroy 500 metres of pipes that irrigate local farms, thereby threatening the livelihood of 50 farmers. In a very small village nearby, the community water supply was permanently cut off; residents are forced to pay for tankers to bring water in on a weekly basis. Sometimes those tankers are impounded. A nearby stream had been polluted by sewage from the Israeli settlement above, rendering it unfit for human or animal consumption. Significantly, Israeli settlers in the Jordan Valley, as well as in the rest of the West Bank, receive a 75 per cent reduction in the price they have to pay for their water, most of which comes from Israeli-controlled aquifers. And their water supply is unlimited, even for swimming pools.

One day we visited the farmer Abu Sakr in the village of Al-Hadidya, a Bedouin community. The village, which is surrounded by three military bases and three settlements, used to be home to 54 families; after the demolitions now only 12 remain. Abu Sakr grazes sheep and goats. He is a local leader, significant enough to have been invited to address a committee of the European Parliament. His house has been destroyed many times, likely in response to his activism: initially razed to the ground, then partially rebuilt by the family the next morning only to be destroyed yet again, and so on. He spoke with power, passion and conviction, swearing that he would never leave his land.

One day, five members of our group, accompanied by a rabbi from Torat Tzedet, went out in the morning with a shepherd and his goats. At one point, three members of the IDF (all young) appeared and accosted them. When asked what the group was doing one member explained that they were protecting the shepherd from harassment by the settlers from the hilltop. This explanation was met with sarcasm (‘poor shepherd’). The group was then informed that they were in a ‘military firing zone’. While 56 per cent of the Jordan Valley is categorised as closed military firing zone, little of it is used as such. Although the rabbi had a map to show that they were not in fact in the military firing zone, the IDF disagreed. No doubt they were under orders to stop and interrogate the shepherd and his ‘protectors’. The shepherd was detained for longer than the volunteers, and not for the first time: two days earlier, when alone, he had been handcuffed, blindfolded and interrogated. Fortunately, his goats – his livelihood – found their way home without him: otherwise, he might have lost his flock, either to dehydration or disorientation. The soldiers were no doubt told (and believed) that they were protecting outpost settlers and that the shepherd, under the influence of activists/internationals, was a threat. More likely an explanation is that his arrest and interrogation was an example of the harassment and humiliation designed to deter the shepherd from using his customary grazing grounds. The destruction of Palestinians’ livelihoods would appear to be a deliberate aim of both settlers and military.

Given the arrests, interrogations, demolitions and lack of access to water and education prevalent in this one small area – and the fact that much of the most fertile land in the Jordan Valley was seized by the Israelis for commercial use in 1967 – it is not surprising that the Palestinian population in the Valley has fallen from approximately 300,000 to 60,000 since 1967. Many of those left reside in Jericho, the only major city in the Valley, so perhaps only 20,000 continue farming the land or grazing their herds. Many have migrated to Jordan and Syria; as refugees they are not allowed to return.

We spent four days harvesting olives in the village of Bureen, near Nablus. During that time we stayed in the nearby village of Awarta in the house of Jamal, an olive farmer, who had, in the past, been attacked by settlers. On one occasion he fled with his son after their tractor was torched. We picked olives on land located just below a settlement that is owned by a family that is now too afraid to harvest their olives due to frequent harassment by armed settlers. We took turns on guard duty. Many Israeli settlements are classed as outposts, unofficial and not recognised by the Israeli government, but the settlers themselves are armed and, invariably, soldiers are posted nearby. Many such ‘outposts’ are connected to Israel’s national electricity grid and water supplies and they are retrospectively authorised.

Over the course of eight days we witnessed many different forms of harassment perpetrated by both settlers and the IDF. But we also witnessed a remarkable resilience, sumoud, in spite of the ongoing trauma that is life under occupation. Many remain determined to stay on their land, to stay in their homes, and not give up. It is both inspiring and humbling. However, increasing displacement, particularly from Area C, attests to the success of an Israeli policy than can only be described as ethnic cleansing, even if most Israelis describe it as Judaisation.

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• Tunisia (December 2017/January 2018)
• Palestine (February/March 2018)
• Egypt (April/May 2018)

• China and the Middle East (June/July 2018)
• Iran (October/November 2018)
Since 2011, Tunisia has been shaped by the instability in Libya, a weak economy, a toughening political environment and a growing strain of authoritarianism. But the vitality of the revolution is not completely lost. George Joffé explains

Tunisia: seven years later

It is now almost seven years since Tunisia led the way in the Arab Awakening by forcing an end to the autocratic Ben Ali regime and introducing a democratic political system in its place. It has not been an easy transition given the security crisis that Tunisia has faced in recent years – partly because of the worsening chaos in neighbouring Libya but also due to some apparently intractable problems, both political and economic, that the country must still confront.

Surprisingly, given the attack on the Bardo Museum in Tunis in mid-March 2015, the subsequent attack on tourists in a beach hotel in Sousse at the end of June in the same year, and a lethal attack on the presidential guard in Tunis the following November, the security situation now seems to be under control. Tunisia’s police and army have been re-equipped and retrained with American and British help to such a degree that the British government removed its travel warning to tourists about the dangers of travel to Tunisia at the end of July.

Terrorist violence now seems confined to the periphery of the state: there are ongoing attacks in the Jebel Chaamba border region around Kasserine, and in March 2016 there was an attack by the Islamic State (IS) on Ben Guerdane in the deep south, close to the Libyan border, for example. Now IS and other extremist groups in Libya are more concerned with survival as the Libyan National Army – in reality an Eastern Libya militia coalition under Khalifa Haftar – moves into Tripolitania. But the threat has not entirely gone away, even if IS has been expelled from Sabratha; an estimated 8,000 young Tunisians are believed to have joined IS, mainly in Libya but also in Syria and Iraq.

The economic conundrum

The most immediate yet chronic crisis, however, is over Tunisia’s ailing economy. Most of the consequent unrest is centred on Tunisia’s impoverished southern region, at Gabes, the centre of the phosphates industry, and the province of Tataouine, which contains oil and gas fields. Since May 2017, one thousand protesters have been living in a makeshift camp at al-Kamour, close to a pumping station on a major gas pipeline, demanding more jobs.

The government has tried to respond and the Prime Minister, Youssef Chahed, offered new infrastructure and 900 new jobs when he visited Tataouine, only to be shouted down with demands for 3,500 new jobs with oil companies and
Despite the growing authoritarianism in Tunisia’s formal public life, the real vitality of the revolution remains inside civil society. $50 million in local investment. Foreign companies operating in the south are unsettled; although ENI professed unconcern, OMV removed 700 non-essential staff, whilst Perenco halted production and Serinus Energy’s oil fields were closed down.

The economic problems in northern Tunisia are far less intractable; the Sahel and the Tunis regions have always been better developed, but the wealth they generate has never seeped down to the south. The result has been that, since the Revolution, the south has also become the domain of the informal sector, relying on the chaos in neighbouring Libya and the smuggling of consumer goods and vast amounts of refined fuels, which has created a new business elite there. These southern elites have no interest in challenging the traditional economic elites of the north, despite the claims of some commentators. And while the majority of the southern population remains excluded from the wealth this new informal sector generates, they have learned that only protests and demonstrations guarantee government concern and response.

Shortly after the demonstrations broke out in May, Tunisia’s President, Beji Caid Essebsi, announced that he had instructed the army to intervene to protect Tunisia’s natural resources. His move was interpreted as an attempt to face down the protesters and, even worse, as a threat to the army’s traditional neutrality in political matters; rarely has the army been ordered to intervene in the domestic scene – an arena normally left to the police. His initiative, however, highlighted the other great concern that Tunisians now feel: what they see as a toughening political environment.

Politics – back to the future?

Nidaa Tounes’s victory in Tunisia’s legislative elections in late October 2014 and its leader, Caid Essebsi’s accession to the presidency have raised a series of knotty questions over the country’s political future for the party has been widely seen as a vehicle for the old political elites of the Ben Ali era. In addition, the party has added to political instability because, as President, Caid Essebsi had to stand down from his position within the party, but he has tried to get his son to replace him instead. The parliamentary party has now split, with 16 of its members forming a new party, bringing Tunisia’s total number of political parties to 26! More importantly, it has lost its parliamentary majority with al-Nahda replacing it as the largest party. Al-Nahda, however, has not claimed the premiership, preferring instead to preserve Nidaa Tounes as political point man and coalition partner. Even in the cabinet reshuffle in September the Islamist movement did not try to expand its ministerial presence and tolerated the return to ministerial rank of two former Ben Ali personalities.

The President, however – who also dislikes Tunisia’s mixed parliamentary-executive presidency system seeking an executive presidency instead – has not returned the compliment, describing al-Nahda in a speech in September as ‘a disappointment’ for not shedding its Islamist image entirely to become a national conservative party instead. He has repeatedly challenged it: forcing through the Administrative Reconciliation Law to rehabilitate thousands of former regime administrators and businessmen, delaying municipal elections, yet again, from December to March 2018, removing the ban on Tunisian women marrying non-Muslim men and threatening to change family law as well to allow women equal inheritance rights to men. Although secularists and feminists have hailed the latter two initiatives, not least the Algerian writer, Kamel Daoud, in the New York Times, the aim has really been to unsettle al-Nahda.

Civil Society – the true alternative?

Yet, despite the growing authoritarianism in Tunisia’s formal public life, the real vitality of the revolution remains inside civil society. That is an arena that the revival of the ancien régime through Nidaa Tounes cannot touch, even though it may try to do so. Thus, although the Instance Verité et Dignité, Tunisia’s own Truth and Dignity Commission instituted to provide transitional justice to 62,000 victims of the former regime, has been attacked by the President who dislikes its head, Sihem Bensedrine, and sees it as a challenge to his own chosen formulation of the reconciliation law, it had, by the start of March 2017, settled 23,000 of the cases brought before it. It is, therefore, inside the realm of civil society that the real success of the Tunisian revolution lies.

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George Joffé is a member of the magazine’s Editorial Board

Sihem Bensedrine, now head of Tunisia’s Truth and Dignity Commission. Photograph by fhimt.com
The 6 December announcement by US President Donald Trump to recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and move the US embassy to the city has thrown Middle East politics into renewed turmoil. Political and religious leaders around the world have condemned the move, with hundreds of protests organised in major cities across the globe. Spiralling demonstrations throughout Palestine itself have been met with violent repression – at the time of writing nine Palestinians have been killed in these clashes, with thousands more wounded or arrested. Palestinian political leaders have pledged to boycott relations with US officials in the wake of the decision, and widespread calls from across the political spectrum are demanding a break with the moribund strategy of a US-sponsored negotiations process. Reminiscent of the Second Intifada of the early 2000s, Palestinian media has presented non-stop coverage of all of these protests and debate. There can be little doubt that the ramifications of the US announcement will be felt for many years to come.

Yet a major issue that has received little attention in commentary around these developments is the wider regional context: most particularly, the increasingly open political alliance between Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). While not a new development – it has been a longstanding objective of US Middle East policy for decades – it is one that has received a major push in the wake of the Arab uprisings that spread across the Middle East from 2010 onwards. An unprecedented shift in the relations between these three states is evident over the past few years, marked by a growing convergence on the key political questions facing the Middle East region.

Most significant to this emerging political alliance has been the question of Iran. Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE have waged an increasingly bellicose campaign against Iran’s regional influence. In the wake of the Arab uprisings, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have sought to project themselves as the key hegemonic powers throughout the rest of the region. The US has provided strong support for this effort, including the endorsement and arming of the Saudi-led war against Yemen that began in 2015, as well as conspicuous encouragement of the Gulf states in their attempts to steer political transitions in other Arab states. All of this has been fully aligned with the orientation of the new US administration.

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Reinforcing this political convergence between the two Gulf states and Israel, numerous military, diplomatic and commercial ties have become evident over recent years. In late March 2017, Israeli newspapers reported that Israeli and UAE pilots flew alongside one another during the Iniochos exercise, a joint military training session held in Greece between 27 March and 6 April. This was not the first time such joint exercises took place. In August 2016, Israel and the UAE also met at the US Air Force’s Red Flag aerial combat exercise in Nevada. The public nature of these exercises points to the increasingly brazen openness of military coordination between Israel and the UAE – something that would have not been possible a few short years ago.

Relationships between Israel and Saudi Arabia are also increasingly public. Israeli media reported in mid-2015 that the two countries had held five clandestine meetings since early 2014. In June 2015, the then-director general of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dore Gold, spoke together with retired Saudi general Anwar Eshki in a public event at the US-based Council on Foreign Relations. Eshki, who has served in the Saudi foreign ministry, also led a delegation of Saudi academics and businesspeople to Israel in 2016 where they met with leading Israeli politicians and military figures. Similarly, in May 2016, former Israeli National Security Advisor Yaakov Amidror held a public discussion with the former Saudi intelligence chief Prince Turki al-Faisal at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Such public appearances could not have happened without the approval of the Saudi ruling family.

Moreover, regional negotiations between Israel and Saudi Arabia almost certainly took place as part a 2017 decision by Egypt to transfer two islands in the Red Sea to Saudi control. The proximity of these islands to Israel, and the fact that they could affect Israel’s shipping routes, means that the agreement represents – at least at a de facto level – Saudi consent to the 1979 Peace Agreement between Egypt and Israel, which guaranteed Israel full maritime rights in the Red Sea.

Such military and diplomatic relations between Israel, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are further strengthened by commercial ties – most notably in the security, surveillance and high-tech sectors. Israeli media and the international business press have documented the sale of Israeli security and military hardware to both Gulf states over recent years, including the participation of Israeli firms in Abu Dhabi’s mass-surveillance system, Falcon Eye, installed throughout the emirate in 2016. Even Israel’s largest private military company, Elbit Systems, is reported to have sold missile defense systems to Saudi Arabia through its US-based subsidiary Kollsman Inc.

Whether these new regional partnerships played a direct role in giving a green light to Trump’s Jerusalem announcement is not yet public knowledge, but they were undoubtedly an important factor within the calculations of US policymakers and Trump himself. The fact that Trump’s son-in-law and special advisor, Jared Kushner, had engaged in months of shuttle-diplomacy between Riyadh, Tel Aviv and Washington in the lead up to the announcement makes Saudi advance knowledge extremely likely. Despite a verbal condemnation, the Kingdom has made no attempt to utilise its considerable financial and political influence to pressure the Trump administration to reverse the decision.

In this context, the widely-reported existence of a new US ‘peace plan’ negotiated with the support of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman presents a major challenge to Palestinian politics. Such a plan is said to differ little from the current territorial status quo – formal recognition of a Palestinian state on parts of the West Bank and Gaza Strip currently controlled by the Palestinian Authority (PA), denial of the right of return of Palestinian refugees, and continued Israeli control over border crossings and the Palestinian economy. In the current environment it would be extremely difficult for the Palestinian leadership to give their consent to any new deal. Nonetheless, given the considerable political and financial connections between the PA and the Gulf states, we can expect that significant pressure will be brought to bear on the Palestinian leadership to accept any proposed deal. Indeed, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas has made almost weekly visits to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states through the latter part of 2017 – presumably linked to the behind-the-scenes negotiations around such a plan.

All of this points to how the emerging Saudi-UAE alliance with Israel will profoundly shape the future of the Palestinian national struggle. The single major obstacle to Trump’s Jerusalem announcement and any attempt to force a deal on the Palestinian leadership remains the aspirations of the wider Palestinian population – including the millions of Palestinian refugees scattered across the Middle East. Whether Palestinian rights are ultimately subordinated to the interests of this new pan-regional alliance remains an open question.

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Egypt is failing its people

Egypt is facing a population boom it can ill afford. There are more than 100 million Egyptians globally, of whom 93 million reside in Egypt. The population growth rate of 2.4 per cent per annum is five times that of developed countries and double the average for developing countries. UN projections estimate that the population will exceed 150 million by 2050; by the end of the century it is expected to exceed 200 million. By 2040 Egypt will be more populous than either Russia or Japan.

Although the birth rate declined during the first decade of the Mubarak era, it began to grow again after that when female members of the ‘youth bulge’ reached child-bearing age, and fertility rates increased (unexpectedly) due to rising poverty and decreasing female participation in the labour force. In 2013, 2.6 million babies were born, almost 50 per cent more than a decade before.

Egypt neither educates nor employs its youths adequately. On the United Nations Development Programme’s overall Human Development Index, Egypt scores twenty places below its ranking on GDP per capita, while on the narrower Education Index it is 35 places below the level it should achieve according to its GDP per capita. Only about two thirds of adult Egyptians are literate, a ratio far behind that of Turkey (89 per cent) or Thailand (94 per cent).

The educational system emphasises quantity over quality and largely fails to address the needs of the poor. Egyptian pupils’ performance on the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) tests are well below middle-income country averages. Inequality offers one explanation for educational under-performance, inadequate government expenditure...
Egypt has become a major supplier of organ transplants as impoverished citizens opt to sell them

offers another. Relative to GDP per capita, Egyptian teachers are the lowest paid in the MENA region. The World Economic Forum ranked Egypt’s higher education 126th out of 134 countries and 128th on the degree to which it satisfied the needs of the country’s labour market. Only 10 per cent of graduates from tertiary educational institutions are in science and engineering, about half the average share in Middle East and North African countries.

Given that the overall recruitment pool from which the labour force is drawn is comparatively poor, as well as poorly and even mis-educated, it is not surprising that the labour force is relatively non-competitive. The overall labour force participation rate of 49 per cent compares to Bangladesh’s 71 per cent and Thailand’s 72 per cent. Unemployment is a chronic problem. Official figures underestimate the magnitude of the problem, partly because the definition of employment used is a minimum of one hour of work per week to qualify as employed. The Economist claimed in August 2016 that the real unemployment rate for youths that year was at least 40 per cent; for university graduates it was 34 per cent. The International Labour Organization reported in 2014 that 91 per cent of employed youths between 15 and 29 worked in the informal sector, meaning without contracts, health insurance or pensions.

Associated with rising unemployment is growing poverty. In 2000 the overall poverty rate was 17 per cent. By 2017, 28 per cent of Egyptians were living below the poverty line on an income less than $2 per day. Increasingly the impacts of poverty are being reflected in the physical well-being of Egyptians. Malnutrition is becoming common: according to a December 2016 UNICEF report, Egypt is among the 20 countries in the world with the highest incidence of chronic malnutrition. About one in every three children under five is stunted – their growth impeded by inadequate diet – according to that report. Half of children under five are suffering from anaemia resulting from iron deficiencies.

As a result of these parlous conditions, Egyptians – especially youths – are increasingly desperate. In September 2016, campus protests included groups of graduates burning their PhD and MA diplomas in protest against the lack of suitable jobs. Those lower down the social ladder take more drastic measures; Egypt has become a major supplier of organ transplants as impoverished citizens opt to sell them. In 2010 the World Health Organization named Egypt as one of the top five countries for illegal organ trade. An organ trafficking ring of doctors, nurses and professors was rounded up by authorities in 2016 and proclaimed by the government to be the world’s largest, operating out of a range of public and private health centres and hospitals as well as the faculties of medicine at Cairo and Ain Shams Universities. Egypt ranks second among African countries for the number of drug trials conducted by pharmaceutical companies; citizens submit themselves to trials for payment and to receive treatments they otherwise could not afford.

Faced with these dire circumstances, an increasing number of Egyptians are voting with their feet. A growing percentage of Mediterranean boat people and the human traffickers transporting them are Egyptian nationals. In July 2015 the country was placed on the US State Department’s ‘watch list’ for Global Trafficking in Persons. Egyptian Government data reported 90,000 youths departing Egypt illegally in 2015, as compared to 15,000 in 2009. In October 2016 the Minister of Immigration and Egyptian Expatriate Affairs was quoted by the newspaper Al Masry Al Youm saying that Egypt ‘ranks first in illegal immigration rates worldwide’. As of 2015, Egypt is among 20 countries globally with the highest number of people living abroad, in part, The Economist of 6 August 2016 notes, ‘because of a surging volume of refugees’.

Successive military-dominated regimes, in sum, have paid insufficient attention to the well-being of Egyptian citizens, especially young ones, as the 2016 Arab Human Development Report attests. They have not bothered to educate and train youths properly, nor to ensure even their basic nutrition. As a consequence, the labour force is steadily losing its competitiveness to other middle and lower-middle-income countries, including neighbouring ones such as Morocco and Tunisia. Egyptians are rushing to the exits in ever-greater numbers, facing uncertain futures in an increasingly hostile Europe and even less receptive Gulf countries. The current regime’s policies signal that it, like its predecessors, is failing its own people.

This article draws on chapter five of the author’s Egypt, published in 2017 by Polity Press.

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Robert Springborg is a non-resident Research Fellow of the Italian Institute of International Affairs (IAI), Rome. Formerly he was Professor of National Security Affairs at the Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey; Program Manager for the Middle East for the Center for Civil-Military Relations; and the holder of the MBI Al Jaber Chair in Middle East Studies at SOAS, where he also served as the first Director of the London Middle East Institute.
In the first three decades since its founding, the People's Republic of China (PRC), demonised as a ‘troublemaker’, was excluded from the international community; first it was a target of sanctions and containment by the West and then later by the Soviet bloc. During this period China perceived the Middle East as a battlefield between the capitalist hegemon (the US) and the socialist hegemon (the Soviet Union). Interference in the internal affairs of weak countries was interpreted as a way to control the fate of the developing world. But for China the Middle East was regarded as a graveyard for hegemons, and as such outside powers’ imperialistic ambitions were doomed to fail.

Since its reform and opening-up policy was initiated in late 1970s, China shifted its diplomatic focus from exporting the ‘Communist revolution’ to enhancing its economic development, but remained somewhat neutral in Middle East conflicts. In 1979, the PRC established diplomatic relations with the US – while Iran broke off diplomatic relations with the latter. China sought a balanced policy between Iran and the US on the one hand, and between Iran and Iraq on the other hand. In the UN Security Council Resolution vote condemning Iran’s kidnapping of US hostages, China abstained to avoid offending both ‘revolutionary’ Iran and ‘hegemonic’ America. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s seeking commercial benefits while shelving political entanglement was a cornerstone of China’s Middle East policy.

By contrast, in the 21st century, particularly since Xi Jinping became President in 2013, China has established a prominent economic presence in areas ranging from infrastructure to energy investments. As of 2017, China was the largest trading partner of Iran and ten Arab countries, the second largest trading partner of the League of Arab Nations as a whole, and the third largest trading partner of Israel and Turkey respectively. Over 50 per cent of China’s imported oil is from the Middle East.

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Since President Xi put forward the ‘Belt and Road Initiative’, China has been...
looking and marching westward, and the Middle East is regarded as the converging point of the 'Belt' and the 'Road'. At the call of the 'Initiative', approximately one million Chinese businessmen and students have flooded into the Middle East. Dubai hosts about 300,000 Chinese expatriates, and Chinese tourists have more than tripled recently. With the increase of its commercial interests and political pride, it's impossible for Beijing to stick to its traditional 'free-riding' policy; nor can she shy away from participating in Middle East security affairs.

To promote its industrial cooperation with Middle East countries, and to protect its overseas investments and nationals, China has intensified its security cooperation with the UN, the great powers, and partners in the Middle East through inter-agency coordination. First, the Chinese Foreign Ministry has intensified its mediation diplomacy in recent years, involving itself in discussions about Sudan, South Sudan, the Iranian nuclear issue, the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and Syria. China was the predominant peace broker between Sudan and South Sudan, and between the Sudanese government and the rebel groups, represented by the Sudan Liberation Movement (SLM) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM). China was active within the ‘6+1’ framework on the Iranian nuclear issue, and contributed to the conclusion of Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in 2015. In late 2017, China launched a tripartite dialogue mechanism with Palestine and Israel based in Beijing to give impetus to the peace process. In the face of the Syrian crisis, China has refrained from military involvement, but in March 2016 China nominated Ambassador Xie Xiaoyan as a special envoy who carried out shuttle diplomacy for the Syrian conflict and de-escalation through multilateral mechanisms like Geneva Talk and the Astana Conference.

Second, China’s Ministry of Defence attempts to play an active role in Middle East security affairs as well. This can be classified into two categories: long-term and ad hoc military involvement. The former seeks relatively stable and long-term objectives, such as the counter-piracy patrols in Somali waters that began in 2008; the building of China's first overseas logistics base in Djibouti in 2017; and various UN peacekeeping operations in the Middle East. In addition, China has pursued ad hoc security policies in the Middle East to pursue relatively short-term and dynamic goals. These include military-training programmes; the deployment of security contractors for key Chinese investment projects; joint military rehearsals with the US, the EU, Russia, Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia; and the dispatch of military vessels for the evacuation of overseas Chinese from the war-torn countries of Libya, Egypt, Syria and Yemen. The People’s Liberation Army (PLA) Navy convoy fleets held two joint anti-piracy drills with the US in 2012 and 2013, and one with EU in 2014. Chinese warships participated in a joint military drill with Russian warships in the Mediterranean Sea in 2015 as well. In 2013, a PLA Navy missile frigate joined Danish, Norwegian and Russian frigates to escort chemical weapons from the Syrian port of Latakia to Italy for destruction, a UN mission.

