

AMERICAN POLITICAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATION

# MENA POLITICS

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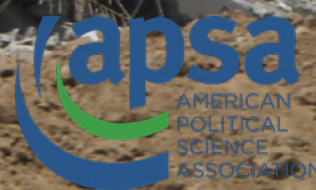


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# Letter From the Editors



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Greetings from the editors of *MENA Politics*, the newsletter of the APSA Section on Middle East and North African Politics.

We are pleased to present the spring 2024 issue of the newsletter, albeit with heavy hearts. The war in Gaza weighs upon us, as section chair Curtis Ryan expounds upon in his letter. The regional landscape already generates enough problems and puzzles to fuel a lifetime of research. The latest bloodshed is something else entirely: it has drawn many of us into difficult personal and professional situations that have tested our ethical commitments, and in the shadow of the war's horrendous human toll.

Much of this issue's content thus centers upon the dynamics of this conflict. The first section comprises two eye-opening essays. The first is a gripping narrative—in the style of critical autobiography—from Ian Lustick. Ian reflects upon the professional and academic costs of adopting critical stances on Israel and Palestine throughout his career, as well as the commitments required to weather deeply emotional storms. The second essay features Marc Lynch and Shibley Telhami, who present astounding results from their pioneering Middle East Scholars Barometer project. They reveal what Middle East political scientists believe on intellectual

and political issues, such as how many feel pressure to self-censor their opinions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (spoiler: it's almost everyone).

In the first symposium, we continue to think of ways to process the graphic stream of civilian suffering from Gaza and to seriously harness our research efforts to reclaim the humanity of people subjected to daily violence and erasure. We thus turn to our colleagues in political science, as well as history, anthropology, and international legal studies, to help us understand this fraught time. We asked these scholars to respond to the following question: "What is one prevalent misconception about the conflict, and how can the field of political science effectively respond to this misunderstanding?" Their contributions highlight the historical roots of the conflict, its regional and global ramifications, and which policy options are made available or foreclosed based on the language and analytical frames we adopt.

The second symposium departs from Gaza, but addresses still an extremely important issue: electoral processes under the autocratic or semi-autocratic regimes in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Elections remain an integral aspect of political life in many MENA states, transpiring

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## Letter from the Editors (continued)

regardless of what crises explode in other parts of the region. Thus, the contributions address various aspects of electoral politics, including minority participation in Iran, representation in Lebanon, political transformations in Iraq, voting behavior in anti-sectarian protests, the impact of electoral systems on tribal representation in Jordan and Kuwait, and the role of elections in conflict transformation and peacebuilding in Algeria, Tunisia, Sudan, and Jordan. Together, these essays challenge perceptions of MENA elections as mere tools of authoritarian regimes, and underscore the vital role of electoral system designs as well as their broader implications on the political dynamics in the region.

To continue with our focus on Gaza, we organized a new section in the last part of this issue—a special forum on teaching about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. This forum features interviews with four scholars, who share their rich experiences and pedagogical strategies in teaching this difficult topic. As the conflict remains unresolved and highly contested, we, as instructors, expect to continue to face significant challenges in the classroom, unfortunately. Therefore, while sharing these scholars' incredibly valuable ideas, we do not claim to have discovered magical solutions to resolve the tensions, constraints, and pressures that come with leading these courses. Nevertheless, we hope readers will reflect on their own experiences, and benefit from the readings list and other insights from this forum.

As always, we eagerly wish to hear ideas from section members for the next issue. No later than June 1, 2024, please send your suggestions, or proposals, on articles to Sean Yom ([seanyom@temple.edu](mailto:seanyom@temple.edu)); on symposia to Nermin Allam ([nermin.allam@rutgers.edu](mailto:nermin.allam@rutgers.edu)); and on roundtables to Gamze Çavdar ([gamze.cavdar@colostate.edu](mailto:gamze.cavdar@colostate.edu)). Section members outside the US are particularly encouraged to contact us.

Finally, we are seeking section members to become the next editor(s) of this newsletter. Our three-year editorial term ends this calendar year, following the fall 2024 issue (to be released in October). Please see the call for nominations and applications in this issue for more information!

- Nermin Allam, Gamze Çavdar, and Sean Yom

If you have comments, suggestions, or ideas for future issues and new features please contact:

Nermin Allam at [nermin.allam@rutgers.edu](mailto:nermin.allam@rutgers.edu) for symposium proposals,  
Gamze Çavdar at [gamze.cavdar@colostate.edu](mailto:gamze.cavdar@colostate.edu) for roundtable proposals, and  
Sean Yom at [seanyom@temple.edu](mailto:seanyom@temple.edu) for article proposals.

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DOI: 10.5281/ZENODO.11061191

# News from the APSA MENA Section

Our organized section has been working hard to prepare for the annual APSA conference to be held on September 5-8, 2024, in Philadelphia. Allison Hartnett and Shamiran Mako—our section co-chairs for the meeting—are working on our program, which honors our pledge from last year to allow some panels to defer from APSA 2023 to this year's meetings. We have also added additional panels, so that our section will have more panels than ever before.

During the APSA meetings, our section will also hold its business meeting online via Zoom, during which we will announce the winners our four annual awards: best article, best book, best APSA paper, and best dissertation. Vice Chair Yael Zeira assembled all the committees, while our nomination committee of Amaney Jamal, Adria Lawrence, and Nathan Brown will also be nominating candidates to replace at-large representative Allison Hartnett and Vice Chair Yael Zeira. Elections for the new officers will be held via an online ballot later this spring. On behalf of the section: Thank you Yael and Allison for all your work over these two years.

## A Few Words on Our Current Challenges

The Gaza conflict has led to conflict within our profession. I know that we have all been following events in the region with heavy hearts, making it hard to even function sometimes as a professional in an academic or any other setting. Our bylaws and APSA rules prevent me from making political statements, so I can't comment on the current war itself. But I can and will comment on our profession and the unusual difficulties, threats to academic freedom, and severe constraints facing us all as scholars and teachers in these

very difficult times.

The study of Middle East politics has always been fraught with controversies, but the present circumstances are dire for many in our field. This is true of any discipline studying the Middle East today, but I think it is especially true for political scientists. The public and professional setting has become particularly toxic for many in our field. This may not be true at your institution, but please be aware that it is true for many others. And that means that our members are extremely vulnerable right now—more so than perhaps ever before.

The threat to academic freedom is particularly intense at present. We have colleagues who have been suspended from their jobs, who have been publicly doxed, and who have had false accusations levelled against them—while many of our colleagues in other subfields in political science have no idea that any of this is even happening.

Many Middle East specialists occupy incredibly difficult positions, often being pressured to speak at public events due to their expertise on regional politics, but in doing so exposing themselves to potentially dangerous situations. For some, this brings threats to their professional careers, current academic position, or future hiring prospects. For others, these dangers can mean personal worries about their own physical safety.

Ours is a truly international section of the American Political Science Association. Our members come from all over the world, and our circumstances vary considerably by location. But no matter where our members are,

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## News from the APSA MENA Section (continued)

it is important to be especially mindful of the vast structural differences we face in terms of our own vulnerability or privilege. Graduate students and junior faculty are in deeply vulnerable positions. This is especially true for international students and faculty, working in universities within countries where they do not hold local citizenship.

These constraints also affect even the most senior faculty. In the US, for example, patterns of privilege and vulnerability vary greatly between elite private institutions and public universities and colleges where state legislatures may monitor campus discourse. Overall, pressures differ based not only on one's own position (student, junior faculty, senior faculty, administration), but also on one's identity (such as gender, ethnicity, and religion), geographic and national setting, and even type of academic institution.

In short, we all face varying degrees of stress and strain, as individuals and as professionals. And we can't ever fully know what pressures others are facing. But we can try our best to support our colleagues in the field. I am asking, in short, that we all be mindful of these severe pressures and constraints, and to support and be sensitive to each other.

Our section has always adamantly supported

academic freedom.<sup>1</sup> And it always will. APSA itself has weighed in regarding some circumstances, issuing specific statements defending academic freedom. But there are also other resources that are especially important in these times. The Middle East Studies Association's Committee on Academic Freedom has been an active force for academic freedom for years, and it is an extremely important resource available to all of us who study the Middle East.<sup>2</sup> In addition, our section has released a series of measures to safeguard your digital security. We encourage all members to look into these, which are available online.<sup>3</sup>

In the meantime, I hope to see you all at APSA 2024, either in person at the meeting in Philadelphia, or online during our annual business meeting, which will be held via Zoom during the conference.

Curtis Ryan  
MENA Section Chair

1 American Political Science Association, "Statement on Indiana University's Sanctioning of Professor Abdulkader Sinno," 9 February 2024, <https://politicalsciencenow.com/apsa-statement-on-indiana-universitys-sanctioning-of-professor-abdulkader-sinno/>.

2 Middle East Studies Association, Committee on Academic Freedom website, <https://mesana.org/advocacy/committee-on-academic-freedom>.

3 MENA Politics Section of APSA, "Important Information on Digital Security for All APSA MENA Members," 9 December 2023, <https://connect.apsanet.org/groups/middle-east-and-north-africa-politics-section-49/forum/group/important-information-on-digital-security-for-all-apsa-mena-members/>. Note: section members must log in to the APSA Connect system to access this bulletin. The recommendations are also posted on Bluesky, here: <https://bsky.app/profile/apsamena.bsky.social/post/3khwfzfmgs2z>.



# News from the APSA MENA Program

*The American Political Science Association's [MENA Program](#) is a multi-year effort to support political science research and networking among early-career scholars across the Middle East and North Africa. Through a series of workshops, departmental collaborations, research grants, and other opportunities, the program extends APSA's engagement with the international political science community and strengthens research networks linking American scholars with colleagues overseas. The goal of APSA's MENA Workshops, generously funded by Carnegie Corporation of New York through 2025, is to enhance the capacities and resources of political scientists in the Arab MENA region, while also providing a forum for supporting their ongoing research.*

Greetings!

In December 2023, APSA launched a research methods training initiative for early-career scholars from the MENA region. Unlike short-term training that concludes after a few days of instruction, APSA's program combines intensive in-person instruction with a range of extended engagements, and features skill-building activities closely linked to research outputs.

The inaugural program, titled "[Quantitative Methods for the Social Sciences: Regression Analysis](#)," was held at the Doha Institute of Graduate Studies, in partnership with the Arab Political Science Network (APSN). Led by Drs. Abdelkarim Amengay (Doha Institute), Sarah Mansour (Cairo University), and Ammar Shamaileh (Doha Institute), the program provided intermediate-level training on understanding and applying quantitative methods in social science research. Twenty-two graduate students and early-career Arab scholars partook in the program, which commenced with three virtual sessions over Zoom in November 2023, followed by a 3-day in-person workshop from December 7-9, 2023 at the Doha Institute. The virtual component served as a refresher-course to regression analysis, with sessions on statistical inference, hypothesis testing, and difference-in-differences. The in-person workshop in December 2023 delved deeper into regres-

sion analysis, covering topics ranging from basic linear regression to difference-in-differences. Following their participation, fellows received a one-year APSA membership and were prioritized through APSA's [MENA Mentoring Initiative](#) to be paired with senior scholar mentors for a period of 3-6 months, with the goal of advancing a specific scholarly output such as a journal article, book chapter, book project, or dataset.

The second methods training workshop, titled "Qualitative Methods for the Social Sciences: Causal Analysis," will be held in May 2024 in collaboration with the Tangier American Legation Museum (TALIM) and the Moroccan Institute for Policy Analysis (MIPA). The program, led by Drs. Jason Brownlee (University of Texas), Matt Buehler (University of Tennessee), and Zaynab El Bernoussi (NYU-Abu Dhabi), aims to reinforce participants' foundational knowledge of qualitative research methods, and to provide training on some of the specific tools of causal analysis used in high-quality qualitative research.

In partnership with the [Institute for Qualitative and Multi-Method Research](#) (IQMR) at Syracuse University and the [Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research](#) (ICPSR) at the University of Michigan, APSA will also support four scholars (each) to attend these programs in summer 2024.

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## News from the APSA MENA Program (continued)

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Additionally, we continue to offer mentorship to graduate students and early-career scholars through the [MENA Mentorship Initiative](#). A call for applications was announced for the spring mentoring cycle in March 2023, with priority given to methods workshop alumni as a follow-up engagement to advance research towards publication.

We look forward to sharing program news, updates, and additional information on APSA's MENA Program website: <http://web.apsanet.org/mena/>. For questions, please e-mail us at [menaworkshop@apsanet.org](mailto:menaworkshop@apsanet.org).

APSA MENA Project Team  
American Political Science Association

# Bulletin from REMENA (Research & Ethics in the Middle East)

*The REMENA Project—the Special Commission on Research Ethics in the Middle East and North Africa—aims to develop recommendations for responsible, ethical, and constructive social inquiry in and on the region.*

Like nearly everyone else in our field, your colleagues at REMENA have been preoccupied and dispirited by events in Israel and Gaza—and in universities across North America—since our last bulletin in the fall 2023 issue of *MENA Politics*. It has been a very trying time, and today's information and communication technologies only heighten the immediacy and sharpen the edge of brutality and intimidation. For better or worse, however, we who have worked in this field for a long time have been tested by conflict and contestation before—my own reflections on the obligations this imposes on us were rehearsed in my MESA Presidential Address of 20 years ago!—and we at REMENA are committed to continuing to foster the conditions that will permit what we call “the conduct of responsible, ethical and constructive social inquiry.”<sup>1</sup>

To that end, our collaborative network has produced several publications that are either already out or in the works. In *Global Perspectives*, we collected a series of articles on various aspects of social science in the region. You can find the introduction to this cluster, co-authored by me and Bassel Salloukh, online; like all the contributions, it is open-access.<sup>2</sup> *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and Middle East* will be publishing a special issue that grew out of a REMENA work group. Its introductory essay, “Decolonizing Research/Politicizing Ethics,” by Lila Abu-Lughod and Maysoun Sukarieh,

will probably win REMENA's best title award!

In addition, *Daedalus*, the journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, will also be devoting a special issue to REMENA's work. Contributions to that volume were presented at a very productive workshop hosted by the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies in February, focused on a mix of our research findings as well as comparative perspectives from African and Latin American studies.

Because *Daedalus* is read by leaders across the US foundation and university worlds, the volume will also include discussion of the long-promised guidelines for enhancing the capacity of funders, publishers, NGOs, universities and other participants and stakeholders to facilitate the “responsible, ethical and constructive” work we all aspire to do. Thus, the focus within REMENA in the coming months will be on developing, refining, vetting and disseminating those very guidelines. We expect to have a small planning meeting in June to organize the production of draft guidelines; anyone who is interested in participating in this next phase of our work—including contributing to vetting and disseminating the recommendations—should let us know. As always, comments and suggestions more than welcome.

1 Lisa Anderson, “Scholarship, Policy, Debate and Conflict: Why We Study the Middle East and Why It Matters.” *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin* 38 (2004): 2–15.

2 For the introductory article, see <https://doi.org/10.1525/gp.2024.93054>.

# Bulletin from REMENA (Research & Ethics in the Middle East)

(continued)

Anyone interested in learning more about the REMENA project or participating in its activities should contact us via our website (<https://www.mei.columbia.edu/re-mena-about>), by official e-mail ([remena@columbia.edu](mailto:remena@columbia.edu)), or by sending a note to Lisa Anderson ([la8@columbia.edu](mailto:la8@columbia.edu)).

- Lisa Anderson, REMENA Project PI  
Dean Emerita, School of International and  
Public Affairs, and Faculty Associate  
Middle East Institute, Columbia University

# News from the Arab Political Science Network (cont.)

*The Arab Political Science Network is a collaborative scholarly initiative that seeks to support Arab political scientists.*

Greetings to all!

These are egregious times for the MENA region and the world. The Arab Political Science Network (APSN) extends its support and sympathies to everyone in our communities—students, educators, researchers, and scholars—directly and indirectly affected by the ongoing daily assaults on Palestine. Nothing we could say would fully capture these horrendous and tragic attacks. Nonetheless, we believe in and support academic freedoms in the region and beyond, while unequivocally condemning all dehumanizing language, bigotry, and silencing.

Despite the difficult circumstances and troubling times, APSN started 2024 with a seminar series on [Politics of Infrastructure](#) in the MENA region in collaboration with [CEDEJ](#). This builds on previous webinars APSN hosted around the growing interdisciplinary approaches to study [infrastructure](#) and [urban](#) politics. The series started on January 16 with a timely conversation around War, Destruction, and Infrastructure, focusing on Palestine and Yemen. We invite you to sign up for our upcoming sessions on [Transportation, Ports and Logistics](#) in May. And if you are in Cairo in July, join us for a workshop on the Politics of Infrastructure, which will bring together over 20 researchers.

## Looking Ahead

Over the coming weeks, APSN will launch calls for applications to three different workshops that will take place over the summer and fall of 2024. The first is an online training

on Quantitative and Digital Methods aimed at both academic and non-academic researchers. The second is our annual Research Development workshop that will focus on war, the changing tides of regional politics, and conflict resolution in the Middle East. The third is our annual teaching workshop, which will look at how faculty and educators teach contentious topics like Palestine, civil wars, and military interventions in the region. If you have any questions about any of these upcoming opportunities, please write to [workshops@arabpsn.org](mailto:workshops@arabpsn.org).

Finally, mark your calendars for an exciting roundtable this upcoming September, at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association (APSA) in Philadelphia. The roundtable is entitled, “Studying Political Behavior in the Middle East and North Africa: Like, Share, or Scroll Past?” It will feature Nermin Allam, Amaney Jamal, Melani Cammett, Youssef Chouhoud, and Ammar Shamaileh.

Check APSN’s [YouTube](#) Channel to see our latest playlists featuring our previous webinars and [research methods](#) videos. Additionally, you might be interested in perusing recent episodes and book reviews from our partners, [Ghayen](#) podcast and [Al-Salon](#). Both provide non-fiction and academic conversations and reviews in Arabic.

# News from the Arab Political Science Network

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You can find more information on our website – [www.arabpsn.org](http://www.arabpsn.org) – and by following us on [Twitter](#) (aka *X*), [Facebook](#), [LinkedIn](#), and [YouTube](#). Please reach out to us at [info@arabpsn.org](mailto:info@arabpsn.org) with any questions, suggestions, and ideas for collaborations.

- Ahmed Morsy (on behalf of the APSN team)

# Call for New Editors

**Deadline: June 1, 2024**

We invite applications and nominations for the editorship of this newsletter, *MENA Politics*—the official publication of the APSA organized section on Middle East politics. The editorship carries a three-year term, with the task of overseeing two issues per calendar year (fall/winter and spring/summer). The section provides a \$250 stipend per issue for an editorial/production assistant (such as a graduate student). The editorial term will start after the fall 2024 issue.

The main responsibilities of the new editor, or editorial team, include:

**-Soliciting** section-relevant information for every issue, such as news from the section board, award winners, and bulletins from affiliated initiatives, such as APSA's MENA Workshops;

**-Curating** and **editing** content for every issue, which typically includes one to three stand-alone academic articles (2,500 to 4,000 words), one to two themed scholarly symposia (clusters of 4-6 short articles on the same topic, each 1,500 to 2,000 words), and at least one interactive roundtable (short essays between scholars in dialogue on a shared engagement, such as a book under review or mutual teaching challenge);

**-Producing** every issue according to the highest visual standards, with the final output taking the form of a downloadable PDF to be disseminated throughout the organized section, other APSA members, and the broader fields of Middle East political science and Middle East studies;

**-Selecting** editorial board members, after collecting nominations and self-nominations from the section;

**-Conducting** two editorial meetings per year with the 8-person editorial board (coinciding with the start of every issue under development), which assists the editors by providing suggestions, brainstorming ideas, and volunteering to write or help organize content for the upcoming issue;

**-Attending** the board meetings of the organized section in the capacity of *ex officio* officer.

Please send nominations or applications to the current editorial team: Nermin Allam ([nermin.allam@rutgers.edu](mailto:nermin.allam@rutgers.edu)), Gamze Çavdar ([gamze.cavdar@colostate.edu](mailto:gamze.cavdar@colostate.edu)), and Sean Yom ([seanyom@temple.edu](mailto:seanyom@temple.edu)). Applications should include a current CV, and proposal (one page or less) that lays out an editorial vision, including potential ideas for future issues and any planned innovations—including changing the current format or experimenting with new sections.

Applications will be shared with the newsletter editorial board under our practice of inclusive governance, with final decisions rendered by the current editors in conjunction with the section board. **The deadline for applications and nominations is June 1, 2024.**

# Sitting on the Third Rail: Studying Israelis and Palestinians, Then and Now

*Ian Lustick*



*Ian Lustick is Bess W. Heyman Professor (Emeritus) of the Department of Political Science at the University of Pennsylvania. His most recent book is *Paradigm Lost: From Two-State Solution to One-State Reality* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019). E-mail: [ilustick@sas.upenn.edu](mailto:ilustick@sas.upenn.edu).*

I have been asked to describe what it has been like for a political scientist to specialize professionally on Israeli and Palestinian politics. Younger scholars are familiar with the strong emotions and political pressures they confront while laboring in this particular vineyard. How do these challenges compare with those I faced over the last half century? Well on my way to moosehead status, I am free to answer this question without affecting my career prospects.

First, I should say that I am neither to be regarded as a victim nor as a hero. On the whole, I have been delighted with and grateful for a career that has been well-supported by universities, foundations, and government agencies, and that has included work ranging far beyond my scholarship on Israel and Palestine—research, teaching, and consulting on computer simulation modeling, social science methods, applications of evolutionary theory to historical institutionalism, organization theory, constructivist approaches to collective identity, theories of control and hegemony, and analysis of how historiographical variation challenges the uses of history as evidence for comparative political scientists. I have had the added satisfaction of being rewarded for producing knowledge directly relevant to

the two peoples whose struggles are closest to my heart—Jews and Palestinian Arabs. Unsurprisingly, however, I have encountered obstacles and challenges that no one working in this area should imagine they can entirely escape.

When I left Brandeis University in 1971 for graduate study, my aim was to become a political scientist focused on comparative and international politics with a special, but not limiting focus, on the Arab-Israeli conflict. I chose Berkeley for two reasons. First, its program offered an historically grounded and theoretically sophisticated approach to social science, emphasizing deep and large questions and demanding conceptual and analytical rigor in attempts to answer them. Second, I did not trust anyone to teach me Middle East politics. Aside from George Lenczowski, who specialized on Pahlavi Iran and the Saudi monarchy, and with whom (since I was Jewish) I was in no danger of forming a close relationship, no one on the social science faculty at Berkeley taught or did research on the topics that mattered to me most.

The importance of this criterion for me, in 1971, documents how longstanding has been the saturation of our field with a Zionist/Isra-



el version of Lysenkoism—pervasive pressures, both official and unofficial, demanding obeisance to approved catechisms enforced by threats of social ostracism and career punishment. In fact, if anything, I vastly underestimated the scale of the professional and career challenges that I would confront by, in my mind, simply seeking to satisfy a deep curiosity about problems close to my heart.

Of course, my commitment to the topic was not simple. However melodramatic it may sound, the fires in my belly were lit in the crematoria of Nazi extermination camps, especially Treblinka, where all my relatives in my

**“...how longstanding has been the saturation of our field with a Zionist/Israel version of Lysenkoism—pervasive pressures, both official and unofficial, demanding obeisance to approved catechisms enforced by threats of social ostracism and career punishment.”**

grandfather’s village nearby that site of horrors were exterminated. Above all I wanted to know enough about Jews, about Israel, and about the struggles in the Middle East, so that I could do my part to honor the categorical imperative of our age: “Never

Again” for any group—not for Jews, not for Palestinians, not for anyone. That meant arguing with those most passionately committed, either to Israel’s destruction or to Jewish domination of the entire country. These arguments quickly produced embarrassment by showing how much less I knew than did my interlocutors. Solving that problem drove me into years of obsessive study of Jewish, Zionist, and Palestinian history, Hebrew and Arabic, Middle Eastern politics, and anything related to contemporary Israeli and Palestinian affairs. Some of this was accomplished in

course work, at the Jacob Hiatt Institute in Jerusalem in 1969, with Ben Halpern and Nahum Glatzer at Brandeis, and with William Brinner at Berkeley, but mostly this was done on my own.

After two years in Berkeley, studying theories of comparative and international politics, I received support to spend a year in Israel and the occupied territories, doing dissertation research on the impact of the occupation on the development of Palestinian nationalism and prospects for an independent Palestinian state. My mentor, Ernie Haas, who left Nazi Germany with his family in the late 1930s, supported my efforts but only after telling me my project was a giant mistake: “The politics of working on Arab-Israeli stuff will make your life miserable. It will ruin your career.” My life has not been miserable and, as noted above, I have had a satisfying career, but as usual Ernie was telling me something I needed to know. I ignored it then but soon came to understand what he was talking about. If my skin were not so thick, and had it not been for some plain good luck, his prophecy would have come true.

Soon after my arrival in Berkeley I joined two Jewish communities—a small but dynamic orthodox synagogue and the Radical Jewish Union (RJU). The latter was a collection of socialist Zionists, Yiddishists, and counter-culture Jewish students based on the Berkeley campus. The RJU published its own newspaper, *The Jewish Radical*. In my first article for the paper I made a simple argument. Without asking who was responsible in 1948 for the transformation of three-quarters of a million Palestinians into refugees, I suggested it was appropriate for Jews to acknowledge that Israel was partly built on the suffering of others and that a portion of Jewish contributions to Israel should be used

to compensate and rehabilitate Palestinian refugees (Lustick 1972a).