China’s participation in Middle East security affairs aims to protect Beijing’s economic practical interests on the one hand, and to acquire her great power status on the other hand. China and the Middle East are interdependent in their development strategies, such as China’s ‘Belt and Road Initiative’, Egypt’s ‘Economic Revitalization Plan’, Saudi’s ‘Vision 2030’, Turkey’s ‘Vision 2023’, Iran’s ‘6th Five-Year Plan’, and Israel’s ‘Red-Med Railway’, etc. In the foreseeable future, China, India, Japan, South Korea and other Asian countries will be the major importers of Middle East oil, and arguably the Middle East is even more important to Asia than to the West from an economic point of view.

So far, China has been cautious in case it might be perceived as a geopolitical challenger to the established powers. It therefore adheres to a ‘zero-enemy’, ‘soft military presence’ and ‘nonalignment’ policy, maintaining a subtle balance between Russia and the West, between Iran and Saudi Arabia, between Israel and Palestine, and between moderate and radical Middle East blocs.

As a newcomer to the Middle East, China will inevitably encounter ‘growing pains’ similar to those encountered by the US after the end of WWII. It is unrealistic to reap economic benefits while turning a deaf ear to Middle East conflicts. With the increase of China’s economic presence in the Middle East, China’s ability and willingness to participate in regional security governance will continue to grow, albeit in a prudent manner. China is so far discreet in using military might for anti-terror missions or engaging in agent wars in the Middle East, but she will eventually become the ‘third force’ after Russia and the West in the volatile and multi-polar Middle East.

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Two years ago, SOAS began sending Persian language students to Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, a leading university in Iran and the country’s most international campus. I was part of this year’s cohort. Apart from the odd self-organised European student, the vast majority of foreign students are from Iraq and Afghanistan.

My flight landed in Mashhad airport, which gives the newcomer an unambiguous welcome to the Islamic Republic: huge banners with the portraits of Ayatollahs Khomeini and Khamenei.

The fact that Mashhad is a centre of modern Shia Islamic pilgrimage makes it different from the other great cities of Iran. When I visited other places, like Isfahan and Shiraz, I was always struck by the mixture of the secular and religious. It made the lack of secular cultural heritage in Mashhad all the more stark. Moreover, it seemed that the government has plans to guard the religious purity of Mashhad. I regularly passed a decommissioned Armenian church on my way to exchange...
currency. From what I learned, Armenian Christians have had to relocate as the strict majority views the presence of other religions in the city as a ‘distraction.’ Similarly, the Mashhadi Jews, a once influential minority, relocated to Tehran or left the country entirely, despite Iran having the second largest Jewish minority in the Middle East. But it was not just the Islamic Republic that had a hand in erasing the city’s heritage; Mashhad’s old bazaar was razed and rebuilt during the 1970s as part of the Shah’s efforts to weaken the conservative, religious and anti-West bazaar community.

Ferdowsi University conformed to this atmosphere, with its huge, elaborate facilities and faculties. And yet, the outdoor spaces and paths linking buildings were often disorganised and unkempt. I had been told that much of the university’s building programme had to be halted after the introduction of sanctions. Now what stands is a vast patch of land dotted with grand faculties alongside a large number of incomplete metal structures, gradually rusting away. The university has almost 30,000 students, yet the campus never seemed crowded. There were almost no organised gatherings or social occasions, apart from events held at the university’s many mosques on days of religious significance and the odd faculty celebration where we were inevitably wheeled out as exotic Westerners for a promotional video. Near silence on campus was commonplace.

Exiting the main gates, past the religious guards of the university (often veterans of the Iran-Iraq War), you would step into the normality of daily city life: skater teens under the bridge of the metro station, families enjoying an early evening picnic on green spaces and the odd elderly man asleep on cardboard (we were told crystal meth or ‘shisha’ was endemic here). The people of Mashhad were friendly and willing to help foreigners in all issues that confronted us, like organising the immensely complicated custom taxes on foreign phones and, of course, changing money. Cash has to be taken into Iran, as international bank transfers are impossible. At first, getting money would only involve a trip to an exchange, but as the price of the rial dropped the government capped the rate. With bureaux de change no longer a viable option we had to be taught how to navigate the black market – something many Iranians have been relying on for years.

We were introduced to the importance of ta’arof, the custom of humbling oneself with elaborate self-deprecation while aggrandising your adversary (there is often a competitive edge to this). All sorts of comical situations arise because of it: traffic jams around doorways as multiple people try to usher others in front of them, or a taxi driver’s refusal to take a fare and the consequences of actually taking his word for it.

My first trip to Tehran was for the eve of Nowruz. I had read about Tehran as a place of contradiction not often described in positive terms but rather as an ‘urban hellhole’. But I instantly warmed to the city, and throughout my five months I would often get the train from Mashhad just for the weekend to be somewhere that is so defined by its young people. Cafes were fantastic for socialising with other students and it was in Tehran that I made some of my best friends. There were other places that made a lasting impression too: the rose bud picking festival of Golab Giri in Qamsar where we walked through huge rose fields at 5:00am; Gilan where we boated in the mangroves, ate the famous ‘torshi-tareh’, an herby risotto of sorts flavoured with Seville oranges and caviar, and tried to buy black market caviar straight off the boats that source it from the Caspian. And there was Qom, a buzzing city defined by its sprawling seminaries, shrine and mosque.

My final few weeks in Iran were during Ramadan. I was hoping increased hardship and the intense heat would make my departure easier, but this was not to be. The aspect of ta’arof that I had always found most difficult to navigate was saying ‘goodbye’. Trying to leave an Iranian’s home is a sensitive business. A combination of woolly phrases can nudge the idea along, and although your host might also want you to leave, you still have to parry elaborate ploys to keep you there. A host might start with the banal ‘Thomas Jaan, I could just make you a coffee if you’re tired,’ then advance to the harder to rebut, ‘You should just stay here, it’s late tonight and you have missed the last metro, surely!’ to the impossibly generous ‘My dear, why on earth are you spending 15 dollars on a hostel? We have properties in Tehran that are far nicer than your shared room. Stay in them, for free!’

On my journey back to the UK through the Caucasus and Turkey, I realised I still had not mastered the Iranian goodbye; my hosts had outclassed me in the duel that is ta’arof. I think this is the Iranian way: make guests feel so welcome and magnetised that the ‘goodbye’ is never really permanent or complete, one final victory to the masters of ta’arof.

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**Nascent Kurdish cinema**

After the first ‘definable’ Kurdish films at the end of the 1990s, Kurdish cinema officially launched at the beginning of 2000. Prior to that date, directors were hesitant to share their Kurdish identity for fear of oppression. It was only after 1999 – when Turkey sought to improve its record on democracy and human rights in a bid to gain entry to the EU – that some of these directors started to identify themselves as Kurdish and the Kurdish language was used in film.

Since then, several Kurdish films shown at international film festivals have been nominated for major awards, including Bahman Ghobadi’s *Dema Hespên Serxeş* (‘A Time for Drunken Horses’, 2000), which won the Caméra d’Or award at the Cannes Film Festival, and Hiner Saleem’s *Vodka Lemon*, which received the San Marco Prize at the 60th Venice International Film Festival in 2003. Another work that deserves mention is the short film *Ax* (‘Land’, 1999) created by the film-maker Kazim Oz. *Ax* helped raise awareness of the Kurdish quest for a homeland while also revealing the denial and suppression of Kurdish identity in Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran, an element common to these films.

But it is *A Time for Drunken Horses* that captures the essence of Kurdish cinema by telling a story of relatively obscure people living within the borders of several countries, a prevalent theme in the milieu. Other films – such as *The Road* (Yol, 1982) by Yilmaz Güney and Hisham Zaman’s *Before Snowfall* (2015) – deal also with questions of invisibility as well as the long journey to recognition. Themes of war, trauma, borders, death and agony abound, as do black humour and fairy tales in such films as those by Hiner Saleem. His well-known *Vodka Lemon* balances drama and humour excellently and is easily described as bittersweet. Moreover, in *Vodka Lemon* the impossible love story – between a Yazidi man forbidden to marry outside his community and an Armenian woman – is itself a fairy tale. Likewise, in Ghobadi’s *Ninewang* (‘Half Moon’, 2006) a man falls in love with a woman’s voice; in the same film a fairy woman appears on a bus and then disappears.

Since the beginning of 2000 and the steps taken towards Kurdish reconciliation in Turkey, many Kurdish films have received positive interest from festivals and film-lovers. In the last decade, after support from the Kurdish Regional Government grew (mainly in response to discovering the power film had on publicising the situation of Kurds in the Middle East), the number of Kurdish films has risen, but the quality and storytelling remain poor; most directors have not attended cinema schools and the Regional Government seems preoccupied with producing more, not better, films.

*Dengbej* (storytelling) is an old tradition among Kurdish people and stories are given life via many different art forms, including through music and oral literature and through Kurdish folk arts such as carpet weaving, embroidery and metal ornamentation. And though Kurdish films are essentially exercises in storytelling, it is difficult to say that there exists a Kurdish-speaking audience that follows and or even knows about Kurdish cinema. This is mainly because many of the towns and cities lack cinemas. Generally Kurdish films can only be seen at Kurdish film festivals, which unfortunately do not run regularly. In the past, some film festivals have been held irregularly in Duhok, Sulaymaniyah and Amed (Diyarbakir). In 2001 the London Kurdish Film Festival made its debut, but it has been held only nine times since then. Other such film festivals have taken place in Berlin and Paris and more recently an initiative was announced to hold the first Kurdish film festival in New Mexico in May 2017.

Although denial continues in those places with little to no demand from the audience, a fledgling Kurdish cinema persists even while the land and its people face renewed pressures from the Turkish government and death at the hands of the so-called Islamic State.

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Mizgin Mujde Arslan worked as a Reporter for six years before transitioning to filmmaking. She has received various awards for her short and documentary films and is the author of *Rejissor Atif Yılmaz, Kurdish Cinema: Statelessness, Boundary and Death,* and *Yeşim Ustaoglu*

**Mizgin Mujde Arslan** on the inception and growth of the foundations of Kurdish cinema

Kurdish films help raise awareness of the Kurdish quest for a homeland while also revealing the denial and suppression of Kurdish identity.
As war intensifies and food becomes scarce due to the financial crisis, readers might think that environmental issues, water in particular, are the last of Yemen’s problems, especially after a season of good rainfall. However, regardless of the outcome of the current war, within a generation or so people will no longer be able to live in Yemen unless environmental issues are urgently addressed.

The shortage of water in Yemen is absolute: current annual use, at 3.5 billion m³ exceeds renewable resources by 1.4 billion m³. Put simply, one-third of the water used is mined from non-renewable fossil aquifers. With a population of 27 million people, per capita renewable water availability has dropped to less than 85 m³, significantly below 10 per cent of the internationally recognised scarcity threshold (1,000 m³). A World Bank report on ‘Assessing the Impacts of Climate Change and Variability on the Water and Agricultural Sectors’ in 2010 estimated that Yemen’s ground water reserves are likely to be depleted in about three decades (report no 54196 YE).

The replenishment to rainfall ratio is dropping just when demand is increasing due to the larger population’s domestic needs and the use of pumps for irrigation. More than 70 per cent of Yemen’s population is rural and depends, at least partly, on agriculture for their livelihoods. About 60 per cent of agriculture is rain-fed, so the unpredictability of rains has a major impact: violent and sudden rainfall damages crops, washes away topsoil, destroys wadi banks and reduces the replenishment of aquifers. Worsening water scarcity in the highlands is already leading to population movements: when wells dry up, people first purchase water from tankers which travel increasingly long distances at higher and higher cost. When this water runs out or people can no longer afford it, they move to stay with relatives where water is still available, returning home after good rains when the wells have filled. Eventually they move permanently.

The year 2015 will be remembered in Yemen not only for the start of the war but also as a unique one climatically: the country suffered not one, but two unprecedented and extremely violent cyclones in November: Chapala brought hurricane force winds of over 120 km/h, with 610 mm of rain in 48 hours (seven times the annual average) and displaced some 45,000 people, causing massive destruction on the ecologically unique...
Yemen’s diminishing water resources must be managed with extreme care. Coastal cities and other areas need desalination programmes; coastal infrastructures must be adapted to cope with rising sea levels. In the highlands, water management must prioritise basic human needs because of the war, but its fundamental causes include earlier inappropriate state and international funding agencies’ development policies as well as the country’s aridity and climate stresses.

Addressing Yemen’s environmental challenges is an absolute priority. This demands effective measures by a strong state committed to the welfare of all its citizens and able to resist the pressures of those who have exploited the resources for their personal, immediate benefit. Yemen’s diminishing water resources must be managed with extreme care: jobs requiring the minimum possible water must be created, implying major improvements in the educational system to qualify people. Coastal cities and other areas need desalination programmes; coastal infrastructures must be adapted to cope with rising sea levels. In the highlands, water management must prioritise basic human needs, followed by those of livestock; this is the only way to enable people to remain in these beautiful, scenic areas. About 90 per cent of Yemen’s water is used in agriculture. This must be significantly reduced and therefore irrigated agriculture must be severely restricted. High-value, rain-fed and drought-resistant crops must be developed for people to live off local resources.

Some experts predict that Yemen needs a generation to solve its political problems. Unfortunately, Yemenis cannot wait that long. If nothing is done, much of the country will have run out of water by then, thus dramatically reducing the area suitable for human habitation. If environmental issues are not addressed, what will happen to Yemen’s 45 million people in 2035? Will most of them force their way into Saudi Arabia and Oman?

This article draws from my recent work ‘Climate Change and Security: Major Challenges for Yemen’s Future’ which appears in the forthcoming book Climate Hazard Crises in Asian Societies and Environments (Routledge, 2017) edited by Troy Sternberg.

Reprinted from vol. 13, no. 2 (2017)

Helen Lackner studied Social Anthropology at SOAS and has been working in rural development for four decades, including 15 years in Yemen. She has published books and academic articles and is finalising work on Yemen in Crisis: Autocracy, Neoliberalism and the Disintegration of a State to be published later this year by Saqi.

Women and children waiting for water from the karif in Utma, Yemen, 2009. Photograph by Helen Lackner
The current socio-economic and political crisis in the MENA region affects the whole of society with a greater burden on medium to lower social strata and other disadvantaged groups. But it is the youth of today who are caught in the eye of the storm; it is through the generation now entering the labour market that a number of ‘normative ideas about responsibilities and entitlements of the previous welfare and developmental state are being re-negotiated’ (Sukarieh and Tannock, Youth Rising?, 2015). The youth phase offers a privileged vantage point from which to observe broader processes of social change and continuity. It is during this time – when young men and women begin to make their transitions into adult life – that we are more likely to see change and continuity in working conditions, family forms and patterns of social inequalities.

Important as it is today the focus on youth, prevailing approaches to youth and youth problems in the region are problematic in many respects, most of all because they fail to place changing youth conditions, and the narratives associated with the youth category itself, into existing power relations and political economy processes.

Maria Cristina Paciello and Daniela Pioppi stress the need to study youth in context to avoid analyses that are reductive or romanticised. They argue that focusing on youth problems tends to emphasise the severity of demographic pressures (youth bulge) and a lack of adequate skills to meet market requirements (the so-called ‘education-employment nexus’). In making youth employment problems purely a matter of individual characteristics and/or deficiencies of the education system, such analyses completely hide the structural factors behind the spread of precariousness and insecurity among the youth. Our understanding of youth-related problems needs instead to be set within the context of the structural transformations induced by the local implementation of neoliberal globalisation in the last three decades.

Neoliberal reforms have significantly reconfigured state-labour-capital relations in the MENA region in ways that have dramatically transformed the landscape of work. With the adoption of structural adjustment policies since the mid-1980s, incumbent regimes have abandoned the policy of offering jobs to university graduates leading to an increase in youth unemployment. Labour laws were revised to deregulate the labour market by ensuring freedom of hiring and firing, restricting the right of strike and allowing the use of fixed-term contracts – which have become the most common type of contract among young people. The integration of the region into the international market, rather than creating quality job opportunities for educated young people, has been based on low-cost outsourcing in unskilled activities, often tapping into a reserve pool of young female labour.

Moreover, neoliberal restructuring has also reinforced labour fragmentation due to its selective and uneven implementation across space and time. Thus, while living a precarious existence, youth are today increasingly divided and differentiated along national, racial and gender lines. Inequalities between cities and rural areas have increased since governments have generally prioritised urban centres to promote capital accumulation.

The gradual dismantling of the welfare state has also further fragmented the experience of being young. Under the influence of international agencies such as the World Bank, reform of the educational system favoured the privatisation of universities which has augmented key structural inequalities. Public policies – such as the plethora of job creation programmes...
Any analysis of youth problems and of the forms and dynamics of youth political participation needs to be placed in a broader context. Established in the 1990s-2010s – have exacerbated precariousness and reinforced fragmentation by specifically targeting a particular subset of youth. In addition, while pressure on youth to migrate has deepened under the drive of neoliberal reforms and war, the securitisation of migration policies in the EU (particularly since 2000) has furthered employment precariousness and insecurity with the spread of temporary and seasonal labour migration programmes for low-skilled workers. Yet, by excluding certain nationalities and prioritising specific groups of migrants (highly skilled workers and researchers), the securitisation of migration policies in the EU and the Gulf also appears to have reinforced labour market fragmentation among youth within MENA countries. The category of youth, therefore, hides a multiplicity of employment relations that are likely to produce very different experiences of 'being young' and trajectories to adulthood.

Youth as an actor of change?

Any major reconfiguration of state-labour-capital relations has an impact on every aspect of socio-political life and on the forms and dynamics of political mobilisation that are shaped today by increased inequalities, social fragmentation and overwhelming state repression. The 2010-2011 wave of popular uprisings in the Arab region were largely interpreted as being 'youth-led uprisings'. All of a sudden, the global political discourse was full of references to 'youth revolutionary potential', 'youth agency' and 'youth transformative power'. Such a positive enthusiasm and emphasis on the youth's political role – both by global actors and, sometimes, by the protestors themselves – should not go unnoticed; in fact, it is in need of a critical analysis.

The idea of 'youth' as a coherent 'political actor' could be misleading in many respects. First of all, if taken as a whole, the current generation is facing a more difficult transition to adulthood with respect to previous ones; but young people are of course as diverse as the entire society. The use of the youth category could thus have a depoliticising effect, hiding other – we would say more relevant and certainly more challenging – social divides, such as class. Also, the emphasis on youth has the effect of downplaying the role of adults and adult-led organisations and of interpreting current social conflicts as 'intergenerational', glossing over more significant issues of political economy that concern the youth and the society at large.

The uncritical appraisal of the youth's political role is also inextricably related to the liberal overemphasis of individual agency, thereby systematically downplaying the importance of well-structured mass organisations and underestimating the strength of power structures which, according to the narrative associated with youth, could be easily disrupted by the sudden mobilisation of atomised masses of (young) individuals.

Furthermore, the use of the youth category conceals a marked preference for certain forms of mobilisation more compatible with liberal civic values than other, more disruptive and less palatable ones. So, for instance, 'youth movements' are generally identified with the so-called 'new social movements': loose networks of techno-savvy individuals, urban and middle class-based. Other forms of mobilisation, such as the variety of Islamist movements or labour-based mobilisations, are either not considered 'youth movements' or – in agreement with the binary approach often associated with youth – are considered to be an expression of the 'bad', 'unsupervised', 'ill-guided' youth in need of control and repression. In order to understand recent waves of mobilisation in the region, to which young men and women are participating in various forms, we need to consider a much larger geography of protest, a geography in which 'the youth' appears to be more of a 'constructed' category (too broad and to narrow at the same time) than a political actor in itself.

To sum up, any analysis of youth problems and of the forms and dynamics of youth political participation needs to be placed in a broader context, in contrast to narrow prevailing approaches that have so far stressed the 'challenges of the youth bulge' or, paradoxically, 'the enormous potential of youth collective mobilisation', while underestimating, and sometimes hindering, existing power relations and political economy processes.

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Maria Cristina Paciello is Adjunct Professor in political economy of Islamic countries at the University of Venice Ca’ Foscari and Senior Fellow at the Mediterranean and Middle East Programme of the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI). She is the Scientific Co-coordinator of the EU FP7 project POWER2YOUTH (www.power2youth.eu)

Daniela Pioppi is Associate Professor of contemporary history of Arab countries at the University of Naples ‘L’Orientale’ and Senior Fellow at the Mediterranean and Middle East Programme of the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI). She is the Scientific Co-coordinator of the EU FP7 project POWER2YOUTH (www.power2youth.eu)
Independent journalism has never been an easy profession in Turkey. Today, with one-third of all imprisoned journalists in the world being held in the country's prisons, it has never been more dangerous to be a media worker in Turkey.

The crackdown on media to silence dissenting voices has been ongoing in recent years, but the state of emergency, declared in the wake of the failed 15 July 2016 coup attempt, has resulted in an alarming deterioration in media freedom in the country. The post-coup measures and the emergency decree laws, leading to widespread arrests, investigations and closures, have practically destroyed the few remaining spaces for any kind of independent, critical journalism.

Two media rights groups, Freedom House and Reporters Without Borders (RSF), have listed Turkey as the country with the sharpest decline in press freedoms during the past year. RSF says Turkey has become ‘the world’s biggest prison for media personnel.’

On 25 April 2017, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, an international body of which Turkey is a founding member, passed a resolution to restart monitoring procedures on Turkey. Expressing ‘serious concerns’ about rights violations, erosion of democracy and the rule of law, the resolution called on Turkey to lift the state of emergency, adhere to the principles of the rule of law and human rights standards, release all the parliamentarians and journalists detained pending trial and take urgent measures to restore freedom of expression and the media.

While the world may well be looking at Turkey closer and more critically than ever, the country’s government has become visibly bolder. Less than a year after the violent coup attempt and under a state of emergency, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) held a referendum on 16 April 2017 on a constitutional amendment that would change the parliamentary system to a presidential one, giving President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan extensive executive powers.

In the run up to the referendum, freedoms of expression and assembly were further curtailed. Media was dominated by pro-government voices. There was very little public discussion of the proposed amendments. When the country’s top leaders began equating dissent with treason, self-censorship reached unprecedented levels. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe’s (OSCE) Observation Mission said that the referendum took place on an unlevel playing field; as such, the two sides of the campaign did not have equal opportunities. A significant portion of the OSCE’s preliminary report was dedicated to the media coverage of the campaign, highlighting practices that are contrary to the OSCE commitments, the Council of Europe standards and other international obligations.

After a narrow and bitterly contested victory, tainted by allegations of irregularities, the newly-empowered Erdoğan’s censorship of the media. Political cartoon by Carlos Latuff

While the world may well be looking at Turkey closer and more critically than ever, the country’s government has become visibly bolder.
president extended the state of emergency and escalated the crackdown on his opponents, including those in the media: nearly 4,000 more public officials and academics were purged, two more media outlets were closed and some popular television dating shows faced new restrictions on moral grounds.

Moreover, in a mind-boggling decision, and without prior court order, the Turkish Ministry of Transport, Maritime Affairs and Communications has blocked access to the free online encyclopedia, Wikipedia in all languages. Turkish officials have claimed that the site’s content was used in a smear campaign against Turkey. Wikipedia founder, Jimmy Wales, responded with a tweet, saying ‘Access to information is a fundamental right. Turkish people, I will always stand with you and fight for this right.’

It is not as if the travails of the Turkish media are ignored. There is a strong international solidarity in support of Turkey’s journalists. Campaigns, run by the Association of European Journalists (AEJ), Reporters Without Borders (RSF), the Index on Censorship, the International Press Institute (IPI), International PEN, Amnesty International and numerous other organisations, highlight the plight of more than 160 journalists behind bars and hundreds more unable to work. International organisations warn that Turkey is on a very dangerous path. ‘Without legitimate dissent and criticism of government policy, there can be no democratic public debate,’ they say. They caution against hatred and violence taking hold in an increasingly polarised society.

Even without taking these gloomy predictions into account, Turkey’s independent journalists already feel the chilling effects of the arbitrariness, insecurity and repression all around them. Fearing that they could be sacked, labelled as ‘traitors’ or worse, prosecuted and arrested at any moment, many reluctantly exercise self-censorship. The mainstream media, by and large, chooses to become an enthusiastic accomplice of the all-powerful government and the state. As totally absurd and false as it is, when the justice minister claims that journalists in jail are there because they are murderers, drug dealers or child abusers, it gets reported and heartily endorsed by conventional pro-government outlets and social media accounts. A strong chorus of official and media voices targeting a journalist is rarely ignored by prosecutors.

Knowing that Turkey must comply with the European Convention on Human Rights, even under a state of emergency, and that the European Court of Human Rights remains competent enough to rule on individual cases eventually, does not make the abuses suffered (such as the denial of the most basic right to mount a legal defence or to avoid a prolonged pre-trial detention) any more bearable for a journalist. Many have been in detention for more than five months without any indictment.

The prominent investigative journalist Ahmet Şık’s case is symptomatic. He was arrested at the end of December 2016, for ‘support to the FETO’, the Gülenist network accused of plotting the coup, and ‘propaganda in favour of the PKK’, the outlawed Kurdistan Workers’ Party. Ahmet Şık, who had spent 13 months in pre-trial detention in 2011 while investigating the Gülen movement’s infiltration in the state administration, was released when the evidence was proven to be fabricated. He was recently quoted as saying, ‘There is only one difference between now and then. When the Gülenist judges prosecuted you, they fabricated evidence. Now, they do not even bother to do that’.

The inability to seek redress from the justice system, here and now, has serious consequences, not only for the individuals in question, but also for their families. On 15 July 2016, Turkey faced a massive threat and the government had every right to take extraordinary measures to re-establish public order. The Turkish authorities argue that the infiltration of state institutions is real and must be dealt with. Yet, the extent of the measures taken so far not only raises questions of proportionality, but also transparency and accountability.

As the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Nils Muiznieks puts it, ‘deviations from the rule of law and human rights principles may expedite the punishment of the guilty. But such an approach will leave indelible scars and be immensely detrimental in the long run.’

The Council of Europe warns that the sense of injustice and victimhood created by disproportionate measures may amount to a ‘civilian death’ and its effects on Turkish society will be dramatic and long-lasting. It is a warning that Turkey’s international partners, presently seeking to establish a new relationship based on their economic, security and migration interests, would do well to take heed.

‘There is only one difference between now and then. When the Gülenist judges prosecuted you, they fabricated evidence. Now, they do not even bother to do that’ – Ahmet Şık

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Firdevs Robinson is a London-based journalist and blogger. A former BBC World Service editor, she has been covering international affairs for three decades, focussing on Turkey, Cyprus, the Middle East, Central Asia, the Caucasus and Europe. Her blog can be found at http://www.firdevstalkturkey.com/

Press conference of six media watchdogs (including the Association of European Journalists) at the end of February in Istanbul. Photograph by Otmor Lahodynsky
The notion of national or civilisational 'exceptionalism' was first used in connection with the USA to explain everything from its propensity for democracy to its apparent resistance to secularisation. The concept of 'Islamic exceptionalism' has a more recent pedigree dating back to the 1990s with the publication of Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations*. Yet the idea that something sets 'Muslim societies' and politics apart has an intellectual genealogy which arguably goes back to 18th-century Orientalist scholarship identified by Edward Said. While this exceptionalism is often cited by critics of Islam as the main reason for its failure to adapt to secular modernity, it is simultaneously celebrated in Islamist discourse as a manifestation of an 'alternative modernity'. Indeed, proponents of Islamism have enthusiastically endorsed the notion that Islam is exceptional in being a total system in which religion and politics are inseparable, thus reaching the same conclusions as Islam's detractors. It is mainly for this reason that they regard secularism as a harmful form of cultural imperialism imposed by the West.

Broadly speaking, the notion of 'Islamic exceptionalism' is based on three overlapping premises. Firstly, in civilisational terms it is argued that the emergence of Islam constituted a sharp break from the past producing a culture which was in religious and political terms unique compared to those which had preceded it in late antiquity and thus lacking any commonality with other civilisations such as Byzantium, Persia and/or medieval Europe. Of course, this account compliments the traditionalist Muslim vision of the emergence of Islam that emphasises its sudden appearance as a miraculous event which owed nothing to the *Jahiliyya* (ignorance or barbarism associated with pre-Islamic Arabia) which preceded it. Moreover, this vision assumes that this religion/culture is determinatively scriptural and essentially self-referential. This 'scriptural determinism' meant that philology was the main tool of analysis of 'Islam' for almost two centuries. Again, we should note the parallel with contemporary 'fundamentalists' who are also effectively scriptural determinists in their understanding of a pure Islam stripped of foreign cultural accretions and based on the literal word of God.

A second dimension of exceptionalism is asserted in the realm of imperialism and violence. In this sphere, it has been argued that the novelty of Islam resided in the synthesis of a universal empire with a universal religion. Whilst there had been
It remains debatable how cogent, empirically or philosophically, an approach which emphasises the difference of Islam to the point of ‘exceptionalism’ is.

universal conquerors before (e.g. Alexander the Great), they did not bring a religion; and whilst there had been universal religions before (e.g. Christianity), they were not connected to the idea of a universal empire. Thus jihad was a form of missionary warfare. In some of the more conservative critiques of Islam, as well as in Salafi-Jihadi ideology, Mohammad’s example of a warrior who engaged (according to some accounts) in over 80 military campaigns during his lifetime is seen as a model for a warrior-religion which glorifies violence and imperialism.

The third sphere of exceptionalism is located in the realm of politics and law. Here it is argued that Islam is unique in the ways that it relates to politics because of the status of Mohammad as both Prophet and statesman. Moreover, it is asserted that the sharia is not simply a religious law, but one which represented a set of social, economic, cultural and political practices which governed every aspect of life. These features prevented an autonomous space for politics and law to operate and have often been cited to account for the failure of secularism as well as the ‘democracy gap’ in the ‘Muslim World’.

Since the 1980s, the assumptions outlined above have been criticized by scholars who have tried to promote a more nuanced understanding of Muslim-majority societies from a broadly materialist perspective. Fred Halliday, Sami Zubaida, Roger Owen, Aziz al-Azmeh and others have argued, in different ways, for an approach which sees the ‘Muslim World’ first and foremost as part of the Third (or non-European) World and subject to the same world historical processes from colonialism to the era of socialism planning to the much more eclectic processes from colonialism to the era of authoritarianism. Other critiques have exposed serious flaws in the scriptural/philological based approach – especially its reliance on the scholastic traditions of the ulama as a privileged, at times exclusive, source of knowledge about Islam to the detriment of less scriptural expressions of the faith and culture. These critiques led to the partial demise of the notion of Islamic exceptionalism, at least in academia, though it continued to persist elsewhere – especially in the world of US-based think tanks and in the discourse of the far right.

The 9/11 attacks saw a revival of Islamic exceptionalism and the notion of a ‘clash of civilizations’, which was eagerly adopted by the far right in Europe and the USA. This trend was boosted by the chaos after the Arab uprisings and the rise of the so-called Islamic State (IS), both of which seemed to confirm the ‘democracy-gap’ and ‘violence’ theses outlined above. ‘Maybe the Orientalists were right in the first place!’ a friend morosely quipped to me a few years after the uprisings began, by which time several countries had either reverted to authoritarianism or descended into brutal civil wars. Indeed, this period saw a number of publications which have, implicitly or explicitly, revived the notion of Islamic exceptionalism. These include: Noah Feldman, The Fall and Rise of the Islamic State (2008); Patricia Crone, God’s Rule (2004); Michael Cook, Ancient Religions, Modern Politics (2014); Wael Hallaq, The Impossible State (2012); and Shadi Hamid, Islamic Exceptionalism (2016). These studies have restated – in a more sophisticated and updated form – some of the premises of Islamic exceptionalism summarised above, often with great intellectual force and analytical clarity. Moreover, they cannot simply be written off as illegitimate forms of Orientalism having often been produced by scholars who see themselves as working outside (and sometimes against) that tradition. These works are important in that they have emphasised some of the distinctive features of ‘Muslim politics’.

But it remains debatable how cogent, empirically or philosophically, an approach which emphasises the difference of Islam to the point of ‘exceptionalism’ is. Such an approach discounts the complexity and diversity of Muslim-majority societies both historically and in the contemporary world. Indeed, recently published empirical studies of secularism in these societies – such as one edited by Akeel Bilgrami, Beyond the Secular West (2016) and another edited by Mirjam Künkler et al, A Secular Age Beyond the West (2017) – show that they have exhibited a range of religion-state arrangements and multiple secularities which defy essentialist notions of typically ‘Islamic’ religion-state relations, often inspired by the view that Islam knew no separation between religion and state.

The revival of the notion Islamic exceptionalism has, nevertheless, underlined the challenge of forging approaches to understanding the politics of the ‘Muslim World’ without sliding into cultural essentialism on the one hand or reductive ‘difference blind’ materialist analysis on the other.

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Hadi Enayat is a Visiting Lecturer at the Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations, Aga Khan University, London and a member of the Editorial Board of The Middle East in London magazine

Sticker on sign for British Street in London. In its complete form it proclaims ‘You are entering a Sharia controlled zone. Islamic Rules enforced. No alcohol. No gambling. No music or concerts. No porn or prostitution. No drugs or smoking. Sharia a better society.’ Photograph by George Rex from London, England
2016

- Cultural Connections (December 2015/January 2016)
- Persian Music (February/March 2016)
- Iran's Environmental Challenges (April/May 2016)
- Migrant and Refugee Crisis (June/July 2016)
- SOAS Centenary Special Issue (October/November 2016)
No one can doubt the powerful financial and political bonds that connect London and the Middle East. But how can one quantify the cultural connections? Barnaby Rogerson takes a personal look at some of these connections in the capital.

To assess cultural connections one could start by making a count of the annual flock of art exhibitions, concerts, books, lectures and articles. Some relevant journals are Banipal and CM – Critical Muslim. Venues to keep a close eye on include Janet Rady Fine Art, Park Gallery and Moroccan Fine Art, Edge of Arabia, the Mosaic Rooms, the Brunei Gallery at SOAS, Leighton House, P21 Gallery and the Nour and Shubbak festivals. This data could be checked against the Time Out weekly summaries, the listing at the back of The Middle East in London and the international Aramco magazine.

These events could be assessed by visitor number, but as anyone who manages any type of Academic Assessment survey will realise, this sort of fact-filled exercise can also be nebulous. Most especially if one starts to try to sort out the degree of purity of a cultural manifestation. Is this a genuinely free-flowing cultural exchange? Or is it part of a teaching course or something tarnished by a grant?

Instead let’s look at some individuals, who in terms of column inches would certainly top any list of cultural connectors. Is Zaha Hadid evidence of a cultural connection between the culture of Iraq and Britain? Of course not; she defines herself, creates a futuristic modernism exuberantly free of national identity tags and belongs to that metropolitan world of the Western Levant which connects Beirut, Bagdad, London, Paris, New York and the Ivy League but has no provincial hinterland. Nor could you argue that Tariq Ali is evidence of an ongoing cultural connection between Britain and Pakistan. He is part of the British literary and political landscape, with historical roots that link him to the once tolerant Muslim city of Lahore. The same would have to be said for the opera-producer Wasfi Kani, who is at the epicentre of a world defined by Garsington-Grange-Glyndebourne, but is completely, if not laughably, untouched by the cultural agenda of Islamabad. The scholar and controversialist, Ziauddin Sardar, might be thought to be a more likely exemplar of a living Cultural Connection. But you only have to listen to him debate at Hay on Wye (or any of the other 365 literary festivals of the British Isles) to realise that you are in the company of Britain’s leading cultural figures.

When looking for cultural connections are we always looking at a bridge, or a journey half delivered, someone caught halfway between assimilation and the indigenous homeland?
The Middle East in London

The Spirit of the Moors was a concert given by the Embassy of Morocco at Cadogan Hall in mid-October. This was not some PR exercise, transporting something exotic, such as Gnoua musicians, for a photo shoot in London. Instead it was a fascinating evening, which would otherwise only ever been aired in somewhere fascinating, which would otherwise be a dispiriting and tailcoats. It was a challenging but serious attempt at cultural synthesis. Contemporary Moroccan compositions were performed by the English Chamber Orchestra, immaculate in their white ties and tailcoats. It was a challenging but serious attempt at cultural synthesis.

So when one is looking for cultural connections does one have to cut out all the real success stories? Are we always looking at a bridge, or a journey half delivered, someone caught halfway between assimilation and the indigenous homeland? To make greater sense of this, I turned my back on statistics and theories and consulted the last fortnight of my diary.

The Spirit of the Moors was a concert given by the Embassy of Morocco at Cadogan Hall in mid-October. This was not some PR exercise, transporting something exotic, such as Gnoua musicians, for a photo shoot in London. Instead it was a very serious attempt at cultural synthesis. Contemporary Moroccan compositions were performed by the English Chamber Orchestra, immaculate in their white ties and tailcoats. It was a challenging but fascinating evening, which would otherwise only ever been aired in somewhere.

musically experimental like Kings Place. But using the power of a gift invitation card and a Chelsea reception, bridges were thrown across to connect otherwise discordant worlds. As I focused on the faces in the crowd, I was reminded of all those odd, slightly quirky organisations that make other connections, year in year out. There is the British-Moroccan society, SPANA, the American School in Tangier, not to mention the Fes Festival of World Sacred Music, Freedom for All and the Maghreb Review.

They are all run for the love of it, rather than a professional salary. There was of course a political narrative behind the event, for the Moroccans believe in music, not only as an aspect of their Islamic practice but as the best way to make connections between different faiths. Having suffered more than my fair share of faith-encounter groups, I also passionately believe in the efficacy of sharing tea and music, rather than theology.

Last weekend, I was part of the Divan Club, a rather bizarre revival of an 18th-century club of Turkey merchants and travellers. This is another bunch of amateurs, who meet just twice a year, once in London, once in Istanbul. It is content to exist as a dining club, bringing together people interested in Turkey around the same, hospitable table. On one level it is a vacuous, almost Walter Mitty-like gathering, yet on the other hand, the conversations can be uniquely stimulating, for no one is on record or fulfilling a professional function. And as many of the bankers, diplomats, academics and writers are now retired, it also allows them to be refreshingly frank. And focusing on the faces gathered together, I was once again able to create a mosaic of all the various Turkey cultural organisations that I flit in and out of: The British Institute at Ankara (archaeological), the Anglo-Turkish Society (which is social but runs a lecture series), Cornucopia (an amazingly erudite glossy magazine), the Friends of Aphrodisias (which supports a statue restoration programme) not to forget the prolifically active Yunus Emre cultural foundation, or the ex-graduates of Roberts College. It also made me smile at memories of the ‘Ottoman Picnic’ which in my student days sought to muddle up art-historians with rug-dealers, artists with academics and travel-writers with archaeologists. I believe a troika of mischievous professors – John Carswell, Honor Frost and Godfrey Goodwin – were the driving force behind this annual picnic. There was no membership, no subscription, no AGM, just a near-magical plethora of bowls of home-made Turkish food brought by each of the guests along with a cascade of rugs. The gathering knew no barriers of age, race, class, sex or language. It was off the assessment radar but a totally valid form of cultural connection.

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Barnaby Rogerson has written North Africa – A History, The Prophet Muhammad – a biography, The Last Crusaders, The Heirs of the Prophet Muhammad and guidebooks to Tunisia and Morocco. He is a member of the Editorial Board and his day job is Publisher at Eland (www.travelbooks.co.uk)
Female presence on stage has been a matter of controversy in many societies especially when this presence is perceived to conflict with the ‘duties’ of a woman as a ‘faithful wife’ or ‘sacrificing mother’, or is likely to distort her image of propriety as a ‘decent lady’. Female singing in particular has encountered restrictions and bans in various parts of the world and at different times. In Europe, until the end of the 17th century boys and castrati sang the female vocals in choruses and operas.

The situation of female performers in the Middle East has also been a direct consequence of the socio-political, cultural and religious priorities of the governing systems. In Iran, prior to the Constitutional Revolution (1906-9) – a major turning point in the history of Iranian modernisation – female performers were mostly bound to court and indoor, female-only performances. A decade after the Constitutional Revolution women began to appear in semi-public theatres and concerts. A few years later in 1924 the first public concert with a female singer took place, and in 1925 the first female singer travelled outside Iran to record her voice. This was not an easy transition as nearly all of these performers faced social, familial or religious pressures and limitations despite Reza Khan’s supportive policies for such activities (1921-25), which later became the official Pahlavi policies during his (1925-1941) and his son’s rein (Mohammad Reza Shah 1941-1979).

In time, this support paved the way for the appearance of many women as instrumentalists, singers, and dancers performing in different musical genres. The presence of female musicians – especially the stars of Persian classical music since the 1920s and then the super stars of pop music since the 1950s – transformed the music culture of the country and initiated drastic changes in the public space. This, in turn, made the restrictions imposed by the post-revolution Islamic government harder to tolerate for most people and music practitioners.

After the 1979 Revolution and the imposition of new policies, which were based on the officials’ interpretation of Shi’a Islamic law, many artists and musical activities faced stark restrictions. Pop music, dance and female solo singing were totally banned and other forms of music were limited. These restrictions have gone through a great number of changes during the last 37 years. Some forms of pop music have been legalised, some dance forms have...
Ham-khani (co-singing) was not created for its beauty, but simply as an act of resistance that generates a space for women

re-entered the public space under the name of harakat-e mozun (rhythmic movements), but female solo singing is still banned. This is due to the government’s reading of Shi’a jurisprudence which holds that the female solo singing voice must not be heard by men. The more moderate members of the regime have so far been unable to find a way to justify it within these given limits. Since the early 1990s, however, female singers have found different ways to challenge this ban and continue their work.

The first attempts began when some singers tried to create new kinds of spaces for female solo singing. These included increasing the size of their private indoor (underground) performances with mixed or female-only audiences. The latter led to the creation of official female-only music festivals since November 1994. Men are banned from attending such concerts, and all the stage crew are women. Cameras and mobile phones must be handed to the female security guards upon entrance and women’s bags and bodies are searched for voice recordings and videos. The space allows women to perform freely and enjoy direct contact with their audience, but it is limited in that they cannot cooperate with male colleagues and their concerts remain marginal.

Another trend has involved holding concerts abroad. For some leading female singers this has become a regular practice, particularly in places with large Iranian diasporas such as parts of Europe and the US. The government seems to turn a blind eye to such performances or allows them to happen as a safety valve. However, most female singers do not have such opportunities, as these performances require formal invitations and external investments that only famous singers may have access to.

The last method of resistance, which is quite recent, is the recording of music and even music videos and posting them on the Internet. There have been instances of actions being taken by the government against this method, but none of the performers have faced serious problems and many continue posting their songs. This is a very simple and affordable way for any singer to push the boundaries, and one can find online numerous simple or professional voice recordings and videos. The reader can see examples of these by searching for ‘a Persian girl sings Hayedeh’s bahar song’ on YouTube, or ‘Solmaz Badri Rooze Azal’ on SoundCloud. Nevertheless, many singers avoid this as no one can predict the state’s reactions.

Since the 1979 Revolution, music, in general, has had a liminal position within Iranian political culture; so long as it does not break its political bounds, its transgressions may be tolerated and hushed. The case of female solo singing inside the country, however, is more political than cultural or religious. This became clear during the late 1990s when the reformists managed to authorise different forms of performances, but failed to legalise female solo singing. The line of argument for this is very straightforward. Firstly, as Shi’a jurisprudence has been the major source of legitimacy for Iranian government, anything that goes against it is political. Secondly, given the debates that are circulated in the country, it seems there is no way to legitimise female solo singing within Shi’a jurisprudence – for the time being. Thus the state cannot authorise female solo singing because such an act breaks the aura of religiosity that has been used to claim legitimacy for Iran’s political system. Yet the demands of the Iranian middle class, who have been changing the patterns of bans since the 1980s via their transgressions, is also a formidable force that cannot be suppressed.

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Parmis Mozafari is an Ethnomusicologist who has taught and published on music, dance, and female performers in Iran. She is also a santour player and is currently a fellow at the University of St Andrews

Mahdieh Mohammad-khani and Mah ensemble, Iran, 2013, Home performance < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p6ggyvR4K6o >
The Air Quality Index (AQI) often reaches alarming levels in Tehran. Nowadays the city’s residents pay close attention to the AQI, though they may not quite understand the science behind it. The AQI is a yardstick to measure air quality. It is inversely proportional to how clean the ambient air is: the higher the AQI, the more serious the associated health effects are for people who breathe the (polluted) air. These effects include a wide range of both short-term (coughing, asthma-like symptoms) and long-term (impacting breathing passages, causing chronic disease) health problems. The AQI is usually reported for five key air pollutants: (1) carbon monoxide, (2) ground-level ozone, (3) nitrogen dioxide, (4) sulphur dioxide and (5) particulate matter (PM) measured at 2.5 and 10 micrometres. Among these pollutants, PM is one of the most hazardous.

The AQI in Iran is comprised of five different levels, which span from 0 to 300. They are also colour-coded. The air is considered clean when the AQI is below 50; for this range the index is highlighted green. An AQI of 50-100 is indicated by the colour yellow and is considered a healthy level. An AQI of 100 is the threshold. AQI measurements of 100-150, indicated by the colour orange, mean that the air quality is unhealthy for sensitive groups (e.g. children, pregnant women and those with cardiac and respiratory system problems). When the AQI goes above 150 it is unhealthy for all people. Thus, AQI measurements of 150-200 are displayed in red. Such levels of air pollution require that specific measures be implemented. For instance, emergency services and hospitals are put on full alert and paramedics are deployed to busy areas of the city. People are advised to stay home, air polluting industries are ordered to put their activities on hold and traffic restrictions are imposed. When the AQI is red, visibility is significantly reduced and a thick layer of smog covers the city. The highest level of air pollution, 200-300 AQI, is defined as very unhealthy and indicated by the colour purple.

The AQI is a product of scientific measurements for each of the above-mentioned pollutants, which are recorded in different units. For example carbon monoxide is reported as parts per million (ppm) and particulate matter in micrograms per cubic meter. A sub-index is calculated for each of the pollutants, and then the highest sub-index of the five major polluters is used as the air quality index. AQI is often reported for a specified average period (often 24 hours).

Airborne particulate matter or PM is a complex mixture of extremely small sized particles that may have different natures (e.g. solid, liquid, organic and inorganic chemicals). These particles can be natural, manmade or a combination of both. According to the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), smaller particles increase the potential risk of causing health issues. Industrial activities, such as cement manufacturing or petrol and diesel combustion engines, are examples

In the 12 months from 21 March 2014 the people of Tehran experienced 16 clean days, 233 healthy days, 113 unhealthy days for sensitive groups and 3 unhealthy days for everyone.
of anthropogenic sources of air pollution. Soil and dust particles are among natural causes of PM. Particles smaller than 10 micrometres are often not trapped in the nose and throat and can therefore enter the lungs. In terms of health impacts, the associated risks with PM 2.5 are notably higher than PM 10. Well-documented research shows both short and long-term exposure to PM has negative impacts on human health, from asthma aggravation to lung cancer. Hospital admissions notably increase when the AQI reaches the unhealthy level (above 150). As mentioned earlier PM 2.5 imposes stronger risk factors than PM 10. It is now well established that exposure to PM 2.5 negatively affects children’s lung development and generally causes irreversible damage to the lungs. At the moment the data available is not sufficient to establish a safe level of exposure with no adverse health impacts.

Tehran, with a population of more than 8 million as of 2011, has one of the worst air quality records in the world. Though Tehran does not have the highest level of air pollution in Iran – particularly when compared to Ahwaz and Sanandaj, which are often among the top 10 most polluted cities due to the high concentration of PM, as Iran’s capital it dominates the news and receives substantially more attention. In 2012 an advisor to Iran’s Health Minister announced that, in a period of one year from March 2011, 4,460 people had died from air pollution in Tehran. According to the AQI records, in the 12 months from 21 March 2014 the people of Tehran experienced 16 clean days, 233 healthy days, 113 unhealthy days for sensitive groups and 3 unhealthy days for everyone.

Tehran’s air pollution is not a new concern; it has been publicly discussed during the past four decades. Even among developed countries air pollution is a major problem. But the frequency and intensity of the air pollution in Tehran makes it stand out among other cities. Thermal/temperature inversion is a phenomenon that often occurs in winters. It happens when the temperature close to the ground is colder than the temperature above it. In such atmospheric conditions we have limited natural air movement, so atmospheric pollutants are not completely dispersed and removed and instead remain in their place. This leads to sharp increases in AQI levels. The geographical location of Tehran and the presence of the Alborz mountain range in the north only exacerbates this problem. Rapid urban development, including the construction of a number of high-rise buildings that limit natural air movement corridors in Tehran, also contributes to this problem.

Mobile pollution sources – petrol and diesel cars and motorcycles – are thought to cause 80 per cent of Tehran air pollution. The number of cars in Tehran is estimated to be about four million. Motorcycles are said to number about one million, though some observations suggest that the real number is closer to three million. Until about two years ago, due to nuclear-related sanctions, it was virtually impossible for Iran to import high standard fuel. Reverse engineering combined with the use of indigenous technology and existing systems for producing petrol led to the production of nonstandard, low quality fuel in Iran that compounded the problem. These days high standard fuel is imported, which has helped produce a notable reduction of nonstandard carcinogenic products emissions.

The incomplete combustion of fuels by cars and motorcycles, regardless of the fuel standard, leads to the formation and emission of air pollutants including PM 2.5. Many of the vehicles in Tehran do not pass minimum standards; some do not even have a catalytic converter. Regrettably these nonstandard vehicles also form a big part of Tehran’s public transport systems; taxis and buses contribute disproportionately to the problem.

Solving Tehran’s air pollution problem is not easy, but it is achievable. London and Mexico City have succeeded before. Investing in public transport, especially by replacing old vehicles with new ones, adopting green technologies like electric and hybrid cars, raising people’s awareness and increasing their understanding of the role they play in air pollution, and implementing efficient regulations are some of the essential steps that must be taken in order to address this challenge.

Hamid M. Pouran has a PhD in Environmental Engineering. Before joining the LMEI as an IHF Visiting Fellow in Iran’s Environmental Sustainability, he was a Senior Research Associate at Lancaster University and a member of the Transatlantic Initiative for Nanotechnology and the Environment

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Photograph by Klára Nováková

© Klára Nováková, Wikimedia Commons

Smog over Tehran seen from Mount Tochal.

Photograph by Klára Nováková
Kicking away the migration ladder?

Recent concerns about the European migration crisis have masked a remarkable – but little noticed – degree of unanimity over the supposed ‘undesirability’ of migration as an economic phenomenon. Amids outrages against ‘economic migrants at European doorsteps’, and their allegedly questionable intentions, the term itself has come to assume negative connotations on a scale hitherto unknown. Statements like ‘we need to distinguish between real refugees and economic migrants’ are used with apparent ease fuelled by the urgent need to address the human tragedy that has been unfolding in our backyard.