Living on a shoestring, I needed whatever extra income I could find. I was therefore happy to accept a one-morning-a-week job as a Hebrew school teacher for a new cooperative school my synagogue was forming with a local conservative synagogue. But after my article appeared in the *Jewish Radical*, I received a telephone call from the Rabbi of my synagogue asking me to come to see him. He was sorry, he said, he thought it was wrong, but he had been told by the conservative synagogue's Rabbi, who had read my article, that if I were not removed immediately from the faculty of the new joint Hebrew school, the entire project would be cancelled. I was fired.

My main activity within the Radical Jewish Union was a petition campaign called *Yaish Breira* (There is an Alternative), supporting creation of a Palestinian state. The petition, which attracted some 400 signatures from Jewish activists around the world, demanded an end to Jewish settlement in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. There were only 1,100 settlers in those areas at the time, but we saw them as the beginning of the end of what we still hoped could be a Jewish and democratic state (Lustick 1972b; *Yaish Breira* 1972; *Yaish Breira* 1973). Each signature was a battle. Often, I, and those working on the project with me, were insulted and condemned as self-hating Jews, as antisemites, and even as Nazis because we supported a “two-state solution.” Illustrating *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*, today I am still the target for these insults, but am now targeted in part because I consider the two-state solution to be no longer attainable.

In July 1973 I arrived in Israel to continue my study of Hebrew and Arabic while developing

a dissertation project focused on political implications of the occupation. But the 1973 War forced a change in plans. I shifted my attention to Arabs in Israel, who comprised 15 percent of Israeli citizens. The first title of the project featured Johan Galtung's theory of “structural imperialism” applied to analyze Jewish-Arab relations inside the country. After covering my draft with furious comments, Ernie smilingly informed me that I had indeed found a dissertation. Then he gave me advice that this time I took: “You'll be in enough trouble with what you're doing. Don't use the word ‘imperialism’ or ‘colonialism.’” So I adopted “control” for the dissertation and titled the book it became: *Arabs in the Jewish State: Israel's Control of a National Minority* (Lustick 1980).

It is never “easy” to turn a dissertation into a book, but the saga of my first book's publication opens a window onto barriers in the 1970s facing work considered critical of Israel. My dissertation committee—Robert Price, Ernie Haas, Ken Jowitt, and Don Peretz (from SUNY Binghamton)—was enthusiastic, though there were times when Ernie struggled with my analysis because of sympathies he had for Israel that were challenged by the dissertation's empirics. This enthusiasm, I'm sure, accounts for the Department's decision to nominate my dissertation that year for APSA's Gabriel Almond Award for the Best Dissertation in Comparative Politics. Unbeknownst to me, Ken Jowitt sent the dissertation to his friend, an editor at the University of California Press, who jolted Ken by refusing to send it out for review. Nothing like what I had written had ever been published in the United States—nothing examining the systematic policies of surveillance, resource extraction, and manipulation that accounted for the otherwise puzzling quiescence of Israeli non-Jews. Whether editors were them-

selves biased in favor of protecting Israel's image, whether they were too shocked to believe my account was accurate, or whether they were frightened away from what they considered a promising project by fear of rebuke or retribution by superiors, I do not know. What I do know is that when I submitted the manuscript to Harvard, Princeton, and other top academic presses, the responses I received were identical. Each press looked at the dissertation and refused to send it out for review.

I was tempted to send it to Britain, where publication would be possible, but I wanted to make a point by publishing it in the United States. In 1977 I reached out to the University of Texas Press, which had a Middle East focused book series. UT Press did send it out for review, and after receiving strong endorsements from one Israeli and one American reviewer, offered me a contract. I signed it, and spent the summer of 1977 in Israel gathering new material and the next academic year updating and polishing the manuscript for publication. But months after submitting the revised manuscript, I received a letter informing me that the Board of Governors of the University of Texas had decided to cancel my contract. No reasons were given in the letter, but in an agonized voice on the telephone the editor explained that the decision had nothing to do with the quality of the work.

I was furious and came as close as I have ever come to abandoning my hopes for a career in academia. Instead, I decided to fight. I knew the original reviewers were Mark Tessler and Sammy Smooha. I wrote to them, and they wrote to the press. The editor, who was ashamed by what had happened, appealed to his superiors and came back to me with a new plan. If the manuscript were sent out to

one more (Israeli) reviewer, then the Board would reconsider its decision based on that review. I breathed a sigh of relief, despite knowing that publication of the already delayed project would be postponed by at least another six months.

It took an agonizing four months before the review came back. The editor sent me the text of the review, which denounced my manuscript as a meritless attempt to "vilify" Israel. The Board would now maintain their original decision. From the scanty substantive comments provided I could tell that the reviewer knew virtually nothing about the topic of the Arab minority in Israel. When I called the editor, he accidentally told me who the reviewer was—the senior scholar and Israeli-expatriate, Nadav Safran, of Harvard University's Department of Government. I then composed a ten-page refutation of everything in Safran's review, in the course of which I explained my own point of view and background as a committed Jew, a Zionist, and a lover of Israel who believed that only by discussing, clearly and analytically, the problems the country faced and the long-term consequences of the policies it was pursuing, would Israel survive. UT Press responded by agreeing to publish the book, but only on one condition—that I include a preface quoting extensively from my long letter expressing my Jewish and Zionist values and my commitment to Israel.

I protested. I did not want my book judged based on who I was, but on the argument it made and the evidence it contained. But the choice was clear. If I refused to write the kind of preface the press wanted, the book would not appear. I accepted the condition, but negotiated hard to reduce the amount of personal information that would have to be included. In 1980 my book appeared and

went on to become one of the UT Press's most successful Middle Eastern titles—even-ually translated into both Hebrew and Arabic. Nonetheless, I was horrified by how the press (obviously worried about political backlash) chose to describe me on the book jacket. "Ian Lustick," it said, "is an assistant professor of government at Dartmouth College, where he serves as a faculty advisor to Hillel."

So the dissertation did become a book that was widely read, positively reviewed, and extensively cited. But years later, I learned that there was a part of the story I did not know. At a Dartmouth College conference in the 1980s, a somewhat inebriated Walker Connor drew me away for a private conversation. Tearfully, he told me he had a confession to make. I was taken aback. I had never met him before, though of course his work on "primordial" identities had served me well as a foil for my own approach. He related that years earlier, in 1976, he had served on the APSA's three-person Gabriel Almond Dissertation Award committee. He and one other member of the committee were persuaded beyond all doubt that my dissertation deserved the award, but the third member absolutely refused to accept their decision because of the negative light the work cast on Israel. Connor said that he had lived painfully for years with the guilt, as he put it, of surrendering to the third committee member's demand—of failing to insist on making the right decision, and not the easy one.

This episode helped me appreciate the extent to which, in ways unknown and largely unknowable, there had been and would be a high professional price to pay for producing honest scholarship on Israel and particularly on Israeli-Palestinian relations. Two more examples of my experiences will suffice,

when usually invisible practices of blacklisting and ostracism emerged from the shadows.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, I returned my attention to the question of the future of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, especially in relation to the flood of Israeli settlers in those areas whose explicit purpose was to prevent emergence of a Palestinian state and ensure their eventual incorporation into the Israeli state. The research program that developed included numerous articles on land expropriation, settlement, Jerusalem, and state-building, a book on the ideology and internal disagreements of the Israeli settler movement, and two books drawing on the British and French experiences in heavily settled but difficult-to-absorb territories—Ireland and Algeria—to analyze the structures, strategies, and choices shaping Israel's relationship to the Palestinian territories occupied in 1967.

*For the Land and the Lord: Jewish Fundamentalism in Israel* (Lustick 1988) originated in a research contract with the Department of Defense, but was expanded into a book with the advice and guidance of a group of experts assembled by Council on Foreign Relations (CFR). The committee recommended the manuscript enthusiastically for publication by the Council, but the final decision rested with Bernard Lewis, the famed Princeton-based Orientalist who chaired the Middle East Studies Committee at the CFR. The committee included J.C. Hurewitz, Stanley Hoffmann, and John Campbell. Both I and the advisory group were shocked to hear that Lewis decided against its publication. I called him to ask for his criticisms of the manuscript. He was evasive and would not provide them. The members of the study committee members then did something unprecedented in the history of the Council on

Foreign Relations—they voted unanimously to overrule the decision of the chair. The book was published in 1988 with a second edition appearing in 1994.

No one knew why Lewis had tried to stop publication of the book, though there were strong suspicions it was because he disliked its argument that an ideologically extreme movement of Messianists and ultranationalists was making Israel into something very different than the image of the country he cultivated, namely an exemplary liberal democracy hated by a backward Muslim and Arab world. Support for this theory came several years later when I was approached by the University of Pennsylvania with an offer to leave Dartmouth to help rebuild its Political Science Department. After the usual visits and preliminary negotiations, I received an unsatisfying offer letter from the Department Chair, Oliver Williams. When I told him that I would not leave Dartmouth for Penn unless my compensation was increased, his entire manner changed. “You had better take this offer,” he warned. “It’s the best you’re going to get. From what we’re hearing about you, I can tell you that you will never get an offer from any other institution.”

I responded by telling him from then on that negotiations would not be conducted between us, but between me and the Dean of the School of Arts and Sciences, Hugo Sonnenschein (formerly of Princeton, soon to be President of the University of Chicago). From friends in the Political Science Department, I learned how ferocious was the opposition to my hire among alumni, donors, and others—including, notably, Bernard Lewis. Accordingly, I was mightily impressed with Hugo, who never raised any of these difficulties with me in our negotiations and who made my move to Penn possible by taking the heat

from what he recognized were strictly political efforts to suppress and punish scholars who did not toe the line on Israel. Thus, I have not stood alone against these intrigues, campaigns, and prejudices. Both

Dartmouth College and the University of Pennsylvania, and before them the University of California, Santa Cruz (where I taught a course on Arab-Israeli relations), have each withstood pressures associated with my presence on their faculties. Forty years ago, the Dickey Endowment at Dartmouth provided funds to convene a conference I organized at which the Association for Israel Studies was founded—an organization created to provide professionals specializing on contemporary Israel with a non-political and specifically non-Zionist space. Our objective was to provide an alternative to the American Academic Association for Peace in the Middle East which functioned transparently as an arm of Israel’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs. After arriving at Penn, I encountered the problem of spies in my classroom, faced Internet attacks by groups such as Campus Watch, CAMERA, and Canary Mission, and had to worry about harassment by extremist groups in Israel and in the United States who sought to silence critics of Israel by filing frivolous but expensive-to-defend-against lawsuits. This last threat was successfully dealt with by an official letter from the University of Pennsylvania, which promised to cover the legal fees I might encounter from such lawsuits.

In 1993, Cornell University Press published my tome entitled *Unsettled States, Disputed Lands: Britain and Ireland, France and Algeria, Israel and the West Bank/Gaza* (Lustick 1993). It was the culmination of almost twenty years of work, and among other things forecast not only secret negotiations between an Israeli government and the Palestine Lib-

eration Organization, but also, based on my comparison of crises in Britain and France over attempts to withdraw from Ireland and Algeria, warned of violence and civil war that would threaten any Israeli government seeking to end Israeli rule of the occupied territories. When the Oslo peace process began, and then when it was disrupted by the assassination of Prime Minister Yithazk Rabin by a member of the groups I had warned against, I urged Cornell University Press to publicize the book's timeliness as well as the accuracy of its forecasts. Unwilling, it seemed to me, to expose the Press to attack from those who virulently opposed the Oslo process, the marketing department refused to do so.

Instructively, the same thing happened thirty years later at the University of Pennsylvania Press. Penn Press published my latest book, *Paradigm Lost: From Two-State Solution to One-State Reality* (Lustick 2019), which analyzed the disappearance of precisely the opportunities to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian dispute via partition that I had studied for the first 35 years of my career. When the war in Gaza erupted following the October 7, 2023 Hamas and Islamic Jihad attacks on Israeli communities, I drew the Press's attention to the book's forecast that while *de facto* annexation had "made Israel's separation from the territories impossible," it had "not reduced the hostility of their Palestinian populations... [making] campaigns of nonviolent, semiviolent, and violent resistance all but inevitable. The Israeli response will be bloody and destructive, with casualties in the tens of thousands" (Lustick 2019, 142). In the midst of a wave of McCarthyist (or as I call it "McIsraelist") intimidation sweeping across university campuses, and with the University of Pennsylvania as the epicenter of attempts to weaponize accusations of antisemitism, Penn Press explained that "for various reasons," it

had become impossible to promote the book by drawing attention to the accuracy of its forecasts.

Yet I again want to affirm my gratitude and appreciation for the investments made and risks taken on my behalf in both Israel and the United States by the universities, foundations, presses, and journals, who have paid me to teach and write and who have published my books and articles. But it is also worth noting that the pressures and hostility I have faced in some quarters in the United States find their counterpart, and sometimes their origins, in Israel. During my last two visits to Israel for research and teaching purposes, in 2014 and 2017, I was sharply questioned at Ben-Gurion Airport about the lectures I was scheduled to give, who I was planning to meet, what my views were about the "situation," and my political opinions. In both cases my passport was taken, though after what were presumably quick Internet searches I was deemed too likely to make a public fuss to be further delayed. On each occasion, my passport was gruffly returned and I was sent on my way.

I regularly do promotion and hiring reviews for Israeli institutions. Last year I successfully chaired a review committee for the Open University in Israel. In 2010, however, I was suddenly removed from an international review committee established by Israel's Council on Higher Education to assess political science departments in all of Israel's major research universities. The order came from the Education Minister, after what I was told were objections to my presence on the committee from some right-wing faculty members. The Chair of the Committee, Professor Robert Shapiro of Columbia University, then resigned in protest. (I eventually received a letter of apology from the director of the Council.)

In the five decades or so of my professional engagement in the multidimensional field of Israel and Palestine affairs, its intellectual, emotional, and political ecology has remained, respectively, explosive, punishing, and underdeveloped. Recently I published an essay explaining publicly what I have always told my students about emotion and schol-

***"In the five decades or so of my professional engagement in the multidimensional field of Israel and Palestine affairs, its intellectual, emotional, and political ecology has remained, respectively, explosive, punishing, and underdeveloped."***

arship (Lustick 2020). Emotional investment in a topic is a sine qua non for mastering complex subject material and contributing new insights to any field of study, even as, in the assessment of evidence and the presentation of findings, one must remain steadfastly committed to what the combination of theory, method,

and data makes visible as the best available truth. Accordingly, I expect and fully understand the depth of emotion on all sides of the myriad of issues and disputes that arise in discussions of Israel and Palestine, whether among experts or among members of the general public.

Indeed, despite the intense emotions that are so easily triggered in discussion of Israel-Palestine issues, over the years the amount of pertinent and accurate information about this subject has vastly increased, along with the sophistication and precision of arguments. These improvements reflect a general elevation in the quality of social science, an increase in the sophistication of historiography, and extensive digitization and translation of

remotely accessible data sources. As a result, many silly arguments and claims have disappeared from serious discourse—for example, that the Zionist movement in the early twentieth century ignored the presence of Arabs in the country, that before the creation of Israel there never was a movement demanding an independent Arab Palestine, that the displacement of Palestinians in 1948 was due to orders from invading Arab states, or that Israel won the 1967 war because of the surreptitious participation of the United States Air Force.

In general, however, the consequence of these changes has been a widening gulf between the knowledge available to experts and the abysmal, unrecognized ignorance of the overwhelming majority of those in the general public who care about the issue. An array of general and specialized journals, and hundreds of monographs and edited volumes, now provide students of Israel and/or Palestine a breadth and depth of finely grained scholarship and access to a range of points-of-view unimaginable in the 1960s, 1970s, or 1980s. At the same time, discourse on these subjects in the general public domain is now, if anything, even less civil and more distorted and ignorant than it was in those decades. In part this is due to the extremization of Israeli politics and the pursuit of policies for most of the last 20 years, which the overwhelming majority of Israel's supporters in the US cannot and do not publicly support or defend.

In the 1970s, I received a letter from the Israel Consulate in San Francisco thanking me for debating anti-Zionists on campuses in the Bay area. In those debates I drew on a manual specially produced by the Israeli Student Organization of North America (Neuberger 1970). It covered a variety of topics—refugees, war and peace, minority affairs, settle

ments, religion and politics, etc.—along with typical criticisms that would require rebuttal and useful lists of quotations to support those rebuttals. When it came to the topic of settlements, for example, the manual stressed that it was a complex issue, with proponents and opponents on both sides and that a case could be made both for and against them.

In sharp contrast, a popular Israel advocacy manual published in 2009 was put together by Frank Luntz—the Republican operative and spinmeister who made his reputation working for Newt Gingrich (Luntz 2009). Luntz focuses on “words that work.” His purpose was not to provide Israel advocates with information, but with rhetorical and emotional strategies for distracting audiences from substantive questions by redirecting conversations, including especially conversations about settlements, with words, phrases, and verbal maneuvers to evoke whatever useful biases the audience was judged to have.

More recently, Israel advocates have moved to an even more extreme strategy for avoiding engagement with substantive arguments. Current formulations, developed by Natan Sharansky and other right-wing Israelis and Israel supporters, do not suggest the use of arguments at all, whether advanced with evidence or rhetorical devices. Instead, the objective is to suppress public discussion by delegitimizing, demonizing, intimidating, and otherwise silencing those who criticize Israel by *ad hominem* attacks labeling them as terrorists, communists, neo-Marxists, or, most prominently, as antisemites. As Amichai Chikli, Israel’s Minister for Diaspora Affairs and Combatting Antisemitism put it in February 2024 when referring to how Israel advocates should defend the country: “The time has come to move from defense to offense, and to ensure that the perpetrators of

antisemitism are identified and treated appropriately.” Central to this strategy has been a hoax known as the “IHRA (International Holocaust Remembrance Association) working definition” of antisemitism. Though withdrawn and canceled by the defunct European organization that originally presented it, this list of ideas, questions, and critiques of Israel deemed to be evidence of antisemitism is being flagrantly weaponized to intimidate and silence potential critics (Gould 2020).

Nor do such tactics spare Jews. To be sure, the fact that I am Jewish, speak Hebrew, understand and use a good bit of Yiddish, and am comfortable with and capable of deploying the idioms, postures, and cultural tropes of orthodox Judaism, have provided me with protection that non-Jews, and especially Palestinians, Arabs in general, and Muslims, do not enjoy. Still, I am regularly attacked as a traitor to my people, the “lowest form of Jew,” or as a self-hating Jew. Indeed, some 25 years ago, I was even put on trial by my conservative synagogue located in a Lower Merion suburb of Philadelphia. Certain far-right members of the congregation prepared a detailed “brief” accusing me of antisemitism, based mainly on my advocacy of a two-state solution and on what they deemed as the dangerous popularity of a reading group I led in the community focused on Zionist thinkers, the findings of contemporary Israeli archeology, and popular Israeli novels. A lengthy and tearful debate among members of the Board of Directors of the synagogue ended in a narrow vote declaring me not guilty of the charge. During the discussion, one member of the Board, who was advocating for my conviction, asked permission to make an announcement. Without a trace of irony, she urged everyone to attend a play by her theatre troupe in Philadelphia about the excommunication of Baruch Spinoza for



challenging Jewish orthodoxies.

It is not possible to conclude this essay without some reference to the horrors of the Gaza war—both the massacres that triggered the Israeli assault, and the atrocities and horrific levels of death and destruction subsequently wreaked by the Israel Defense Forces on Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip. As noted above, in the mid-1980s I convened a conference at Dartmouth College, which became the founding moment for the Association for Israel Studies. We started out with twenty or thirty members. Now, 500 or so participants attend the Association's annual meeting.

Over the years of my close involvement with the Association, I have benefited greatly and learned a great deal. I have edited its newsletter, chaired committees, served multiple times on the Board of Directors, organized two annual conferences, served as President, raised money, chaired panels, and published regularly in its journals. Unfortunately, but instructively for my purposes here, AIS has changed. The hyper-politicization associated with anything pertaining to Israel, and reflecting both the sharply increased number of Israeli members and the political and cultural tendencies dominating Israeli life in recent decades, has moved the Association away from its strictly non-political, non-Zionist, and non-ideological origins. It has assumed instead an increasingly apologetic posture.

Although AIS was proud to have been accepted as an affiliated group within the Middle East Studies Association, in response to ME-SA's 2022 referendum supporting the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement, AIS suspended its membership. Six days after the Hamas and Islamic Jihad attacks on October 7, 2023, its leadership posted an impassioned

denunciation of the atrocities along with statements of compassion and solidarity with Israel and Israelis. In December 2023 and January 2024, eleven past presidents of the Association, including four of us who were present at the founding conference, asked the Board of Directors to post just one sentence of sympathy and concern for the suffering of Gaza Palestinians as a result of the war. Through repeated majority votes, the Board refused to do so, and refused as well to offer a substantive explanation for its decision. These embarrassing developments have reminded me that the world changes faster than can institutions and that, since under today's circumstances no serious study of Israel and Palestine, as separate topics, is possible, a new departure is required.

Hence, I find myself a part of a new project—*The Palestine/Israel Review*—an open access, peer-reviewed journal.<sup>1</sup> Unlike either the Association for Israel Studies or the Institute for Palestine Studies, it is committed to developing space for discussion, scholarship, and debate that equally honors the aspirations, predicaments, fears, and traumas of Jews and Palestinian Arabs. It is on this note that I end this essay, looking toward horizons for scholarship that are more appropriate than traditional Zionist or Palestinian paradigms for addressing the challenges of life between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River. ♦

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# The Middle East Scholars Barometer

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When Hamas shocked Israel with a brutal attack across the security perimeter on October 7, 2023, the repercussions were felt deeply across Middle East political science academic communities. Campuses polarized quickly, as the media and external advocacy groups focused special attention on new challenges facing higher education communities, especially students. But on campus, the lived experience of faculty and students seemed considerably different, especially for those faculty whose work addresses the Middle East. Through the grapevine, stories proliferated of faculty who had been silenced or disciplined by their administrations, excluded from public panel discussions, or had their own events canceled. Some incidents percolated up to the headlines: stories of professors banished from the classroom or campus, removed from departmental websites, or attacked for secret recordings of their class discussions.

How prevalent were such experiences? How were they impacting Middle East political scientists and other academics? We thought it was important to find out. So, from November 10-17, 2023, we fielded the sixth wave of the Middle East Scholars Barometer (MESB) (Telhami and Lynch 2023). The MESB, first launched in spring 2021, invited a comprehensive list of academic scholars of the region to complete a short survey about political events or controversies in the region or in the profession. Previous surveys had focused on issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Iranian nuclear program, and the stability of regional countries a decade after the Arab uprisings. This time, we focused our questions on the campus climate after October 7. Unlike earlier waves of the MESB, this time we included a textbox for short open-ended responses for people to describe their experiences.

The results, which we ultimately published in a widely-read essay for the Chronicle of Higher Education, were both shocking and utterly in line with our lived experience (Lynch and Telhami 2023). We found that 82 percent of US-based respondents to the survey self-censored when discussing Israeli-Palestinian issues in a professional capacity – and 72 percent said it had gotten worse since October 7. That tracked with the results

***"We found that 82 percent of US-based respondents to the survey self-censored when discussing Israeli-Palestinian issues in a professional capacity – and 72 percent said it had gotten worse since October 7."***

of a similar question asked one year earlier, when 57 percent said they felt need to self-censor when discussing Middle East issues. Virtually all graduate students (95 percent) and assistant (untenured) professors (98 percent) said they self-censored. So did almost 90 percent of tenured associate professors. Eighty-one percent of US-based respondents who self-censored said that they felt the need to hold back views that are critical of Israel, while 11 percent self-censored criticism of Palestinians, and only 2 percent self-censored criticism of US policy. When asked why they self-censored, almost 60 percent mentioned campus climate or fear of offending students, while 53 percent mentioned external advocacy groups. Over 40 percent cited concerns about being disciplined by their own university administrations, which have overwhelmingly failed to protect their faculty from attacks on their academic freedoms.

The numbers only hint at the scale and scope

of the problem. Respondents to the survey flooded the open-ended text boxes with appalling accounts of external groups trying to get them fired and college administrators silencing and disrespecting them. Fear was the pervasive sentiment, with an undercurrent of despair at not only the failure of administrations to come to their defense but often their active participation in repression.

Our article reporting the responses to the MESB survey helped to draw national attention to a crisis of academic freedom which to that point had largely been ignored or minimized. The Middle East Scholars Barometer began well before October 7, 2023, though, and had a much broader mission: to find out and communicate what Middle East scholarly experts really thought about some of the most controversial and difficult issues facing the region and the profession.

## **The Middle East Scholars Barometer**

The Middle East Scholars Barometer launched in spring 2021, when we fielded the first of what would become a unique biannual survey of Middle East scholars.<sup>1</sup> It represented a collaboration between the Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS), directed by Lynch, and the Critical Issues Poll at the University of Maryland, directed by Telhami. Our goal was straightforward. We wanted to discover what academic experts and especially political scientists, who have spent their careers studying the Middle East, think about contested issues related to their region, and in turn communicate those findings in a way that could influence and guide public debate. Our intuition was that we did

<sup>1</sup> All of the survey results referenced in this essay can be found in entirety on the Middle East Scholar Barometer website: <https://criticalissues.umd.edu/middle-east-scholar-barometer>.

not definitively know what our peers thought about these issues, and that it could be useful to track how those collective attitudes changed over time.