Whilst a distinction between ‘voluntary’ and ‘forced’ migration can be helpful both conceptually and in aiding us to understand the historical significance of migratory flows in particular contexts, its uncritical and dismissive – if not diminutive – usage in recent times has tended to obfuscate rather than enlighten current debates. Unfortunately, this seems to have been true for both those who have been un receptive to refugees’ urgent need for protection as well as – albeit with very different and noble intentions – those who have rightly sought to highlight their plight.

The populist backlash has drawn its potency from exaggerated fears and demagogic vilification of migrants as a ‘threat’ to the social cohesion and economic prosperity of host countries. Unsurprisingly perhaps, this perspective has favoured harsh treatment of migrants and erecting physical barriers to their entry in various countries (most notably Hungary, Serbia and Macedonia). In some, strong nationalist sentiments have even justified de facto breach of the Refugee Convention of 1951 and undermined the Schengen Area visa agreement.

On the other hand, for those sympathetic to migrants the challenge of presenting migration as a general force for good has been side-lined by the need to articulate the case for national and global protection systems to address the plight of desperate refugees fleeing war, human rights abuses and persecution in recent years.

But widespread negative depictions of economic migrants misrepresent the role migration – forced or voluntary – has played in the course of social and economic development of many areas and regions, Europe included.

To be sure, the root causes of this conception predate the recent crisis. In his in-depth study of migration (Exodus – How Migration is Changing Our World, 2013), Paul Collier has carefully examined how the movement, on a global scale, of the poor eager to live and work in rich nations is giving rise to one of the ‘most pressing and controversial questions of our time’.

He premises his study on the observation that “The control of immigration is a human right. The group instinct to defend territory is common throughout the animal
More recent adulations with globalisation are based on the central idea of the freedom of movement, across borders, for all factors of production, including labour.

A sensible discussion and ultimately the need for a measured migration policy is undeniable, whether for home or host countries. What this perspective confuses, however, is a supposedly discretionary policy (immigration control) with an immutable principle (universal human rights). Imagine a policy of immigration control being advocated as a new amendment to a country’s constitution!

Statements of this type also often juxtapose immigration control to no immigration control – a false and unhelpful dichotomy. More generally, the anti-immigration narrative focuses on the short-term picture by exaggerating its costs to receiving communities and underestimating its long-term benefits both for home and host nations. This is questionable on at least three levels: philosophical, historical and economic.

First, from a philosophical point of view, the case against a desire to improve one’s well-being through relocation is directly at odds with the basic tenets of mainstream economics and the underpinnings of a capitalist system. Neoclassical economics is premised on the notion of rational choice and maximising behaviour of *homo economicus*. In consumer theory this translates itself to utility maximising individuals just as in the producer context it entails profit-maximisation. The same approach subscribes strongly to free trade among nations as a win-win strategy.

More recent adulations with globalisation too are based on the central idea of the freedom of movement, across borders, for all factors of production. Yet the asymmetry between freedom of movement of labour and other factors is puzzling: international roaming for capital in search of the highest rates of return is applauded, but a similar enthusiasm for international freedom of movement of labour is conspicuous by its absence.

Second, there is ample evidence in support of the two-way economic benefits of migration for both receiving and sending countries. Migrants are more likely to be of working age (active in the labour force), more educated and less likely than the local population to use public sector services. Contrary to popular projections, migrants from the 28 countries of the European Economic Area in the UK are estimated to have made a net positive contribution exceeding £2.5 billion during 2010-14 (income tax and national insurance contributions paid net of benefits and welfare support received). Recent analyses of National Insurance figures also confirm that a third of EU migrants coming to work in the UK in the same period returned home within a year. Similarly, a new study has estimated that immigrants have started more than half of the start-up companies in the US, which are together valued at one billion dollars or more (creating an average of approximately 760 jobs per company). As for home countries too, evidence suggests migrant remittances help reduce poverty and promote consumption and investment (including household members’ education and human capital).

Last but not least, we may take a leaf from history, which offers a rich array of migration experiences across different countries and over time. There is little doubt that the wealth and prosperity of countries like the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand have much to do with incoming European immigrants. In turn, such movements afforded the Europeans significant opportunities to improve their own lives or to escape from hardship and poverty at home. This is also true of the GCC states where the largest concentration of migrants at both ends – high-paid, skilled expats and low-wage Asian workers with paltry social rights – has been oiling ambitious growth trajectories of these states.

In his seminal book *Kicking Away the Ladder*, Cambridge economist, Ha-Joon Chang, shows that despite benefiting from protectionist policies in the heyday of their own industrialisation in the 19th century, the developed countries today effectively deny emerging nations the same opportunities by advocating free trade.

It is hard to resist the temptation offered today by this analogy in the context of the current debates on economic forces behind international migration.

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**Hassan Hakimian** is Director of the London Middle East Institute and a Reader in the Department of Economics at SOAS.
One of the many shocking images of the failed military coup in Turkey was that of a young, bearded man in civilian clothes, draped in the red Turkish flag, using his belt to beat a group of young soldiers who are lying on the ground huddled up against each other. Heavily armed policemen appear to be watching the spectacle without intervening. Several sources have reported brutal attacks on military conscripts, many barely 18 years old, even after they had already surrendered. Some video clips suggest that policemen have threatened to rape the daughters and wives of captured soldiers.

These incidents are a stark reminder of the complex ways violence plays out in conflict situations. But they also tell us a lot about underlying gendered norms and power relations. Prevailing notions of masculinities, promoted and embodied by the militarised Turkish state, articulate strength and authority through force rather than democratic legal means. Throughout his rule as the former Prime Minister and now President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has heavily played on his image as the über-patriarch, tasked to protect the honour and unity of the nation. This 'protection' has frequently translated into oppressing religious and ethnic minorities as well as political dissidents. At the same time, Erdoğan has left no doubt that, in his world view, women are not equal to men. On numerous occasions, he has referred to the idea of gender equality and challenges to heteronormativity, as campaigned for by feminists and LGBTQ activists inside Turkey, as a foreign conspiracy.

Political scientists, international relations scholars and historians often focus on what we think of as 'the big picture' when analysing war and conflict in the Middle East and elsewhere. The majority of discussions in the media and policy circles revolve around national security concerns, changes in political economies and state-society relations. What a gendered lens adds to the picture is not only the recognition that women and men might be affected and challenges to heteronormativity, as campaigned for by feminists and LGBTQ activists inside Turkey, as a foreign conspiracy.

Attention to gender as a structural feature of inequality opens up our research enquiries into exploring the ways that gender might intersect with other power hierarchies.
Women and men are mobilising jointly, particularly amongst the youth, to resist violence against women as an integral part of their demands for democracy and dignity by and implicated in war and conflict differently, but also that there exists a continuum of violence in terms of what is happening at home, within the family, the workplace, the streets and situations of acute armed conflicts, including battle fronts. Moreover, attention to gender as a structural feature of inequality that cuts through world politics, state institutions, economic contexts, social and legal arenas and daily lives, also opens up our research enquiries into exploring the ways that gender might intersect with other power hierarchies.

For example, in Iraq I explored the ways in which being an Iraqi woman or man might intersect with being of a particular social class and a specific religious sect or ethnic group at any given historical moment: during the Ba’ath regime, the economic sanctions period, the invasion, the occupation, or more recent sectarian tensions and political struggles. In relation to my work on the Turkish-Kurdish conflict, I found that power differences linked to being a man or a woman need to be explored in conjunction with ethnicity (Turk/Kurd) as well as religious differences, particularly in relation to the Alevi minority. Different forms of violence intersect; many Kurdish feminist activists stress that their struggle against state violence goes side by side with their struggle against gender-based violence, including that at the hands of fellow Kurdish men.

Cutting across any specific empirical context is the fact that women and children are disproportionately impacted by war, conflict and forced displacement. An increase in sexual and wider gender-based violence, restrictions on mobility, limited access to healthcare and the feminisation of poverty are common, gendered aspects of war. Since the start of the Syrian conflict early marriage, forced marriages, forced prostitution, sexual violence, and the demand for maternal and wider reproductive healthcare have increased greatly.

Meanwhile, women’s behaviour and appearance are both considered to be symbolic of the national, religious and ethnic community. Women, then, are often the target of legal or informal mechanisms or even physical violence with the aim of imposing dress codes, controlling sexual behaviour and limiting access to the public sphere, all in the name of ‘restoring authentic values’. In reality these actions demarcate boundaries of ‘us vs them’ and consolidate the authority of specific political actors or attempts to ‘break’ the opposition. This trend was particularly obvious in the Iraqi case: sectarian struggles were very much fought over the bodies, dress codes and mobility of women.

The impact of recent political transformations in the Middle East on women and men, on women’s rights and gender norms has been varied according to national contexts, respective histories of state feminism and gender activism, as well as differences among and between women and men based on class, citizenship status and place of residence, amongst other social differences. In general, mass protests and uprisings created new openings for women’s involvement in public, however, these were rapidly threatened by armed conflict, counter-revolutionary backlashes as well as the empowerment of Islamist political forces seeking to promote their conservative gender agendas as part of signalling a break from former regimes.

In the struggle for political power, women’s bodies, but also increasingly men’s bodies and their sexuality, have become the targets of violence and control by a range of actors seeking to ‘break the will’ of those advocating change while simultaneously consolidating their authority.

Gender studies has long moved away from essentialised ideas about men as perpetrators and women as victims of violence and has been engaging in studies that look at agency, resistance, complexities and complicities. Current research indicates that despite what generally is a gloomy picture, there have been significant developments on the societal level. Women survivors of violence are speaking out publicly and breaking the taboo surrounding the discussion of sexual abuse and harassment. Moreover, women and men are mobilising jointly, particularly amongst the youth, to resist violence against women as an integral part of their demands for democracy and dignity. Men, especially young men, are increasingly making the connection between state authoritarianism and prevailing patriarchal gender regimes. And those men opposed to political authoritarianism in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Egypt and elsewhere in the region have also started to realise that the struggle for gender-based equality lies at the heart of struggles for more egalitarian and democratic societies.

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Nadje Al-Ali is Professor of Gender Studies at the Centre for Gender Studies at SOAS and a member of the magazine’s Editorial Board
• Contemporary Art
  (December 2014/January 2015)
• Environment (February/March 2015)
• North Africa (April/May 2015)
• Iraq - People and Heritage
  (June/July 2015)
• Endangered Languages
  (October/November 2015)
How to make a gas mask? You will need: a marker, a large plastic bottle, a box cutter, a length of foam or some soft fabric, a surgical mask and some glue. Hold the bottle up to your face and, using the marker, draw a U-shape. Cut off the bottom of the bottle using your box cutter and then cut out the U-shape. Glue the foam around the cut edges to protect your face. Stuff a surgical mask in the top of the bottle and use the elastics to secure the mask to your face. Remember to carry vinegar to soak the surgical mask prior to donning your homemade gas mask (Disobedient Objects, V&A Museum). Demonstrators created these makeshift gas masks during the 2013 Gezi Park protests in Istanbul. Since then they have been spotted as far away as Caracas, Venezuela, and several instructional graphics detailing their construction can be found with a quick Google search.

Everyday objects, when employed creatively, can become powerful weapons of subversion – practically and symbolically. According to Crispin Sartwell all politics is aesthetic; at their heart political ideologies, systems and constitutions are aesthetic systems, multimedia artistic environments’ (Political Aesthetics, 2010). The political aesthetics of grassroots social movements work to further their aims via a visual language that targets the problem and inspires people to act. Aside from Gezi Park’s makeshift gas masks, demonstrators in Syria modified the bottoms of paper bags, allowing them to serve as graffiti stencils. The repurposing of these objects acts as a compelling visual statement: paper bags and plastic bottles are not items that one would traditionally use to oppose a government with a police force and army that have a host of weapons at their disposal – tear gas, pepper spray, riot shields, guns. The mundane, non-violent and everyday nature of these repurposed, ‘disobedient objects’ is empowering: every individual has access to them and in them lies the means for opposition. Moreover, these objects have symbolic weight; they serve to make the violence and repression they were created to guard against appear ridiculous in scale. If all an individual has to protect himself is a plastic bottle and some vinegar, deploying tear gas and using riot shields seems like textbook overkill.

A key component of the strength of these political aesthetics lies in their ability to subvert established definitions and discourses and to disrupt the status quo. Generally, protest artwork and other paraphernalia, by their very nature, are acts of subversion and mockery – they are not (necessarily) pieces of fine art produced by trained artists with access to quality materials and high-tech studios, and they are unlikely to be products designed and mass produced in factories. Instead they tend to be created under conditions of constraint and duress; access to resources...
is limited and, in some contexts, exposure could very well mean imprisonment. Thus, their manufacturing is not an endeavour of privileged elites; it is a product of ‘the people’ for ‘the people’. Yet even with such constraints these pieces are not haphazardly chosen; they are thoughtful, aesthetic responses to changing circumstances that aim to embody the spirit and ethos of the movements they represent.

Subversion can take on other, more direct forms as well. In 2003 when the US invaded Iraq, the US military created a set of Personality Identification playing cards which contained the names, faces, addresses and, sometimes, job titles of the most-wanted individuals in Iraq. In response, Noel Douglas designed the Regime Change Begins at Home playing cards during the height of the Anti-War Movement, depicting the ‘most unwanted’ members of the US government described as warmongers and profiteers. The cards are humorous: they contain unflattering images of the individuals, one of their more colourful quotes and, for George W. Bush, a nickname whose spelling seems to mock his Texas accent – ‘Dubya’.

Defacing currency, images of political leaders or appropriating national flags are other examples of this visual language of dissent. These objects are often thought of as national symbols: they are created, owned or generally mobilised by the government. Painting over the national flag or drawing on a country’s currency is a direct aesthetic assault on government power and authority.

Thus, in Libya we see examples of Qaddafi’s face being blacked out on the Libyan dinar and graffiti which effemines him. In Yemen and Tunisia protestors painted their flag’s colours on their bodies, sometimes alongside powerful statements explicitly expressing their grievances and demands.

Social movements and activism are dynamic processes that have the power to transform individuals, processes in which the idea of ‘the people’ is constantly being renegotiated and redefined via a visual language – be it the site of the protest, graffiti, theatre, leaflet, prop or tool (The Political Aesthetics of Global Protest: the Arab Spring and Beyond, AKU-ISMC). Thus, donning a makeshift gas mask alters the demonstrator’s appearance, signifying his or her commitment to action. The gas mask has improved his/her ability to withstand tear gas, altering the power dynamic between the demonstrator and the authorities. Those authorities can no longer use tear gas as effectively as a crowd-control tactic. The hidden stencils allow individuals to move freely and ‘tag’ strategic locations with the mark of the resistance, disseminating their message widely and mocking the power’s inability to catch them. The Regime Change Begins at Home playing cards use humour to poke fun at established officials, rendering the individuals depicted less powerful and more human. They are transformed from sources of authority into sources of amusement. While blacking out Qaddafi’s face on the Libyan dinar may seem petty, the symbolic resonance cannot be denied: with one action he has been rendered not only blind, but faceless.

While varied in form and function, objects created and employed by protest movements around the globe embody a political aesthetic, often taking the form of a visual language of dissent. They draw inspiration from the opposition and an existing repertoire of protest, of iconic imagery and symbolism, which is then adapted to the local vernacular. Visuals have always provided a means for getting one’s message across, but technological innovation has allowed for their cheap, effortless and near immediate dissemination to massive audiences, multiplying their value. In the context of grassroots movements, these aesthetic objects or creations aid in renegotiating and reimagining the status quo, subverting traditional hierarchies by empowering ‘the people’. More importantly, though, they demonstrate that all that is required to activate the latent aesthetic power of the seemingly mundane is a mixture of ingenuity and necessity.

This article was informed by the following exhibitions: Disobedient Objects at the V&A Museum in the Porter Gallery until 1 February 2015; The Aesthetics of Global Protest: the Arab Spring and Beyond at the Aga Khan University Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations (AKU-ISMC) and Goldsmiths College, University of London ended 6 and 23 November 2014 respectively.

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Megan Wang is the Coordinating Editor for The Middle East in London. She has a Master’s degree in Muslim Cultures from AKU-ISMC

Effeminising Qaddafi, Tripoli, Libya (February 2012). Photograph by Igor Cherstich, Anthropology Department, University College London
We need water ecosystems; water ecosystems do not need us. We have become too many.

Scarce water – food-water is very scarce but non-food water need not be scarce even in 2050

Water is certainly scarce in the Middle East. It doesn’t rain much: very rarely it rains in the summer, and the winter rains are useful but not reliable. Its water ecosystems are not water rich. Between 1950 and 1970 all the economies of the region ran out of water not because of climate change or reductions in levels of rainfall. Water scarcity was the result of the doubling of population every 25 years across the region. Some economies are having to provide water and food for populations that have increased almost tenfold between 1950 and 2010.

The Middle East has lost the battle to be food-water secure. Food-water is the water needed to raise crops and livestock. It accounts for about 90 per cent of the water needed by an individual or an economy.

We need about 5.0 cubic metres per day if we eat a lot of beef. We only need 2.5 cubic metres if we are vegetarian. Food consumers and their politicians are not yet aware enough of these metrics. Perversely, urbanised consumers in the Middle East – like those in rich OECD economies – also throw away and waste about 30 per cent of the food they purchase.

The region’s current food-water deficits have been silently and very effectively mitigated by international trade. The trade is not in water but in food. Each tonne of imported wheat needs about 1,000 tonnes (cubic metres) of water from the environment of another economy. Each
A tonne of beef requires 16,000 tonnes. This ‘trade’ in virtual water since the 1950s and increasingly since the 1970s has proved to be very rational. The economies of the region have been able to protect their own water ecosystems. They have used the water environments of the US, Australia, Brazil, Argentina and Europe and recently those of Russia and the Ukraine. Virtual water ‘trade’ was environmentally rational. It was also an economic no-brainer. The US and the European Union have been driving down the price of traded food staples since the 1950s. Traded staple food commodity prices have been running at half production costs. This half cost food has mitigated two major strategic regional insecurities – water and food.

Other numbers are important. Non-food water – that is the water we drink, use at home and for our jobs – only accounts for about 10 per cent of the water we consume. 150 litres per day is a widely used estimate. The region’s water ecosystems will always have enough water to meet non-food water needs. There are three reasons. First, by 2050 when the region’s population will be about 600 million it will need about 600 cubic kilometres of food-water annually. It will only have about 200. The rest will have to come from outside the region. The food-water battle has been lost. But the non-food water needed will only be about 60 cubic kilometres annually. The region’s economies can provide this volume from its water endowments. Some economies will, however, find it more difficult than others.

Secondly, recently developed water recycling technologies are beginning to enable the affordable re-use of urban and industrial water. 50 per cent recovery rates will be feasible and higher levels seem possible. Thirdly, most of the population of the region live near the sea or a major river. Since 2000 the costs of desalinated water have been driven down to about $US 60 cents per cubic metre. If desalination could be based on clean energy – that is energy generated by solar or wind power – non-food water would be doubly secure. Researching and developing these technologies is a high priority in the region and very significant environmentally.

To be self-sufficient in food and water the economies of the Middle East currently need water ecosystems that could provide about 30 per cent more water

Emotional and easily politicised

Water scarcity is not well understood by those who use water to raise crops and livestock, by those who drink water and especially by those who have to make water related environmental policies. Water itself is also very emotional. It has an iconic place in all the religions of the region. It is, as a consequence, very easily politicised. This is especially the case if people believe that their water and food security depend on having sovereignty over sufficient water for both their food and their non-food needs.

That water insecurity and food insecurity are so very tightly linked increases the emotional temperature of any discourse on the topic. Food is even more emotional than water and volatile food prices are a nightmare for any politician who has to ensure that cheap food is available for poor urban communities. Food price spikes make for very frightening politics.

Misunderstood

The main water resource delusion relates to the nature of the region’s water scarcity. The region is not non-food water insecure. It is very food-water insecure. To be self-sufficient in food and water the economies of the Middle East currently need water ecosystems that could provide about 30 per cent more water. They will need about three times the region’s water endowment when the population doubles by about 2050. If the water environments of the region are to be protected the region’s political economies will have to continue with three policies that have served them well for the past half-century. First, they will have to ‘import’ virtual water and the water ecosystems from other countries. Secondly they will have to accelerate the adoption of recycling non-food water and desalination, preferably with clean energy. Thirdly and most importantly, they will have to accelerate the diversification of their economies so that they can afford the importation of virtual food-water. They will also have to address the impacts of climate change which will reduce the availability of water. The region will remain non-food water secure.

Finally, it will also have to address food-water insecurity with the policies that have successfully addressed the problem for 50 years – virtual water ‘imports’ and economic diversification.

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Tony Allan is Emeritus Professor at KCL and SOAS

Water trucks, like the one pictured here in Jordan, are an important source of drinking water for areas of the Middle East
There has been much discussion on the role of civil society in promoting democracy in the Arabic speaking region, especially with the growing maturity of social groups in defending human rights and women’s rights, holding the government accountable, calling for economic transparency and raising environmental concerns. Recent innovative research on civil society activism in the region rejects the normative Western understanding of civil society as a parameter of democratic change; it also attempts to locate civil society activism under authoritarian constraints. ‘Liberal’ authoritarian states such as Morocco create state-sponsored forms of civil activism which make it difficult to distinguish genuine activism from other forms used to promote a liberal image of the state. In this case, the regime actively co-opts leaders of professional associations and organisations so that the state’s authority is not challenged. The authoritarian state also imposes restrictive legal procedures and infiltrates civil society groups to keep abreast of their activities. However, this does not mean that there are no autonomous civil society groups that can resist the state’s co-optation. Moreover, in the region there are various types of secular and religious-based civil society groups. The normative division that perceives religious-based activism as ‘undemocratic’ and secular activism as democratic is problematic as it demonises the Islamists and denies their active and complex participation in society as well as their large popular support base.

One can partly agree that the recent Arab uprisings were not the outcome of civil society activism but more a result of mass dissatisfaction and ‘mass revolutionary fervour’ as well as ‘loose horizontal networks’ ( Cavatorta, Civil Society Activism).
Individuals have invented new forms of activism by creating blogs and virtual discussion forums. Without formal association, dissenters connect over the Internet and individual initiatives give way to widespread activism that is not traditionally confined to associative life.

The ‘Daniel Gate’ scandal in Morocco in August 2013 is an example of this kind of activism. This refers to King Mohamed VI’s pardon (on the occasion of the Throne Day) of 1,000 prisoners, including a Spanish paedophile serving 30 years of imprisonment for sexually abusing several Moroccan children. The royal pardon caused a massive outrage across social media. Individual online activists created a Facebook page to denounce the King’s decision. This was followed by demonstrations across Moroccan cities, some of which were violently suppressed by the police. Moroccans from across the social and political spectrum were united in their outrage, forcing the Royal Palace to issue a statement reversing the pardon of the paedophile (who had already fled abroad). In a country where criticism of the King is prohibited, open criticism of his decision in cyber space and street protests were unprecedented. Individual activism from below via social media outlets creates new forms of opposition that are difficult to control, giving people with ideological differences the opportunity to rally together to achieve common goals.

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Karima Laachir is a Senior Lecturer in Literary and Cultural Studies in SOAS. She works on cultural studies and the intersection of aesthetics and politics of the MENA region with particular focus on the Maghreb.
The world was stunned on Saturday, 11 April when ISIS released a video showing destruction at Nimrud. If the intention was to shock they certainly achieved their objective. Nimrud, now in Northern Iraq, was one of the principal cities – along with Nineveh, Khorsabad and Ashur – of the great Assyrian Empire that flourished between the 9th and 7th centuries BC. It was here that Ashurnasirpal II (883-859 BC) established his capital which remained an important centre until it was destroyed by the Medes and Babylonians in 612 BC. The walls of Nimrud – now represented by earthen banks – enclose an area of 360 hectares, within which are a great citadel mound and the site of Fort Shalmaneser, a palace arsenal constructed by Ashurnasirpal’s son Shalmaneser III (858-824 BC). Crowded on to the citadel mound are a ziggurat, temples dedicated to the gods Nabu, Ninurta and Ishtar, and various palaces, the chief of which was built Ashurnasirpal (the North-West Palace) and is known to have measured at least 200 by 130 metres. Nimrud may once have had a population of more than 60,000 and, by any standards, is one of the most important sites in the whole of the ancient world. It should certainly have been recognised as a world heritage site long ago; the fact that it was not is a reflection of the relations between Iraq and the international community in the time of Saddam Hussein.

The first excavations at Nimrud were undertaken by the great Victorian traveller, archaeologist and politician Austen Henry Layard between 1845 and 1851. His descriptions of Assyrian art and civilisation, published through a series of well-written and popular books, attracted enormous interest amongst a British public well-versed in the Bible and hungry for information about the Ancient Near East. For the first time, people were introduced to the now-familiar carved stone panels showing the Assyrian king in official ceremonies, hunting bulls and lions, or leading his army into war, as well as the massive stone gateway figures showing winged human-headed bulls and lions. It is said that the Assyrian images of bearded figures inspired the fashion for beards in Victorian England, but this may be apocryphal. The main focus of Layard’s excavations was the North-West Palace of Ashurnasirpal, where he worked mostly in the state apartments to the south of the main entrance. Many of the stone reliefs that he found, and some of the colossal gateway figures, together with miscellaneous smaller objects and cuneiform tablets were sent to the British Museum in London where they now occupy pride of place in the Assyrian galleries. After

Nimrud was one of the principal cities of the great Assyrian Empire that flourished between the 9th and 7th centuries BC

The reconstructed North-West Palace at Nimrud seen from the ziggurat

© J. E. Curtis

The best surviving example of an Assyrian palace has been destroyed by ISIS. John Curtis remembers what was lost
The contents of the tombs not only demonstrated the great wealth of the Assyrian empire, but also revolutionised our understanding of Assyrian technology and arts and crafts.