We built our initial invitation list from a combination of the POMEPS list-serv, the membership of the American Political Science Association's organized section on MENA Politics (then also directed by Lynch), and the membership of the Middle East Studies Association. In later rounds, we added members of the American Historical Association, who indicated a Middle East area of research, but given the overlaps in membership this (and our exploration of other professional associations) did not substantially change the overall composition of the survey. As we are political scientists, and were guided by an advisory committee of five other political scientists, we especially sought other political scientists; our questions more often than not concerned political issues facing the region, as well as American foreign policy. Nonetheless, we thought it useful, at least for comparison, to include respondents who are not political scientists.

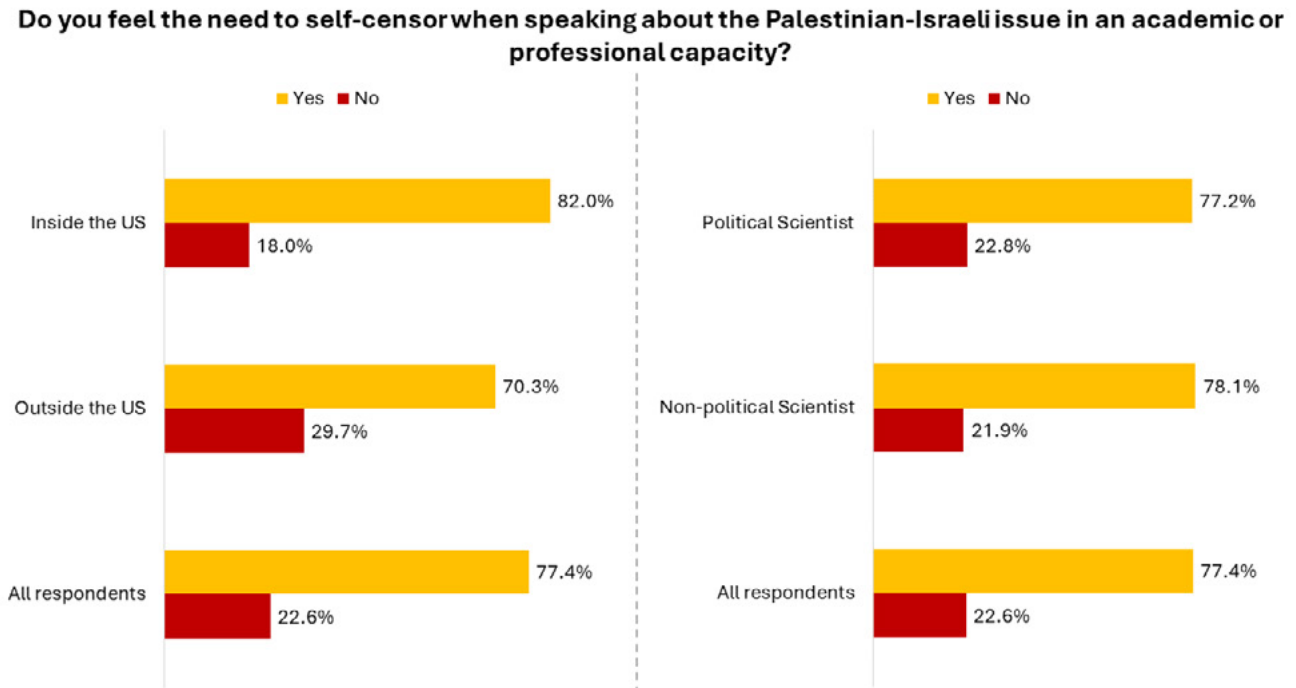
We decided to run the survey twice a year, repeating some questions in order to track changes over time and adding some new questions in response to events, requests from survey participants, or suggestions from our board of advisers. Beginning in 2022, we began devoting one survey a year to professional issues such as the impact of COVID, research ethics and fieldwork concerns, and self-censorship. The results of each survey were made publicly available, and also reported in the *Washington Post's* Monkey Cage (until it ceased publication in 2023), the Brookings Institution's blog, and (in fall 2023) in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

Some methodological concerns about the survey are worth addressing here. First, the survey's respondents are not a random representative sample; they are self-selected respondents drawn from as close as we could get to the full universe of potential respondents. It is possible that respondents are more likely to be drawn from scholars sympathetic with one political trend, disciplinary position, or identity. This concern became especially important to us after the Israel Studies Association severed ties with MESA following its adoption of an academic boycott resolution. But members who were on our list before the breakup remained on the list of those polled. Most of our respondents came from the POMEPS and APSA lists, though, inevitably, there is overlap.

A second potential critique is that perhaps the political views of MESA members were distorting the results. Fortunately, we asked respondents whether they were political scientists or from another discipline from the start, and later began asking about membership in professional associations. That allowed us to look for any systematic differences between MESA members and APSA members, for instance. For the most part, we did not observe systematic differences across professional associations or disciplines. When such differences did exist, they more often emerged for questions that touched on issues that political scientists study systematically, such as the likelihood of protest recurrence or the stability of autocratic regimes, rather than on the nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We also broke down the results by MESA members and non-MESA members, and found only small differences between them.

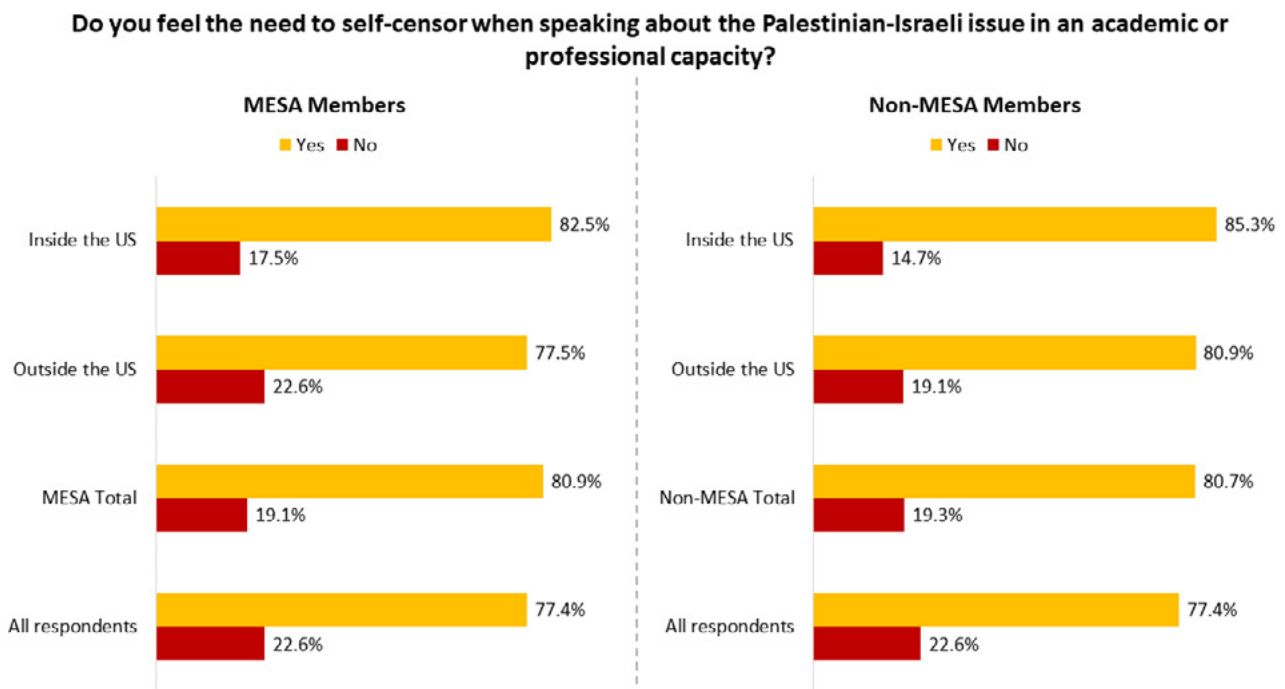
In sum, distinctive trends of opinion hold across discipline, location, and associate membership, as Figures 1 and 2 illustrate.

Figure 1. Self-Censorship and Israel/Palestine—Results from MESB, Based on Location and Discipline.



These results are among 936 respondents, from the Middle East Scholar Barometer fielded November 10 - 17, 2023 online using the University of Maryland's Qualtrics platform.

Figure 2. Self-Censorship and Israel/Palestine—Results from MESB, Based on MESA Membership.



These results are among 936 respondents, from the Middle East Scholar Barometer fielded November 10 - 17, 2023 online using the University of Maryland's Qualtrics platform.

## Israel/Palestine

Prior to the November 2023 study of campus climate, by far the most widely discussed and influential findings of the survey had to do with views of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Here, we tried to differentiate between analytical understandings of the nature of reality and normative preferences over what that reality should be. Because we were involved at the time in a project exploring the nature and prospects of Israel's relationship with Palestine, which would ultimately be published online as a POMEPS Studies collection (POMEPS 2020) as well as an academic book (Barnett et al. 2023), we were particularly keen to ask about this issue.

The MESB so far asked has the same battery of questions four times, beginning in February 2021 and most recently in November 2023. We intend to repeat it in spring 2024. The survey waves span several major events in the conflict: the May-June 2021 flare-up of conflict over settler provocations in East Jerusalem; the emergence of a large-scale pro-democracy Israeli protest movement against an extreme right-wing Israeli government; and the October 7 Hamas attack and subsequent Israeli war in Gaza. We also asked other questions on some of these surveys, such as about the Israeli protest movement and the effects of the Abraham Accords.

In every survey but one, we asked respondents whether the two-state solution was still possible. In February 2021, 52 percent said that it was no longer possible; that increased in each survey, peaking at 63 percent in March 2023 before dropping to 50 percent in November 2023. Only 5 percent in that first survey said it was still possible and likely within the next ten years, remaining relatively constant at 7 percent in the most recent sur-

vey. The rest thought it was still possible but unlikely in the next ten years.

Next, we asked respondents to describe the current reality regarding the two-state solution, regardless of their preferences over what the final status of the conflict should be. The results provided a range of possible descriptions: 60 percent in February 2021 chose "a one state reality akin to apartheid" and 7 percent "a one state reality not akin to apartheid." In November 2023, 61 percent chose "one state reality akin to apartheid," and another 6 percent chose "one state reality not akin to apartheid."

Finally, when asked about the most likely outcome if a two-state solution could not be achieved, over three-quarters responded "a one state reality akin to apartheid" in the February 2021, September 2021, March 2022, and March 2023 polls. Intriguingly, in the March 2022 wave, respondents generally declined to extend the apartheid label to Israel excluding the West Bank and Gaza, with 61 percent describing Israel as a democratic state with deep structural inequality. However, in March 2023, 87 percent said that it was not possible for Israel to have a full democracy for all Israeli citizens while maintaining military rule over Palestinians in the occupied territories.

What did respondents expect to happen? Whereas US and Israeli policymakers optimistically believed that Palestinians could safely be ignored in favor of pursuing Israeli normalization with Arab states, the surveys show that academic scholars have been deeply pessimistic. In March 2022, 66 percent of our respondents considered the collapse of the Palestinian Authority likely within the next five years, 72 percent expected Israeli expulsion of some or all Palestinians from the

occupied territories, 78 percent expected a new Intifada, and 80 percent expected Is-

***"Whereas US and Israeli policymakers optimistically believed that Palestinians could safely be ignored in favor of pursuing Israeli normalization with Arab states, the surveys show that academic scholars have been deeply pessimistic."***

raeli annexation of some or all of the West Bank and Gaza. That 74 percent also said they expected to see the status quo with minor changes does raise questions about the relative likelihood ascribed to each possibility, though.

Respondents had more complicated thoughts about the call for an academic boycott of Israeli institutions. While 54 percent supported the resolution boycotting Israeli universities adopted by MESA in 2022, another 36 percent said that they supported some BDS measures but not academic boycotts. Not even six months later, the numbers began trending towards support for some form of sanctions against Israel: 31 percent said that they supported BDS unconditionally, and 50 percent with conditions.

Finally, scholars generally did not share the Trump and Biden administration's enthusiasm for the Abraham Accords. In the August 2021 and March 2023 surveys, only 6 percent saw positive effects from these peace treaties on the Israeli/Palestinian peace process. In 2021, only 5 percent thought they would advance democracy and human rights, and 26 percent thought they would improve regional stability. Oddly, in 2021, 41 percent thought they would advance US interests as they understood them – even as very few thought they would improve human rights, promote Israeli-Palestinian peace, or enhance region-

al stability. It would have been interesting to find out what they thought US interests in the region actually were.

## **The Arab Uprisings and Regional Politics**

In several of MESB waves, we asked questions at the core of the scholarship for many political scientists. In particular, we wanted to know how academics viewed the 2011 Arab uprisings and how they assessed the stability of autocratic regimes and states in the Middle East. In the first wave of the survey, almost exactly ten years after the uprisings, we asked about whether that revolutionary wave of upheavals had fundamentally transformed the region. Only 29 percent said that the uprisings had a transformational impact on the region, while 17 percent said that the protests had been a temporary disruption with limited long-term impact. A majority, 54 percent, took a middle stance, that the uprisings had made a significant impact but were not fundamentally transformational.

Asking these questions in slightly different ways produced unexpected results, which we think sheds light on how political scientists think about "outcomes" differently from other communities. Despite the general skepticism about the ten-year product of the uprisings, only 7 percent of the survey respondents agreed that the uprisings were over and unlikely to return. Thirty percent expected them to return in the next decade. But more interestingly, 46 percent believed the uprisings are ongoing, but in different forms. This suggests political scientists are moving away from conceptual binaries that see countries as either immersed in protest and unrest, or either engaged by quiescence and autocratic repression (that is, revolutionary "success" versus "failure").



In projecting the future, the MESB found a combination of skepticism about the prospects for political change. On Iran, where hope for another revolution sprung eternal in Washington, scholars generally downplayed the prospects of change: in the March 2022 survey, only 37 percent expected regime-threatening political instability in the next five years, while a year later only 8 percent said it was likely that protests would overthrow the Islamic Republic in the next two years. Also in the March 2022 survey, almost nobody saw any country as “very unstable,” although a third did see Egypt, Turkey and Iran as somewhat unstable. However, when asked about whether Egypt would face regime-threatening instability in the next five years, 45 percent thought it was somewhat or very likely. (That does not sound very stable.)

## Regional Security and Global Order

Iran lay at the center of a number of questions that the MESB has asked concerning regional security and war. For several years, the survey asked whether a return to the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) would make it more or less likely that Iran obtains a nuclear weapon in 10 years. Two-thirds of respondents consistently said less. However, scholars were also pessimistic regarding the prospects of restoring the JCPOA framework. In addition, survey respondents across all waves overwhelmingly opposed war with Iran, and remained guardedly optimistic that Saudi-Iranian reconciliation might make such conflict less likely—and that Israeli provocations would not escalate into regional war.

In March 2022, we also asked a series of questions about Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and its effects on the Middle East. Then, 58 percent thought the invasion of Ukraine would

weaken Russia’s influence in the region; a year later, only 46 percent thought so. In 2022, 63 percent thought China’s position would be strengthened; a year later, 76 percent thought so. As for the United States, the scholarly perception of geopolitical fortunes changing was quite dramatic. In 2022, 40 percent thought the crisis would increase US influence in the Middle East, but by spring 2023, only 7 percent still felt that way. In spring 2023, 94 percent of respondents thought that regional states would respond to the Ukraine war based on their self-interests, while only 56 percent thought perceived US hypocrisy on Israel/Palestine would sway their policy choices.

It would be useful to ask this particular question again in light of the ongoing Gaza war. We suspect the effects will be profound. Overall, in February 2021, 75 percent said the US was weaker in the Middle East than ten years ago, and only 38 percent said it remains the dominant power. It is hard to imagine those trends reversing, but after Gaza we certainly intend to ask.

## The Profession

In the wake of the global COVID-19 pandemic and other challenges to Middle East studies, we decided to dedicate the October 2022 survey to the professional field. The MESB results were eye-opening. Respondents reported a plethora of new obstacles to fieldwork, with 54 percent saying they had been forced to change or adapt their ongoing research. The barriers they reported were diverse: 68 percent of scholars faced restrictions due to COVID and 26 percent due to ongoing war, while 31 percent mentioned visa denials or other restrictions by the governments or states being studied. It is worth noting that a startling 47 percent of respondents said they

received no mitigation for COVID from their academic institutions; 34 percent received extra time on their tenure clock, but only 3 percent received childcare support.

Safety in the field is another issue that has troubled Middle East studies, given the arrests, intimidation, and other alarming forms of harassment that have befallen scholarly researchers in countries like Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Iran over the past decade. In the October 2022 survey, we queried on where, in the MENA, it was appropriate to hold a workshop. Surprisingly (to us), 63 percent said Egypt. Of those who disagreed, the reasons were overwhelmingly about safety: 46 percent worried about their personal safety, and 75 percent the safety of participants. By contrast, 48 percent of respondents said Israel was appropriate to hold a workshop; but of those who said no, 94 percent cited principled or ethical concerns. Principled and ethical concerns were also most commonly cited in the Gulf countries, with just under 90 percent of respondents stating that workshops should not be held in the UAE, Saudi Arabia or Qatar. In both Saudi Arabia (57 percent) and the UAE (48 percent), there existed significant concern for the safety of academic participants in such gatherings.

The MESB also explored more positional issues regarding research ethics and exploitative relationships between Western researchers and local communities in the MENA. Such problems have received growing attention by our field, notably from the REMENA project. Though the questions remain delicate, the results appeared better than we expected, all things considered. Only 35 percent of our scholarly respondents have a research partner from the region. Of those, only 5 percent had research funding awarded jointly; only 20 percent planned research

together with the partner; 8 percent said the partner collected data and they analyzed it; 14 percent said they analyzed the data together; 12 percent acknowledge the partner in this capacity, while 19 percent list the partner as a co-author.

Finally, the MESB surveys have not produced a portrait of a scholarly community of Middle East experts obsessed with policy relevance. The October 2022 survey round fielded several questions on this matter. Then, an overwhelming majority, 93 percent, cited their scholarly publications as targeting their academic discipline (such as political science), while 84 percent cited the wider field of Middle East studies. Only 27 percent indicated the government was a target audience, while 43 percent mentioned the broader policy community. Perhaps the Middle East studies field should try harder to influence policy, but it does not seem that doing so is a prevailing concern for most scholars in this academic canon.

## **Towards the Future**

What has the MESB contributed to our understanding of Middle East political science? For one, we are surprised at how widely shared some views turned out to be, and how consistently many trends and patterns are on a variety of critical issues regarding Israel, regional security, US foreign policy, and professional academia. To the extent that understanding about the beliefs of others shape choices, greater public recognition over these shared values could be significant. This could encourage previously reticent scholars to speak up, but it could also generate peer pressure by introducing a self-imposed need to conform. As the survey grows in popularity, there also exists the risk of “gaming” the system: if political scientists know how

their colleagues views on, say, US foreign policy or boycotting Israel will be reported in the prominent media venues, they may feel pressure to give the more politically useful answers.

The MESB could also give an artificial precision to necessarily fluid and amorphous beliefs. Numbers are great, but the patina of science could be misleading. Minor changes in responses to questions – 71 percent to 75 percent, for instance – are likely insignificant in practice and could represent little more than a handful of people not having time to answer the survey. Shifts in the composition of survey respondents could also change results in ways we cannot determine from available data. Indeed, students of public opinion are familiar with how surveys *construct* public opinion as much as they represent it. The latest November 2023 MESB round went beyond the numbers by adding an option for respondents to offer detailed thoughts, and they did so in ways that provided as much contextual insights as their raw responses.

In looking ahead, we invite fellow members of this organized section and other readers of *MENA Politics* to suggest new questions or topics to survey. We find it important to keep surveys short to maximize response rates, but there is always room for new questions regarding pressing issues of wide disciplinary or public interest. Please e-mail us with your ideas and recommendations ([marclynchgwu@gmail.com](mailto:marclynchgwu@gmail.com) and [sadat@umd.edu](mailto:sadat@umd.edu)). ♦

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# Research Symposium: Gaza

## Introduction

*Nermin Allam, Diana B. Greenwald, and Noora Lori*

When we began brainstorming this symposium in December 2023, Israel's military assault on Gaza, in response to the Hamas-led terror attacks of October 7, was entering its third month. At that time, approximately 1,200 Israelis and over 19,000 Palestinians had been killed, with tens of thousands more injured (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs 2023). Now, as we pen this introduction in late March, 130 hostages remain in captivity, according to the Israeli government, including those who are no longer believed to be alive (Saidel, Said, and Peled 2024). Meanwhile, the death toll for Palestinians in Gaza has surpassed 32,000, according to the Ministry of Health in Gaza (UNOCHA 2024). The World Food Program reports hundreds of thousands are on the brink of famine as Israel continues to obstruct the entry of humanitarian aid into Gaza, plunging some 1.1 million into "catastrophic hunger" and starvation (World Food Programme 2024). At least fifty percent of all buildings in Gaza have been damaged or destroyed in some of the most intensive aerial bombardment and concentrated warfare seen in modern times (Palumbo et al. 2024). Hospitals, schools, mosques, churches, homes, and universities have not been spared bombardment and shelling. As political scientists—not to mention, as mere humans—it is hard not to feel helpless and even, dare we say, hopeless.

Many of us are processing these events amidst a swirling media environment, featuring a regular, graphic stream of civilian suffering and trauma from Gaza, while our feeds

are also peppered with allegations of misinformation and disinformation. Narratives of demonization and dehumanization are feeding into a climate of fear and vulnerability, while we are also witnessing heightened censorship of speech on college campuses and beyond. In sum, this is a fraught time to attempt to apply the tools and lenses of social science. Nonetheless, this is precisely the moment that we should turn to political science—drawing on existing research, methods, and tools for understanding the ferocity and scale of the devastation we are witnessing, its origins, its nature, and its manifold consequences. Further, this is precisely the moment that we should place a mirror in front of political science, considering how the past six months has exposed our discipline's gaps and limitations. Yet, this symposium does not aim to be a self-indulgent exercise in reflection from some distant ivory tower on the epistemological, theoretical, and empirical limitations of the field. Rather, it is an attempt to seriously harness our research efforts to reclaim the humanity of people subjected to daily violence and erasure.

With this in mind, we turned to our colleagues in political science, as well as few scholars from related disciplines (history, anthropology, and international legal studies), to respond to the following question: "What is one prevalent misconception about the conflict, and how can the field of political science effectively respond to this misunderstanding?" Collectively, the pieces highlight the different lenses that political scientists can use to understand the level of violence we are

witnessing, its consequences in the region and beyond, and which policy options are made available or foreclosed based on the language and analytical frames we adopt.

**“What is one prevalent misconception about the conflict, and how can the field of political science effectively respond to this misunderstanding?”**

bel-Patel and Nahed Samour, and Mark Tessler underscore the importance of moving beyond—or at least supplementing—‘conflict’ frames. Their respective contributions engage with other meaningful conceptual categories such as settler colonialism, apartheid, occupation, siege, and genocide. Dana El Kurd and Amytess Girgis, Neil Ketchley, and Sean Lee explore, in their respective pieces, the understudied connections between what happens in Palestine and broader MENA politics. Still other contributors including Mohammed Abu-Nimer, Yasmeeen Abu Laban, Abigail Bakan, Anwar Mhajne, and Samer Anabtawi describe, and caution against, the politicization and weaponization of identities. Their pieces focus on narratives surrounding religion, anti-Palestinian racism, antisemitism and its relationship to anti-Zionism, the importance of gender-sensitive analysis, and the role of intersectional solidarity from LGBTQ+ communities. Looking forward, the contributors recommend changes in our scholarship. For example, Youssef Chouhoud calls for moving beyond surface-level measures of sympathy for Israelis or Palestinians toward a more nuanced understanding of US public opinion. In our diagnoses for policy making, Jonathan Graubart’s piece, as well as Mark Tessler’s contribution, urge us to avoid repeating the same failed diplomacy of the

Scholars in the symposium covered a wide range of topics. Contributions by Bassam Haddad, Raz Segal, Christine Schwö-

past, and to pay close attention to how the transformation of both Israeli and Palestinian political institutions might empower constituencies for peace. Through this collective space, we present diverse perspectives and voices on the conflict and above all a shared human concern—and agony, over the ongoing human suffering. ♦

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# Only the Most Important Thing

*Bassam Haddad*



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In one word, the most glaring “misconception” about Israel-Palestine is “context”—literally the fountain from which all else flows, including an array of misplaced assumptions, arbitrary historical starting points, misnomers, and, most significantly, glaring blind spots.

These shortcomings are not solely a matter of lack of knowledge or information, but a matter of interpretive lenses. We may all be looking at the same thing(s), especially in the past 6 months of a slaughter, yet not all understand it as the same thing. For millions, including the 17 members of the International Court of Justice, it is a plausible genocide. Yet, for many others, it is the gruesome and necessary cost of war.