Layard’s time many other Nimrud reliefs or parts of reliefs were removed from Nimrud and sent to museums around the world.

Other 19th-century excavators at Nimrud included Hormuzd Rassam, William Kennett Loftus and George Smith, but then there was a hiatus. Large scale excavations at the site were resumed by the British School of Archaeology (now the British Institute for the Study of Iraq) between 1949 and 1963, led first by (Sir) Max Mallowan and then by David Oates. During this time the School made many important discoveries. Of three wells excavated in the North-West Palace, one (NN) produced some of the finest Phoenician ivory plaques yet to be discovered including two showing female heads – one very beautiful (nicknamed ‘the Mona Lisa’) and the other rather less comely (‘the ugly sister’) – and a pair of plaques each showing a lion killing an African. These ivories were carved in a centre or centres in Phoenicia or Syria and brought to Nimrud in antiquity as booty or tribute.

During his time at Nimrud, Mallowan was always accompanied by his wife, the celebrated crime writer Agatha Christie, who not only wrote some of her thrillers at Nimrud but also helped on the excavation. In her autobiography Agatha describes how she had to sacrifice her precious face cream to help clean and preserve the ivories. The excavations of the British School will probably be chiefly remembered, however, for the vast numbers of ivories discovered in Fort Shalmaneser, particularly in the storerooms SW 7 and SW 37. Thereafter, a Polish team excavated in the central part of the citadel mound between 1974 and 1976, and in the late 1980s British Museum and Italian teams worked in Fort Shalmaneser and, in the latter case, in the outer town. In recent years, however, the most important work at Nimrud has undoubtedly been done by the Iraq Department of Antiquities. Clearance of a well in Room AJ in the North-West Palace yielded another spectacular collection of ivories, but the most dramatic discoveries were made in four vaulted, subterranean tombs in the domestic wing of the North-West Palace.

The tombs were discovered and excavated by Muzahim Mahmud between spring 1988 and November 1990 and were found to contain astonishing quantities of goldwork including bowls, jewellery and even a crown. Cuneiform inscriptions showed that the consorts of several Assyrian kings were buried in these tombs. The contents of the tombs not only demonstrated the great wealth of the Assyrian empire, but also revolutionised our understanding of Assyrian technology and arts and crafts. Fortunately this mass of goldwork (together with some of the ivories) was moved to a bank vault in Baghdad before the second Gulf War in 2003 and is still in safe keeping there.

Iraqi archaeologists also cleared previously unexcavated parts of the North-West Palace and undertook a lot of restoration work, rebuilding mud brick walls. Although many reliefs had been removed to museums around the world, there were about 50 panels still in position, together with a large number of fragments. Consequently, apart from being the only substantial building still standing at Nimrud, the North-West Palace was the best surviving example of an Assyrian palace and probably represented the only location where it was possible to get an impression of how such buildings would once have looked. Also, some of the reliefs were of the highest quality and, in contrast to the exported reliefs, still retained extensive traces of their original paint. On 2 April the entire North-West Palace was blown up by ISIS in a massive explosion, leaving only a pile of rubble. The world will be the poorer for the loss of this unique cultural treasure.
Today there are about 7,000 languages spoken worldwide, and we estimate that half of these will have fallen silent by the end of this century. Our linguistic diversity is vanishing in front of our eyes. Globalisation, climate change, political pressure and displacement affect people all over the world. In many areas of the world, speakers leave their traditional ways of life behind, moving to new locations with dreams of building a better life. Once they have arrived they make sure their children speak the ‘more prestigious’, dominant language that will allow them to succeed.

Speakers adapt their languages all the time, and language change is the beauty of this living medium, but what we are observing today is language shift at an unprecedented speed. The speed at which we are losing the world’s languages has increased dramatically over the past few decades. Some compare it to the 5th mass extinction, when the dinosaurs died out.

The Middle East is experiencing dramatic political changes, and the onslaught on its cultural heritage is affecting its communities dramatically. And when people are displaced, take refuge or escape they will most likely adapt to the majority language, which will allow them to have social and economic mobility or just simply make a living to survive. These people are the carriers of a unique cultural history encoded in the languages they speak, in the languages that will fall silent because their children do not learn them anymore.

Now, wouldn’t it be better if we all had one language and wouldn’t that make our lives easier? We would no longer be lost in translation, but how would we choose? We could all speak Chinese. Isn’t the Tower of

Mandana Seyfeddinipur discusses the dramatic, global decline in linguistic diversity and outlines the preservation efforts of SOAS and the Endangered Languages Documentation Programme

Losing our language diversity

People are carriers of a unique cultural history encoded in the languages they speak, in the languages that will fall silent because their children do not learn them anymore

Taleshi speaker Rustaa Capazaad in Iran. Photograph by Gerardo de Caro
Babel metaphor telling us that it is a curse to have these many languages? So let's make a choice. How about a Turkic language, which expresses whether you have directly witnessed/experienced an event or only heard about it second-hand? Or what about Rotokas, which is made up of only 12 sounds? Or Chinese, of course, where the meaning of a word can change if it is spoken in a higher tone? Choosing is not easy: when faced with giving up our own languages we come to realise how at home we are in the unique languages we are able to speak.

Ask a multilingual about words they cannot translate and you will get a lot of beautiful examples like the Japanese word *Komorebi*: the sort of scattered light effect that happens when light shines through trees. Why would we want to give this up? Here is another question to think about: why does it have to be one or the other? Aren't multilingual speakers the key to being ready for the challenges to come in a globalised, highly mobile and at the same time fragmented world? Being multilingual, being able to express oneself and think in different ways makes us highly agile in responding to the challenges we are facing.

It is diversity that makes a system robust, and in many places around the globe we can observe multilingual agility being a response to challenges in the environment.

What makes this language loss even more dramatic is that many of these disappearing languages have never been described or recorded. The richness of human linguistic diversity is disappearing without a trace. This is happening while millions of tourists are visiting the British Museum to admire and learn about the treasures of our cultural heritage that are preserved there. How can we make sure we are not losing what we have today so that in the future our children and their children can learn about our linguistic heritage?

For a start and given the urgency, we should document these languages. Archaeologists now try to take at least 3-D pictures of monumental ruins, which are the remains of cultural centres of the ancient world. In the same way, we can record these languages, preserve the recordings and make them available to the world. About 20 years ago, the outcry from linguists led to the establishment of many initiatives around the world focussed on preserving vanishing languages. Archives, funding initiatives and language centres were set up and began their work. Most of these initiatives have now ended, and we are left with the ongoing loss.

SOAS, University of London set up the Endangered Languages Documentation Programme, the Endangered Languages Archive and an academic programme with a generous donation from the Arcadia Fund. These programmes support people around the world who document these disappearing languages and bring the audio and video recordings and the translations and analysis back to preserve them in the Endangered Languages Archive. The school is creating a lasting record of our linguistic diversity and is building capacity by training scholars and students worldwide in language documentation. We also bring this knowledge and expertise into the places where the languages are disappearing and the areas where disappearing languages are still being spoken: Ghana, Ethiopia and Cameroon or in Siberia and Yunnan.

Our digital archive – ELAR – at the SOAS library not only preserves these collections of language recordings, but also gives the speakers of these languages a voice. It allows them and their communities to relay their past and their present to the world. The archive makes the collections publicly accessible, allowing scholars around the world to draw on these materials and helping them to add a locally informed perspective to their work – a perspective which is often lacking in academic discourse.

We were able to support the documentation of a few languages in the Middle East like the project on Taleshi, a language spoken in the North of Iran. The project started in Iran but was jeopardised when the researcher could not go back for political reasons. He found a speaker here in London who could become a major contributor in documenting his disappearing language while living in exile. But we only have scratched the surface. Many minority languages in the Middle East are under threat: some have only a handful of elderly speakers left. We are racing against time to record the invaluable knowledge these speakers hold and to preserve these treasures of our cultural heritage.

For more info visit www.eldp.net

*Mandana Seyfeddinipur is a linguist and the Director of the Endangered Languages Documentation Programme at SOAS, University of London*

*SOAS is creating a lasting record of our linguistic diversity and is building capacity by training scholars and students worldwide in language documentation*
• Iran - Sixty Years After the Coup (December 2013/January 2014)
• Palestine (February/March 2014)

• Turkey (April/May 2014)
• Oil - Past, Present, Future (June/July 2014)
• Youth (October/November 2014)
It is often hazardous to posit a direct connection between political changes and shifts in literary expression. While the winds of political change may blow overnight, changes in literature almost always manifest themselves in slow, gradual progressions. It would, therefore, be difficult to see a cause and effect connection between the two spheres of politics and culture. Still, one can find events of social and political significance that have had consequences for artistic and literary production. Changes that may lead to perceptible modifications in prevailing moods may in turn bring about shifts in the works of social groups that tend to reflect or record them.

Still, we would be pressed to point to events in the political history of modern Iran that are believed widely to have rattled the nation as much as those of the years 1951-53, particularly those volatile summer days that culminated in quick succession in the humiliating departure of Shah Mohammad-Reza Pahlavi, the spectacular fall of Mohammad Mosaddeq, and the shah’s triumphal return. To this day, the political upheavals surrounding what is often referred to simply as ‘the coup’ are seen as the most significant watershed not just in the country’s political history but in its cultural history as well, including the production and dissemination of literary works and the ideas and emotions governing such texts. For many Iranians, this was not only the Pahlavi monarchy’s trial by fire, and the beginning of the end of the country’s supposed 2,500-year-long monarchical system, but the beginning of a sense of frigidity and gloom in the literature of Iran.

Chroniclers of contemporary Persian literature have seen the coup as apocalyptic to devastating, its impact on literary expression as nothing short of catastrophic. And the poet who best illustrates the mood and most extensively exemplifies this feeling is Mehdi Akhavan Saless (1930-1990), a
It was not until 1970 when a guerrilla movement emerged that we see a more positive, if still idealistic, mood appearing on the left of the political spectrum. A similar emotion, though perhaps not as intense, prevails in Hava-ye Tazeh (Fresh Air, 1956), a collection of poems by Ahmad Shamlu. Here, poems bearing titles like Bitter Patience, Cold Arsen and Dark Symphony depict doleful idleness on one side, callous indifference on the other. More directly related to what the poet perceives to be the governing emotion, if not the spirit, of the times, in several poems here and in subsequent collections of poetry, we see a speaker lamenting the years that have been spent in a futile struggle for a less oppressive ruling class which would allow poets to express themselves and their society, rather than take on a political system which they think has little legitimacy in the eyes of the people. A decade or so later, as Forough Farrokhzad was beginning to write her mature poems, the prevailing mood turns angrier and more explicitly expressive of a dark vision bordering on the apocalyptic; it also turns into an abiding feature of the emerging canon of the so-called New Poetry. In one particularly prophetic poem titled Terrestrial Verses the opening lines herald the end of the world thus: ‘Then/ the sun cooled/ and fertility left the earth.’ The poem goes on to depict the horrifying impact on the intellectual community in these words:

‘Swamps of alcohol
exuding dry deadly gases
attracted inert masses of intellectuals
to their depths
while in antique cabinets
pernicious rats gnawed
at the golden leaves of books.’

The prose literature of the 1940s and early 50s was even more explicit in its condemnation of the ruling classes and their chimerical false hopes, of the failed attempts at revolt for the betterment of her society with mythical and religious ideas of heroic martyrdom. Appeals to historical or legendary uprisings also became a feature of this literary tradition, as illustrated by the multi-volume novel Kelidar (1980s), the narrative of a 1940s revolt in north-east Iran.

It was not until 1970 when a real guerrilla movement registered itself on Iran’s socio-political scene that the prevailing mood began to take a more positive, if still idealistic, turn, which appeared in the wake of a series of newly formed radical political movements on the left of the political spectrum. In response, the Iranian government unleashed its security forces to crush that movement, thus further widening and deepening the already alarming chasm between state and society over the preceding two decades. For its part, the opposition forces, now comprising an energised younger and more radical left began to come together with the traditional democratic forces in the middle and sundry religious groups on the right, and seriously challenge the state’s legitimacy.

The plethora of poems, stories and other forms of literature written since the early 1950s manifests the desire to see a coming together of all these oppositional forces and when all this happened a new revolutionary movement began to take shape, eventually culminating in the Iranian Revolution of 1978-83.

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Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak is Professor and Founding Director of the Centre for Persian Studies at the University of Maryland. He is a leading expert on Persian language and literature and Iranian culture and civilisation and author of nineteen books and over 100 major scholarly articles.
Palestinian refugees and the politics of return

The 1993 Oslo agreements signalled the beginning of a progressive marginalisation of the Palestinian refugee question that was dramatised with the release of the ‘Palestine Papers’ in 2011. By disclosing the secret negotiations between the Palestinian Authority and Israel on the return of a mere 1,000 refugees over a period of ten years, the Palestine Papers confirmed the absence of any plan to deliver justice to four generations of displaced and stateless people. They underscored a perception of Palestinian refugees as pawns whose rights could be tacitly and arbitrarily exchanged for minor concessions at the negotiating table with Israel.

The official dismissal of the Palestinian refugee question by its supposed national leadership has prompted, among many refugees, narratives and criticism that were previously considered taboo. In this gloomy context, Palestinian refugees are urged to make new sense of over sixty years of dispossession and exile, starting with bitter disillusion with the official narrative that their lack of rights and the temporary nature of their condition (avoiding ‘tawteen’, or naturalisation) were pre-conditions for return. The third, and even fourth, generations of Palestinians in exile still don’t enjoy basic rights, and yet their return has never been as distant as it is today. In addition, the assumption that Palestinian refugees are eager to live temporary or suspended lives merely awaiting return to their national territory, where they will finally achieve rights and citizenship, does not do justice to the complexity of their aspirations and claims. These comprise the ‘right to return’ (haqq al-awda), and the ‘right to have rights’.

In the host states, the narrative of ‘avoiding tawteen’ as the pre-condition for the Palestinian return has, over the decades, legitimised and prolonged a problematic amnesia about issues of democracy, social justice and pluralism in a region where refugees’ exclusion or suspension from rights or entitlements fits into an agenda of reinforcing confessional, tribal, national and gender hierarchies.

Refugees perceive return as a trope for multiple aspirations: return to origin and roots, to land and properties, to dignity as well as to individual and collective rights and freedom. This new ‘politics of return’ speaks to a wider spectrum of claims and entitlements that exist prior to and beyond the nationalist project and throws light on the flawed nature of contemporary manifestations of nationalism or the nation-state in the region and beyond. Palestinian refugees today can be seen as subaltern subjects whose claims and aspirations voice a project of democracy everywhere they are. By operating through the framework of democracy and self-determination rather than nationalism or modernity, Palestinian refugees contribute to the emergence of what the scholar Partha Chatterjee has defined as a ‘political society’. Chatterjee coined the term to denote those new aspirations and claims that in many post-colonial contexts emerged outside, and in opposition to, the earlier liberal consensus of state-civil society relations.

Political societies are interested in a project of democracy rather than in one of nationalism and modernisation, from which they are excluded or in which they are only partially included. While their idioms are still nationalist, these movements may encompass and express different types of allegiances, aspirations, claims and solidarities beyond the nation-state, which come to be scrutinised, contested and even challenged.

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Ruba Salih works on refugee issues at SOAS, where she is Reader in Gender Studies

Palestinian refugees today can be seen as subaltern subjects, whose claims and aspirations voice a project of democracy everywhere they are
Islam is part of Turkish national identity. This was as true of Ottoman times as it is today. The Ottoman Constitution of 1876 granted Islam the status of official religion. In the Turkish Republic, founded and shaped by Mustafa Kemal (Ataturk), after the abolition of the Caliphate in 1924 Islam was disestablished in 1928. However, the link between Islam and the state was not broken. In the Ottoman Empire, the state controlled Islam through the office of the Shaykhülislam, who was appointed by the Sultan. Today, this function is discharged by the Presidency of Religious Affairs, attached to the Prime Minister’s office. It appoints all religious officials, controls (and often prescribes) sermons and is in charge of R.E. lessons and faculties of theology.

There is also, as there was in Ottoman times, an unofficial Islam of Sufi orders and brotherhoods, which are theoretically banned but remain influential, while an estimated one-fifth of the population defines itself as Alevi – a relaxed form of Islam, which differs from the strict Shi’ism practised in Iran and elsewhere, with which it shares a veneration of Caliph Ali. Turkish Alevis worship in meeting houses, known as cemevi, not in mosques and do not fast in daylight hours during Ramadan; women Alevis are not veiled and join men in ritual dances.

In politics, Islam has been widely used and abused. The Sultans and their governments used it to legitimise their rule; opposition often rallied round the slogan that the sharia should be respected. To conciliate the opposition, governments sometimes promised ‘to respect the sharia to an even greater extent.’ Even 19th-century Ottoman liberals – the ‘Young Ottomans’ – appealed to Islam as they denounced the Sultan’s governments.

The status of Islam as the official religion was illustrated every Friday when, health permitting, the Sultan led officials in worship in a ceremony known as selamlık, which expressed allegiance to the sovereign. But no reigning Sultan ever performed the pilgrimage to Mecca. Sultans used Islam in worship in a ceremony known as selamlık, which expressed allegiance to the sovereign. But no reigning Sultan ever performed the pilgrimage to Mecca. Sultans used Islam to enhance their position – none more so than the last autocratic Sultan Abdülhamid II – but took their religion with a grain of salt. Wine-drinking was widespread, mainly in Christian-owned taverns; Islamic

Having used Islam to establish a Turkish national state, Mustafa Kemal dispensed with it as a prop
Since 2002, Turkey has become more puritanical, more obviously a Muslim country

punishments (amputation for theft, stoning for adultery, etc.) were not imposed. Although Sultans and their governments claimed to respect sharia law, this was supplemented by civil law (kanun) and its application was eventually limited to family law. Islamic rules, such as the prohibition of paying or receiving payment of interest, were circumvented by a procedure known as hile-yi sheriyye, meaning literally 'cheating the sharia.' The Ottoman Empire was not puritanical.

The assumption by the Sultans of the title of Caliph meant that they claimed to be the leaders of the worldwide Muslim community. This was not disputed by foreign Muslims, who, however, usually went their own way. It was the failure of the proclamation of the Holy War (jihad) when the Ottoman Empire joined Christian Germany and Austria-Hungary in World War I that encouraged Turkish secularists. The sight of Indian Muslims and Algerian, Senegalese and other Muslims in the ranks of Allied occupation forces at the end of World War I impressed Turkish nationalists much more than the theories of Western materialists. Nevertheless, Mustafa Kemal posed as defender of Islam to rally the Muslims of Anatolia and to mobilise such support as he could from foreign Muslims (such as the Khilafat movement among Indian Muslims).

Having used Islam to establish a Turkish national state, Mustafa Kemal dispensed with it as a prop. As a materialist, he saw Islam as an obstacle to the realisation of his ideal – Turkey rising to the level of universal modern civilisation through education in positive sciences. He did not ban Islam, in the knowledge that many of his closest companions were believers. He considered religion a matter of individual choice and discouraged its external manifestations, banning the Ottoman fez and Muslim turban, but not the veil for women, insisting that all citizens should wear 'civilised' dress. He closed down seminaries and faculties of theology (for 'want of demand'). The call to prayer was to be recited in Turkish and not in Arabic. This was much resented, and the ban on Arabic was the first to go when governments started responding to popular demands after World War II.

Gradually, other concessions followed: the reopening of seminaries and faculties of theology but strictly for vocational training.

However, at the behest of the army, which saw itself as guardian of Atatürk's legacy, the constitution banned the use of religion for political purposes. The Constitutional Court closed down a succession of Islamist parties – the National Order Party (1971), the Prosperity Party (1998) and the Felicity Party (2001). The Justice and Development Party (AKP), which has ruled Turkey for the last decade, escaped the same fate by declaring that it was democratic and conservative, not based on religion. In fact it was an expression of political Islam, and used Islam in its electoral strategy. Nevertheless, protests last year showed that something like half the electorate – the educated half – differed little from their contemporaries in the West. Their practice of religion is often minimal: boys are circumcised, and all burials take place at mosques (indeed Atatürk himself received a Muslim funeral). Abstaining from alcohol during Ramadan is widespread. However, the Islamic revival since 2002 has seen an increase in mosque attendance and construction. Alcohol sales have been limited. Minor Muslim holidays are now celebrated to a greater extent. Turkey has become more puritanical, more obviously a Muslim country. This causes discomfort to the secularised, whose residential neighbourhoods have been least affected by the Islamic tendency.

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his closest companions are products of religious schools who believe their duty is 'to raise a pious generation'. This intensifies the cleavage of Turkish society along religious lines and explains the acrimony of the political debate. But there are nuances: while Erdoğan is influenced by the strictly orthodox Naqshbandiya tradition, followers of the preacher Said-i Nursi, author of the Epistle of Light (and the source of inspiration of the currently influential preacher Fethullah Gülen), are modernists who believe Islam is compatible with modern civilisation.

Erdoğan's religious orientation has led him to support the Muslim Brotherhood throughout the Muslim world, to the detriment of an effective foreign policy. One exception is the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq where Turkey's economic interests determine policy. Economic progress is what ultimately counts most with the electorate. The AKP has delivered this since 2002, but the economy appears to be heading for trouble, and with it the fortunes of political Islam in Turkey.

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Dr Andrew Mango is the author of a highly acclaimed biography of Atatürk and of its sequel The Turks Today. He goes back in time in his latest book, From the Sultan to Atatürk (2009)

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (November 1930)
Nostalgia is a thriving business in the bazaars of Abadan. In its heyday, the city was home to the world’s biggest oil refinery and one of the Middle East’s most modern, cosmopolitan societies. Today, Abadan is a mere shadow of its former self, and Abadanis yearn for bygone times. Pride in the past and embarrassment over the present becomes palpable when locals present their city to the now only occasional foreign visitor.

This culture of nostalgia is expressed in memoirs and fiction, in urban myths and local historiography, in online and exile communities.

This culture of nostalgia is a product of oil’s transformative, creative and destructive powers, and it illustrates how oil modernity can shape societies but also animate their imaginaries. In order to understand this, we must appreciate Abadan’s dramatic trajectory from a sleepy village of a couple of hundred Arab date farmers when oil was struck in 1909 to a complex cultural and political city of over 220,000 inhabitants in the 1950s.

During the Anglo–Persian (later Anglo–Iranian) Oil Company’s four decades of presence in Iran, Abadan developed into a multi-cultural if segregated city with a progressive if unequal society. It had middle class suburban houses with all mod-cons alongside impoverished shantytowns. It saw both ruthless suppression of labour activists alongside impoverishment. It saw both ruthless suppression of labour activists as well as gradually increasing social mobility and welfare. Abadan was then populated by Europeans, Jews, Armenians, Arabs, Indians and Iranians who had flocked from all over the country to Abadan in search of work. As they settled, they forged a new culture, distinctly global in its orientation.

As a key entrepôt of new technology, fashion and consumerism, Abadan’s image as a liberal, even hedonistic haven and leftist hotspot was cemented in the years after World War II. In July 1946, the oil labour movement staged a strike at Abadan refinery, which foreshadowed the ousting of British imperialism during the 1951 oil nationalisation movement. The latter movement was headed by the popular Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq, who in turn was overthrown by a CIA-engineered coup in 1953.

As American ideals replaced British influence, Abadan entered a golden age of cultural production and consumption that spawned some of Iran’s most famous artists, novelists, cinematographers and musicians. Political dissent remained strong, and one of the key events that took the
Abadanis routinely re-invoke the image of a city that was once the epitome of industrial progress, aspiring for a place in the world and symbolising the possibilities of the future. Anti-Shah movement into its revolutionary phase was a disastrous fire, set by unknown perpetrators, in one of Abadan’s cinemas in August 1978. The Islamic Revolution was followed by Iraq’s bloody 1980 invasion of Iran, during which Abadan was evacuated. Although it is today repopulated, it has never regained its pre-revolutionary status and glory. It is on this background that nostalgia flourishes.

During my most recent trip to Abadan, my host took me on a tour of the places that to him symbolised the past. To each location, he attached a personal memory or popular anecdote. There was, for example, the roundabout on which Iran's best stocked shopping store, Alfie, used to be, and where newspapers would arrive the same morning they were published in London; the place where the Greek photographer had his fancy atelier; and the area that was once inhabited by Indians, the only traces of whom can be found in Hindi loanwords.

Some of the material frames of these spaces are still standing but seem eerily abandoned, rusting or in the process of being reclaimed by nature: the former holiday residence of the Shah; the university, which used to be one of the world’s finest academies for petroleum engineering; or the airport, which – locals are keen to stress – used to have direct flights to London but now appears dilapidated and provincial. Other buildings still stand in all their might, reminding Abadanis that their city was once the recipient of the finest in architecture and engineering: the Cinema Taj, a colossus of imported red bricks, which used to showcase the best from Hollywood, Bollywood and Egypt; and even the refinery itself, insisting on its presence right in the city centre, but seemingly archaic.