Perhaps the first order of misconceptions is the misnomer “conflict” in Israel-Palestine—though its usage depends on intention. A conflict in regional and international relations usually exists between two parties who are equal in relation to their status, notably of sovereignty. In the case of Israel-Palestine, we have a relationship of subjugation: one sovereign party (Israel) and another non-sovereign party (Palestinians) that is completely dependent on the former, not least by virtue of the effective military occupation under which it survives. Under these conditions, the ensuing

relationship is not one of contention between two equal parties fighting over land, resources, or anything else. It is a relation of subjugation, by brute and vastly disproportionate force, of one party by another, daily, consistently, unwaveringly, and almost completely, for many decades. Enter context. Any immediate encounter with such subjugation involves witnessing a *military occupation* as an essential starting point: Walls, checkpoints, restricted movement, home demolitions, random and frequent raids, land and other property confiscation, arbitrary detention and imprisonment, total administrative control of people and goods entering and leaving the territory via land, sea, and air, total control of basic resources (food, water, energy sources)—all occurring with impunity. Since the Second Intifada in 2000, military occupation has also been compounded by warfare, or the use of military force against Palestinians living under occupation (i.e., siege, extrajudicial assassinations, shoot to kill, aerial missile strikes).

Beyond framing, we witness the building of new realities on the ground via long-term forms of dispossession whereby land/villages/towns inhabited by one people (Palestinians) are systematically replaced with permanent settlements for another people (Israelis). This occurred within, as well as outside, the

borders delineated by the United Nations Partition Plan of 1947. There is a term for this systematic process: *settler colonialism*.

In turn, we witness the existence of two legal frameworks that govern two sets of people based on their racial/ethnic background: one for Jewish-Israelis and another for Palestinians. Within the context of both military occupation on the one hand, and a systematic and unabated process of ethnic cleansing on the other, this legal distinction and duality becomes possible and increasingly concrete. There is a term for this systemic form of discrimination: *apartheid*.

While these realities—military occupation, settler colonialism, and Apartheid—have evoked objections and shock among supporters of the state of Israel historically, the unanimous convergence of nearly all independent human rights and legal organizations on all three dimensions of the Israel-Palestine context addressed above has been resounding in recent years. Yet, the “shock” and consternation in some circles at the mention of these terms at every historical juncture during the past few decades reminds us that the elision of context and history might well make people, including political scientists of the first order, believe that we are witnessing a conflict between two parties. We have now come full circle.

Plainly and simply, what political science can do to is to reintroduce the context of subjugation. This is buttressed by the brutally glaring power differential between the two parties in question— in terms of military, financial, administrative, and relational power at the level of external patronage, provided by the most powerful country in human history, the United States. Incorporating such vast relational and power differentials into the

analysis transforms existing discussions on the matter from cultural to political ones that are subject to the falsifiable frameworks and methods applied in the better corners of the field. ♦

# Beyond Conflict: The Erasure of Palestine and Palestinians in Zionist Thought and Violence

*Raz Segal*



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*Framing Israel's attack on Gaza as a conflict is in itself a key misconception.* Israel's attack on Gaza is *not* a conflict, even though it followed the Hamas-led attack on Israel on October 7, 2023. This misconception structures efforts in the West, including in Western academia, to minimize, blur, disavow, and deny the character of Israel as a settler colonial state. The distorted lens of “conflict,” in other words, legitimizes the basic oppressive relationship between Zionist colonizers and colonized Palestinians. As Zionist leader Zéev Jabotinsky puts it in “The Iron Wall,” his seminal text from 1923, “Colonisation can have only one aim, and Palestine Arabs cannot accept this aim,” so that “Zionist colonisation must either stop, or else proceed regardless of the native population” (Jabotinsky 1923).

And proceed it did, so that the creation of Israel in the 1948 War was the Palestinian Nakba—the mass deportations of 750,000 Palestinians amidst massacres of 15,000 Palestinians, and the destruction of hundreds of Palestinian towns and villages. Denial of the Nakba has therefore figured as a hallmark of the denial of Israel as a settler colonial state (Nassar 2023). It is remarkable, then, that Israeli leaders, politicians, and journalists have used the word Nakba numerous times since the October 7 attacks, now admitting the

1948 Nakba and pushing for a “second Nakba.” For example, Ariel Kallner, a member of the Knesset (Israeli parliament) representing the ruling Likud party, called on October 7, 2023, on X, formerly Twitter, for “Nakba to the enemy now. ... Nakba! Nakba that will overshadow the Nakba of 1948” (Kallner 2023). Indeed, the scale of killing and destruction in Gaza has now exceeded that of the destruction of Palestinian life and culture during the 1948 Nakba. Israel has killed more than 30,000 Palestinians, wounded over 70,000, and forcibly displaced nearly the entire population of 2.3 million people (UN OCHA 2024). Israeli war cabinet minister Avi Dichter described this “second Nakba” on Israeli TV on November 11, 2023, as “the Gaza Nakba” (Middle East Eye 2023). Perpetrators usually do not move from denial to recognition, so we should take note when they do.

A plan for the forced removal of all Palestinians in Gaza to the Sinai desert, across the Egyptian border, was in fact outlined in a document from the Israeli Ministry of Intelligence a month earlier, on October 13, 2023 (Abraham 2023). This is not a language of conflict, but of mass violence, which the International Court of Justice (ICJ) depicted as plausibly genocide in its provisional ruling on January 26, 2024, in the case of South Africa against Israel (ICJ 2024). In a speech to Israe-



lis on January 13, 2024, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu responded to the South African case against Israel at the ICJ by casting Hamas as Nazis. More specifically, Netanyahu said that Israeli soldiers had found in Gaza a tablet of a girl with a photo of Hitler as its screensaver (i24News English 2024). No evidence for this has surfaced, not even in Israeli media, but Netanyahu knew that Israelis did not require evidence to support the idea that Palestinians in Gaza are Nazis, as it has been articulated in various ways in Israeli politics and media since the October 7 attacks. The focus in this case on a Palestinian child, in the context of an attack that has already killed over 12,000 Palestinian children, renders this image thoroughly genocidal.

This weaponization of the Holocaust erases Israeli history and turns the world upside down. It puts forward a narrative where a powerless people, forcibly displaced and attacked through decades of Israeli settler colonialism, military occupation, and siege are depicted as the worst perpetrators in modern imagination. This image then casts the settler colonial state, armed with nuclear weapons, and backed by its western allies, as the ultimate victim.

A war against Nazis is not a conflict; rather, it requires, in Israeli minds, the lifting “of all restrictions,” as Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant explained on October 10, 2023 (Jones 2024). It is therefore urgent for scholars committed to documented truths, including political scientists, to recognize the horrible truth articulated both long ago by Jabotinsky and very recently by Dichter—that Zionism is premised on the destruction of Palestinians. It is urgent because we will fail to address this reality without recognizing it. And it is urgent because it remains a condition for envisioning other futures, beyond the Iron Wall. ♦

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# The Mislabeleding of the Siege on Gaza as a ‘War’ between Israel and Hamas

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The events of October 7th 2023 did not ‘start a war.’ Rather, as Ralph Wilde has argued, the events marked “a new phase in an ongoing illegal use of force” by Israel (Wilde 2023). The new phase began when, far from entering prisoner exchange negotiations or putting Hamas leaders on trial, Israel launched a systematic armed offensive against Palestinians in Gaza (Reuters 2023). Some states, international organizations, and lawyers were at the time quick to speak out in support of Israel’s ‘right to self-defense’ (Financial Times 2023). What was then a moral outrage at the unexpected attacks by Hamas has been continuously framed as a ‘war,’ giving legitimacy to the self-defense argument made by Israel. The offensive by Israel has, some five months later, killed over 31,000 Palestinians (Middle East Monitor 2024).

Under international law, where the terminology of ‘armed conflict’ is used instead of ‘war,’ the current offensive on Gaza cannot – and could not – be justified as falling under a right to self-defense. Article 51 United

Nations Charter (UNC) regulates the right of a nation state to use force in self-defense. It can only be invoked in response to an ‘armed attack,’ understood as the *beginning* of hostilities. It cannot be invoked as part of ongoing hostilities, as is the case here. Otherwise, each party to the conflict would be in an absurd situation of claiming self-defense every time an attack is made. Israel does not have a right to self-defense within occupied Palestinian territory, because *it is the occupying power*. The International Court of Justice (ICJ) advised already twenty years ago that Article 51 UNC has no relevance with respect to Israel as an occupying power (ICJ 2004).

The relevant international legal framework is in this case the law of occupation. The law of occupation, which is a subfield of international humanitarian law, recognizes occupation as a reality of armed conflict, but restricts its use in terms of temporality. At the latest since the 1967 war, Israel forced large parts of formerly Palestinian land under military occupation. In the Gaza Strip,

Israel militarily tightened control of land access since 2007 and enforced a total naval blockade since 2009. Various Security Council resolutions, which are binding under international law, underline the illegality of Israel's *prolonged* occupation.<sup>1</sup> Due to Israel's systematic, widespread, and ongoing legal restrictions on all aspects of Palestinian life, it has been described as an apartheid regime (Human Rights Watch 2021).

And yet, Israeli voices have repeatedly claimed that Gaza is no longer under occupation because Israel gave up its settlement policy in the Gaza Strip in 2005. However, these ignore the control Israel continues to exert over essential services, like water and electricity, and the ongoing blockade. It also ignores UN Security Council Resolution 1860, which confirmed that Gaza is an 'integral part' of the territory occupied since 1967.

A more accurate label, then, is the terminology of a 'siege', the essence of which is complete isolation from reinforcements and logistical supplies (Emanuela-Chiara Gillard 2019). Abandoning the 'war' terminology, which is associated at least historically with a basic level of equality of arms between the parties, more clearly puts Israel in the frame as an illegally occupying power that has been fundamentally discriminating against Palestinians for decades and has now intensified its operations.

There may be costs connected with the unsettling of the 'war' terminology in favor of 'siege' under conditions of an ongoing occupation. One question is: Do the same protections apply for civilians in an occupation as in a 'war'? Notably, the Geneva Conventions, which regulate warfare to prevent excesses

of conflict, provide for the scenario of occupation. Common Art. 2 of the Geneva Conventions extends the scope of protection to cases of partial or total occupation. Common Art. 3 in any event provides for a minimum standard of protection in any armed conflict, including occupation. This includes the prohibition of targeting civilians and care for the wounded and sick. These provisions apply to all the signatory States of the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their Additional Protocols of 1977, including Israel. Nonstate actors such as private citizens, armed groups, national liberation movements, and international organizations are also bound by these minimum standards, including Hamas. A further question is: Can certain atrocities still be referred to as 'war crimes' in an occupation? Under international criminal law, the crimes committed outside of war qualify as crimes against humanity (Art. 7 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court). There is no hierarchy in terms of severity or level of accountability between war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Rather than labelling recent events a 'war' – which implies a single event sparking hostilities and a minimum of equality of arms – it is legally, politically, and morally correct to refer to a siege by Israel, the occupying power, on the Gaza Strip. The bottom line, though, is that regardless of a 'war' or a 'siege', the probability of a genocide being committed lays bare the powerlessness of (counter-hegemonic) international legal arguments vis-à-vis the power of settler colonialism. ♦

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1 Since 1967, UN Security Resolutions 252, 476, 478, and more recently 2334 have explicitly prohibited Israel's belligerent occupation.

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# Important Questions, About Which There Are Strong Feelings but Not Agreement

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On February 8, I moderated a panel on the war in Gaza at an APSA virtual research conference. To guide the discussion, I distributed in advance some difficult questions, about which there are strong feelings but not agreement. I continue to think about these questions and reflect on how they might best be answered. Here are my thoughts on several of the questions.

Some questions concerned frequently heard, but contested, words and phrases. “From the river to the sea” is one, and its meaning depends on the user and context. It might mean, as supporters of Israel charge, replacing Israel with a Palestinian state over all of historic Palestine.

Many Israeli leaders and others call for a Jewish state to be established from the river to the sea. Indeed, this was enacted into law by the Knesset in 2018. The phrase might also reference, as some Palestinians and Israeli post-Zionists advocate, the establishment of a democratic and secular state in the territory with equal rights for Jews and Palestinians. The word “genocide” comes up in this context. Criticism of Israeli policies and actions, however severe, is not antisemitism or advocacy of genocide. But is it advocating geno-

cide to call for Israel to be replaced by a democratic secular state, for the end of the Jewish state but not the death or displacement of Jewish Israelis? Advocating the destruction of a state, but not a people, may stretch the meaning of genocide too far.

And if the destruction or denial of a national political structure does constitute genocide, the term would certainly seem to apply to the Israeli 2018 Nation-State Law. This law denies Palestinians the right to a state. It proclaims that “the Land of Israel” is the historic homeland of the Jewish people and that the right to national self-determination in this territory is exclusive to the Jewish people. It adds that Jewish settlement is a national value and that Israel should act to encourage and promote its establishment and consolidation.

The term genocide may apply to Israel’s conduct of the war, although this will be fiercely contested. Israel is killing thousands of Palestinian civilians in Gaza, and objective observers claim that Israel has not done enough to limit civilian deaths. Israel has also destroyed or made unlivable the dwellings of more than half of Gaza’s population, forcing multiple displacements and, very probably, creating a new Palestinian refugee population. Given extensive media coverage, some will say we

are watching Nakba 2.0 unfold before our eyes.

Israel responds that it does what it can to minimize civilian casualties. Further, the staggering loss of life resulting from Hamas's 7 October attack, a loss equivalent to more than 40,000 American deaths, makes understandable Israel's determination to destroy Hamas. Understanding this goal, however, need not imply approval of Israel's conduct of the war, nor that its conduct is exempt from international law. Interestingly, and perhaps significantly, a recent report in *Jewish Currents* suggests that little about the suffering of Gaza Palestinians is shown to the Israeli public (Goldberg 2024).

Let me squeeze in mention of two other very controversial questions that I drafted for the APSA panel. The first is whether armed struggle is an acceptable form of Palestinian resistance. In the absence of other means to resist occupation and bring attention to their right to self-determination—an absence which, although denied by some, accurately describes the Palestinian situation—it is difficult to insist that armed struggle can never be justified. At the same time, while the legitimacy of armed struggle is recognized, at least in principle, it does not follow that killing and maiming civilian non-combatants, often with gratuitous brutality, is an acceptable way to advance the Palestinian cause.

A second question asks what should come after the war. American, Arab state, and other world leaders appear to believe there is no solution other than a two-state solution. How this could come about is, unfortunately, far from clear. Should this nonetheless be the basis for post-war negotiations, it will be important not to repeat the mistakes of Oslo, where prolonged negotiations consumed time

while developments on the ground made Palestinian statehood ever more distant. Progress around the table must be accompanied in real time by progress on the ground. ♦

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# Palestine and Dissent in the MENA Region

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Analysts continue to inadequately assess the impact of the Palestinian cause on broader MENA politics. There has been a great deal of focus on militia groups and the “axis of resistance,” fueled by Iranian intervention, but less attention to 1) the role that Palestine plays in dissent across the region, and 2) why the narratives of the “axis of resistance” have gained such traction in the first place.

To begin, the Palestinian question has long galvanized contentious politics in the region, and this has been noted by scholars such as Reem Abou-El-Fadl, Shibley Telhami, and others. The issue of Palestine, and the long-denied sovereignty of the Palestinian people, has facilitated the expansion of civil society across the region and spurred protest movements during moments of political openings. In my own research, I have characterized Palestine as the “gateway to dissent,” not only because activists involved in pro-Palestine advocacy begin to understand their own political agency, but also because their involvement in this work builds the skills necessary to sustain their engagement and mobilize others—often on issue areas unrelated to Palestine. Indeed, as the activists involved in the Arab Spring uprisings have noted, pro-Palestine activism helped them build the skills they later used to topple regimes.

But for many political scientists, there has been a tendency to downplay the role of the Palestinian question in broader patterns of contentious politics, or to limit the impact of Palestine to its emotional or normative impact in our discussions. Much of the discussion in the media characterizes pro-Palestine protest or sentiment as indicative of ‘Arab rage,’ most likely diffused and eventually forgotten. Some discussion also centers on the religious framing around the Palestinian question, and how it may appeal to the region’s Muslim-majority population. However, I would argue the Palestinian question and its role in regional politics goes beyond its emotional or normative impacts. This is not to suggest that emotions are not important for understanding political mobilization more broadly, as Wendy Pearlman crucially outlined in her article, “Emotions and the Microfoundations of the Arab Uprisings” (Pearlman 2013). However, the impact of Palestine on dissent should be understood in all its manifestations. In particular, concern over the Palestinian question should also be seen as quite strategic. Palestine acts as a litmus test for Arab government responsiveness.

Moreover, what happens to Palestinians has very real impacts on conditions for Arab citizens, with the constant risk of conflict spillover and the economic toll of wars in the



region. Most recently, with the new authoritarian alliances between Israel and Arab states, activists can see that what happens in Palestine is weaponized against them in their own countries. Online surveillance and repression, in the name of ‘cybersecurity,’ is one such example, as Marwa Fatafta (2013) has outlined. Thus, the Palestinian issue is not only impactful for its emotional weight, but it has very real tactical implications for anyone espousing opposition to the status quo in the region. This is why, historically, the Palestinian question has *fueled* democratic sentiment in the region. Understanding democracy and dissent in the region must then incorporate the Palestinian question.

The fact that Arab democrats have successfully been repressed in the aftermath of the Arab Spring does not change this implication, but it leads to understanding new dynamics. Today, in 2024, Arab citizens expressing opposition to the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians and the larger status quo tend to see the ‘axis of resistance’ as the only viable option. This is why, despite the extremist positions of groups like Hezbollah, the Houthis, and other Iran affiliates, the popularity of these groups has skyrocketed. This can be seen in media discourse, online discussions, and in polling data. The latest data from the Arab Opinion Index (2024), for example, shows that only 7% of Arab respondents in the region view Iran as the actor that is “most threatening” to security and stability (a decline from 13% in 2018). Furthermore, 48% of Arab respondents view Iran’s position on the latest war positively, second only to Turkey. This is compounded by the fact that the US, the global power espousing democratic values and adherence to a rules-based order, has spent a great deal of energy in the last five to six months shielding its ally from consequences on the international stage. Thus,

unsurprisingly, only 3% of respondents view the American response as positive.

Thus, in the absence of Arab democrats, and with the US largely seen as providing cover for Israel’s conduct, the latest violence in Palestine and the normalization of the “axis of resistance” will impact how people view questions of democracy and opposition. In this way, the question of Palestine is once again crucial to our understanding of dissent in the region. ♦

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# Boycotts and Pro-Palestinian Activism

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Millions of people are engaged in pro-Palestinian activism across the Arabic-speaking Middle East and North Africa (MENA)—but their actions are unlikely to enter protest event datasets, which typically operationalize activism as street-level mobilization.

Following the October 7 attack by Hamas that killed approximately 1,200 Israelis and foreign nationals, Israel has conducted a brutal assault on Gaza that has so far killed over 31,000 Palestinians and destroyed or damaged at least half of all buildings in Gaza (Middle East Monitor 2024). In response, people across the MENA region and beyond have participated in a sustained economic boycott of Western companies, accusing

them of complicity in Israel's actions.

On January 4, the McDonald's CEO Chris Kempczinski noted on LinkedIn that its franchises in the region were experiencing a “meaningful business impact” due to the ongoing boycott of the company's restaurants (Reuters 2024). Starbucks similarly reported a hit to its bottom line in Egypt (El Gaafary 2023). Walking through Cairo in early March, most Western-owned restaurants and stores appear to be empty. Even locally owned establishments selling ‘Western’ style food have gone out of their way to express pro-Palestinian sentiment, hanging flags and placards along their storefronts.

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Figure 1 shows Google Trends data for the Arabic search term “مقاطعة” (*muqāta'a*, boycott). It indicates a surge in interest shortly after Israel commenced its assault on Gaza. In Egypt, the matter has become sufficiently serious that pro-government figures have weighed in, calling on consumers to support local businesses, even if they belong to foreign-owned franchises (Raouf 2023). At the same time, sales in locally produced alternatives to Western products have boomed (Husni 2023).

To help coordinate the boycott campaign, activists have developed apps that allow consumers to identify target companies.

One example is “قضيّتي” (*qadiyatī*, my cause), which was made in Egypt and launched on the Android Play Store on October 30, 2023. It currently has over 1 million downloads and now offers country-specific versions (see Figure 2). To identify a boycotted company, users can scan a product’s barcode or enter the company’s name (see Figure 3). They can also suggest companies to be boycotted and request further information from the app’s community.

These initiatives point to important and novel forms of collective action that operate outside the realm of street-level mobilization.

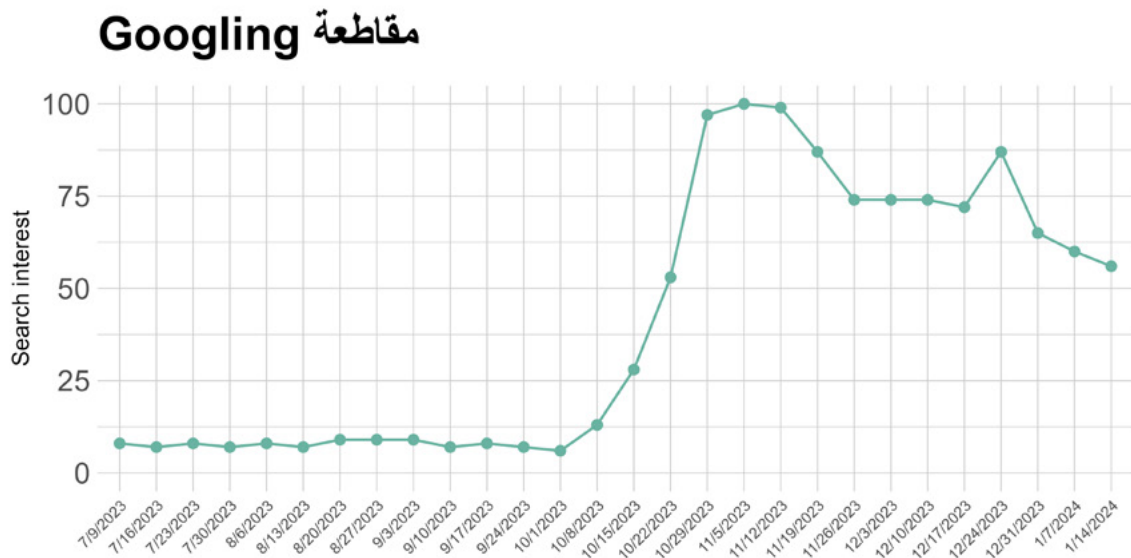
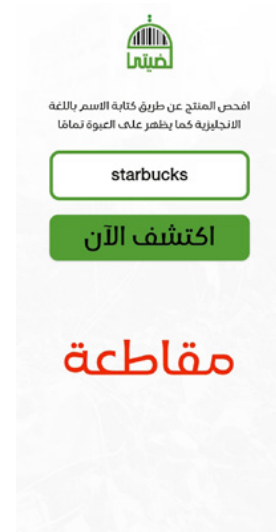


Figure 1. Google Trends data for “مقاطعة”, July 2023-January 2024.



on the left, Figure 2. Countries covered by “قضيّتي” (*qadiyatī*, my cause) app



on the right, Figure 3. Consumers can enter a company’s names to receive instructions on whether they should be boycotted or not

Against this backdrop, the boycott has several implications for how we conceptualize both the occurrence and effects of contentious politics in the region. To begin with, despite the tactic's importance in civil resistance campaigns from the Indian national movement to the Jim Crow South, these forms of oppositional politics will not be picked up by most quantitative measures of mobilization which typically count visible protest events and strikes. While these measures will capture those energetic protests across the Arab world against the ongoing Israeli assault, excising participation in the boycott will dramatically underestimate the true level of contention in the region.

This contributes to a larger measurement problem: Arab citizens in U.S. aligned autocracies overwhelmingly support the Palestinian quest for statehood and oppose normalization with Israel, but they are often afraid to say so in public (El Kurd 2020). This silence, paired with their states' normalization with Israel, is sometimes portrayed as apathy to the fate of the Palestinians. The strength of the boycott, now in its fifth month, problematizes this trope and reminds us of Asef Bayat's (2003) observation that, "The metaphorical [Arab] street is not deserted, so much as it is controlled."

The boycott also points to important long-run trends in political socialization. As Dana El Kurd (2022) has chronicled, pro-Palestinian activism frequently acts as a "gateway to dissent," and often prefigures other kinds of activism in autocratic Arab states.

Finally, the popularity of the boycott has important implications for the United States and several European countries. A number of national and state legislatures in those contexts have passed legislation targeting the move-

ment for the boycott, divestment, and sanctioning (BDS) of Israel. While many of these initiatives have subsequently been struck down by courts, the continued witch hunt against proponents of BDS raises important normative questions for democratic politics in those countries, and in particular the rights of individuals to participate in forms of nonviolent opposition to Israeli policies. ♦

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# Delinking Religious Prophecies of Destruction from the War on Gaza

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The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is often mischaracterized as a religious conflict, or a conflict between Muslims and Jews. This misperceived and inaccurate framing has contributed to its labeling as a deep-rooted and intractable conflict. When analysts, politicians, or others approach this conflict as one between the Jewish and Muslim faiths, various assumptions are made based on theological framing, perspectives, and values regarding the conflict's causes, processes, and possible resolutions.