The tour ends with a surprise gift. In a little shop in the bazaar that develops film and sells sunglasses, the vendor has prepared his signature speciality: a thick, faux leather-bound photo album stuffed with pictures from old Abadan. The vendor, a young man with a knack for the nostalgia business, has meticulously gathered hundreds of pictures from the internet and local sources. He tells me the photo album is a best-selling product, and as I flip through the pages, a crowd of young onlookers gather around me. Nostalgia even thrives amongst those too young to possibly remember.

In the album, we see pictures of picnics in parks, parties in backyards and poolside recreation; we see smiling nurses, football teams, shiny cars on orderly streets, boat races, fire brigades and nightclubs. We do see poor neighbourhoods, but the idyllic white fenced suburbs are overrepresented. There is a series of depressing sceneries of Abadan as a ghost town during the war, but most pictures are from before the revolution. Women are dressed like American and Italian movie starlets of the day, fancy hair styles, chic skirts, short pants; men sport jeans, Clark’s shoes, smart shirts and Ray-Ban sunglasses. In the colour photos, trumpet pants, batik t-shirts, longer hair and bigger mustachios enter the picture. One photo catches my attention: it shows Dizzy Gillespie, standing next to Mohammad-Reza Shah’s sister, Princess Shams. It turns out the picture was taken during Gillespie’s US government-funded 1956 tour of the Middle East as a goodwill ambassador.

Today, only some Abadanis know that their city was once graced by visits from the likes of Dizzy Gillespie, Dave Brubeck and Duke Ellington. They do however routinely re-invoke the image of a city that was once the epitome of industrial progress, aspiring for a place in the world and symbolising the possibilities of the future. Abadanis are not in denial that the promises of modernity remain largely unfulfilled, and they are conscious of the tormented chapters of their city’s history. They are aware – and proud – of Abadan’s role in Iran’s bloody national struggles, with holes in the walls and streets, erratic power cuts and horrendous water quality reminding them daily of the price their city has paid. Yet while oil brought social injustice, political oppression, ethnic tensions and environmental degradation, it also broadened horizons and enlivened imaginaris. Abadani nostalgia, then, is the embodiment of the contradictory experience of oil modernity as perceived by a city that refuses to forget.

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Rasmus Christian Elling is PhD in Iranian Studies and Assistant Professor at the Institute for Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies, Copenhagen University. He has published on identity politics in post-revolutionary Iran (Minorities in Iran: Nationalism and Ethnicity after Khomeini) and is currently writing a book on the history of Abadan

National music competition organised by the Khane Javanan (‘House of Youth’) in 1977. Abadani bands often won first place in these competitions. Photo courtesy of Shahriar Tashnizi

© Shahriar Tashnizi
Salafis (or ‘Wahhabis’ as they are often known) are commonly associated with a Saudi-inspired ‘hardline’ ideology. Their scripturalist and literalist version of Islam has aroused much controversy due to its conservative tenets and practices. These include strict female dress codes (the all-concealing veil, niqab, and gown, jilbab), and heavy restrictions on women’s travel, education and employment opportunities. Salafis maintain that the rules they observe derive directly from the Qur’an and sunna of the Prophet Muhammad, which they strive to follow precisely.

Although its precepts and practices are strict and demanding, Salafism has attracted increasing numbers of young British women since the early 1990s when it started to have a significant presence, particularly in London and Birmingham. These new adherents have a variety of ethnicities, and the vast majority have non-Salafi or even non-Muslim backgrounds.

In London, Salafism particularly attracts Afro-Caribbean converts from Christianity, and young Somalis whose (usually more liberal) parents sought refuge here after the 1991 outbreak of the Somali Civil War. These young women have adopted an identity based on neither their parents’ religious orientation nor that of the liberal, secular society in which they grew up.

I spoke to many such women during my doctoral fieldwork in London between 2010 and 2012, including 23 women aged 19-29 whom I interviewed in depth. They had stumbled upon Salafism as teenagers or twenty-somethings, they said, at a time when they were seeking certainty in religion and a group that would help them practise Islam ‘correctly’.

The women in my interview sample comprised 11 Somalis and five converts (four Africans, one Afro-Caribbean), a mix of other Africans and one South Asian. All had been exposed to various Islamic interpretations, including the culturally infused Islam of their parents and versions propagated by various religious groups and sheikhs that were followed by Muslim friends and boyfriends. Many of the women had been involved with other Islamic groups – ranging from Sufism to the now banned Al-Muhajiroun – before becoming Salafis.

All had eventually decided that Salafism offered the most convincing and practical answer to the question: ‘What is the “true” Islam?’ The niqab and other practices, they came to believe, represented ‘pure’ Islam as enshrined in the Qur’an and sunna. The women’s trajectories into Salafism were varied and complex, but the following were the most significant factors in their thinking.

First, there was the fundamental issue of sacred authority. Ordinary believers learn about Salafism primarily through Salafi friends, local teachers (for example, imams) and the writings and lectures of Salafi scholars abroad (many of which are accessible online). To the women, the credibility of these sources was enhanced by their distinctive diligence in supporting their teachings with the Qur’an and sunna – whose authority most Muslims would not dispute – while minimising any references to personal opinion, sentiment, politics or culture.

For example, soon after her conversion to Islam, Humayrah was approached by both a Shi’a and a Salafi at college. She rejected the Shi’a girl’s arguments in favour of the Salafi’s because the latter had seemed knowledgeable, gave proofs from the Qur’an.
and sunna, and never said ‘I think’ when explaining Islam.

Maryam, of Nigerian background, had previously been involved with a West African 'cultural' mosque, as she put it. But she switched to a Salafi one when she met a teacher who constantly referenced the twin ‘pure’ sources. As Maryam explained: ‘When you hear the Qur’an and sunna, you don’t wanna reject it because this is the command of Allah.’

For Somali Shukri, it took one lesson on the staple Salafi text, The Prophet’s Prayer Described, by Sheikh Muhammad Nasiruddin Al-Albani (1914-1999), to convince her. Why? Because, she said, all of the points on how to pray were backed up with evidence from the practice of no less than the Messenger of God.

Most of the major Salafi scholars, such as Al-Albani, have the added advantage – in the women’s eyes – of being associated with Saudi Arabia. For many, the Kingdom had an aura of ‘authentic Islam’ as the land of the two holy cities in which the Prophet had dwelled. They were also aware that Salafi scholars often study for many years at the feet of established and famous scholars in Saudi Arabia.

The women all felt that they could trust these scholars’ interpretations because of their distinguished reputations and their interconnectedness in a ‘chain of authenticity’. As Afro-Caribbean convert Hayah said: '[Salafi teachings] all go back to very well-known scholars, seekers of knowledge, you know, those people. So you can follow, follow, follow the chain back.'

Also appealing was that the lower-ranking teachers at local Salafi centres in London created a serious, studious atmosphere at their lessons. These tended to focus on painstakingly coaching Muslims through the basics of their religion, such as the five pillars and tawhid (Islamic monotheism). The teachers also encouraged regular attendance, note-taking, independent reading, memorisation and homework.

This back-to-basics approach contrasted favourably with the women’s previous experiences of learning about Islam. Even women with Muslim backgrounds had never been taught in detail the meaning of the shahada, Islam’s first and most important pillar, or of the prayers that they had been encouraged to utter daily. Nearly all had attended madrasas as children, but had only learned to recite the Qur’an in Arabic, without translation.

Other Islamic groups some women had tried had emphasised such matters as politics and learning Arabic. Hannah, a convert of North African origin, said: ‘If you compare them to other Muslims, [Salafis] constantly seek knowledge… Other [mosques]… they’ll go there on a Friday, but they just like literally pray and they learn Arabic so they can read the Qur’an – but they don’t actually study, they don’t study Islam in depth.’

The women were therefore relieved to find somewhere they could learn about Islam comprehensively, with supporting evidence from scripture in English. Fowsiya, a Somali who had previously followed a politically oriented Islamic group, said: ‘When I went [to a Salafi lesson], I felt like… I was actually learning with a book and a pen, and I was learning the fundamentals of the din [religion] and proofs.’

Such instruction is part of the practical aspect of Salafism’s appeal. Salafi teachings address everything from major doctrinal issues to the mundane and everyday – from the meaning of tawhid to lavatory etiquette and the permissibility of mortgages.

Seven women spoke of the comfort of having clear-cut guidelines on just about everything, in contrast to the hazy rules of conduct they had learned either at church, at madrasa or while trying out other Islamic groups.

Many mentioned their ‘inner peace’ or ‘tranquillity’ at having finally identified an approach that generated ‘correct’ answers to every question. Saidah, for instance, said she had found a ‘manual’, a complete set of instructions to life that, if meticulously followed, would guarantee the optimal result – God’s pleasure and, ultimately, Paradise. And Maryam said: ‘I feel more tranquil [now], in the sense that I am trying my utmost… to implement the religion, because I have evidence to support me.’

Having such a clear sense of purpose in life strongly appealed to the women, even if they often struggled to practise Salafism’s strict teachings in a secular, liberal society.

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Dr Anabel Inge recently completed her AHRC-funded PhD – focusing on the conversion and commitment of Salafi women in London – at the Department of Theology & Religious Studies, King’s College London. She was Coordinating Editor of The Middle East in London (2008-11)

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- Culinary Connections (October/November 2013)
Kirkuk: the symbolic power of a contested city

The city of Kirkuk is today central to the historical memory of the Iraqi Kurds as a modern nation. Since the creation of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq in 1991 and the consolidation of the Kurdish Regional Government after 2003 this memory has been increasingly intertwined with the political realities of Kurdish self-determination. Often referred to as the ‘Jerusalem’ of the Kurds and the ‘heart’ of Kurdistan, the city has the power to evoke strong feelings of dispossession and nationhood. The mythical status assumed by Kirkuk in the minds of Kurdish politicians and ordinary people is largely the result of its undefined political status in post-Saddam Iraq. Bitterly disputed between Baghdad and the Kurdish Regional Government, the city has increasingly become the focus of Kurdish national solidarity as the only urban centre with a large Kurdish population that has never been under Kurdish administrative control.

Kirkuk’s very recent past tells us only part of the story of this disputed city. Since the creation of the modern Iraqi state after the First World War, Kirkuk has been Baghdad’s alter ego of sorts, the object of contestation between Iraq’s successive central governments and local political elites. Not only did Kirkuk develop as the centre of Iraq’s oil industry (large petroleum deposits were discovered in 1927) but it was also Iraq’s most multicultural city with a majority of non-Arab residents, also including large numbers of Turkmen. The battle that has inflamed Kirkuk in the modern era has focused on the city’s ‘true’ ethnic identity and engaged almost relentlessly its Kurdish, Turkmen and Arab communities. Given a very controversial history of demographic change, this has been primarily a battle of ‘numbers.’ The makeup of the urban population started to change in the early 1930s with the urbanisation of Kurdish villagers and the arrival of oil workers from other parts of Iraq. The transformation of the city’s demography gained momentum after the takeover of the Ba’ath party in 1963 and materialised with a program of forced Arabisation that continued in the following decades. The Arabisation of the city and of its hinterland still carries a profound emotional appeal for the Iraqi Kurds. It is still remembered as one of the atrocities committed by the Baghdad regime alongside the Anfal operation and the gassing of the town of Halabja in 1988.

As it is often the case with contested cities, the representation of Kirkuk in novels and poetry helps us to understand the claims of its communities as well as its history as a multcultural place. While Kirkuk has recently become the ‘Jerusalem’ of the Kurds – a place of return – it has also featured prominently as a central theme in the poetic tradition of the Iraqi Turkmen, a very influential group as a result of their connection to the Ottoman government before the First World War. Represented as a homeland and a holy site, for almost a century Kirkuk has been portrayed as the symbol of Turkish distinctiveness in Iraq. In contrast, Fadhil al-Azzawi’s novel The Last of the Angels stands as the best testimony of the multicultural soul of modern Kirkuk. Written in the late 1980s and set in one of the popular quarters of the city in the 1940s and 1950s, this novel uses magic realism to depict a host of colorful characters. Although al-Azzawi stereotypes Kurds, Arabs and Turkmen, he portrays this crowd with tenderness and affection. Instead of revealing a divided city, the novel provides a corrosive satire of government, politics and religion as both disruptive and life-enhancing forces of social life.

While Kirkuk today features prominently in the agenda of politicians in Iraq and beyond, snapshots of urban life as those presented by ‘Azzawi reveal a rich cultural and political tradition at the grassroots. Contestation over place and its meaning has been a constant feature of the city yet also an integral part of communal interaction and coexistence.

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Nelida Fuccaro is Reader in the Modern History of the Middle East, SOAS. She is currently researching the history of urban violence in modern Kirkuk and Iraq.
Three key events over the past two centuries have tied Persian-language journalism with Britain, more specifically with London. The most prominent was the establishment in December 1940 of the BBC’s Persian Service, which played an important role through its coverage of major events from the abdication of Reza Shah Pahlavi in 1941 to the Khomeini revolution of 1979.

An earlier milestone had been laid with the launch in February 1890 of the newspaper Qanun which was the first publication to directly attack the Qajar monarchy, declaring that lawlessness was at the root of Iran’s problems. Qanun was published by a former courtier and Nasereddin Shah’s Ambassador to Britain, Mirza Malkam Khan, after he lost his post and titles because of his involvement in a scheme to introduce a lottery into Iran. After Nasereddin Shah’s assassination in 1896, Malkam dropped the call for reform and asked the new king, Mozafareddin Shah, for a post. Two years later, he was appointed as Iran’s ambassador to Italy and stopped publishing Qanun altogether. Nonetheless, the paper’s content and its simple prose style inspired other opposition writers as the country moved towards the Constitutional Revolution of 1906.

The earliest London connection with Iranian journalism came in 1837, with the publication of Iran’s first newspaper by Mirza Saleh Shirazi, one of the first Iranians to study in Britain. Mirza Saleh and four other students were sent to Britain by the Iranian Crown Prince, Abbas Mirza, in 1815, following Iran’s defeat in its first war with Russia (1804-1813), to learn modern sciences and technology as a means of addressing Iran’s weakness, especially in its military capability. During “three years and nine months and twenty days” in England, two of the students received a military education; one learned about sword-and gun-making and another studied medicine. Mirza Saleh, meanwhile, studied English, French and Latin, as well as natural philosophy and printing; he bought a printing press to take home and joined the Freemasonry, becoming a Master.

After returning to Iran in 1819, Mirza Saleh was involved in a number of diplomatic missions. He visited Britain...
He calls England Velayat-e Azadi (the land of freedom), where everyone ‘from the King down to the beggar on the street’ is ‘committed to the nizam (state)’

in 1822 – when he succeeded in having the British envoy to Iran, Captain Henry Willock replaced. In 1827, he led unsuccessful negotiations with Russia to end the second Russo-Persian war (1826–28) and in 1829, he was a member of a delegation that presented the Iranian government’s apologies to Russia’s Tsar Nicolas I for the killing of the Russian Minister, Aleksander Griboyedov, and his staff in a riot in Tehran. Mirza Saleh later became mayor of Tehran and published a monthly journal that became known as Kaghaez-e Akhbar (literally, newspaper). Several hundred copies of the paper were probably printed each month, of which few have survived. Publication stopped after Mirza Saleh was removed from the post of mayor three years later.

Although Mirza Saleh was impressed with British newspapers and their ability to make money by selling advertising, his own paper was a much more modest enterprise. The surviving copies of the paper, in two lithographed one-sided sheets, only contain laudatory reports about the king and his movements, and reports about a variety of events or novelties from around the world, under the titles of ‘News from the Western countries’ and ‘News from the Eastern countries.’

One issue, for April–May 1837, reproduced in 1839 in the Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, includes reports about a fire at the Royal Library in Naples; the launch of a new steamship in New York which had cut down the journey time to Britain from one month to twelve days; the arrival in Bombay of the new British naval steamship, Atlanta, with 68 guns after a voyage of sixty-eight days rather than the usual six months [a footnote by the Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society explains that the ship had only two guns, using 68-pound shots] and the beheading in Istanbul of a ‘petulant, matt-haired, foul-mouthed, impudent, impious’ dervish who had spoken to the Ottoman Sultan Mahmud ‘with the highest disrespect, accusing him of subverting the faith of Islam.’ With such content, although historically important, Kaghaez-e Akhbar is unlikely to have had much social or political influence, and it was certainly not an instrument of reform.

Of far more significance are Mirza Saleh’s diaries of his group’s travel to Britain, via Russia, and their return to Iran via the Mediterranean and Ottoman Turkey. The diaries survived in manuscript form for 150 years before they were printed in Tehran in 1969. They include long segments on the history, geography and economy of Russia, Britain, and the Ottoman Empire, translated from other languages. These sections include inaccuracies in facts and figures, including dates, perhaps caused by the perennial problem of converting the lunar Islamic calendar to the solar Western one.

The best-written parts of the diaries were Mirza Saleh’s observations on daily life, especially in England, where he travelled extensively and interacted with people from a variety of backgrounds. He speaks with admiration of Britain’s system of governance, taxation, elections, justice and prisons, transport, medical care, education, agriculture and industry. He calls England Velayat-e Azadi (the land of freedom), where everyone ‘from the king down to the beggar on the street’ is ‘committed to the nizam (state), and ‘would not deviate from it.’ ‘This land’, he says, ‘like Arabia and other lands, did have evil, corrupt and blood-thirsty people, but they have changed their ways over the past four hundred years ... [No] other country in the world is either so organized, or so orderly. This they have achieved through years of toil, giving blood and shedding blood.’

Mirza Saleh’s writing reveals little about his personal views on Iran, although from time to time his praise for aspects of British life implies the wish that his homeland could have the same features. The closest he comes to criticizing Iran’s governance is when he describes how the mullahs had prevented the Ottoman Sultan Selim from ‘bringing European sciences to Istanbul, out of jealousy, and did not allow people to leave the road of ignorance and stupidity. In fact, if the mullahs enter any government and get up to their tricks, that government and that country will never progress.’ He shows similar disdain for the Catholic Church, with ‘priests who are not allowed to marry, so they would commit heinous acts and abuse women. In fact, sheep have been left in the hands of wolves.’

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Hossein Shahidi is an Iranian journalist who has worked for the BBC and the United Nations

The Albert Memorial in Hyde Park was built in 1872. Some Iranian writers have said that the man in the sheepskin hat was modelled on Mirza Saleh.
There is nothing that prompts us to encourage revolution as it is enshrined in danger... It just comes when profound reform has stumbled.

Salman Al-Awda, Islamist

Like all of us watching the Arab world in the last two years, Saudi Islamists (I refer throughout to the Salafi Islamists) were taken by surprise when the Arab masses marched en masse calling for the downfall of their regimes. Official Saudi religious scholars immediately warned against the chaos of revolutions, banned demonstrations, and called for respect and obedience to rulers. Despite this, they supported the uprisings, perhaps in anticipation of Islamist parties and movements replacing the old regimes in Egypt, Tunisia and beyond. They were, however, cautious when revolutionary effervescence started creeping into the heart of Arabia. Amid Saudi calls for demonstrations, civil disobedience and change via the internet, they held back from endorsing such calls, as if to assert that neither they nor their followers were ready for peaceful collective action. Instead, they applauded the bravery and determination of Arab protestors abroad and shifted their focus to local battles with the Saudi regime against detention of prisoners of conscience, the legitimacy of peaceful collective action and the right of the people to be represented in an elected assembly.

On the eve of the Arab uprisings, Saudi Islamists had already reinvented themselves as peaceful activists seeking reform of the regime from within. During the uprisings they reclaimed their position on the map of Saudi Arabia. They developed their own strategies in order to remain relevant and central to any debate about the future of the country. The Arab uprisings reinvigorated them as two Islamist parties came to power - al-Nahda in Tunisia and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. At the same time they supported the struggle of Tunisian, Egyptian, Libyan, Yemeni and Syrian activists whom they dubbed Sahwa Islamiyya, (Islamic awakening). Many Saudi Islamists saw the Syrian uprising through the lens of sectarian politics and considered the Syrian rebels defenders of Sunni revival against the hegemony of a minority Alawite regime. On the Bahraini uprising, Saudi Islamists concurred with the Saudi regime that described the Bahraini revolution as a Shia-Iranian conspiracy to undermine the security of the Gulf. They also condemned the Saudi Shia uprising in the oil-rich Eastern Province. They accused the Shia of opportunism and blamed them for provoking the regime to increase oppression and arrest among their own activists.

Unlike the majority of official Saudi religious scholars, veteran Islamist Salman Al-Awda (born 1956) anchored peaceful collective revolutionary action in an Islamic

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framework and reached out for humanist interpretations that assimilate Western intellectual positions with his own Salafi orientation. He surprised his audiences when he published *As'ilat al-Thawra* (Questions of Revolution) in 2012. Al-Awda rehabilitated revolution after decades of Sunni religious scholars associating it with instability, chaos and danger. This book put him in a position different from both traditional official Saudi ulama and Jihadi ideologues, who had adopted violent strategies locally and globally. Needless to say the book was immediately banned in Saudi Arabia, prompting the author to circulate it on the internet. In this book, Al-Awda’s engagement with the question of revolution brought him back as a relevant figure at a critical moment in the Saudi and Arab public sphere. The eruption of unforeseen and unexpected revolutions needed an Islamic endorsement, interpretation and justification. Al-Awda swiftly seized the opportunity and improvised a text that moved away from the duality of the permissible and prohibited in Islamic political theology.

Al-Awda fuses western political thinking on revolutions by Marx, Popper and Fanon with his own Islamic Salafi heritage, producing a hybrid discourse that aims to reach beyond religious study circles. He defines revolution as building on the past, reform and reconstruction rather than destruction. It always starts peacefully but may later become militarised when confronted with oppression. Simply phrased, revolution is a fruit that may ripen, dry prematurely or be belatedly harvested.

Al-Awda proposes to go beyond the duality of total obedience to rulers or military revolt. His ‘third way’ centres on ‘organised collective action that regulates political opposition and accountability.’ The social contract, exemplified by the English Magna Carta, represents in Al-Awda’s thinking an early example of limiting monarchical powers and asserting individual rights. The strategy that collective action requires is not necessarily violent. Revolutionary attire, slogans and hunger strikes prove to be efficient and justified steps in a peaceful revolution. He acknowledges the diversity of *al-jamahir* (organised collective action that regulates political opposition and accountability), the critical Arab publics behind the revolutions.

On the sharia in a post-revolutionary phase, Al-Awda calls for gradual application in an attempt not to burden societies after revolutionary upheaval, a burden that may precipitate total rejection. Post-revolutionary justice requires accepting the diversity of Arab publics opinion. This justice requires reconciliation with all sectors in society including supporters of deposed regimes: as the Prophet said, ‘go, you are free.’

He warns against raising slogans such as demanding the immediate application of sharia, thus capitalising on people’s emotional dispositions. The purpose of sharia is to establish justice, protect property and guard lives.

Al-Awda asserts that in Islam there is no scope for a theocracy, the rule of Islamic jurists. The Islamic state is a contractual project between people on the basis of a civil contract. In his opinion, democracy proves to be better than autocracy. He calls for representation of the people, freedom and civil society. Why should Muslims accept autocracy and reject democracy if the latter proves to be the best available option simply because it is a western import, he asks. Democracy promises to be inclusive. Pluralism is a precondition for just government. He warns against alienating sectarian and ethnic minorities, a potentially dangerous strategy that triggers foreign intervention and civil war. He calls for respecting minority rights within a democratic framework.

While hesitating to call for revolution in Saudi Arabia, many Saudi Islamists have learnt hard lessons from a decade of terror that was displaced by peaceful collective action across the Arab world. It remains to be seen whether these new Saudi intellectual mutations will lay the foundation for a new era in an age of hybridity and pluralism. From the heartland of Salafism, Islamists are beginning to engage with this hybridity thanks to those Arab masses who have opened a new chapter in their struggle for freedom, dignity and social justice.

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*Madawi Al-Rasheed is Professor of Anthropology of Religion at King’s College, London. Her most recent publications include A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics and Religion in Saudi Arabia (CUP 2013), Contesting the Saudi State: Islamic Voices from a New Generation (CUP 2007), and A History of Saudi Arabia (CUP 2010)*

Unlike the majority of official Saudi religious scholars, veteran Islamist Salman Al-Awda (pictured third from left) anchored peaceful collective revolutionary action in an Islamic framework.

© The author, Salman Al-Awda
Historically, non-Muslims in the Middle East had the legal and social status of dhimmis, granted protection by the Muslim sovereign in return for special taxes and impositions, and assigned an inferior status with many disqualifications. In reality, their conditions varied from time to time and in relation to class and power, ranging from violence and extortion to prosperity and high office for some. Political modernity, the colonial episodes and the nation-state were, in the earlier decades of the 20th century, favourable to most non-Muslims. The 19th century Ottoman reforms and the later constitutional revolutions of the early 20th century within the Empire and in Iran, included large measures to secularise the state and institute laws granting equality of citizenship. Missionary and Jewish schools from the mid-19th century equipped some members of these communities with a modern European education and familiarity with European languages (mostly French), as well as Turkish and Arabic. This qualified beneficiaries for careers in business, bureaucracies, professions and the arts in the emerging modern states, economies and public spheres. The (theoretical) legal equality of non-Muslims, and the advantages enjoyed by their elites under modern conditions, as well as their association with ascendant European interests, led to a sharpening of resentments and antagonisms within the Muslim population, sometimes resulting in riots and attacks. These punctuated the history of communal relations in the 19th and 20th centuries, starting with the attacks on Christians in Egypt following the Napoleonic invasion at the turn of the 19th century, followed by similar events in many countries including Syria and Lebanon. The First World War and its aftermath witnessed the massacres and forced movements of population in Turkey.