However, in its origin and dynamics, the core of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is about self-determination and national sovereignty over a specific territory. Its primary roots are in the Zionist movement claiming the land of historic Palestine in the late 1880s and ignoring the existence of Palestinian Arab inhabitants of that land. From a settler colonial perspective, it is very similar to what other Western colonial powers did during roughly the same period of history (the French in Algeria, the Dutch in South Africa, the Spanish and Filipino in Mindanao Philippines, etc.).

Throughout the history of the conflict between the settlers and indigenous people of the land, the religious identities of the two sides were deployed in order to justify territo-

rial and political claims for power and ownership. However, they have made these claims from two different starting points—one from settler colonialism, and the other from indigenous and locals struggling to survive a process backed by colonial superpowers.

Even before the 1948 *Nakba*, or the creation of the State of Israel, certain Jewish religious and theological interpretations were deployed to establish an exclusive ownership of the land and mobilize the migration of settlers from around the world and from specific religious communities. For example, as Don-Yehiya (2014) describes,

*[I]n the pre-State period most religious Zionists were firmly opposed to any proposal for the partition of Palestine between Jews and Arabs. This attitude was clearly manifested in the debate at the 20th Zionist Congress in 1937 over the partition proposal of the British Palestine Royal Commission (the Peel Commission). The overwhelming majority of the religious Zionist representatives to the Congress voted against the proposal, and only a handful of the representatives abstained from the voting (244).*

Similarly, the national Palestinian movement from its inception in the early 1900s, relied on religious identity markets to mobilize political and military resistance against the Zio-

nist Jewish settlers who were arriving in historic Palestine. For example, a quick and basic review of the narrative of the Palestinian revolt in 1936 against the British and Zionist colonial powers, provides ample evidence on how Islamic religious values and beliefs were deployed in the battles.

However, until about four decades ago, on both sides, the role of religious identities in the conflict, and in national political dynamics, remained confined to political minorities. The Palestinian resistance movement, led by the different factions of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), was dominated by a secular nationalist orientation until Hamas emerged in 1986. Similarly, on the Israeli Jewish side, the Jewish right wing religious settler ideology became more influential in the early 1980s, even dictating policies toward Palestinians and their quest for independence.

Today, during the war on Gaza, we have witnessed an even more dramatic shift in the rhetoric of Israeli government leaders. For example, in late October, Prime Minister Netanyahu referenced the Biblical attack of the Amalekites on the Israelites and invoked the story to justify the genocidal campaign against Palestinians in Gaza.

There is no doubt that there is a religious dimension to the Israeli Palestinian conflict—after all, it is the holy land, and it has all the history of the three Abrahamic faiths. Nevertheless, it is dangerous and destructive to mask the core issue of territorial conflict with zero-sum religious framing, or, even worse, to describe it as a conflict between ‘evil people’ versus ‘people of the light.’ It is even more dangerous to link the resolution and fight over territory with prophecies about a return of the Messiah or day of judgment.

Such linkages contribute to dehumanization and a sense of determinism that often lead to the escalation of the conflict and discourse of ‘total destruction of the other.’ It also feeds into a sense of hopelessness or helplessness in the capacities of people to reach mutually satisfactory resolutions. This can encourage submission to the belief that solutions to this conflict will only come about from a supernatural, or divine, intervention, and we all should simply wait for such a moment.

There is no doubt that, in our efforts to de-escalate and resolve this conflict, it is important to address the religious dimension by placing it in its proportional scale and context and preventing it from feeding into narratives of dehumanization and helplessness. Thus, political, religious extremism that mobilizes the hearts and minds of its followers need to be countered by religious narratives that promote diversity and inclusion, and acknowledge common religious values of justice, freedom, and dignity.

This does not mean that Western diplomats and policymakers should continue to totally ignore the religious dimensions of the conflict, as they have mostly done over the past century. Instead, politicians, diplomats and peace workers have to take into consideration and understand the religious actors and their impact on the conflict’s dynamics, and support efforts to counter the narratives of religious exclusivism that justify dehumanization, occupation, and apartheid systems. ♦

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# Prevalent Misconception: The Discipline Can Do Its Work Without Naming and Analyzing Palestine and Anti-Palestinian Racism

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The anguish before, during, and after October 7, 2023, has been horrendous. The violence, destruction and death tolls of Palestinians in Gaza still mount. By January 2024, the interim ruling of the International Court of Justice, based on the case brought against Israel by South Africa, underscored that the situation in Gaza was so grave it was plausible to speak of genocide (International Court of Justice 2024). We desperately need to talk about the ideas, actions and structures of power that fuel dehumanizing in-group and out-group constructions. Yet, a central misconception running through the academy in the United States, Canada, and elsewhere, is that political scientists can do their job, and students can learn, without naming or analyzing Palestine and anti-Palestinian racism.

In the English-speaking world negative depictions and stereotypes of Arabs, and Palestinians in particular, are prevalent in media accounts and popular culture (Shaheen 2001; 2008; Abu-Laban 2023). Moreover, evidence of silencing of Palestinian history and the current context and claims of Palestinians abounds. It would be a serious mistake to see this silencing as being confined to the current moment. For decades there has been legitimation of a culture of active repression

on university campuses that has worked to restrict student organizing, limit free expression, and implicitly or explicitly threaten academic freedom when it comes to Palestine (Landy, Lentin, and McCarthy 2020; Abu-Laban and Bakan 2020).

Silencing and erasure are actually core features of anti-Palestinian racism which has been described by the Arab Canadian Lawyers Association as follows:

*Anti-Palestinian racism is a form of anti-Arab racism that silences, excludes, erases, stereotypes, defames or dehumanizes Palestinians or their narratives. Anti-Palestinian racism takes various forms including: denying the Nakba and justifying violence against Palestinians; failing to acknowledge Palestinians as an Indigenous people with a collective identity, belonging and rights in relation to occupied and historic Palestine; erasing the human rights and equal dignity and worth of Palestinians; excluding or pressuring others to exclude Palestinian perspectives, Palestinians and their allies; defaming Palestinians and their allies with slander such as being inherently antisemitic, a terrorist threat/sympathizer or opposed to democratic values (Arab Canadian Lawyers Association 2022, 14).*



The main difference since October 2023 is that the silencing over Palestine has become obvious, practically everywhere, all at once. Concerted attacks on universities, university professors, academic freedom and free speech threaten core values of the Western academy. Such attacks also raise alarm bells at the highest levels internationally, including the UN where experts have expressed concerns that charges of antisemitism are being used to shut down legitimate discussion (United Nations, 2023). Antisemitism is real and needs to be opposed. But antisemitism cannot be equated with criticism of Israel's policies or the defence of Palestinian human rights.

As it stands, in the heightened climate academics face today, self-censorship is normalized. This accounts for a November 2023 survey of American-based specialists of the Middle East in political science and related fields showing fully 82% of respondents engaged in self-censorship in professional discussions of Israel/Palestine. Of those engaging in self-censorship the majority (81%) did so in relation to criticism of Israel, with decidedly fewer holding back criticism of Palestinians (11%) or the United States (2%) (Lynch and Telhami 2023). Marc Lynch and Shibley Telhami further discuss the report in the introduction of this newsletter.

When even Middle East specialists self-censor, it is not surprising that some non-specialists may actively discourage or even prohibit classroom discussion of current events in Israel and Gaza. On the other side, there are still others who may welcome discussion but seek to achieve a 'balance' by confining discussion to 'the conflict' a word that tends to convey two equal and homogeneous sides. 'The conflict' descriptor often elides analytical clarity when it comes to considerations that are central orienting concepts of political

science: states and power relations.

Political scientists need to crack through the epistemology of ignorance that renders the racism directed at Palestinians—whether under occupation, in Israel, or in the diaspora—somehow unknowable (Mills, 1997; Abu-Laban and Bakan, 2020; Bakan and Abu-Laban, 2021). It can only be done by naming and analyzing Palestine, as well as taking serious account of anti-Palestinian racism and the state structures and processes through which it is expressed. Naming and analyzing Palestine and anti-Palestinian racism can also serve as a basis for refusing to be complicit in this form of racism, as well as a basis for analyzing and challenging all forms of racism, including antisemitism. ♦

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# Prevalent Misconception: “Anti-Zionism is Antisemitism”<sup>1</sup>

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On November 28, 2023, the US House passed a motion stating, “anti-Zionism is antisemitism” (US Government 2023). On November 24, 2023, *the National Post*, a conservative Canadian daily, featured an article headlining: “Don’t Be Fooled – ‘Anti-Zionism’ is just antisemitism, rebranded” (Shalev 2023).

It is not. Equating anti-Zionism with antisemitism is not about challenging antisemitism at all, but part of a drive to silence growing solidarity with Palestinians in the midst of Israel’s genocidal war on Gaza, marking a rhetorical escalation of anti-Palestinian racism (Majid 2022; Abu-Laban and Bakan 2021). Antisemitism is a serious threat, and opposing it without compromise is critical. But it cannot be challenged effectively if its meaning is trivialized or distorted.

Antisemitism has multiple meanings that are often problematically conflated. At its core, the term refers to anti-Jewish racism, which is how I discuss it in this contribution. Another problematic use of the term—forwarded in the examples listed in the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism—falsely equates criticism of Israel with antisemitism (Gould

2020). The IHRA working definition, for example, claims it is “antisemitic” to ascribe the State of Israel as a “racist endeavor”.

Anti-Zionism, however, is not in any way the same as antisemitism. In fact, Zionism, anti-Zionism and non-Zionism have been discussed in the Jewish community for decades. There are certainly some antisemitic currents, including white nationalism, which use the term “Zionism” as a place saver for Jews, as an object of hate. Indeed, white nationalist currents appropriate many terms and manipulate them to their own aims. But it is not rising white nationalism that has provoked US Republicans and conservative Canadian pundits to express concern about anti-Zionism.

Zionism has taken multiple forms historically, some interpreting Biblical verses to signify a spiritual home for Jews. The dominant form of Zionism today is political Zionism, or what I have termed “really existing Zionism” (Bakan 2014). Zionism is the founding and ongoing ideology of all of the main political parties in the State of Israel. Its premise is that Jews can only live in peace, free of antisemitism, away from non-Jews, in an ethnically defined nation-state.

<sup>1</sup> This contribution is adapted from an earlier presentation for the panel, “Antisemitism in the Current Moment: Critical Voices from the Jewish Faculty Network”, organized by the Jewish Faculty Network, Canada. February 15, 2024. [Jewishfaculty.ca](http://Jewishfaculty.ca)

Zionism in any form, however, is not the same as Jewish identity, culture, theology, or religion. Indeed, prior to the Holocaust, Zionism was a minority view in the international Jewish community. Jews challenged antisemitism as oppressed peoples have continuously challenged oppression—linking arms in common cause with others to fight for fundamental social change and eliminate oppressive hierarchies. But liberal democratic states offered no safe haven for Jews. The US and Canada blatantly refused Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi Germany. Many Jews looked to socialism—and yet even socialist states failed Jews, adapting, or continuing earlier patterns, of violent anti-Jewish racism.

In 1948 when the state of Israel was established the Jewish population had been decimated. Those surviving WWII were desperate to find a way to imagine a life of peace and safety. In that moment of extreme despair, Zionism came to fill the vacuum. This was a state founded as a colonizing project. Some participated knowingly, others did not, but the outcome was the same. Israel originated as an ethnically defined “Jewish” state, not a state of all its citizens regardless of race or religion. And this apartheid orientation has been reaffirmed repeatedly, including in Israel’s 2018 Basic Law (Government of Israel, Knesset 2018).

The land of historic Palestine comprised a productive, diverse society including a majority of Indigenous Muslim and Christian Palestinians, as well as Mizrahi and some Ashkenazi Jews. The *Nakba*, Arabic for catastrophe, marks the moment of occupation, ethnic cleansing and displacement in 1948. This was not only an historic event, but continued in 1967 and beyond, tragically reaching the present day genocide against the people of Gaza.

Political Science can and should be the disciplinary space that can unpack misguided political rhetoric. It can teach us how to understand Zionism as a political ideology, an “ism”, comparable to other “ism’s”, such as liberalism, anarchism or socialism. If we fail to take up this responsibility, misusages and distortions of terms like “antisemitism” and “Zionism” become hegemonic, with, as we see today, dangerous and tragic political consequences. ♦

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# Gender and Sexual Based Violence

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The ongoing Israel-Hamas war cannot be only examined through political, religious, or economic lenses; understanding it necessitates a thorough examination of its gender dynamics. Reports on gender-based violence, reproductive health challenges, and the weaponization of gender narratives underscore the critical need for a gender-sensitive approach to analyzing the conflict and its implications. Incorporating Feminist International Relations (IR) perspectives into Political Science frameworks can effectively address this gap (See Cockburn 2013; Nordås & Cohen 2021; Cohen 2013; Enloe 2014; Sjoberg 2016; Tickner 2011; Grey and Shepherd 2013; Plümper and Neumayer 2006; Wood 2014, Pankhurst 2014). In the case of the October 7th attacks and their aftermath, a feminist IR lens helps us understand how women's bodies have become instrumentalized and weaponized to justify violence, reject ceasefire, and draw moral distinction between victim and perpetrator.

We witnessed gender and sexual based violence become a central point of debate and mobilization in the aftermath of Hamas's October 7th attacks, when organizations such as the United Nations (UN) expressed concerns over reports of sexual violence against Israeli women during the attack (UN Women 2023, see also ARCCI 2024, UN 2024, PHR-Israel 2023). Even with UN experts asserting, "the

growing body of evidence about reported sexual violence is particularly harrowing" (OHCHR 2024a), people still questioned these allegations (Burbank 2024). The reason behind the questioning is partially due to wide disinformation and misinformation, including the unsubstantiated claims of be-headed babies (See Mhajne & Trantos 2024), and the questionable coverage of the issue by the New York Times (Boguslaw and Grim 2024). The denial also came from Hamas who criticized Western media for what they viewed as amplifying the Israeli attempts to demonize Palestinians and justify alleged war crimes in Gaza (Ahram Online 2023).

The reports of sexual violence committed by Hamas against Israeli women on October 7th were weaponized to justify the continuation of the war and to argue against a ceasefire. For instance, when the Security Council failed to pass a resolution demanding a ceasefire on December 8, 2023, Israel government spokesperson Eylon Levy tweeted: "Thank you to the United States of America for vetoing a UN Security Council resolution designed to keep Hamas' rapist regime in power." Similarly, Levy responded to South Africa's International Court of Justice Genocide case by stating in an interview to the i24News English that, "We hold South Africa criminally complicit with the Hamas rapist regime." Additionally, on February 21,

2024, the Association of Rape Crisis Centers in Israel (ARCCI) released a detailed report focusing on sexual and gender-based violence during October 7th. The report concluded that Hamas used sexual violence systematically (ARCCI 2024). It also added testimonies from hostages who were released recounting gender and sexual based violence that happened in captivity (ARCCI 2024). Linking to the news about the report, AIPAC tweeted, “A ceasefire now keeps these rapist monsters armed and in power in Gaza” (2024).

On the other hand, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR 2024b) reported that Palestinian women and girls in detention have “been subjected to multiple forms of sexual assault, such as being stripped naked and searched by male Israeli army officers. At least two female Palestinian detainees were reportedly raped while others were reportedly threatened with rape and sexual violence.” Israel’s Mission to the UN in Geneva quickly denied the report and heavily criticized the agency. In a statement on X, formerly Twitter, the mission asserted that, “Israel forcefully rejects the despicable and unfounded claims published today by a group of so-called UN experts, including one who just days ago legitimized the massacre of October 7 in which more than 1,200 people were murdered, executed and raped, and another who publicly doubted the testimonies of Israeli victims of gender-based and sexual violence....” (2024).

The reports and the ensuing reactions to them, whether characterized by denial or endorsement, often puts women and their bodies into the heart of political discourse, serving to either validate or discredit the violence perpetrated by Hamas or Israel. Women's rights and the maltreatment of specific

groups of women are being securitized and utilized to rationalize military actions under the guise of protecting women. This securitization inherently prioritizes the protection of certain women over others, reinforcing power dynamics that favor the dominant narrative. Consequently, women who align with the perceived interests of those in power may receive more attention and support, while those who challenge or fall outside this narrative may face marginalization or even further harm. Violence against Israeli women is used to justify and perpetuate further violence on Palestinian women, and Palestinians at large.

Palestinian women and children bear a disproportionate toll of this violence, with them constituting 70% of casualties reported (UN Women 2024). Of the 2.3 million inhabitants of Gaza, about 1.9 million people are displaced, with nearly one million being women and girls seeking shelter and safety (UN Women 2024). In Gaza, limited access to medical care increases the risk of infection and maternal mortality. Newborns suffer due to unsanitary conditions and overcrowded, bombed-out medical facilities, with miscarriage rates seeing a 300% increase since the war's onset (Zhang 2024). South Africa's submissions to the International Criminal Court of Justice highlight reproductive violence in Gaza, accusing Israel of obstructing Palestinian births under Article 2(d) of the Genocide Convention (Axelson and Venkatraman, 2024). Israel's attacks on Gaza's medical infrastructure and deprivation of resources are cited as indirect measures to hinder Palestinian births (Axelson and Venkatraman, 2024).

The politicization of women's bodies in the context of conflict thus not only shapes the discourse but also affects whose suffering is recognized and validated. Furthermore, this narrative is employed to distinguish between

the 'children of light' and the 'children of darkness,' effectively separating victims from aggressors. The manipulation of narratives surrounding women's rights and victimhood serves to reinforce existing power structures and biases, influencing the allocation of resources, attention, and support. Women who do not fit neatly into the dominant narrative may find themselves overlooked or further marginalized, highlighting the complex interplay between gender, politics, and conflict. ♦

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# Queer Politics Might Be Exactly Where We Need to Search for Answers on Palestine

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As a researcher of LGBTQ politics in Palestine and the wider MENA region, I often encounter bewildered looks when discussing the growing ‘Queers for Palestine’ movement. Questions like “*Do gay people exist in Palestine?*” and “*shouldn’t they be supporting Israel for being more LGBTQ friendly?*” reveal commonplace flawed assumptions: that Queer and Palestinian identities are antithetical, and that national liberation struggles necessitate the subordination of other social struggles.

A cursory search on Palestine and Palestinians in mainstream political science publishing outlets reveals serious limitation in our understanding of intersectional oppression and Palestinian political life more generally. Where Palestine is invoked in recently published works, the research tended to obscure Palestinian identity and agency, mislabel self-identifying Palestinians as Israeli Arabs, and frame contentious intergroup relations within a reductive minority framework. With few notable exceptions, Palestinian politics rarely surfaced outside the confines of discussions of anger, hostility, frustrations, and ‘ethnically based terrorism.’

But turning our attention to emerging spaces within the discipline, particularly the field of

Queer politics can provide historical nuance to how we understand marginalization, solidarity, and intersectional mobilization within the context of occupied Palestine.

New research on LGBTQ mobilization highlights the centrality of political solidarity to Queer movements historically. Zein Murib’s book, *Terms of Exclusion*, illustrates how the early gay movement constructed its identity historically “by linking gay people with Black Panther, antiwar, Women’s Liberation, and Communist movements” (2024, 40). The movement cemented the idea that all forms of marginalization are the product of “intertwined ideologies of sexism, racism, capitalism, and imperialism” (Murib 2024, 40). In the early 1970s, Gay Liberationists insisted on defining queerness as “political praxis” rather than a mere “expression of sexuality,” paving the way for today’s resurgence of anti-liberal Queer Liberationist thinking.

Queers for Palestine reflects a growing political consciousness among young LGBTQ+ groups in response to the nation-state’s violence against marginalized people. Queer communities are acutely aware of the links between the cascade of laws targeting trans individuals and the mounting legal pressures to silence pro-Palestine advocacy. Since the war on Gaza began, LGBTQ people have watched with concern how the same liberal

regimes that claim to champion human rights and celebrate LGBTQ+ people are the ones rushing to resupply Israel's war coalition with weapons. And since the war started, Queer communities have been at the heart of Palestine solidarity organizing to demand a ceasefire and stand up against liberal pinkwashing (Atshan 2023). And the divides over defining queer identity we saw in the seventies have appeared once more as Queer activists recently protested outside the Human Rights Campaign annual Gala to oppose their ties to weapon manufacturers (Factora 2024).

What's more, liberal politicians have been publicly attacking pro-Palestine protestors and framing them as a fifth column of Putin (Guo 2024), in a way that evokes the lavender scare of the 1950s, and the subsequent demonization of Queer people as communist subversives. It is, thus, no surprise that Queer people are drawing on a long tradition of viewing Queerness as a 'commitment to solidarity' with all oppressed people whose fates are intertwined, and a rejection of liberalism's use as a coverup to the violence against Queer people, Palestinians, and those at the intersection.

When power asymmetries produce such horrific injustice, we, political scientists, can also seek inspiration from the Queer tradition of viewing identity as political praxis, and that includes our professional identities as scholars of politics. Our pursuit of objectivity and value neutrality as essential to studying politics as a science should leave room for Queer and feminist epistemologies or 'ways of knowing' that do not privilege knowledge production about the marginalized, but for them (McHugh 2014). The strict quest for value neutrality in what we produce has proven damaging to our ability to speak to this moment and to challenge it. Perhaps worse, it

has led many among us to remain silent. ♦

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# Known Unknowns in US Public Opinion Towards Israel

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Six months into the assault on Gaza, America's policies towards Israel have barely budged from their default positions of unconditional aid, overwhelming deference, and diplomatic cover. Of course, this stagnation is not for lack of pushback. Even in the face of protests that drew tens of thousands and high-profile resignations, the Biden administration has remained steadfast in its intransigence.

In fairness, the president will, occasionally, sharpen his rhetoric toward a foreign government prosecuting a plausible genocide, but appears to draw the line at using his considerable leverage to limit, let alone halt, what is potentially the most indiscriminate bombing campaign in history (Borger 2023). All this as a clear majority of likely voters want the U.S. to call for a permanent ceasefire (Data for Progress 2023). Against this backdrop of domestic 'political' and foreign 'violent' conflict, Americans' attitudes toward President Biden and his policies have decidedly soured with opinions towards Israel following suit.

Despite these clear trends, one misconception about the broader Israel-Palestine conflict is that we actually know Americans' opinions on the matter in any meaningful sense. To be sure, we certainly have a clear snapshot of public sentiment in the months following

the October 7 Hamas attack. For instance, only one-third of respondents in a December 2023 New York Times/Siena College Poll said they approved of Biden's handling of the Israel-Palestine conflict (Weisman, Igielnik, and McFadden 2023), similar to the result in a Pew poll taken a few weeks earlier (Pew Research Center 2023). Additionally, in a more recent USA Today/Suffolk University survey, nearly half of respondents said Biden should do more to pressure Israel to ease the humanitarian crisis in Gaza (Irwin 2024).

Similarly, Americans' opinion of Israel's military campaign in Gaza, and regard for Israelis in their conflict with the Palestinians generally, has taken a demonstrably negative turn. In a mid-February poll, half of US adults said that Israel had "gone too far" in its prosecution of the current war (Knickmeyer and Sanders 2024). In terms of which side Americans sympathize with in general, Gallup's latest World Affairs poll finds that, for the first time, Democrats say that they are more sympathetic towards the Palestinians than Israel (Gallup 2023).

Yet, how much can we really learn from such findings when it comes to Israel-Palestine policy generally? More often than not, surveys on the broader conflict merely report

some measure of affect—and not a particularly informative one, at that. The question most frequently asked pits Palestinians against Israel/Israelis for Americans’ sympathies. Sometimes the query will take a more typical favorable/unfavorable format, even adding nuance by differentiating the people from their government (Alper 2022), but there is a near total dearth of polling on Americans’ policy preferences toward Israel.

This is where political science can intervene to ask questions that not only probe key attitudes of interest that go beyond surface-level support for one side over the other, but also do so in a manner that accounts for different messaging contexts. For example, we would certainly want to know where the public stands on conditioning aid to Israel. Yet, simply asking “Would you support conditioning American aid to Israel?” would have limited utility. Instead, public opinion scholars could field survey experiments that most polling firms are reticent to incorporate into their questionnaires to get a more valid gauge of attitudes toward this issue. We would then be able to compare baseline levels of support for conditioning aid, in general, to support for various, specific criteria upon which such decisions could be made. Moreover, this methodology would allow us to deduce whether it makes a difference if you inform respondents that aid to foreign countries is typically conditioned and that the no-strings-attached package that Israel receives is outside the norm. A similar assessment of framing effects could be fielded concerning sanctions: Would the American public be more willing to sanction settlers in the West Bank if you inform them that this group’s actions are illegal under international law and that they regularly use violence to reinforce their presence?

Even more fundamentally, a better gauge of

Americans’ knowledge and prioritization of policies toward Israel would be invaluable to both lawmakers and activists. For instance, does knowing how much annual aid Israel receives make one more or less likely to support conditioning it? Scholars could also deploy various means to assess the extent to which support for Israel wins out when it is pitted against another policy priority (say, immigration or taxes or healthcare) or how it fits within a seemingly misaligned ideology like “America First.”