In reality, the theoretical stipulations of legal equality and common citizenship were often subverted in political and administrative practice, as well as in popular attitudes and actions. One component of popular ideology and imagination is what may be called ‘Umma nationalism’: the idea that the world is divided into religious solidarities, and that the Christianity of Europe and the Judaism of Israel encompass the local/national Christians and Jews. Anti-imperialism, then, would include hostility to all non-Muslims, reinforcing historical antipathies. The antidotes to these sentiments were present in both traditional, conservative ideas of neighbourliness and coexistence, and the modern universalist ideologies of liberalism, socialism and even fascism, which sidelined religious identity in favour of national solidarity. Christians and, at an earlier stage, Jews, were part of these imaginings. Christian intellectuals played an important part in Arab nationalist politics from the 19th century, and one of the founders of Ba’th ideology and the

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party was Michel Aflaq, a Syrian Christian. In Egypt, Coptic personalities were at the forefront of political life and prominent in the nationalist struggles. In Egypt, Iraq and the Maghreb many Jews were active in the leftist national movements.

Countries in the region have different profiles of communal and cultural composition. In Turkey, for instance, Christian groups were for the most part ethnically distinct Greeks, Armenians and Assyrians, and most Jews were Sephardic Ladino speakers. Waves of ethnic cleansing through the twentieth century resulted in a predominantly Muslim population, mostly Sunni but with a sizable Alevi minority, an offshoot of Shi’a Islam, itself the subject of prejudice and discrimination. Egypt, by contrast, has a Coptic population estimated at 10 percent, which is native Egyptian and shares language, culture and custom with its Muslim neighbours. Iraq famously features many religious and ethnic divisions. At present, Sunni-Shi’a sectarianism and Arab/Kurdish divisions are centre stage in the country’s politics, merging into the regional, geopolitical sectarian patterns. There are also considerable Christian populations, in both the Arab and Kurdish regions, mostly Chaldeo-Assyrian who speak Aramaic dialects, which continue to be their liturgical language, though they are now predominantly Arabophone and culturally integrated. Their numbers in 2003 were estimated at 1.4 million. In the turbulent years following the 2003 invasion and up to the present, the sectarian militias of both sides, often with the acquiescence of the authorities, have targeted Christian and heterodox populations with killings, kidnapping and extortion, bombing of churches and kidnapping of priests. Large numbers have taken refuge in neighbouring countries, mainly Jordan and Syria, as well as having been internally displaced to the Kurdish autonomous region.

Recent transformations

The rise of Islamic politics in the later decades of the 20th century placed greater pressure on non-Muslim communities in many countries. The ‘nation’ became increasingly identified as the Muslim nation, part of a worldwide Islamic Umma, a resurrected ‘Umma nationalism’. The call for the application of the Shari`a poses threats to the citizenship status of non-Muslims. The more recent uprisings in the Arab world, the so-called Arab Spring, were animated by universalist demand for liberty, dignity and social justice, and included an assertion of citizenship and fraternity. Copts were prominent participants in Tahrir Square. The reactions and violence that followed, however, targeted the Copts. In October 2011, a predominantly Coptic crowd demonstrated in central Cairo, against the demolition of a church in Upper Egypt. They were attacked by the army and security forces, as well as civilian thugs, resulting in the notorious massacre with 23 deaths and 212 injuries. The attacks on Coptic churches, businesses and individuals occurred frequently under the previous regime and seem to be continuing. The authorities, including the recently elected Muslim Brotherhood President Morsi continue to proclaim equality, as did their predecessors, but their police and security services continue to be bystanders, or even sometimes complicit, in the attacks against Coptic targets.

The sharpening sectarian, Sunni-Shi’a, tension in the region has the effect in divided countries of subverting national identification in favour of the sub-national, the sect, and the supra-national sectarian solidarities in regional alignments. This is clearly the case in Iraq, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, and now fiercely in Syria. Christians, Baha’is and esoteric sects, such as Yazidis and Mandeans in Iraq, fall victim to the violence from one or other, or both sides. In Iran, sectarian divisions are superimposed on ethnic identities with respect to Sunni Kurds, as well as the continuing persecution of Baha’is, and the pressures on Christians and the few remaining Jews. Sectarianism in the region is also reinforcing the entrenched communalism in Lebanon in confessional identifications and solidarities, with all sides opposing any measures towards common citizenship in electoral arrangements or in allowing civil (and possibility of mixed) marriage. The reformers’ and revolutionaries’ aspirations to national fraternity and common citizenship appear utopian.

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Sami Zubaida is Emeritus Professor of Politics and Sociology at Birkbeck, and Research Associate at LMEI, SOAS. His latest book is Beyond Islam: A New Understanding of the Middle East
Food and drink have always held a prized place in Middle Eastern literature, explains Narguess Farzad

A loaf of bread, a jug of wine and rhyme: Images of food in Persian poetry

Food imagery has been an integral part of the literatures of the Middle East, with the earliest examples appearing in a Sumerian poem of the second millennium BC. In Persian literature the most vivid and colourful examples begin to appear from the tenth century onwards. The poets at the courts in the greater Khorasan paid particular attention to the variety of food and the culinary expertise that was then available. Their descriptions highlight the sophistication of the court and the health of its treasury. The best examples of such poetry can be found in the works of Rudaki, the Shahname of Ferdowsi as well as in the feasting scenes described by the other Samanid, Ghaznavid and Saljuq poets such as Manuchehri, Anvari and Nezami, many of whose works are illustrated by sumptuous miniature paintings.

A well-known account of the potency of food appears in the Shahname, when the almost vegan King Zahhak is gradually seduced and corrupted by Satan, who introduces him to dishes of eggs, veal, richly cooked game and other elaborate recipes. In this passage, Satan, alternatively referred to by his Arabic name Iblis or the Persian Ahriman, appears to Zahak in the guise of a cook, as translated by Arthur George and Edmond Warner:

‘Foods then were few, men did not kill to eat but lived on vegetals of all earth’s produce; So evil-doing Ahriman designed To slaughter animals for food, and served Both bird and beast. He fed the king on blood To make him lion-fierce, and like a

Jami describes the tables laid with rare fruits, platters of quince blossom pastilles, delicate sugared almonds and jugs of cordial and sherbets

Lohrasp enthroned (c.1540) from Ferdowsi’s Shahnameh

© The Fitzwilliam Museum
The climax of the lunch party, sugared almonds and jugs of cordial and platters of quince blossom pastilles, delicate are laid with rare fruits, all ripe and juicy, and justify her love for the beautiful Joseph: motive is to silence their gossiping tongues Zulaikha, Potiphar's wife. Her ulterior party of the ladies of Egypt organised by century Jami takes us to the lavish lunch world of humankind. Ferdowsi wonders if this was a plan to rid Iran of its young heroes and indeed the day. As his reward he asks to kiss and lay his eyes and face on the king's shoulders:

Iblis received permission, kissed and vanished. A marvel followed—from the monarch's shoulders, Grew two black snakes.'

And with this line begins the horror of a millennium of Zahakk's rule of terror who could only satiate the snakes by feeding them the brains of two young men every day. Ferdowsi wonders if this was a plan to rid Iran of its young heroes and indeed the world of humankind.

On a more cheery note the fifteenth century Jami takes us to the lavish lunch party of the ladies of Egypt organised by Zulaikha, Potiphar's wife. Her ulterior motive is to silence their gossiping tongues and justify her love for the beautiful Joseph:

'What a feast in a royal banquet hall! What sweetmeats pure of each colour and hue, Like a light reflected the darkness through! And in crystal cups whose lip overflows Is mingled rose-water with attar of rose. Its ground was decked as with the sun's golden bars: The silver cups a galaxy of stars. Flavour and perfume from table and bowl, Food for the body and strength for the soul. Things there for eating whatever you wish, Of bird they had brought together and fish.'

Jami describes in detail the tables that are laid with rare fruits, all ripe and juicy, platters of quince blossom pastilles, delicate sugared almonds and jugs of cordial and sherbets. The climax of the lunch party, however, is when each lady is presented with a fruit-knife and invited to peel an orange: 'One hand the knife held, sharp its work to do, Orange the other, gladness to renew.'

At this precise moment Joseph is enticed to look in on the gathering and as he steps into the room, the women who catch a glimpse of him begin to swoon and a shocking scene of self-inflicted injuries ensues:

'With that one sight their senses them forsook, And from their hands the reins of power shook. From her own hand her orange no one knew, And thus across her hand the knife she drew. A pen made one her fingers with her sword, Upon her heat devotion to record; From every line there flowed a stream of blood, They cried aloud: "No mortal man is he, "Not formed, like Adam, of water and clay: "An angel pure below has found his way."'

In the twelfth to fifteenth centuries, the predominant and recurring image in Persian poetry is that of wine and the poets take great pain to describe its preparation, consumption and powers. However, the inebriating earthly wine of the earlier heroic and romantic epics, as well as the self-indulgent pleasure of drinking associated with the quatrains of Omar Khayyam, is transubstantiated into the wine of divine intoxication. Only two centuries later the poetic persona has all but abandoned the splendid royal banqueting halls of Iran and appears to be content to inhabit the old tavern. In this era it falls to Rumi, Sādī and Hafez to beguile us with descriptions of wine with such expertise that the most loquacious of sommeliers would fail to match.

The wine of this period is often a metaphor for spiritual resilience. In his solitude, Hafez of Shiraz dismisses the forbidders of wrong:

'Go away, ascetic, and stop picking on the drainers of dregs; On the Day of the Covenant this was the only gift conferred We have imbibed what He poured into our cup Were it the nectar of Paradise or the wine of intoxication' Rumi, while a master user of the wine imagery, is equally discerning about soups and sweetmeats and shows a sound knowledge of what goes on in the kitchen. The conversation between a cook and the chick-pea boiling in a pot of broth in book three of the Masnavi is ostensibly a metaphor for the hardship and pain entailed in the meaningful journey from naivety to maturity but the attention to detail shows that Rumi knew a lot about food preparation too. He also betrays a weakness for the variations of halvas that appear in his poems. Prepared from figs, dates or a variety of raisins and syrups, Rumi assures us that their finest can elevate the mystic to the heavens.

If only Rumi could visit London today where he would be spoilt for choice and could indulge his sweet tooth with the wide range of halvas available in shops and Middle Eastern patisseries all over the city.

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Narguess Farzad is a Senior Fellow in Persian at SOAS and a member of the editorial board

Zal shoots a water-fowl (c.1570)
• Iraq (December 2011/January 2012)
• Iran (February/March 2012)
• Palestine (April/May 2012)

• The Cultural Olympiad (June/July 2012)
• Protest (October/November 2012)
Mapping Iraqi art in London

Mention Iraq to anyone today and one’s thoughts immediately turn to a country in turmoil, a people in mourning and a future that remains, at least for the time being, uncertain.

In stark contrast, however and far removed from the Middle East, is London. Albeit in the grips of economic recession, it is nevertheless a place which thrives on opportunity, diversity and cultural plurality. Given that so many Iraqis have chosen to settle in London, I set out to find out how these two polarities can be reconciled both on a personal and national level.

No story about contemporary Iraqi art in London can begin without acknowledging the immense role that the artistic movements of the 20th century played within Iraq itself. It was in the early 1950s when a group of artists including the sculptor Jawad Salim, instructor at newly established School of Fine Arts, together with the eminent theorist, Shakir Hassan al-Said, formed the Baghdad Group for Modern Art. Working with other artists such as Faiq Hassan, the group began to germinate the seed of a modern artistic identity. Their aim was to articulate through an aesthetic synthisising of their knowledge of their birthplace with their studies abroad the political rhetoric of a nascent Arab state.

By the 1970s however, this solidarity of identity had been diffused. Art was being manipulated by the ruling parties as a tool for self-glorification and artists were losing their freedom to create truly independent works. It was at this time that several prominent artists left Iraq with some, like Dia Azzawi, heading for London, where he became art consultant at former Iraqi Cultural Centre in Tottenham Court Road.

It is perhaps to Dia Azzawi that Iraqi artists in London owe most gratitude. With a career spanning over 49 years (he graduated from Baghdad University with a degree in Archaeology in 1962 and the Institute of Fine Art in Baghdad in 1964), he has participated in more than 65 shows and has been editor of major international magazines including UR: The International Magazine of Arab Culture, London; Funoon Arabia, London and on the Editorial Board of Mawakif, London. Through his publications and exhibitions, he has contributed widely to the intellectual development of the arts of the Middle East. Tellingly, out of the 77 artists shown at the British Museum’s Word in Art Exhibition in 2006, nearly 25 per cent were from Iraq and it was to Dia that the curators of the inaugural exhibition last year at the Mathaf Gallery in Doha turned for guidance and support.

Working in a variety of media, his most distinctive images are undoubtedly those encapsulated in his powerfully evocative paintings. Executed in neo-Cubist style, his blocks of brightly coloured pigments combine seamlessly to reflect often semi-abstract subject matter ranging from memories of Iraq's rich heritage to more political imagery, highlighting the pain of loss and struggle throughout the Arab world.

Acknowledging Dia’s influence, the American born, Iraqi artist, Maysaloun Faraj has, through her work as an artist, curator and gallerist, achieved acclaim for promoting Iraqi art in London. Conscious of the hardships suffered by Iraqis in exile, Maysaloun wanted to bring together the country’s scattered ‘talents in the wind’ and to communicate their positive and creative energies. Thus in 1995 her project entitled ‘Strokes of Genius: Contemporary Iraqi Art’ was born. At first its focus was a comprehensive database of Iraqi artists.

It is perhaps to Dia Azzawi that Iraqi artists in London owe most gratitude. With a career spanning over 49 years he has participated in more than sixty five shows.
The Middle East in London

The growing success of Iraqi art and artists globally can undoubtedly be measured in the participation of Iraq in this year’s Venice Biennale.

www.incia.co.uk. With the help of others including curator Ulrike al-Khamis and artists Rashad Selim and the then Baghdad based Hanaa Malallah, by 2000 the project had grown into a touring exhibition and the subsequent publication of the eponymous book, the only comprehensive reference in English, on the subject.

Maysaloun's work continued when in 2002 she opened the Aya Gallery in west London with her husband. Here Maysaloun curated a series of important Iraqi shows until her last exhibition in 2009, a solo show of her own paintings and ceramics entitled ‘Boats and Burdens: Kites and Shattered Dreams.’ Through the joie de vivre imagery of her ceramics, to a more poignant expose of the tragic destruction of life symbolised in withering date palms, her work attempts to capture a beauty and innocence lost forever.

Not all Iraqi artists in London share the same feeling about their homeland. Rashad Selim, who was born in Sudan, of a German mother and Iraqi father, resides in a more liminal mental space, neither outside or inside Iraq or London. While he acknowledges his Iraqi identity (he is Jawad Salim’s nephew), his peripatetic childhood and time in London, where he has lived since 1982, have given him a duality of perspective not prevalent in many of his compatriots. Although influenced by Islamic culture, which he began to appreciate while living in London, he sees his art as having universality not specific to Iraq. For Rashad, being in London has broadened his creative side. Most indicative of this is his current re-piano project, in which he strips out and transforms old pianos into living works of art, Rashad aims symbolically to re-engage with and transform the universality of broken culture.

Hanaa Malallah by contrast, who came out of Iraq in 2006 (and now cannot return), at first found living in London difficult. Here though now she is able to concentrate on her art and has exhibited widely. A deeply thoughtful and philosophical person, Hanaa’s work addresses the subject of ancient Mesopotamia, contemporary destruction and exile. Like many artists of her generation, she found traditional media inadequate to express her ideas. Instead she uses burnt paper and cloths, barbed wire and bullets, with splintered wood and found objects. Often shown in Dubai, Hanaa is now preparing for an exhibition at the Qattan Foundation in April 2012.

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Janet Rady is a specialist in contemporary art from the Middle East

Walid Siti, 5, 2010, White Cube Gallery
Some 300 million people, from western China, Central and West Asia to the Balkans and other communities worldwide, celebrate Norouz ‘new day’ – the spring equinox – an event that has achieved greater significance in political and cultural diplomacy since the 1980s.

The collapse of the Soviet Union led to a search for cultural and historical identity by its Islamic republics, which were emerging for the first time as independent nation states. Peoples of these republics had celebrated Norouz secretly, despite the official ban. In the post-independent era, Norouz gradually became a national holiday, to the extent that most of these republics now celebrate both January 1 and March 21 (spring equinox) as their new years. For some, such as in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Azerbaijan, Norouz is more important than the western New Year.

For Iranians, Norouz has always been the main Eid (festival), far more important than religious Eids. When the monarchy ruled Iran, Norouz was the only occasion when schools and universities were closed for two weeks and the country came to a standstill. This trend has so far continued. Recent attempts to curtail these holidays and to give more prominence to the religious occasions have not been a great success.

The Islamic Republic has an uneasy relationship with Iranian nationalism. The word melli (national) was banned for several years, and replaced by an Islamic term. The National Consultative Assembly was renamed the Islamic Consultative Assembly. The National Iranian Airline was renamed Islamic Republic Airline and there are many other examples. However, when the authorities discovered that people respond better to the government if it appeals to their sense of nationalism, in particular towards the end of the Iran-Iraq war, melli was rehabilitated in the media. The ambiguities remained, and attempts by political hardliners and religious conservatives to denigrate Norouz as a ‘pagan practice’ never ceased.

However, hardliners’ campaigns against national cultural symbols had the opposite effect. Helped by social networking sites, the Iranian youth, eager for meaning and joy in their lives, are presently waging an intensified campaign to revive national symbols. They began to celebrate Yalda, the eve of the Winter Solstice, and Mehrgan, the autumnal equinox.

If celebrating Norouz divides the ruling establishment, taking advantage of the popularity of national symbols and sentiments for political and electoral gains has also divided them. While the more conservative elements play down nationalism, populist politicians surrounding the president, such as Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei, have sparked...
Since 2009, President Obama has used the event to demonstrate a better understanding of the Iranian people and their culture demonstrating its importance to western politicians. Many western leaders and lawmakers are increasingly acknowledging Norouz as a special day, as has Sweden. This new international awareness is coupled with UNESCO putting Norouz in the list of intangible cultural heritages of humanity, a move proposed by the Republic of Azerbaijan. It was later recognised as the International Day of Norouz by the UN General Assembly, calling on member states that celebrate the festival to study its history and traditions with a view to disseminating knowledge about it among the international community and organising annual commemorative events.

Coincidentally, most nations who celebrate Norouz are members of the ECO (Economic Co-operation Organisation), an intergovernmental body of the central and west Asian states. The ECO was set up to promote cultural and economic cooperation, though it has had little success in the field of culture. A regional and international interest in Norouz has given the ECO inspiration to focus on a shared, secular cultural heritage. The ECO member states have agreed to be the official host of Norouz on rotation. Last year was Iran’s turn. The heads of states that visited Tehran last year witnessed a sombre occasion as they were not allowed to celebrate the occasion at Persepolis or Takht-e Jamshid, the throne of Jamshid, the mythical founder of Norouz.

This year’s festivals will be hosted in Dushanbe, Tajikistan’s capital. A fusion of Tajik arts: dance, music and mounting spectacles, should offer a more joyous and colourful festival befitting the happy occasion of Norouz.

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Bager Moin is director of Jadidonline.com and former head of BBC Persian and Pashto
Bringing Palestine and the world together; in poetry and prose

All peoples of the world have icons, who are often associated with the making and refining of perceptions. The philosopher Edward Said (1935-2003) and the poet Mahmoud Darwish (1941-2008) are such icons for the Palestinians. They not only contributed decisively to putting Palestine on the world's map, but also brought the world to Palestine. Their secret, if they ever had one, was the power of language – painstakingly crafted, with visions of justice, freedom and humanity at its heart.

Said and Darwish's contributions are too plentiful to enumerate fully here. Said brought the plight of the oppressed to world attention, and to where it matters – the very centres of power that for so long acted as disinterested sources of knowledge and governance. He did this with scrupulous and passionate scholarship, examining the makeup of the colonial ventures in the east and the often dubious representations that buttressed and objectified them. Darwish wrote what amounts to the Song of Songs for Palestinians, illuminating the sites of their wounds and the vistas of their human condition in the context of the Israeli occupation.

Edward Said was born in the Talibiyeh district of Jerusalem, and grew up in Cairo and Lebanon before settling in the United States. He worked in the literary, political and musical fields with the overriding ideal of human reconciliation and co-existence, while exposing the injustices of colonialism, its political, economic and cultural exploitation, and its demeaning intellectual representation. As his colleague Joseph Massad wrote, Said's intellectual life ‘was guided by his radical opposition to ignorance and by his unwavering commitment to fighting injustice. Everything he wrote revolved around these two axes.’ In his book, Orientalism, for which Said is best known, he poses a question which sums up the spirit that guided his writings: ‘Can one divide human reality, as indeed human reality seems to be genuinely divided, into clearly different cultures, histories, traditions, societies, even races and survive the consequences of humanity?’

Said's entire work attests to a search for the genuine commonalities and connections underpinning humanity, transcending the mediocrity of provincial scholarship. In this sense, Palestine is not an isolated case of occupation, but interlinked with colonial exploitations and misrepresentations, and as such deserving of a humane solution.

Unlike the stubborn ideologue, both Said and Darwish believed in a tomorrow, a future, in which justice would be available for all, and in a yesterday, a past, which could serve as a wellspring from which all could learn – rather than one which would stultify with its claims to authenticity and exclusivity. To this end, their views on Israel and Palestine evolved, though their premises remained constant.

At the centre of their shared view was the understanding that Palestinians have been victims of Zionism's colonial mindset and practices. These entailed both land theft and displacement of the native population, and attempts to eradicate Palestinian culture – all aimed at undermining the viability of the Palestinians' continued existence in their homeland.

Nevertheless, alongside their rejection of all forms of orthodoxy and extremism, Said and Darwish retained a belief in the possibility of coexistence between Palestinians and Israelis on the basis of equality. They also opposed unjust agreements such as the 1993 Oslo accords and other lopsided negotiations and bogus deals, however dressed up they were as promoting national aspirations. These could not restore even a modicum of the rights the Palestinians had struggled and longed for.

Both drew their visions, in prose and poetry respectively, from and for the Palestinian question.
At the centre of their shared view was the understanding that Palestinians have been victims of Zionism’s colonial mindset and practices.

I became a metaphor of a swallow
Floating over my debris
In the spring, in the autumn
Baptizing my feathers with the clouds of the lake
Prolonging my greeting
Unto the Nasserite who never dies
Because in him is the spirit of God
And God is the prophets’ luck

Along the revolutionary journey, which Darwish and Said both chronicled, Darwish’s poetry acquired new dimensions. In one interview, he approvingly quoted the Mexican poet Octavio Paz as stating that ‘words in prose are to inform, but in poetry, to be’. The Palestinian condition is one of a struggle for viable existence and survival and another of informing and educating the world on its predicament, as Darwish did in vivid poetry and Said in luminous prose. Increasingly, Darwish’s expanded vision resorted to the ordinary, mystic, epic and musical, giving a worldly voice to the voiceless, while at the same time celebrating the world for its small gifts and hopes.

Darwish and Said gave the Palestinians, and indeed the world, their genuine gift of vision and humanity. We touch the grace of this gift in the words of Said, in several scholarly fields. We hear and feel it in the poetry of Darwish, acclaimed all over the Arab world and beyond. Darwish seemed to have spoken of himself, when he wrote of Said:

He loves a land then departs from it.
(Is the impossible far?)
He loves departure to anything.
In free travel between cultures, the researchers of human essence might find enough seats for everyone. Here is a periphery advancing.
Or a centre receding. The East is not completely East and the West is not completely West. Because identity is open to plurality, It isn’t a citadel or a trench.

In such words resides worldly hope for which Darwish and Said planted ripe seeds. The Arab revolutions, with all their complexities, seem to testify to this in a way that can only mean their hope for justice and humanity lives on. Said was fond of quoting the Martinique-French Poet Aimé Césaire, whose words best illuminate Darwish’s sentiments above:

‘No race has a monopoly on beauty, on intelligence, on strength, and there is a place for all at the rendezvous of victory.’

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Atef Alshaer is a post-doctoral and teaching fellow in the Near and Middle Eastern Department as well as the Media and Film Studies Centre at SOAS.
If there is one sport associated in the public’s eye with Arabs from the Arabian Peninsula it must be horsemanship. The finest type of horse, the Arabian, developed in the desert. It seems, therefore, appropriate that a Saudi team of four show jumpers has qualified to take part in this summer’s Olympics, one of just 15 teams. The last time the Saudis won an Olympic medal was for show-jumping in Sydney in 2000. They competed with great success in the Rolex Kentucky three-day Event at Lexington last summer, winning silver for show-jumping. Last year they spent millions on buying 12 high-performing horses from European stables. Their hopes are high for a medal this summer.