Myriad gaps exist in our understanding of how Americans regard the US-Israel relationship and what messages and considerations influence that assessment. In the absence of informative survey findings, interest-group narratives and partisan heuristics will continue to drive public discourse on the topic. Political scientists can intervene by providing deeper, more holistic public opinion data. Hopefully, this moment underscores the urgency in building this cache of knowledge. ♦

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# The Delusion of a Long-Term Diplomatic Resolution Without Political Transformation

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There is no shortage of misconceptions about Israel’s Gaza offensive. The most egregious one is locating the conflict’s onset on October 7 when Hamas and its allies killed nearly 1200 people and abducted over 250 back to Gaza. Pro-Israel advocates invoke this narrative to deem Hamas culpable for all the ensuing devastation inflicted on Gazans. A less frequently circulated misconception, of appeal in some Palestine-solidarity circles, is that the Gaza horrors and all past ones stem entirely from the creation of a Jewish settler-colonial state forged through ethnic cleansing.

The misconception I wish to highlight is that most common in U.S. and allied diplomatic circles. This holds that there is a diplomatic path for enticing Israeli and Palestinian political leaders to reach a peaceful resolution. This misconception flies in the face of entrenched internal political dysfunctions in both communities.

Contrary to official U.S. claims, but well documented in human rights reports, Israel is not a liberal democracy but a regime that maintains Jewish domination across all greater Israel, which includes the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza, and perpetrates egregious human rights abuses of Palestinians

in the West Bank and Gaza. Its current governing coalition consists of hardline nationalist parties, including one inspired by the late Meir Kahane, an outspoken racist and advocate of ethnic cleansing. Even if Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is voted out of office, the hard-right and intolerant attitudes of Israeli Jews ensure that the illiberal, racist, and violent policies will endure. The full viciousness of this political culture is on display in the relentless Gaza offensive coupled with the widespread racist and often genocidal statements from politicians, soldiers, journalists, and regular citizens.

The formal Palestinian political institutions consist primarily of the PLO-led Palestinian Authority (PA) in the West Bank and Hamas in the Gaza Strip. Because Israel asserts ultimate control over both territories and aims to keep Palestinians weak and fragmented, both political entities are severely limited in governing capacity. Yet even factoring in these restrictions, Palestinian politics has moved in a distressing direction since the formation of the PA in the early 1990s. Palestinians are caught between an authoritarian Fatah-led PA with no popular legitimacy and an oppressive Hamas, whose normalization of violence, as Tareq Baconi (2018, 243) concludes, has “threatened to erode the very social fabric of the Palestinian community under occupa-



tion.”

In short, neither Israelis nor Palestinians have political institutions equipped to take the bold steps needed to reach a just and lasting resolution. The U.S. and allies conveniently remain in denial of this reality, hoping that a path can be found if only Hamas and the most extremist coalition parties in Israel can somehow be marginalized. Indeed, the U.S. keeps propping up Israel and, to a much lesser extent, the PA, with military or internal security assistance.

To be sure, the recent decision of the Biden Administration not to block a UN Security Council resolution demanding a ceasefire gives hope that there will soon be a halt to Israeli’s onslaught. But a broader diplomatic resolution is not possible under existing political realities. The only way to end the cycle of death and misery, whose impact falls overwhelmingly on Palestinians, is to transform the political institutions in both societies. In “Truth and Reconciliation,” the late Edward Said (2001, 319) appealed to a vanguard of Palestinian and Jewish iconoclasts who possess an “innovative, daring, and theoretical willingness to get beyond the arid stalemate of assertion, exclusivism, and rejection.”

Such iconoclasts are present in Palestine-Israel and the diaspora. Guided by Said’s insight, political scientists should diagnose the political dysfunctions of all protagonists, identify the vanguard constituencies, and find lessons for how these actors can reach a critical mass. ♦

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# Research Symposium: A Multifaceted Exploration of Elections in the MENA Region

## Introduction

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The study of electoral processes under the autocratic or semi-autocratic regimes in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is fraught with challenges. These challenges emanate not only from the operational constraints of conducting research within such political landscapes but also from a deep-seated skepticism regarding the significance of such studies and the actual meaning of electoral processes in such contexts. Despite this, the MENA region, known for a complex political terrain marked by autocratic governance that was not permeable to the different waves of democratization that reached the rest of the world, and even remained resilient after the Arab Revolts of 2011, has seen a notable uptick in scholarly interest. This symposium tries to show a glimpse of the intricate dynamics of electoral politics within these regimes, drawing upon a rich tapestry of case studies that shed light on the multifaceted roles elections play in shaping the political narrative of the region.

The electoral processes in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region are often considered as tools used by authoritarian regimes to maintain their power. This criti-

cism stems from the perception that MENA elections fall far short of democratic ideals. But, indicators like those from the Electoral Integrity Project (EIP), challenge the notion of a vast gap in perceived electoral integrity between MENA and Western democracies. Notably, the EIP's 2023 report found a higher perception of electoral integrity in Qatar (rated 65) compared to the United States (rated 64), despite Qatar's 'Closed Autocracy' classification versus the US's 'Liberal Democracy' (Garnett et. al., 2023, 6) This highlights a disconnect: how elections are perceived in non-democratic regimes may differ from how they are categorized based on established democratic principles. Therefore, assessing electoral integrity necessitates a broader perspective that extends beyond the formal architecture of the system and its influence on the polity of MENA states. It involves delving into the significance and interest these elections truly evoke among voters, as evidenced by empirical data. This comprehensive approach highlights the importance of understanding the nuanced motivations and engagements of the electorate, thereby providing a more holistic view of electoral dynamics and their implications for democratic progress in the region. MENA elections, far

from mere formalities, can be pivotal events impacting domestic and international politics despite the arguably lack of interest that they can generate among the general public. The objective of this symposium is then to explore the inherent value these elections hold for governments, candidates, and voters, despite not being fully democratic. It seeks to unravel the underlying meanings and implications of electoral participation in such contexts.

The authors' contributions are the product of a two-round workshop on electoral politics held during 2023 at the Gulf Studies Center, Qatar University, the workshop was jointly organized by the SEPAD Project at Lancaster University and the Observatory on Politics and Elections of the Arab and Muslim World, Spain. The event showcased over 20 papers examining electoral processes across the region, from Morocco to Pakistan, signifying the depth and breadth of contemporary academic exploration into this area. By highlighting these efforts, this symposium acknowledges the critical role of scholarly research in enhancing our understanding of electoral politics in the MENA region. Thanks are due to Dr. Daniel L. Tavana who has solicited the contributions, edited the pieces, and worked closely with the authors to put together this symposium.

In 'Ethno-Religious Minorities and Electoral Politics in Iran', Mansour Anbarmoo and Edward Wastnidge address the participation of ethnic and religious minorities in Iran's elections, focusing on Sunni-dominated provinces of Sistan and Baluchistan, Kurdistan, and West Azerbaijan. The contribution reveals how shifts in government policies have influenced minority participation rates, painting a picture of evolving political engagement within the Islamic Republic. Their analysis

shows that voter turnout in these provinces often differs from the national average, with early years showing lag but later aligning more closely or exceeding national participation rates. They highlight the influence of reformist candidates on increasing minority participation and the role of local Sunni leaders in mobilizing voter turnout. The piece also traces the Iranian government's policies towards minorities over different administrations, from focusing on security and economic reform to more inclusive civil society efforts under Khatami and recent shifts towards securitization under Raisi. They eloquently show how while Iran's minorities have historically faced challenges in political participation, recent electoral trends present a complex picture of engagement, influenced by local leadership and national political dynamics.

Chantal Sarkis' 'The Evolution of Electoral Representation and Internal Conflicts in Lebanon' examines Lebanon's confessional representation system and its impact on the country's internal conflicts and electoral system from the 19th century to the present. She details the historical development of the system, starting with the division of Mount Lebanon into two regions in 1841, leading to the establishment of the *moutassarifya* system and eventually the Ta'if Accords in 1989 that ended the civil war with modified power-sharing arrangements. Sarkis argues for an electoral system that not only ensures effective representation but also promotes inter-community cooperation. Her analysis of Lebanon's electoral history demonstrates the challenges and evolution towards achieving a balance between accurate group representation and fostering spaces for inter-group cooperation, and how electoral and institutional engineering can contribute to overcome the differences among different groups.

Zeidon Alkinani's piece 'Iraq's Electoral Political Dynamics: Traditional Structures vis-à-vis Reformist Tendencies' explores the evolving landscape of Iraq's parliamentary electoral system since its establishment in 2005, highlighting the enduring ethnic-sectarian power-sharing system known as the *mahasasa* system, and the emergence of reformist forces challenging traditional Islamist political parties. It delves into the consequences of the 2019 Tishreen protest movement, which prompted significant political transformations, including governmental resignations, electoral law amendments, and the rise of independent candidates, despite the subsequent reassertion of traditional parties' dominance. Furthermore, the analysis examines the latest 2023 provincial elections, emphasizing the Coordination Framework's manipulation of electoral outcomes to maintain power and thwart potential opposition, reflecting broader issues of electoral integrity and democratic reform in Iraq.

Simon Mabon's piece, 'Why do anti-sectarian protesters vote for sectarian parties?', complements Alkinani and Sarkis pieces, as it investigates the paradox where anti-sectarian protesters in Iraq and Lebanon, despite their vocal opposition to sectarian politics, ended up voting for sectarian parties in subsequent elections. Drawing on a comprehensive survey conducted in 2021 across both countries, the study highlights the profound frustration with socio-economic conditions and government performance, alongside a deep-seated resentment towards sectarian elites. Despite widespread dissatisfaction, the results underscored a pragmatic choice by many voters who, faced with existential crises, viewed sectarian parties as capable of providing necessary support for survival. Mabon suggests that this outcome reflects the complex interplay between ideal visions of politics free

from sectarianism and the harsh material realities of daily life, underpinned by the sectarian parties' ability to offer material support in times of need. His analysis sheds light on the enduring influence of sectarian identities in political life and the challenging process of desectarianization in both states.

Courtney Freer's research, 'Effects of Single Non-transferrable Vote (SNTV) Systems on Tribal Representation: Preliminary Findings from Jordan and Kuwait' explores the impact of the SNTV system on tribal representation in both monarchies, highlighting its largely ineffective role in diminishing tribal votes in Kuwait and its partial success in Jordan, specifically against tribes antagonistic to the regime. The study delves into the SNTV's strategic disadvantages for organized political groups, like tribes, and its role as a tool for monarchies to control electoral outcomes without significantly altering the tribal composition within parliaments. Despite expectations, the SNTV system reinforced tribal identities at the polls in Jordan and did not significantly alter the tribal representation in Kuwait, where tribes remain a potent political force, demonstrating the complex interplay between electoral systems and tribal politics in hybrid regimes.

Finally, Rafael Bustos' piece, 'When and how elections can be drivers for conflict transformation: transitional justice and peacebuilding in WANA societies,' delves into a very current topic, how elections can facilitate conflict transformation and support peacebuilding in West Asia and North Africa (WANA), focusing on Algeria, Tunisia, Sudan, and Jordan. Bustos argues that elections can either exacerbate or mitigate conflicts, contributing to social peace through power sharing or fueling further divisions. Through a dual analytical framework that assesses the contexts of re-

gime change, armed conflict, authoritarian rule, and the role of inclusive processes, Bustos identifies distinct dynamics of elite and social inclusion or exclusion in the studied countries. The findings reveal varying degrees of integration and exclusion across cases, with electoral and constitutional designs playing crucial roles in shaping these dynamics and their impact on transitional justice and conflict transformation efforts.

The analysis presented in these six contributions underscore the critical role electoral system designs play across a range of contexts characterized by diverse ethno-linguistic, tribal, and religious divisions. These factors are equally as impactful as the ideological-political cleavages found in many democratic regimes. Together, the pieces shine a light on numerous obstacles to inclusive and equitable political participation, including the impacts of sectarian politics, ethnic-sectarian power-sharing arrangements, and electoral outcome manipulations. Such challenges are portrayed as pivotal elements influencing electoral integrity and the pursuit of democratic reforms. This phenomenon is not unique to the regions studied but can also be observed in other areas like Africa, South Asia, or Latin America, which possess distinct socio-political structures. Hence, the notion of ‘exceptionalism’ often attributed to the MENA region, which has been used to argue both its incompatibility with democratic principles and the supposed ineffectiveness of applying standard analytical tools, methods, and theories, is effectively challenged. This critique opens the door to a more nuanced understanding and examination of the region’s electoral processes and political dynamics, underscoring the universal applicability of democratic analysis and reform. ♦

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# Ethno-Religious Minorities and Electoral Politics in Iran

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The electoral politics of post-revolutionary Iran are often portrayed in Western media and academic analyses as an enduring battle between reform-oriented pragmatism and varying shades of conservatism (Axworthy 2013; Amanat 2017; Hashemi and Postel 2011). An underexplored aspect that enhances our understanding of the complexities of Iranian politics is the extent of participation by ethnic and religious minority groups in its electoral processes. This intervention aims to advance understanding of political participation of ethnic and religious minorities and their place in the electoral system in Iran. Precise census data pertaining to ethnic and/or religious identification is not available, and is a politically sensitive issue, thus requiring a certain degree of extrapolation from known populations and their geographic location. As such, the primary focus will be on presiden-

tial election turnout in three provinces namely Sistan and Baluchistan, Kurdistan, and West Azerbaijan which contain populations that are commonly understood to be largely distinct in both ethnic and religious terms from the Persian and Shi'i majority in the country.<sup>1</sup>

## Exploring ethno-religious groups in Iran

Though often perceived to be centred around a Persian-speaking and, since the 16th Century, Shi'i, 'core,' ethnic and religious minority groups have a long history of political activism in Iran. Whether contributing to revolutionary activities, campaigning for minority rights, or being instrumentalised by external powers, minorities have played a significant role in Iran's political history. Noted works in the English language (Elling, 2013; Tohidi,

<sup>1</sup> We make use of field interviews in Iran, and the data provided by Mehrzad Boroujerdi's 'Iran Data Portal' at Syracuse University, which offers translations of key Iranian Ministry of Information statistics on elections, alongside other socio-economic and political data from Iran. <https://irandataportal.syr.edu/>

2009; Sanasarian, 2000) have sought to explore the broader historical and social contexts of ethnic and religious minorities in Iran, including in the Islamic Republic Era. Meanwhile, the US policy community has exhibited a longstanding enthusiasm for the potential opportunities for ethnic secessionism in Iran as a means of unseating its current government (Hamid, 2019; Nader and Stewart 2013).

The ethno-religious minorities residing in the three provinces, that are the focus of this paper, being primarily Sunni and either Kurd or Baluch, are also under intense scrutiny from Iran's central government due to their long history of acting as a community base for separatist groups challenging the Islamic Republic. Iran's 'ethnic fringe' has also long provided avenues for hostile powers or secessionist groups based in neighbouring countries, and has thus become highly securitised (Abrahamian 1993, 115-118; Elling 2008, 486).

The constitution of the Islamic Republic contains a number of articles which relate specifically to minorities in Iran, most notably articles 12, 13, 15 and 19.<sup>2</sup> These articles all allude to some form of protection of rights for minorities, with provision offered in principle for freedom of worship and non-interference in jurisprudential matters for other Muslim sects, official recognition of non-Muslim minorities, and use of non-Persian regional languages. However, only non-Muslim minorities are given explicit political representation in terms of parliament. There are also legal restrictions regarding certain political positions in Iran. These include the stipulation in article 115 that the president must be

a Muslim and 'believe' in the official religion the country (i.e. Shi'ism), thus restricting access to the highest elected role in the country. Ministers are also to be elected from among 'Iranian Muslims,' thus precluding non-Muslim participation in high-ranking government office.<sup>3</sup>

## **Overview of Successive Iranian Administrations' Policies Towards Ethno-Religious Minorities**

The government's initial phase of ethnic policies spanned from 1979 to 1989. During this time, the government prioritised security, in terms of establishing a secure post-revolutionary regime and managing the eight-year war with Iraq, while policies oriented towards minority groups were pushed to one side. This was seen in an emphasis on bolstering security measures targeted at managing minority populations, rather than concentrating on initiatives related to their economic advancement and the promotion of political involvement. From 1989 to 1997, coinciding with the start of start of Ayatollah Khomeini's leadership, Iran's ethnic policies entered a new phase. Following the war's conclusion, policies aimed at developing the affected and/or neglected regions meant that ethnic minorities became more of a priority. The government shifted its focus from security to economic reform, prioritising the development of the economy and increasing its presence in Iran's 'ethnic fringe.'

During Khatami's presidency (1997-2005), there was a noticeable difference in the government's focus compared to previous periods, with an emphasis on building a more inclusive civil society. Khatami stated that the

<sup>2</sup> Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, English version: <https://ecnl.org/sites/default/files/files/2021/IranConstitution.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, English version: <https://ecnl.org/sites/default/files/files/2021/IranConstitution.pdf>

emphasis on quantitative and one-dimensional development, which focuses on economic areas, was unachievable in relation to the ethnic and religious minorities in the border areas of the country and could not solve ‘ethnic problems’ (Ahmadi 2011, 156). The presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013) saw an emphasis on policies aimed at aiding the lower classes, with a strong emphasis on a more Persian and Shi’i-centric national identity, thus alienating some ethno-religious groups.

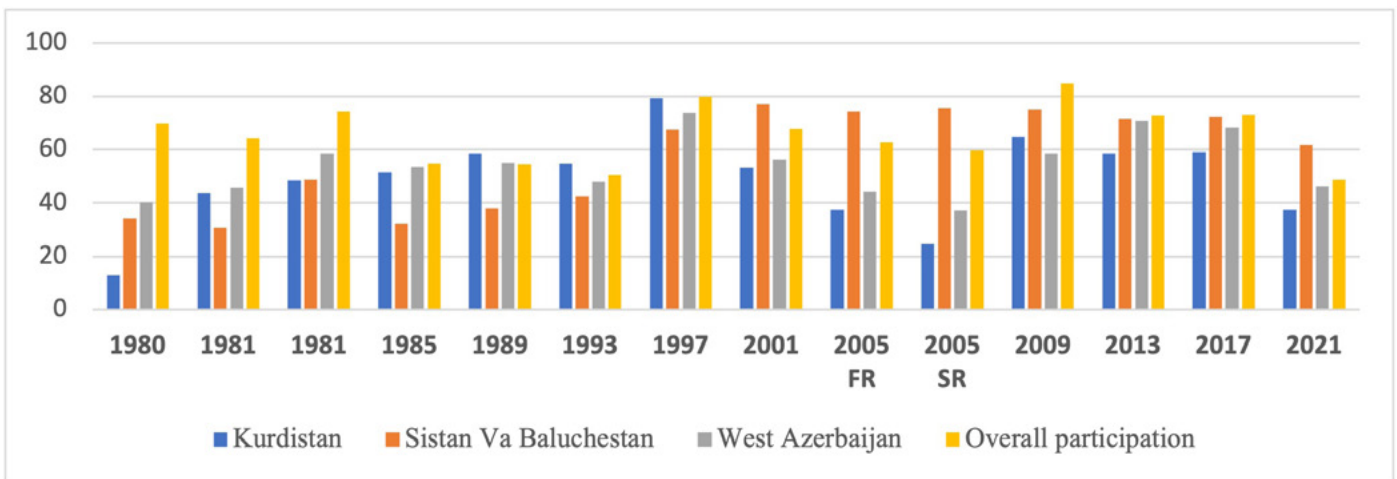
Conversely, the Rouhani presidency (2013-2021) saw various activities that influenced ethnic trends, including drafting the Charter of Citizen Rights, placing emphasis on Constitution principles 15 and 16 related to minority rights, appointing a special assistant for minority affairs. The ethnic policies during the first term of Ebrahim Raisi (2021-) have thus far been similar to those of Ahmadinejad’s first term, emphasising national (mass) unity and also moving towards a more securitised stance toward Iran’s minority groups.

### Overview of Participation Rates in Ethnic Minority Provinces in Presidential Elections

To comprehend the political conduct of Sunnis in elections, the involvement of three Sunni majority provinces of Sistan-Baluchistan (approximately 85% Sunni), Kurdistan (approximately 80% Sunni) and West Azerbaijan (approximately 60% Sunni) are examined in relation to presidential elections in Iran (see work of Soltani 2016; Masaeli 2023 for contemporary population estimates). As an ethnically heterogeneous country, it is not possible to offer an in-depth treatment of all minorities’ experiences with the multiple electoral processes that exist in the Islamic Republic. In addition to the common understanding of Kurdistan and Sistan-Baluchistan being largely distinct in both ethnic and religious terms, it is notable that West Azerbaijan can be seen as Iran’s third Sunni province on account of its large Kurdish population.

The below graphical illustration shows turnout in the three provinces for presidential elections compared to overall turnout.<sup>4</sup>

From the above, one can see that turnout in



<sup>4</sup> Data is obtained from these websites: <https://irandataportal.syr.edu>, <https://www.moi.ir/service/election-headquarter>. \*author's own illustration



Iran's presidential elections differs across the selected provinces and is often at odds with the overall turnout picture for the rest of the country. In the first decades of the Islamic Republic, participation rates in Sunni majority provinces examined here lagged substantially behind the overall turnout. The political atmosphere of the first decade of the Islamic Republic was impacted by the Iran-Iraq war, domestic concerns with regime security, and security incidents in the east and west of Iran, which likely explain the lower participation rates in these provinces, and which are significantly lower than the overall turnout. Participation in these provinces improved from the election of Rafsanjani in 1989, falling more into line with the national average, though remained comparatively low in Sistan-Baluchistan until 1997. This relative uptick in turnout reflects the improved security environment in the country following the cessation of the Iran-Iraq war, as well as the impact of the constitutional amendments enacted following the death of Khomeini, which elevated the status of the presidential office in Iran (Ahmadi 2011, 25-29).

We can see something of a pattern of these provinces often voting for reformist candidates in opposition to the perceived 'establishment' and/or conservative candidate.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, all reformist candidates have emphasised minority rights in their campaigns, for example Khatami 1997, Mousavi/Karroubi 2009, and Rouhani in 2013/2017 (Rahimikhani, 2020, 99). This was evident in the 1997 election of Khatami, the first round of the 2005 elections, the 2009 elections (with the exception of Kurdistan), in the 2013 victory of Rouhani, and in the 2017 election of Hassan Rouhani against the establishment-supported candidate, and eventual

<sup>5</sup> See <https://irandataportal.syr.edu/presidential-elections> for individual breakdowns of election turnouts and 'winning candidate per province' information for presidential elections since 1980. A table by the authors collating this information is available on request.

president himself from 2021, Ebrahim Raisi.

In terms of overall turnout, the figures for the election of Khatami in 1997 represent a prominent peak in participation rates in Kurdistan and West Azerbaijan in particular. This is commensurate with what was at the time a record turnout for a presidential election (bettered only by the turnout in the disputed elections of 2009), and a notable moment of change in the political atmosphere of Iran. Though not reaching the same participation rates as the other two provinces, Sistan-Baluchistan's turnout for this election was its highest on record at the time, and participation continued to grow in the province, often exceeding overall voter turnout at successive presidential elections, and regularly topping 70%, with the exception of the 2021 election, in which there was a record low turnout overall at only 48%. It is notable that turnout in Sistan-Baluchistan for the 2021 election was still some 12% higher than the national average. Kurdistan's participation has been lower than other two provinces on average, with a notable dip in 2005 when Ahmadinejad was elected president. This is likely a result of Ahmadinejad's rejection of Kurdish demands during his campaign.

The fact that all three provinces supported the conservative, establishment-backed candidate, Raisi, in the 2021 elections might appear as something of an anomaly. However, this is also due in part to the lack of serious alternative candidates being offered in the presidential race, thus leading to the record low turnout. It can also be seen as a reflection of key Sunni leaders, such as the Baluchi leader Molavi Abdolhamid Ismaelzahi, offering their support for Raisi in explicit terms, and a wider sense of disillusionment

with the reformist/moderate project in not delivering on the goals it had set for improving minority rights. In interviews with Sunni religious scholars and politicians, the respondents viewed elections as a means of participation rather than a political activity, due to the sensitivity surrounding Sunni leaders.<sup>6</sup> This sense of political realism stemmed from the perception that Sunnis were unable to become part of the power structure in Iran, due in part to their historical experiences as a minority, and a lack of belief in their ability to attain political power.<sup>7</sup> As a result, Sunni populations were characterised as preferring social interaction and camaraderie rather than engaging in explicit political action, and can be seen preferring to remain ‘non-political’ in more general terms.<sup>8</sup>

## Conclusion

This short intervention has illustrated how the political orientation of Iran’s ethnic and religious minorities can be analysed through their participation rates. The data presented in this paper demonstrates that voter turnout for presidential elections in these three, largely Sunni provinces, that are also distinct in ethnic terms from the majority population of Iran, often lagged behind overall turnout figures in the early years of the revolution. This was influenced by the adverse security situation both in these provinces and in the country as a whole during the war years. Participation rates have tended to peak around the rising popularity of reformist candidates, and the voting choices confirm that support for reformist candidates tends to be more probable. Participation is also influenced by the prominence of local leaders’ engagement with electoral processes, as seen in the compara-

tively high participation rates in Sistan-Baluchistan from the Khatami period onward. ♦

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# The Evolution of Electoral Representation and Internal Conflicts in Lebanon

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This intervention explores the impact of Lebanon's confessional representation system on its internal conflicts and electoral system. It traces the historical development of this system, which assigns political seats according to religious groups, from its origin in the 19th century to the present day. It analyzes how each conflict and resolution affected the electoral system and the power-sharing arrangement among different communities. It argues that electoral systems in divided societies should not only ensure effective representation but also foster inter-community cooperation and prevent social isolation. It suggests Lebanon's electoral system should reflect its unique social and political characteristics and uphold its consensual democracy.

Lebanon's confessional representation system emerged from conflicts between the Druze and Christians in Mount Lebanon during Ottoman rule. The first official system of confessional representation was established in 1841 after international intervention to end violence (Rabbat 1986, 180). The solution was to divide Mount Lebanon into two regions *qaimaqamyas*, one led by a Christian governor and the other by a Druze governor. However, conflict resumed in 1845 due to dissatisfaction with authority and tax inequality (Njeim 1995, 275-277). The international powers

then recognized six confessions (Sunnah, Druze, Shia, Catholic, Orthodox, and Maronite) and created two administrative councils composed of 12 members representing the six confessions. Although the confessions felt more represented because the system ensured effective representation, it did not foster cooperation or compromise between them, as they voted in isolated confessional electoral colleges. The *moutassarifya* System, established after the 1845 conflict, replaced the *qaimaqamyas* system in Mount Lebanon. Led by a Christian Ottoman Ruler, it featured an administrative council representing the six confessions based on their demographics. Representatives were directly elected by their communities, and religious leaders collaborated with feudal lords to select council members. The administrative council of the *moutassarifya* was the first kind of representative parliament and the first power-sharing system based on confessional representation in Lebanon (Rabbat 1982, 226-230). Although the confessional electoral college prevented vote trading, the system fostered cooperation and compromise because it gave each confession a voice and made them work together in the same council. This system ensured effective representation while promoting unity against Ottoman interference. For sixty years, this arrangement

facilitated peaceful coexistence in Mount Lebanon until 1920.

The first official system of confessional representation emerged in 1920 when Great Lebanon was announced and defined with its final borders. The political system relied on a national pact between Christians and Muslims, who agreed to share power and keep Lebanon neutral from both the Western and Eastern worlds. The system had four features: a confessional quota in parliament for each group based on a 6:5 ratio—6 for the Christians and 5 for the Muslims; a multi-confessional electoral college where voters from different groups voted for all the representatives regardless of their religion; a two-round-majoritarian system in lists—bloc vote system—after the abolition of the delegates' system; and large and multi-confessional districts. This system ensured effective representation of the groups, and any attempt by the French mandate to abolish the confessional representation was rejected (Hakim 2005, 260-266). The bloc vote system also promoted accommodation and cooperation among the groups, as it encouraged moderate speech and candidates who could make compromises and peace deals because candidates needed to attract votes from all confessions, especially in large confessionally heterogeneous districts (Ghanem 1972, 160-161). The system maintained peace and coexistence for 32 years from 1920 to 1952.

However, the system was challenged in 1958, and civil unrest broke out due to internal and external factors. The internal factors were the change of the electoral system by the Christian president Camille Chamoun from the bloc vote system to the first past the post system that isolated the groups in small mono-confessional districts, weakening the effective representation of the Muslim

representatives who lost the elections due to the districting by president Chamoun (Johnson 1985, 118). The external factors were the Christians supporting the Eisenhower Doctrine and opposing the USSR, and the Muslims supporting the Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser and his alliance with the Soviets. The 1958 violent clashes between Christians and Muslims led to the dissolution of the 1957 parliament, the election of a moderate president Fouad Chehab in 1958, the adoption of a new electoral law in 1960, and new parliamentary elections in 1960. The bloc vote system which was reinstated in 26 districts balanced the effective representation of the groups and the cooperation between them. The over-representation of Christians was offset by the influence of Muslim voters in electing 13 Christian MPs out of 54. The confessions were pushed once again to cooperate in the multi-confessional districts. This system led to 15 years of peace and coexistence from 1960 to 1975. The 1960 electoral system was fair and stable for all Lebanese sects (Taqi Al-Din 1996, 140). It allowed them to have a proper representation that matched their demographic distribution. The war disrupted the political harmony that was achieved by this system.

The Lebanese civil war started in 1975. Some of the internal reasons for the war were the Muslims' request for a change in the 6:5 ratio of parliamentary representation that favored the Christians, the Muslims' request for more powers for the Sunni prime minister, and fewer powers for the Christian president. Some of the external reasons were the Palestinian armed forces in Lebanon, the Arab-Israeli disputes, and the Lebanese alignment with different international actors. The war destroyed the political unity that was built over 50 years. The war did not happen because of the flaws in the political system

that respected diversity. The political system could have changed peacefully, if not for the Palestinian-Israeli conflict that weighed on it (Harik 1980, 46-47).

The Ta'if Accords in 1989 that ended the civil war modified the system as follows: equal representation in parliament and cabinet between Christians and Muslims (128 MPs split equally between Christians and Muslims), reduced power of the Christian president, increased power of the Sunni prime minister and the cabinet, and Syrian influence over Lebanese politics and politicians. From 1992 to 2005, the bloc vote system in large districts led to the Christians' boycott of the elections because they could not elect their representatives despite the confessional quota (El-Khazen 2000, 81). The electoral system was imposed by the Syrian occupation to favor loyal representatives. The redistricting in the 2000 electoral law also affected the representation of all Lebanese groups, especially the Sunni community. This resulted in the emergence of national cooperation between Christian, Sunni and Druze, which peaked in the Cedar Revolution in 2005 after the assassination of prime minister Rafic Hariri. After the Syrian troops left Lebanon, Lebanon was divided between two camps: pro and anti-Syria-Iran. The 2005 parliamentary elections produced a more representative parliament, but not to the satisfaction of Christians whose members of parliament were still influenced by Muslim voters. However, the 2005 elections witnessed cooperation between the groups under the bloc vote system, even though the confessional representation was not always effective. From 1990 to 2005, Lebanon experienced 15 years of confessional tension and misrepresentation (Sleiman 2007, 274).

The 2008 mini-civil war, when the 8 March camp led by Hezbollah took over Beirut

and some regions in Mount Lebanon, led to the Doha Agreement that introduced some changes to the power-sharing system. The Shia community was granted an unofficial veto power by controlling 1/3 of the cabinet, the bloc vote system in 26 districts instead of 13 was adopted which gave the Christians influence on 28 seats out of 64 Christian seats (Doha Agreement 2008, provisions two and three). Some of the internal factors of the 2008 clashes were the Shia's demand for veto power in the cabinet and a proportional representation (PR) system in a single district in Lebanon which would favor them because of their demographic size, and the Christians' demand to change the electoral system that was imposed by the Syrians, and which gave them influence on less than 16 seats. External factors are always present in Lebanese politics and have since the 19th century shaped the political system, the divisions of the Lebanese between the pro- and anti-Syria-Iran camps (14 March and 8 March coalitions) were exacerbated during that period. After the 2009 parliamentary elections, the Christians felt more represented, but the Shia continued to demand a full PR system to increase their influence on the seats (Catusse, Karam, and Lamlou 2011, 299). The 2009 parliamentary elections showed some cooperation among the groups, as they needed each other due to the block vote system in mixed districts. Christians went from being underrepresented to being semi-effectively represented. The electoral system ensured better cooperation among the groups, but it did not satisfy all of them. Due to the dissatisfaction of both Shias and Christians, negotiations on a new electoral system continued until 2017 when Lebanon adopted the PR open list system in 15 districts.

In May 2018, Lebanon implemented the PR system for the first time after years of political

negotiations. Observing the 2018 and 2022 parliamentary elections, we can conclude that the PR system enhanced the representation of different groups in society, especially political and confessional minorities. It also affected the voting behavior and the electoral dynamics in various districts, by boosting participation, promoting cooperation among parties, and reducing confessional conflicts. Minority groups who did not vote before because their vote was meaningless under the majoritarian system, were motivated to vote again. The different shapes of the electoral districts, including confessional homogeneous, and mixed districts, created a balance between electoral competition within each confession and cooperation among confessions. The PR system, especially in mixed districts, made most parties cooperate to secure the electoral quotient, which lowered the intensity of confessional rhetoric, as cooperation overcame confessional mobilization.

The historical correlation between internal conflicts and electoral representation in Lebanon provides valuable insights into the country's political dynamics. The evolution of the electoral system, driven by the need to address conflicts and ensure fair representation, reflects Lebanon's complex socio-political landscape. Despite the challenges, the country has made significant strides towards achieving effective representation and cooperation among the confessions. In conclusion, while no electoral system can serve as a panacea for the shortcomings of any country's political system, the most suitable system is one that ensures accurate and effective group representation and simultaneously fosters spaces for inter-group cooperation. The more an electoral system aligns with these two objectives, the more reassured societal components feel about their existence and active participation in the political system, and the

more inter-group cooperation is bolstered. ♦

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# Iraq's Electoral Political Dynamics: Traditional Structures vis-à-vis Reformist Tendencies

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Iraq's parliamentary electoral system has witnessed various developments since its official establishment in 2005—2 years following the 2003 US-led invasion which toppled the former regime under Saddam Hussein's rule. Almost two decades after the first elections, whilst some customary traits remained, others faded away. One custom that remained strong is the ethnic-sectarian apportionment of powers known as al-Muhasasa al-Tai'fiyah ['Muhasasa System' hereafter] which allocates the main three presidential positions as follows: a Shia Arab for the Prime Minister's position; a Kurd for the President's position; and a Sunni Arab for the Speaker of Parliament's position (Dodge and Mansour 2020, 58). An unusual practice (amongst many others) which emerged in the new political order is the revival of reformist forces that are hostile towards the traditional and ruling Islamist political forces (Alkinani 2022). The recent existing scholarship is focused on a narrowed viewpoint towards reform being limited to opposition forces only, and overly focuses on the parliamentary electoral dynamics vis-à-vis the provincial (Eriksson and Grief 2023, 363; Berman, Clarke and Majed 2020, 27). This intervention aims to shed light on two understudied angles in the current scholarship on post-2003 Iraq's democratic and electoral system: the emergent reformist

tendencies within the political class; and the impacts of traditional parties' continued attempt to dominate power regardless of the electoral results with a focus on Iraq's latest provincial elections. The former is noticed through the public's keenness in supporting—electorally and politically—any candidates that are not affiliated with the Iran-affiliated electoral coalition known as the Coordination Framework. While the latter raises a very important point in the limitations to democratic reform and practice in post-2003 Iraq.

## **Reforming and Preserving the Electorate (2019-2022)**

Iraq's electorate faced its most apparent existential crisis when anti-government protests known as the Tishreen [October] protest movement began in October 2019 as it challenged the status quo's Muhasasa System, which led to the system's first governmental resignations, electoral law amendments, and the early elections (O'Driscoll and Costantini 2023, 69-76). The political elite was seen as compensating for the public dissatisfaction with governmental failure in providing efficient public services and solutions to unemployment rates (France 24 2019; Al-Rahim 2019). Some of the common issues that

became apparent in the political discourse and attitude during the transformation of Iraqi politics following the Tishreen movement were criticism of Iran's proxy influence; corruption; impunity; and a preference for a civic-led and reform-oriented alternative to the ruling Islamist parties (Manfredi Firmian 2024, 5- 21).

Whilst some emerging forces from the protest movement participated in the early elections of October 2021, others decided to boycott and continue the 'incomplete civil disobedience' against the ruling class (Anderson 2022, 173-177). This divided the pro-reform forces and eventually led to the traditional parties re-emerging through the new electoral cycle despite an amendment in the electoral law. Nonetheless, it is worth highlighting that despite the schism within the protest movement and the large boycott campaign, around 40 independent candidates were elected to the parliament (Jangiz 2021; Alkinani 2021). However, despite the emergence of intra-group elitist rivalries over the political leadership of each of their Shia, Sunni, and Kurdish groups—the new emerging pro-reform forces failed to influence the new changes in the long run, and the new governmental formation followed the same Muhasasa System's style, and the electoral amendment was reversed (Alkinani 2023). Most importantly, the withdrawal of the Sadrist Movement as per the directions of its leader Muqtada al-Sadr despite winning 73 seats following the October 2021 early elections—paved the way for the Iran-aligned bloc known as the Coordination Framework to fill the 'majoritarian' gap following months of a political deadlock between the two Shia rivals (Sadrist vs. Coordination Framework) (Yuan 2022). The Sadrist withdrawal made it even more complicated for new independent lawmakers to engage with the Coordination

Framework on issues related to democratic reform, considering that the latter presented a hardcore in-group version of the current political sectarian rhetoric.

## **Reformist Tendencies within the Political Elite**

In December 2023, Iraq's 15 provinces (excluding the Kurdistan Region's 3 provinces) held its first provincial elections in a decade (Rasheed and Azhari 2023). Iraq held its last provincial elections in April 2013, and the parliament voted to dissolve the provincial elections in response to Tishreen's pro-reform protests in 2019 which accused the councils of representing a major element of the country's state of corruption (Menmy 2023). The latest provincial elections were also faced with a low turnout due to early disappointments over reducing the number of electoral districts and recurring the Sainte Lague system of proportional representation (Menmy 2023) – reversing the previously mentioned amendments to the electoral law following Tishreen's pro-reform movement.

The Coordination Framework's gradual domination of the political arena did not end with the sudden Sadrist withdrawal from the Iraqi parliament and the entire political process. It became apparent that the Coordination Framework aimed to remove even the successful governors in the provincial elections from the scene despite the latter's sweeping victory following the latest provincial elections. Just over a month following the provincial elections, the Coordination Framework's leadership reportedly decided that they would not renew any term for any of the electorally winning governors and would reward them with positions outside the governorates' administrations. This indicated an alarming violation of the electorate and its results.

The votes of the public in the provincial elections were to elect the governors and the members of the provincial councils. The Coordination Framework is politicizing the results by appointing their prioritized candidates and transferring the candidates who won the elections towards 'other' positions (Saeed 2024). Why are the Pro-Iran blocs deteriorating the electorate at a time when it represents the parliamentary majority and under a government it formed?

## Preventing Future Provincial Independent Alliances

The Coordination Framework's rationale behind preventing the electorally successful governors in the recent elections from earning their positions is interpreted as a fear of the possibility of some governors resorting to forming their alliances in the future and becoming important rivals in the upcoming parliamentary elections of 2025. The last thing the Coordination Framework wants is the emergence of new political forces, following years of being challenged and exhausted by pro-reform forces from Tishreen and the Sadrists.

Whilst the majority of the Iran-allied bloc insists on excluding the newly and repeatedly elected governors, there are still some forces within the Coordination Framework which recognizes that preventing some of the electorally winning governors comes with major challenges and may raise tensions in the street. This is particularly relevant in Basra, where its increasingly popular governor Asaad Al-Eidani, received enough votes that qualify him to re-assume the position (Menmy 2024). However, the Coordination Framework and Asaib Ahl Al-Haq in particular, categorically refuse to renew Al-Eidani's term by trying to install Uday Awwad, who

received a very small percentage of votes compared to Al-Eidani (964media 2024).

This is not the first time that political parties attempted to override election results. Iraq's previous electoral experiences witnessed the inability of Iraqi politician Iyad Allawi to become Prime Minister despite his electoral win in 2010, and the inability of the Sadrist Movement to create a parliamentary majority and form a government despite an electoral victory in 2021 (Katzman 2010, 1-8; Mansour and Robin-D'Cruz 2022, 2-4). These past experiences reminisce with the victory of the provincial governors of Basra, Karbala, and Wasit, who were not able to form their local governments. This will lead Iraqis to lose confidence in the feasibility of the elections—that is if they did not lose it. Some of the electorally winning governors were faced with intimidation and threats by traditional political parties.

The Coordination Framework's hostility towards the three governors in Karbala, Basra, and Wasit is interpreted due to the candidates not running on the framework's list and decided to nominate separately considering their great popularity in their governorates. This reflects the Coordination Framework's early cautiousness towards allowing any candidates to emerge beyond the framework's influence and indicates a politicized pressure towards the electorate, hence undermining the democratic nature. Moreover, the Pro-Iran bloc would most likely find ways to create divisions within the coalitions of the winning candidates to undermine the latter's internal legitimacies in front of the public opinion—a common tactic in Iraqi electoral politics.

## Conclusion

Reform in Iraq is no longer limited to the

interests of the Tishreen protest movement and its affiliated emerging parties, activists, and supporters. As previously discussed, the lead-up to the parliamentary elections signaled a major division between the protest movement's candidates—-independent lawmakers—and the established political parties over amending versus maintaining the status-quo. The political deadlock that overshadowed the governmental formation and led to a delay of around one year since the elections took place indicated that the 'reform' debate is amongst the establishment's political parties.

This intra-elitist schism over encouraging or limiting reform was reflected following the December 2023 provincial elections. This reassures that despite pessimism in the Iraqi political structure, recent development indicates that while there are limitations to reform in both the system and elections—there is still an evident reflection of willingness towards "new" faces—both Tishreeni and emerging independent figures—challenging the traditional status-quo. Reform in post-2003 Iraq has reconstructed into becoming a focus debated across different political forces, beyond the protest movement, including the establishment's elite. ♦

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# Why Do Anti-sectarian Protesters Vote for Sectarian Parties?

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In late 2019, protesters took to the streets of Iraq and Lebanon demanding an end to the domination of political life by sectarian groups. The organization of political life in accordance with identity concerns—enshrined within power sharing systems—has long provoked ire amongst Iraqis and Lebanese, culminating in widespread protests across the final months of 2019. With chants of *kellon yani kellon*—all of them means all of them—and *nurid watan*—we want a homeland—ringing out across urban centers, the ordering principles of political and social life across the two states faced an existential challenge. And yet, in the election that followed, sectarian parties were overwhelmingly returned to power, seemingly at odds with the widespread protests that had taken place in the months and years earlier.

While this choice may be pragmatic given the scale of crises in both states, it remains somewhat surprising given the depth of anger expressed by many in preceding years and broader efforts to engage in processes of desectarianization (Mabon, 2020). In this intervention I reflect on why this took place, drawing on data from a SEPAD/TOI survey conducted in Lebanon and Iraq in 2021. The surveys were designed by a group of scholars from the Sectarianism, Proxies and De-sec

tarianisation (SEPAD) project and Bringing in the Other Islamists (TOI) who work on each state and put in the field by survey companies based in Lebanon and Iraq. The surveys recruited over 2000 respondents from a wide social base. Ultimately the intervention argues that while the protesters point to the wider rejection of sectarian politics, the material capabilities of sectarian parties meant that in times of existential crisis, such parties were deemed to offer support necessary for survival.

## **Sectarianism and the State in Lebanon and Iraq**

Lebanon and Iraq are often heralded as examples par excellence of states shaped by a legacy of sectarian difference (Salloukh, 2020; Salloukh et al, 2015; Dodge, 2018). Sectarian identities are interwoven into the very fabric of political life in both states, much to the chagrin of many. Power sharing modes of political engagement were put in place in Lebanon and Iraq as a means of addressing violent social cleavages. Whilst differing in implementation, the power sharing systems in both states are broadly mapped onto social cleavages, reinforcing those lines of in/exclusion in the process and meaning that political life increasingly took on sectarian character-

istics. The dominance of sectarian leaders—in part as a consequence of their political influence—was all encompassing, spanning, political, social, economic, and legal, enforced by violent militias (Saouli, 2019). Unsurprisingly, in such conditions of dominance, corruption was rife and bureaucracies inert.

The Ta'if Accords ended the Lebanese civil war by building on the National Pact of 1943, enshrining sectarian difference in the fabric of the state. In particular, leaders of wartime militias retained positions of prominence in the post-war landscape. In the years that followed, elites captured state resources and distributed them across their constituencies through clientelist networks that undermined state building efforts in pursuit of group and self interest. This landscape “trapped” Lebanese politics in a form of “zombie power sharing” (Nagle, 2020; Makdisi and Marktaner, 2009).

In Iraq, following the 2003 US led invasion which toppled Saddam Hussein, the establishment of the *muhassassa* system of government by the coalition provisional authority attempted to capture ethno-sectarian demographics within the formal political system. This elite bargain allocated positions of influence on the grounds of ethnicity and sect, incentivizing elite engagement with government actions. In this landscape, government formation was forged by grant elite bargains, sacrificing political interest in the process (Dodge and Mansour, 2020).

The architects of power sharing agreements in Lebanon and Iraq created a landscape beset by paradox: political stability was ensured by balancing the interest of communal elite against the broader collective (Cammett and Issar, 2010). Communal elites were able to accrue vast fortunes through capitalizing

on their positions of influence and a lack of oversight (Salloukh, 2019). In this context, elite interest trumped national interest, with hollowed out states unable to fulfil obligations to their citizenry (Nucho, 2016; Cammett, 2014).

In both Lebanon and Iraq, the nature of power-sharing created political landscapes that bred corruption and elite self-interest. Resentment quickly grew between communal groups, reinforcing lines of exclusion in the process. But the corruption of elites meant that resentment also began to ferment against those in positions of power. In recent years, anger at the sectarian domination of political systems has erupted in protest yet it was 2019 that marked the most serious challenge to the power-sharing system.

Across the final months of 2019, this simmering anger erupted as protesters took to the streets of Lebanon and Iraq. Calls for political, economic, and social reform rang out amidst mass mobilizations that prompted the prime ministers of both states to resign. Though protesters were met with violence by militias associated with sectarian elites, protesters were determined to continue on their path to reform.

## Understanding Discontent

Seeking to better capture the nature of this frustration, a joint SEPAD-TOI project put a survey into the field to capture the feelings of people across both states. The results point to a deep-seated anger at the ways in which politics is ordered, capturing anger at socio-economic conditions, government performance, and the actions of officials.

In Lebanon, respondents painted a bleak picture. When asked about the most important

national issues, security and stability were cited as issues of most serious concern, closely followed by fighting poverty and unemployment. Locally, fighting poverty and unemployment were deemed more important, emblematic of the devastating socio-economic crisis endured by the Lebanese state at the time. Few believed that they had support from the state. When asked who they would turn to in the case of serious economic challenges, 48.8% stated that they would turn to their family while 38.2% said they would manage on their own. In contrast, the government was viewed as a source of support by only 5.2% of respondents. Moreover, 80% of respondents were not at all satisfied with government performance, while 88.4% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that public officials in Lebanon provide services to citizens without expecting anything in return.

In such conditions, tensions between rich and poor, and between government and opposition supporters were held to be most significant, with 50.8% of respondents viewing tensions between rich and poor as a big or moderate problem, and 53.5% of respondents viewing tensions between government and opposition supporters as a big or moderate problem. In contrast, sectarian divisions were deemed not a problem by 53.1% of respondents, and tensions between Christian and Muslim were deemed not a problem by 61.6% of respondents.

In Iraq, a similar picture was revealed. At a national level, poverty and unemployment were deemed the most pressing issues, closely followed by maintaining security and stability. Much like in Lebanon, the day-to-day dimensions of socio-economic crises featured centrally in the minds of people. Only 1.2% believed that addressing sectarian tensions was the most important, whilst there was a

broad anger at entrenched sectarian elites. Locally, such issues were equally prevalent, with 41.2% of respondents believing that addressing unemployment and fighting poverty were most important. Only 2.6% of respondents viewed reducing sectarian tensions as the most important issue.

Few respondents believed that they had support from the government, with 42.7% of respondents suggesting that they would turn to their family for support. Anger at government performance was widespread: 43.5% of respondents were not at all satisfied with government performance with a further 20% not satisfied. Unsurprisingly, this anger manifested in tensions between government and opposition supporters. An overwhelming majority of 64.7% of respondents described tensions between government and opposition supporters as a problem, while similar sentiments were found when asked about tensions between rich and poor.

## **Elections**

In an effort to take the sting out of the protests, elections were declared in both states. Protest movements in Lebanon and Iraq sought to field candidates who reflected the ideas of the movements, albeit to varying degrees of success as a result of the heterogeneous opinions at play. The elections returned surprising results. Despite the anger at sectarian parties expressed by protesters in Lebanon and Iraq—as reflected in their slogan “all of them means all of them”—protester candidates failed to match the hopes of many. These results beg the question: why did anti-sectarian protesters vote for sectarian parties?

In Iraq, elections returned Mustafa al-Sadr’s faction with 73 seats, the largest single bloc



in parliament, dramatically changing the balance of power within the elite pact, albeit not in the way that protesters wanted. The Sadrists articulated a broadly nationalist position, setting the group apart from other Shi'a parties who possessed links with Iran. With a turnout of just 36%, the elections were characterized by widespread discontent and while the Fateh Alliance—with links to both Iran and certain parts of the Popular Mobilization Forces—lost a large number of seats, the dominance of erstwhile members of the elite, notably the Sadrist movement, was clear. Imtidad, a party that emerged from the Tishreen movement, was able to secure 9 seats whilst most other parties associated with Tishreen boycotted the elections. The elections reveal a tension between the status quo parties and those emerging from the protests.

In Lebanon, over 80% of parliamentary seats were won by parties and candidates associated with the establishment. Structural factors pertaining to electoral spending, restrictive voting procedures and the lack of a viable electoral oversight body were all important issues, but the palpable fear of violence continued to play a part. While the main political parties emerged from elections largely intact, the Christian Free Patriotic Movement lost seats, becoming the second largest Christian party behind the Lebanese Forces.