If, that is, they are allowed to compete. Along with Qatar and Brunei, Saudi Arabia has never sent a woman athlete to an Olympic Games. Jacques Rogge, chairman of the International Olympics Committee (IOC) has been in discussion with all three countries about their plans to send female athletes to the London Olympics and Qatar is now planning to send women athletes, who have been offered ‘wild cards’ by the IOC. Rogge wanted full gender representation at this Olympics, in compliance with the Olympic Charter which supports equality for all who want to compete, regardless of gender. On April 4, however, Prince Nawaf bin Faisal, President of the Saudi Olympic Committee, said Saudi Arabia was ‘not endorsing female participation in the London Olympics’ although he did not rule out women entering independently. This statement was taken as an official ban on female participation and provoked widespread outrage, with calls for the IOC to ban Saudi Arabia from the Games as they once banned Afghanistan under the Taliban for its attitude to women.

In fact, the Saudi statement reflects the reality of the situation in a country with very few sports facilities for women: women are simply unable to reach the qualifying standards required by the Olympics and, even if allowed to participate, could not qualify to join the male riders in the official team. There is, however, one glimmer of hope for Saudi women athletes. At the Singapore Youth Olympics in 2010 Dalma Rushdi Malhas, a young Saudi horse-rider, won a bronze medal for show-jumping, but she competed as an independent. She might be invited to participate in the same way in London this summer, but she would not be part of the country’s team.

Saudi Equestrian, the body responsible for taking the Saudi team to the Olympics is also one of the supporters of an exhibition entitled The Horse: from Arabia to Royal Ascot which will run throughout the summer at the British Museum*. The Arabian horse was said to have been created by angels or born out of the wind: in Arabia they were prized more highly than gold.

The exhibition, in Room 35 of the British Museum, will run from May 24 to September 30 and will be free.

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“Ionis Thompson is a member of the MEL Editorial Board

* The exhibition, in Room 35 of the British Museum, will run from May 24 to September 30 and will be free.
Much has been written recently about the flowering of street art in the wake of the popular uprisings of 2011 in Cairo, Tunis and Tripoli. I wanted to know more about this form of art and what part it had played in the events of that momentous year and whether it still plays a part in the continuing protests in the Middle East. I went to an expert in the field, Charles Tripp, Professor of Politics of the Middle East at SOAS, and asked him what role he thought art had played in the recent uprisings.

He said one could look at the relevance of art to the protest movements in three ways: by considering its antecedents; by looking at the public assault on official art and by observing the different artistic forms the movements gave rise to.

Taking the first of these, art in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia before 2011 gave a strong sense of something being afoot, in terms particularly of a gradual loss of authority by the governments. Huge edifices represented the state’s authority, but these edifices were effectively hollow. Artists were sapping their power. When the protests began the only weapon governments had was force, their authority having already been undermined, and so they lost in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. Art was the early warning system.

Official art, in particular statues and the pictures of dictators’ faces that used to glower over cities, had long been used to reinforce the power of the state. The uprisings reversed this by defacing or caricaturing these representations. This was a key part of the struggle for public space and although a symbolic act rather than a direct attack on authority, it had its effect in showing that the protestors could get away with it. The attack on the way power presents itself was humiliating to the authorities and had an important effect in rallying people. It showed art is of the people, and that recapturing public space is easily achieved.

The third way of looking at the relevance of art to the movements is to see how many different forms of art were able to flower after the uprisings, giving people the freedom to express their political aspirations, their solidarity with one another, their new respect for others and the commemoration of martyrs. I asked what sort of art he meant. Graffiti is an obvious one. Of course anyone can scribble on walls and only some of it can be classified as art, but it is difficult for governments to control this form of expression and it is ubiquitous. Sometimes protest art has so displeased the authorities that they’ve removed it from the show. But this censorship is itself a tribute to the art, showing its power.
Some graffiti is done using stencils: artists design pictures on the stencils and others using spray cans transfer these designs onto walls, as Banksy famously did on the Separation Wall in Israel/Palestine. In Tahrir Square, people used anything to hand to carry their messages - plastic cups, old cardboard, their own bodies, their children, even their cats. This was a sort of performance art. Then there is also fine art: there has been a flowering of art galleries and exhibitions all over the Middle East recently, which has included some examples of protest art. Sometimes protest art has so displeased the authorities that they’ve removed it from the show: this happened in the Dubai Art Fair. But this censorship is itself a tribute to the art, showing its power.

In Egypt this street art was new – there was very little before - and it represented the multiple voices of Egyptians. There was suddenly so much street art that it became difficult to stop and the number of pictures appearing gave a sort of protection to the artists. In Cairo, street art continues and acts as a running commentary on the politics of the country: it attacks the military, Islamists, everything.

I wanted to know how Charles thought protest art had influenced events at the time of the uprisings and if he thought it continued to have an impact today. It definitely had an effect at the time of the uprisings, he said, by changing the nature of public space. Now it is common to see arguments taking place in public as graffiti and counter-graffiti express opposing views and arouse terrific passions. So, street art has moved from being directed against one power to being able to express different opinions. Now it offers a rallying space which reflects the plurality of the Arab Spring. Since 2011 there has been a big growth of international interest in art from the Arab world, particularly artists who have been censored or whose work is considered critical of ruling regimes, as these artworks depict the spirit and thought processes behind the politics. Art has a subliminal effect, a drip, drip effect.

I wondered about the power of humour to influence people. Charles said humour is a very powerful tool, always. Laughter deflates power. It gives the artist self-affirmation. And it’s infectious, it encourages solidarity with others. The Egyptians have always been known for their jokes, and these have been prominent in the uprisings. Famous cartoons have made their way round the world and led to the arrest of some artists - as you can see in the illustration shown above. Ali Ferzat, a well-known cartoonist in Syria captures what’s wrong in the state with this cartoon, juxtaposed with a photograph of himself in hospital after the Syrian authorities had broken both his hands for drawing a ‘subversive’ cartoon in which an executioner is seen weeping over a soap opera on television while his victim hangs from the wall, his feet having been cut off. Although crippled by the attack on his hands, Ali Ferzat was able to depict his defiance in this cartoon which went round the world.

The internet has been important in circulating protest art around the world. This is significant, Charles pointed out, as many artists are unable to work in their own countries: Syria is particularly cruel in its repressive measures and many Syrian artists have moved to Paris and elsewhere. Is it possible to see Middle Eastern protest art in London, I asked. He said that for several years the British Museum has been collecting the works of modern Middle Eastern artists, some of it the work of protest artists, those who can’t be shown in their own countries. There have been some exhibitions by protest artists in London: the new branch of ARTSPACE Dubai which opened in London this year featured the Egyptian artist Mohammed Abla. The cartoon by Abla on the front cover of the magazine, which he has called ‘Hand in Hand’ satirises the claim, made by the authorities, that ‘The Army and the People are One’. He says: ‘In London… several paintings communicate the pressing social and political issues. Moreover, some canvases – depicting Salafis, Muslim Brotherhood and the Egyptian army – might not be accepted in Egypt right now. In the London exhibition I manage to release this charge.’

Professor Charles Tripp’s new book The Power and the People: Paths of Resistance in the Middle East will be published by CUP in November 2012.

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Ionis Thompson is a member of the MEL Editorial Board
2011

- Iran (February/March 2011)
- The GCC States (April/May 2011)
- North Africa (June/July 2011)
- The Levant (August/September 2011)
- Yemen and Oman (October/November 2011)
The Golha (‘flowers of Persian song and music’) radio programmes were broadcast on Iranian National Radio for 23 years from 1956 to 1979. They comprised approximately 850 hours of programmes made up of literary commentary with the declamation of poetry, which was sung with musical accompaniment interspersed with solo musical pieces. The Golha were the brainchild of Davoud Pirnia, a one-time assistant prime minister, enthusiastic patriot and scholar who harboured a deep love for Persian culture and its rich literary and musical traditions. He retired from political life in 1956 and for the next 11 years he devoted himself tirelessly to producing the Golha programmes.

The foremost literary, academic and musical talents of his day offered Mr Pirnia their collaboration and support. The greatest Iranian vocalists of the 20th century saw their careers launched on these radio programmes. Besides having such a rich pool of talent at his fingertips, Mr Pirnia had the support of the director of the Iranian National Radio (1950-1960s), Nusrato’llah Mu’niyan, who transformed the radio from a commercial advertising platform for entertainers and a parking place for relatives of political elites into a respected and influential vehicle for the preservation and promotion of Persian culture. The Golha programmes became exemplars of excellence in the sphere of music literature, setting standards that are still looked up to in Iran today, referred to by scholars and musicians as an encyclopaedia of Persian music and poetry. Most of the great ballads and songs in modern Persian literature were commissioned specifically for these programmes.

Mr Pirnia produced five different categories of programme: ‘Eternal Flowers’ (Golha-ye javidan), ‘Multicoloured Flowers’ (Golha -ye rangarang), ‘A Green leaf’ (Barg-e sabz), ‘A Single Flower’ (Yek shakh-e gol) and ‘Desert Flowers’ (Golha-ye sahra’i), each featuring choice selections from the lyrics of the great classical and contemporary Persian poets, combining song, declamation with musical accompaniment, learned commentary and Persian folk music.

The Golha marked a watershed in Persian culture. Before this, due to the conservative socio-religious bias, music had been practised behind closed doors. Where they performed in public spaces, performers were branded as street minstrels. Due to the high literary and musical quality of these programmes, the public perception of music and musicians in Iran shifted and its participants became referred to – for the first time – as maestros, virtuosos, divas and...
The most important effect of the Golha programmes on Iranian society was that they encouraged people to listen to good poetry and music on the radio.

Adopters of a fine art, no longer inhabiting the lowest rung of the social ladder.

The Golha programmes were so popular that people organised their schedules around listening to the broadcasts. They also evoked a neo-classical revival in Persian song and verse of the late Qajar period, which were re-interpreted and performed by modern musicians and vocalists, and likewise promoted Persian vernacular music that was carefully researched, recorded and broadcast. This helped to preserve both the vernacular and classical traditions of Persian music and poetry, which were under threat from influences both outside and within Iran that wished to modernise the society.

The most important effect of the Golha programmes on Iranian society was that they encouraged people to listen to good poetry and music on the radio, re-introducing over 560 Persian poets from the ancients to the moderns, thus re-invigorating interest in classical Persian literature. Divans of poets never properly edited or published before were suddenly in high demand. This was crucial as the illiteracy rate was 85 per cent in some places in the period 1950-60.

When Pirnia retired in 1967, several other musicians, scholars and poets succeeded him. In 1972 Hushang Ibtihaj, a well-known modern Persian poet, took responsibility for the programmes, changing their name, consolidating all the various types of 'flowers' into one programme called 'Fresh Flowers' (Golha-yi tazeh). Ebtehaj patronised the revival of interest in Persian music of the Qajar period (1794-1925). As a partial result of Ebtehaj's vision, despite the general ban on music in Iran after the 1979 Islamic revolution, a movement to preserve and cultivate the traditions of Persian urban art music is still alive and flourishing in present-day Iran.

The Golha Project began in early 2005 with a pilot project supported by the Iran Heritage Foundation, the British Institute of Persian Studies and the Department of Music at SOAS to see if it was possible to collect, archive and digitise the programmes. Following the success of the pilot project, over the next two years, with the support of the Department of Music at SOAS and British Library Endangered Archives Programme, assisted by many generous private and institutional collectors in Iran, France, Germany, Canada and the United States, the Golha programmes were collected. In July 2007 a digital copy of the complete Golha archive was deposited in the British Library's World Sound Archive.

In 2008 the second phase of the Golha project was launched, supported by the Iran Heritage Foundation, the British Academy, the Parsa Foundation and the Department of Music at SOAS. This aims to construct a searchable, relational database for the Golha programmes, which will include bibliographical data on the performers and authors, photographs, musical notation of the songs and transcriptions of the poetry. The database will be searchable through a purpose-built website allowing one to search it by programme name, number, singer of the avaz and tarana, song-writer, poet of the avaz, first line of the song or poem sung, name of the song, instrument, musician, composer, name of poet whose poetry is sung or declaimed, poetic genre, dastgah or avaz and gusha of the music performed and so on.

The searchable relational database for this important archive, which will be a unique cultural resource for students and lovers of Persian culture and a teaching tool for Persian music and literature, will be accessible at www.golha.co.uk in late 2011.

Since 2005 many other archives have been collected by or donated to the Golha project, including folk recordings, private recordings and additional archives of radio programmes, comprising thousands of hours of 20th-century Persian music. Some of these resources have already been digitised, but over 1,000 reel and cassette recordings still need to be digitised, archived, indexed and included in the Golha database. We hope that in its future phases, the Golha Project will find the support it needs to make this intangible heritage of Iran available to all.

Reprinted from vol. 7, no. 7 (2011)

Jane Lewisohn is a Research Associate for the Department of Music and an Associate Member for the Centre for Iranian Studies, SOAS
Samar Al-Sayed meets the founder of the Hajj Research Project and a distinguished SOAS alumnus who is critical of the construction boom that is transforming the skyline of the holy city

Manhattan comes to Makkah

Three years after work began on the latest expansion of the Grand Mosque's precincts, Makkah is in the midst of a property and construction boom. The mosque itself is now almost completely enclosed by skyscrapers and real-estate panels, and on entering the city cranes and construction sites obscure the view of the surrounding mountains. Some of these historically significant heights are themselves being dynamited to build luxury accommodation for well-heeled pilgrims. On Mount Omar, for instance, a gigantic Clock Tower looms where an 18th-century Ottoman fort once stood, centerpiece of one of scores of new developments in a multi-billion riyal-building spree.

With over two million pilgrims performing the obligatory Hajj pilgrimage annually and many more making the optional 'Umra pilgrimage at other times of the year, Makkah has to accommodate visitors on a scale unmatched by any other holy site on earth. The need for a further expansion of the precincts was undoubted. Yet controversy has stirred about the implementation of the project, which required the demolition of more than 1,000 adjacent properties, and the nature of the accompanying development.

'The structure and fabric of Makkah is being altered to the point of no return,' says Dr Sami Angawi, a Makkah-born architect and founder of the Hajj Research Project, which studies urban planning in relation to the dynamics of the pilgrimage to Makkah.

He stresses that the holy city is, essentially, a sanctuary. 'In Islamic thought, sanctuaries are a no-go, no matter what religion they represent. They are a red line. Within the boundaries of a sanctuary, one cannot hunt or even retaliate for the killing of one's own father. Trees are not to be uprooted. How is it, then, that we find bulldozers and dynamite in such a place?'

The Old Mosque is the main indicator of scale in the city, and any development 'must be proportionate in that it must remain the focal point,' Angawi argues. 'Creating industrial urbanisation of the type we see in Manhattan and London is simply disrespectful to the sanctuary and the character of the city. The Prophet taught us the beauty of balance – 'al-meezan' – in Arabic, which is a prevalent theme in the Qur'an. What we see in Makkah today is every bit the contradiction of the principle of balance and proportionality; skyscrapers are dwarfing the House of God and robbing Makkah of its harsh, mountainous character.'

Angawi cites another feature of the city's recent development that leads him to the shocking conclusion that 'socially and culturally, Makkah is finished.' Historically, he explains, the area surrounding the mosque was a centre for social interaction and trade between people of a huge array of nationalities. In recent times, however, the norm has been for pilgrims from different countries to be assigned to their separate camps on the periphery, with the centre now monopolised by the up-market real estate sector and its clients. After worship, the humbler visitors are ushered back to their own accommodation areas. 'As such, there is minimal interaction between Malays, Turks, Afghans, Iranians, Arabs, Pakistanis and many other nationals who come on a yearly basis. It is very sad.'

Makkah can no longer evade the tentacles of globalised capitalism. Commercialism is no longer confined to the old souqs selling cheap gold, carpets, prayer beads and other items, but has also extended to include international fast-food and hotel chains, not to mention designer boutiques.

So what is to be done about this seemingly irreversible change that is sweeping this historic goldmine? Angawi says: 'We are trying to leverage this movement in order to take our case to the highest authorities and stop the dramatic change to this skyline.'

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Samar Al-Sayed, a Saudi-based writer, holds an MA in International & Comparative Law from SOAS
Libyan society may be tribal, but the conflict is not, says Igor Cherstich

Libya: tribal war or popular revolution?

Libyan society is tribal. The Libyan uprising, however, is not a tribal conflict. This equation might appear contradictory, but it is not. Tribal dynamics have played and will play an important role in the Libyan conflict, but tribalism is not the only factor to take into account. The leadership of the Warfalla, together with some sections of the Magariah – two of the most influential tribes of Western Libya – have publicly defected from the government’s side, declaring that Qaddafi is ‘no longer a brother’. This declaration is particularly important as the two groups had an established fidelity (though not continuous) to the regime, and today the interim prime minister appointed by the anti-Qaddafi forces is effectively a Warfalla: Mahmud Jibril. Nonetheless, a view of the uprising as a conflict regulated purely by tribal motivations is misleading and, more importantly, is based on a simplistic understanding of what tribes are about in Libya.

It is important to clarify that tribal links in Libya are significant, but they are also flexible. There are about 140 tribal groups in the country. However, some Libyan tribes are not geographically homogeneous entities that can easily mobilise people when required. In other words, though they have zones of influence, they count members in different areas of the country. The Fwatir tribe, for instance, though historically attached to the area of Zliten, is diffused in small groups all over Libya. This is relevant particularly in light of the fact that many Libyans, even those that value their tribal membership and rely on tribal connections in their everyday lives, do not know who their tribal leaders are. In this sense, tribalism is not a static and clear-cut network of fixed relationships, but rather a language that people use in everyday life for different purposes. This flexibility explains not only how a member of a historically minor tribe like Qaddafi was able to stage a coup in 1969, but also how, in the minds of many Libyans, tribal affiliation does not necessarily contradict national identity.

Without doubt, ‘tribe’ and ‘nation’ are concepts that have been combined in a specific way by the Qaddafi propaganda. The Green Book explains how the jamahiriyya, (the ‘state of the masses’, the current political system in Libya) is a national entity that is modelled on the idea of ‘tribe’ as form of natural organisation and not on the notion of ‘state’, which is seen as an artificial construction. However, far from being mere rhetorical tools adopted by the regime, ‘tribe’ and ‘nation’ are also concepts that play an important role in the language of self-determination of the Libyan people, and this has to be considered when looking at the uprising.

Libyans might be aware of tribal divisions and affiliations. However, they do not refer to Libya as a geographical space occupied by tribes but as a recognisable entity, a country whose history is rooted, among other things, in precise symbols of anti-colonial resistance. The protagonists of the struggle against the Fascist colonisers, though members of specific tribes, are described as national heroes. Bearing this in mind, the Libyan uprising cannot be reduced to a tribal affair. The two camps involved in the fighting are making use of tribal affiliations, but this does not necessarily imply that Libyans are unable to think nationally.

As soon as the anti-Qaddafi forces managed to liberate the east of the country, they summoned a tribal council in the city of Al Baydha that called immediately for the creation of a transitional national council. This should not be taken to mean that those that sided against Qaddafi are, in fact, tribes that pretend to be part of a national organisation. On the contrary, it is simply that Libyans are able to discern when the language of tribal affiliation is enough, and when the national connotation that is part of ‘being Libyan’ has to be re-affirmed. Libyans are not fighting a tribal war, but a popular revolution through tribal means.

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Igor Cherstich is a Doctoral Candidate in Social Anthropology at SOAS. He has conducted extensive ethnographic fieldwork in both Eastern and Western Libya.
How can you describe the current situation in the Arab world?
I use the concept of revolutionary process because if we look at the level of the Arab world, there’s hardly any country that has not been affected by this revolutionary shockwave. The process is still going on and it will probably continue for a very long time, so we are really still at the beginning of a process of transition, of revolutionary transition. In some countries regimes are trying to cope with this without reaching the point when the people would demand an overall regime change. In Libya, Syria and Yemen, a civil war of various degrees of violence is taking place, or threatening to, and the outcome will influence the rhythm of change elsewhere.

Can we turn to Syria and talk more about the status of this process and the objectives of the opposition?
The most representative group speaking for the Syrian protest movement is probably the group of local co-ordination committees that you can find on Facebook. They demand freedom and democracy, and refuse to negotiate with the regime as long as the savage repression goes on.

We should make a basic distinction between at least two kinds of states in the Arab world. In Egypt and Tunisia, we find state apparatuses pre-existing the toppled leaders. The situation is different in Syria and Libya where the state apparatus has been radically re-shaped by the ruling family or the ruling elites. The two regimes were originally rooted in the military and, in both cases, the new rulers have completely reshaped the armed forces. If the regime were to be overthrown in Syria, it could only be as a result of a split in the armed forces and a civil war.

Are there any signs of other protests or strikes taking place in Syria?
Economic elites are still on the side of the regime because it has created favourable conditions for them in recent years. The protest movement remains mainly peripheral and the larger cities, Aleppo and Damascus, are still largely quiet. The elites are supporting the regime for fear of post-regime chaos. They may shift their position if the protests last and reach the urban centres. The fear of chaos is much higher in Syria than what you had in Egypt. And therein lies the problem: if people manage to overthrow the regime in Syria or Libya, they will face a certain degree of institutional vacuum because the existing institutions are organically linked to the dictatorships.

As for the workers’ movement, it played a major role in Tunisia and Egypt and helped

I cannot see any regime overthrow in the short term in Syria, unless there is a civil war
We are witnessing the unfolding of a revolutionary process affecting all of the region and it will take years.
Janet Watson explores the six languages which survive alongside Arabic in the southern Arabian peninsula

The non-Arabic languages of southern Arabia

Six unwritten Semitic languages, known as Modern South Arabian Languages (MSAL), still survive in the southern Arabian peninsula: Mehri spoken in eastern Yemen, western Oman and fringes of the Empty Quarter; Jibbali (or Ṣ̣ḥẹṛi) spoken in western Oman; Hobyōt spoken in eastern Yemen and western Oman; Harsūsi and Baṭḥari spoken in western Oman; and Socotri spoken on the island of Socotra. The MSAL share with other Semitic languages the consonantal root-and-pattern structure of verbs, nouns and adjectives. Thus words involving k-t-b, for example, express the notion of writing. They also share much of the basic lexicon with one or another Semitic language. They are not, however, mutually comprehensible with their close cousins Arabic, Hebrew or Ethio-Semitic. (This also applies to the language or dialect spoken on Jabal Rāziḥ in north Yemen, and other similar survivals may yet be discovered).

An estimated 100,000-180,000 people straddling three state borders still speak Mehri, 60,000 Socotri, 10,000 Jibbali, under 1000 Harsūsi, around 400 Hobyōt and only a few Baṭḥari. Given the geographical separation of Harsūsi in Jiddat al-Ḥarāsī, Oman, and that early Islamic maps show Mahrah extending well beyond the present extent of spoken Mehri, these languages have clearly retreated significantly over the past 1500 years.

The MSAL were first discovered by western writers in the 1830s, and the sixth MSAL, Hobyōt, was only discovered (by Lonnet and Simeone-Senelle) in the 1980s. The major stages in MSAL documentation are the work of the Viennese Expedition of the early twentieth century, the research of the renowned SOAS linguist, T M Johnstone, on the MSAL of Oman from the late 1960s to the early 1980s, and the French mission studies of the MSAL of Yemen from 1983 to the present day. Since 2000 field research on Mehri has also been conducted by Liebhaber on poetry and songs, Sima on the Mehri of eastern Yemen, and myself on the Mehri of eastern Yemen and Oman. All this work has been conducted with the acknowledged collaboration of native speakers.

The MSAL are of great typological interest to Semitists and general linguists. They are the only Semitic languages still spoken to have three plain sibilants - /s/, /š/ (English ‘sh’) and /ś/, a lateral sibilant very similar to Welsh ‘ll’. They are also the only ones which differentiate between singular, plural and dual in pronouns and verbs. Thus ‘we went’ in Omani Mehri can be realised as ākay syarki ‘we (dual) went’ or as nḥah syūran ‘we (plural) went’. The majority of MSAL are also unique within both extant and extinct Semitic languages in negating a clause with a final negator, as in Omani Mehri wadak kam lāʾsaxawwal bi-maskūt lā [literally: I know how long I will stay in Muscat] ‘I don’t know how long I will stay in Muscat’, or with an initial and final negator, as in: la-ḥams tinkā lā [literally: not I want her come not] ‘I don’t want her to come’. The fact that Socotri, the most conservative of the MSAL, negates at the beginning of the clause, as in other Semitic languages, suggests that some MSAL have gone from using an initial negator to an initial and final negator and then to a final negator only. This development is seen in French, for example, where ne, the original negator, was reinforced by pas ‘step’, and in some dialects pas can express negation on its own, as in je veux pas ‘I don’t want’. This discovery is of great interest to comparative linguists.

All MSAL are endangered languages, and not all members of their ethnic groups still speak them. Threats to their survival include education (dominantly in Arabic), the development of mass communication, and the rapid loss of traditional cultural knowledge and practices. They therefore urgently need documenting for future linguists to study, and for the sake of future generations of speakers.

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Janet Watson is Professor of Arabic Linguistics at the University of Salford, and author of several books and articles on southern Arabian dialects and languages, including The Phonology and Morphology of Arabic (2002) and The Structure of Mehri (In preparation)
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Centre for Iranian Studies
Dr Arshin Adib-Moghaddam (Chair)
E: aa106@soas.ac.uk
T: +44 (0)20 7898 4747
W: www.soas.ac.uk/lmei-cis

MA in Iranian Studies
Dr Nima Mina (Department of the Languages and Culture of the Middle East)
E: nm46@soas.ac.uk
T: +44 (0)20 7898 4315
W: www.soas.ac.uk/nme/programmes/ma-in-iranian-studies

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