Central to responses in both Lebanon and Iraq were fears about safety and security. Such concerns were hardly surprising, encapsulating broad worries about violence, militias, and more human security concerns around socio-economic issues, access to food, fuel, healthcare, and shelter. Lebanon continues to endure a harrowing economic crisis while the Iraqi state has experienced similar types of challenges. Concerns about safety and security are central in understanding

why anti-sectarian protesters voted for sectarian candidates. While the protests demonstrated the ability to imagine political life free from the shackles of sectarianism, the material realities of daily life suggests that material support remains a key mechanism in the arsenal of sectarian leaders.

## Conclusions

Whilst it is too soon to assess the enduring success or failure of the 2019 protests, the process of transformation is clearly underway. The protests demonstrate that it is possible to imagine a form of politics free from the dominance of sectarianism, but the realities of implementing such a system are far harder. Untangling the material realities of a political system based on and reinforced by sectarian identities is one that will take time and effort as a result of the enduring legacy of sectarianism as an ordering principle in both states. Processes of desectarianization are long, complex journeys and while it appears that both Lebanon and Iraq have embarked on these journeys, they remain in the formative stages. ♦

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# Effects of Single Non-transferrable Vote (SNTV) Systems on Tribal Representation: Preliminary Findings from Jordan and Kuwait

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The single non-transferrable vote (SNTV) system, sometimes called “one person one vote” does just that: it grants each voter only one vote, rather than allowing each person to cast votes for multiple candidates. This system, though straightforward and easy to understand, is rarely implemented, largely due to the tendency of such a system to disadvantage organized political blocs (Butto and Kim 2012, Gao and Templeman 2023). Nonetheless, it was used in Jordan between 1993 and 2016 and has been in place in Kuwait since 2012. Both countries, notably, house large, politically active tribal blocs that have been forced to navigate changes to electoral systems and processes. This piece is a first step to explain the effects of the SNTV system in each case and the reasons that and extent to which its effects have varied in both states in its ability to regulate representation of tribal blocs. As to Kuwait, Andrew Leber and I have noted elsewhere that the overall representation of tribes has not shifted meaningfully with the introduction of the new system (Freer and Leber 2021). In Jordan, findings are a bit more complicated: tribes on a whole seem not to have been disadvantaged by the system, solely those antagonistic to the regime. This piece therefore examines the efficacy of SNTV systems in influencing

tribal votes in two hybrid regimes in which such systems have been put in place. Overall, SNTV appears to have been largely ineffective in reducing the so-called tribal vote in Kuwait and has solely been partially successful in so doing in Jordan.

## **The Management of Tribes in Hybrid Regimes**

Jordan and Kuwait qualify as hybrid regimes, states with strong monarchies which also host meaningful parliamentary elections (Brown 2012, 17-18). As such, the laws governing their elections have been the subject of extensive study, largely to determine whether elections under authoritarianism or semi-authoritarianism are ideologically and politically meaningful (Freer 2018), merely a tool for the disbursement of patronage (Lust 2009, 122-135), or a means of appearing to support democratic outcomes without effectively doing so (Brown 2012, 7-8).

The implementation of the SNTV system is often portrayed in this literature (Case 2006) as one means by which monarchies can control electoral outcomes. When each voter is limited to selecting a single candidate, coordination issues arise, primarily for organized political groups. As Gao and Templeman

conclude, “SNTV creates several problems for organized political groups such as parties or, in the Jordanian case, tribes seeking to maximize the number of seats they win” (Gao and Templeman 2023).

In Jordan and Kuwait, the implementation of SNTV has been met with concern from both ideologically and tribally organized political blocs. Many who oppose the system consider it a means of centralizing political control in the hands of ruling families at the expense of tribal figures and Islamists in particular, as these are often the most organized political blocs. Then-leader of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood affiliate Islamic Action Front (IAF) Hamza Mansour claimed, when SNTV was put in place, that the system “forgoes the will of Jordanian citizens” (Köprülü 2014). In Jordan, the political opposition made these very complaints about the system in 2012, having made them decades earlier, with some parties boycotting the 2010 election held under the system, on charges that it is skewed to benefit tribes and particularly East Banker tribes (Köprülü 2014). In Kuwait, the amir’s announcement that voters would receive one, rather than the previous four, votes in 2012, led to an opposition-wide boycott that lasted between 2012 and 2016. There is still considerable resistance to this electoral system, which has also led political blocs to put in place new strategies in elections (Tavana 2018).

Jordan and Kuwait are, of course, quite different states, and the goal of comparing them is not to lessen or ignore the distinctiveness of each country. Jordan houses a large Palestinian population and allows for the legal organization of political parties, although parties remain weak and since 1992 have been required to register with the Ministry of Interior. Kuwait, on the other hand, has a majority

expatriate population, none of whom has the right to vote, and does not house official political parties, although political blocs fulfill many of the same responsibilities of parties in other countries. In both states, which have substantial populations who identify politically and socially with tribal affiliations, discourse has emerged about concerns that the political system could become “tribalized” (Al-Jabri 2018).

## **The Jordanian Case**

SNTV was introduced to Jordan in 1993, abolishing a previously applied multiple vote system. Russell Lucas explains, “The new electoral system benefited regime supporters—especially those with tribal support. The change in the Election Law would make the regime’s life easier” (Köprülü 2014). In 2012, the system was altered such that SNTV was put in place in 60 percent of districts, the remainder of which were organized under single member plurality districts (SMD) through a first past the post system (Kao 2022).

Kao has found that, in SNTV districts, tribal representatives won seats largely due to support from fellow tribal members, whereas under SMD, electoral coalitions emerged across tribal lines (Kao 2022). In short, when both systems existed side by side, “under SNTV rules, strategic voting for a consensus candidate diminishes while sincere voting on the basis of social identity increases” (Kao 2022, 1245). SNTV, rather than diminishing the relevance of tribal groups at the polls, therefore appears in danger of reifying it.

## **The Kuwaiti Case**

Kuwait houses a unicameral parliament with 50 elected seats; appointed cabinet members automatically become members of parliament

as well. As noted above, in 2012, Amir Shaykh Sabah introduced a system of SNTV, altering the previous arrangement in which each Kuwaiti voter had four votes. Implementation of the new system prompted an electoral boycott and therefore initially affected the composition of but not the overall proportion of tribal MPs in Kuwaiti parliament.

Notably, most of Kuwait's tribes have increasingly switched from "service MPs" to members of the opposition—particularly since driving forward the Karamat Watan protests in 2012 (Albloshi 2018). In addition, since the imposition of a five-district system in 2006, which was intended to reduce opportunities for gerrymandering, most tribal constituents have been located in outlying districts IV and V, leading tribes to be *over-represented* in those areas but *under-represented* by the system overall. Andrew Leber and I found, in examining elections between 1991 and 2020, that "Tribes may be overrepresented by the number of winning candidates, but their votes are underrepresented by district size (i.e., tribe-heavy districts have more voters per parliamentary representative). If anything, therefore, tribes have been under-represented in the National Assembly" (Freer and Leber 2021, 20-21).

In the first election held after the imposition of the SNTV system, smaller tribes gained seats over larger tribes, in part due to some larger tribes contemplating a boycott, but larger tribes have since that time recovered their position. Indeed, the 2020 legislature saw the largest number of tribe-affiliated MPs (29 out of 50) since 1992 (Freer and Leber 2021). In fact, the tribal vote today, then, still appears to account for about 20 of 50 seats in parliament, and so SNTV has largely failed to contain it.

## Conclusions

Many segments of nontribal populations in Kuwait and Jordan charge that tribal groups serve as harmful conduits of patronage, rather than as meaningful political actors. These claims should be interrogated more thoroughly in these cases and others to understand the extent to which identity politics are necessarily linked to clientelism. In the Kuwaiti case, the era of "service MPs" remains, although some tribal figures have also become members of the political opposition (Albloshi 2018; Freer and Leber 2021, 26-27). If areas of contact on political issues can be found between tribal and non-tribal groups, coordination across tribal / non-tribal lines could facilitate political learning about how best to circumvent challenges presented by electoral systems implemented by hybrid regimes.

In Jordan, Kao charges that the system "resulted in an electorate fractured along tribal lines and in-group favoritism among elected representatives" (Kao 2022, 1245). The system may in fact reify tribal distinctions, which in turn makes it more difficult for these groups to coordinate with non-tribal segments of the political opposition, but it also makes integration of the population politically more difficult.

This short piece represents only a first step in examining the actual versus intended effects of the implementation of SNTV systems. More work should be done on the effect of district size and arrangement influences tribal representation in parliaments of hybrid regime states. ♦

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# When and How Elections Drive Conflict Transformation: Transitional Justice and Peacebuilding in WANA Societies

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This short intervention will examine the conditions under which elections can be conducive to conflict transformation. This paper builds on my own observations of elections in Algeria and Tunisia and the electoral analysis published by the Observatory of Politics and Elections in the Arab and Muslim World (OPEMAM). I focus on four comparable cases from West Asia and North Africa (WANA): Algeria (2002-); Tunisia (2011-); Sudan (2005-); and Jordan (1989-).

In general terms, elections may have a double sword effect on conflicts, either aggravating existing divides and cleavages or reducing them. They can foster social peace through power sharing or act as catalyst of conflict (EC-UNDP-IDEA 2011, 7).

Massive violations of human rights, whether committed during armed conflicts or under authoritarian regimes, are central to the UN framework of transitional justice, conceived and developed in the United Nations Secretary-General UN SG 2004 Report, titled “The Rule of Law and Transitional Justice in Conflict and Post-conflict Societies: Report of the Secretary-General,” and the 2010 UN SG Guidance Note.

Within this framework, institutional reform is a crucial component aimed at preventing the recurrence of atrocities (UN. Secretary-General 2010, 2). Institutional reform encompasses, among other things, electoral design, constitutional design, and the legal bases for a political party structure. Notwithstanding the significant impact of elections on conflict, only a scant body of literature has examined the positive effects they may have on peacebuilding efforts and transitional justice.

## Methodology

To trace the effects of elections on transitional justice, I propose a double analytical tool. My analytical tool departs from the transdisciplinary field of transitional justice and puts political science in dialogue with International Relations.

First, I underscore the significance of contexts in shaping the outcomes and the effects of elections. As Thomas Hansen puts it, “operating with a single theory of transitional justice is problematic” (2011, 3). I, thus, distinguish between regime change and non-regime change cases, as well as whether the country has undergone a previous armed

conflict, authoritarian rule, or both.

Tunisia stands out as the only case of successful political transition without previous armed conflict, whereas Algeria and Sudan both experienced authoritarianism, armed conflict, but not regime transition. Finally, Jordan had a repressive rule, but it did not experience significant armed conflict or regime change.

Second, I emphasize the key role of inclusive processes within post-conflict and post-authoritarian transitions. Statistical evidence links the sustainability of peace agreements to the participation and inclusion of all groups, particularly minorities and women (Nils-son 2012). Also, the Women Peace Security Agenda (WPS) has since its inception strongly reinforced the significant benefit of including women's groups in ensuring successful conflict resolution.

With all of this in mind, I suggest that elections may produce inclusion and facilitate peacebuilding at two different levels: elite inclusion/exclusion and social inclusion. A dynamic two-level analysis is used to show that each of the four cases follows a different pattern. That is elite and social inclusion may operate quite autonomously from each other.

### **Constitutional Design, Elections, and Social Cleavages**

Elections must be understood as part and parcel of political and constitutional design, it creates the architecture of political parties' formation, citizens participation, and political representation. They ensure the functioning and the legitimacy of the legislative, executive, and judicial powers. By elections, the reference here is to all aspects of the legal

electoral framework, from census and voter registration to adjudication of electoral disputes.

Elections and its processes are thus important tools for peacebuilding in post-conflict and post-repression situations, although sometimes with unintended consequences (see for instance Reilly 2008, 2016). They can serve as inclusive instruments, allowing for integration of former enemies, fighting groups, and formerly excluded oppositional forces and minority groups. However, they can also act as tool to exclude agents of the former regime who are responsible for mass atrocities. That is, elections can function as an important vetting tool to exclude former public officials and candidates, as it was widely the case in post-Communist Central and Eastern Europe (Roman 2006). Decisions over how to organize elections, who is allowed to run for elections, and who is excluded from the electoral process produce important effects on the representation, legitimacy, and fairness of the entire political process. It can either reinforce or reduce social cleavages and fractures.

### **Findings**

My findings show that Jordan stands as a case where there has been partial integration of the Palestinian population and partial integration of Palestinian elites (see Dynamic A in FIGURE 1). Dynamic A refers to partial integration of excluded population and partial integration of elites. When a pluralistic system was installed in 1989, they carefully designed a political and electoral system whereby Palestinians (and their political parties) would always have very limited access to political institutions. The electoral system included the overrepresentation of rural districts and tribal sectors and diminished the prospects of political parties and urban



candidates—as they could mobilize constituencies of Palestinian origin.

Dynamic B represents the partial social inclusion and the full elite inclusion, it is the model that best fits the Sudanese case. Following the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), the regime and the Southern elites involved in the Second Sudanese Civil War participated in the process leading to the national referendum of independence. All social groups, however, could not be fully incorporated or invited to participate, neither in Sudan nor in South Sudan. The failure to include different groups was a result of state fragility and its weak enforcement capacity.

The case of Tunisia and its troubled path to transitional justice is best understood by applying Dynamic C (see FIGURE 1). Dynamic C refers to the full social inclusion and the partial elite exclusion. In the case of Tunisia,

the full social inclusion combined with partial elite exclusion resulted in favorable political outcomes but hindered the path to transitional justice. Even though the Ben Ali's regime deployed for years a massive apparatus of vigilance and denunciation, only the top officials were taken to trial, and a small fraction of party and state officials were nominally excluded from politics through a process of nominal vetting.

Finally, the Algerian case better corresponds to Dynamic D (see FIGURE 1). Dynamic D refers to the full social inclusion and full elite exclusion. In the case of Algeria, the country witnessed the full inclusion of social groups coupled with the full exclusion of Islamist former political elites. The voters and sympathizers of the Front of Islamic Salvation (FIS)

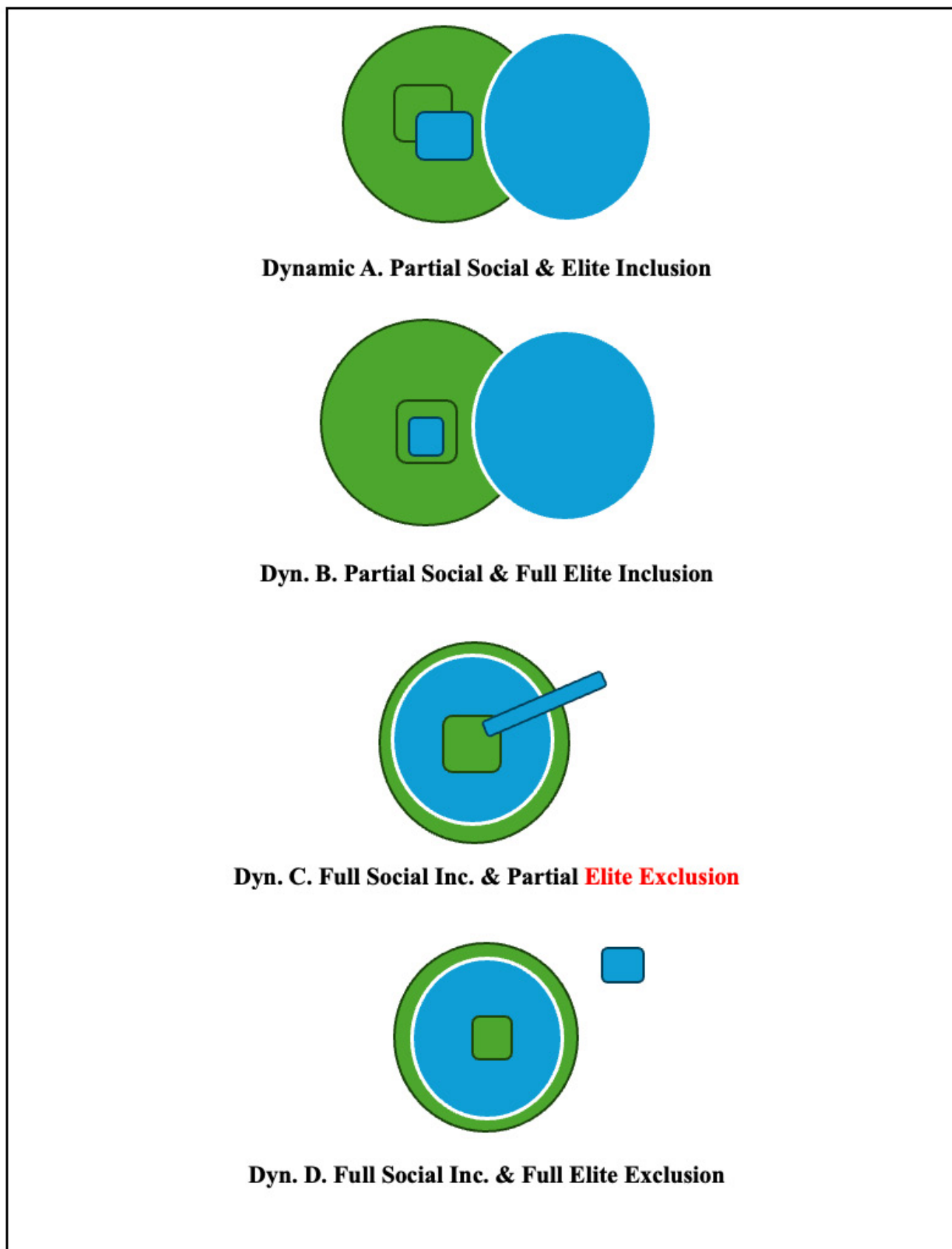
party could fully participate in elections, but top officials and FIS founders remained excluded from the political process.

## Conclusion

The analysis above underscores how elections are strongly connected to transitional justice and conflict transformation, either as foundational events or as series of iterative acts. However, to determine how and when elections can help peacebuilding efforts in post-conflict and post-authoritarian contexts, we need to carefully examine in each case the two-level dynamics of integration and exclusion, from both the elite and grass-root perspectives. This exercise allows us to identify which electoral elements were unsuccessful or could have been better designed to advance the goals of conflict reconciliation.

Constitutional and electoral design, including party laws can be seen as key elements affecting the different inclusion/exclusion dynamics. In Jordan, the electoral system failed to fully integrate the minority and oppositional forces. Also, the constitutional powers vested in the king impeded a more inclusive reform. In Sudan, the constitutional and electoral design could have enabled a democratic post-secession scenario had the Northern elites accepted to stop extracting resources and rent-seeking patronage. In Algeria, the new political elites excluded banned Islamist elites such as the FIS with excessive zeal slamming the door to any possible reconciliation. Finally, in Tunisia the electoral design's goal to minimize the weight of the Islamists had an unintended consequence: Secular and Islamist elites could not agree on a common course to apply transitional justice. Unintentionally, elections debilitated reconciliation and social cohesion, where they were meant to facilitate them.

**FIGURE 1: REPRESENTATION OF TWO-LEVEL INCLUSION-EXCLUSION DYNAMICS**



Source: the author's own elaboration, 2023

Finally, despite obvious differences in context, all four cases had something in common, they all show that the full inclusion of

both elites and social groups failed for various reasons and that resulted in undermining the prospects of peaceful peacebuilding and reconciliation. ♦

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# Special Forum: Teaching About the Palestinian - Israeli Conflict

Organized by Gamze Çavdar



*Dr. Yael Berda is an Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Hebrew University and a fellow at Harvard School of Kennedy's Middle East Initiative. Her most recent book is Colonial Bureaucracy and Contemporary Citizenship (Cambridge University Press, 2022).*



*Dr. Sebnem Gumuscu is an Associate Professor of Political Science at Middlebury College. Her most recent book is Democracy or Authoritarianism: Islamist Governments in Turkey, Egypt and Tunisia (Cambridge University Press, 2023).*



*Dr. Hanan Hammad is a Professor of History, Director of Middle East Studies, and Department Chair of Women and Gender Studies at Texas Christian University. Her most recent book is Unknown Past: Layla Murad, the Jewish-Muslim Star of Egypt (Stanford University Press, 2022).*



*Dr. Wendy Pearlman is a Crown Professor of Middle East Studies and interim director of Middle East and North Africa Studies. Her most recent book, The Home I Worked to Make: Voices from the New Syrian Diaspora, will be published in July 2024 (Liveright).*

Teaching a college class can be hyper-politicized everywhere in the world, but particularly in the United States. College classrooms have become a battleground for many polarizing views: Critical race theory, LGBTQTI+, DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion), migration, vaccine mandates, and genocide are to name a few. All sides often feel isolated, discriminated against, misunderstood, and

complain that unfair advantage is given to those who are on the other side (Jentleson et al. 2023, Pace 2021). The Palestinian-Israeli conflict is no different. As soon as such words as Hamas, apartheid, terrorism, occupation, etc., enter the classroom, the temperature goes sky-high, especially since October 7th, 2023, the beginning of the war in Gaza.

This piece aims to share the experiences and pedagogical approaches of four scholars who regularly teach about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in their classes. We share these experiences with the readers of MENA Politics hoping that they encourage us to actively reflect our own experiences in the classroom, improve our teaching practices, and enhance student learning.

The four scholars who were individually interviewed are diverse on many grounds. First, they teach in different disciplines, namely political science, history, and sociology. Second, they teach in institutions located in different parts of the world. Third, as the rest of the article demonstrates, the scholars use many different strategies and sources tailored to the needs of their students. Lastly, they teach in different languages and use a multitude of original sources.

Despite these differences, the scholars interviewed also share many commonalities. One major characteristic they have in common is they all have extensive experience in the MENA region either because they originally come from a MENA country or spent considerable time in the region, living, studying, teaching, and conducting research. The scholars interviewed are—in alphabetical order—Dr. Yael Berda, Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Hebrew University (Israel) and a fellow at Harvard School of Kennedy's Middle East Initiative, Dr. Sebnem Gumuscu, Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science at Middlebury College (USA), Dr. Hanan Hammad, Professor of History and Director of Middle East Studies and the Department Chair of Women and Gender Studies at Texas Christian University (USA), and Dr. Wendy Pearlman, Professor of Political Science and the interim director of the Mid-

dle East and North Africa Studies Program at Northwestern University (USA). Three of the interviews took place on Zoom, lasting about an hour each, while we received written answers for the fourth interview.

At the expense of stating the obvious, two disclaimers must be stated here: First, it is necessary to highlight at the outset that there is no single way to teach about this or any other conflict nor our scholars claim that theirs is the best way. These scholars are invited for an interview because they do what educational institutions are supposed to do, that is to teach. In the current highly polarized political environment, this is an extremely courageous thing to do.

The second obvious disclaimer is that this article will not magically solve all the challenges that we face in relation to teaching about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. These classes will remain contested as long as the conflict itself remains hyper politicized, deeply polarized, and unresolved, because teaching a topic in a classroom eventually mirrors the topic in the real world. Having said that we hope the readers of MENA Politics find these conversations as inspiring as we did and benefit from them to improve their own classroom experiences.

Each section in this article highlights commonalities as well as differences as outlined by our four colleagues. In the Appendix, our readers can find a list of sources that the interviewees use in their classes and have kindly shared with us.

## 1. KNOWING YOUR STUDENTS AND INTRODUCING YOURSELF

Instructors must know their students because the information about the community of students will deeply shape how the course is designed, lectures are prepared, and the discussions are organized, among others. As instructors, we design our courses with certain objectives in mind and then think about the strategies that help us meet these objectives. Therefore, the following factors will have to be considered in the course design: The location of the institution, the characteristics (or composition) of the student body, such as language skills, the depth of knowledge about the region and the conflict(s) in question as well as their personal attachments and emotional investments (Soria & Stubblefield, 2015). Understanding the latter will also enable instructors to identify the triggers during the conversations and take preemptive measures to contain tension. As a result, it is impossible to teach the same course to a group of students with similar backgrounds and political leanings versus another group consisting of extremely diverse views, variable depth of knowledge, and backgrounds.

This is not a one-time, linear process during which one departs from an initial point and arrives at the destination or discovers the magical formula to be repeated each year. It is, rather, a messy and iterative process that includes an instructor's self-assessments and reassessments, design and redesign, success, and failure—sometimes, all at the same time. What works one year does not guarantee that it will work the next, especially in a time of rapid political change, like the one we are currently experiencing. Undoubtedly, the ongoing political developments in the region will require instructors to constantly engage in this iterative process of assessing and reas-

sessing their courses to make sure the objectives are met.

An instructor's own positionality also potentially shapes the way a topic is taught and covered in the classroom. The term "positionality" assumes that the social and political context shapes our identity, which in turn affects our emotional attachments, values, and biases. As Klesse (2010) points out "The perspective of positionality strives for an understanding of the manifold and varying impacts of the interconnected oppressive forces around 'race'/ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, age, and disability on the life experiences of individuals" (11). The instructor's reflections on their own positionality might enable students to engage in a critical reflective discussion, create space for an open conversation and be active participants in their own learning experience.

Dr. Berda teaches *Society in Israel, Sociology of Law and the Bureaucracy in the State* in Hebrew University to an extremely diverse body of students that includes "mainstream Israelis, Palestinian citizens of Israel, Jewish settlers from the West Bank and Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem." In response to the question as to how her identity and positionality might have influenced the way she approaches to this topic, Dr. Berda said:

*In terms of my background, my father is French-Tunisian and my mother grew up in the United States. My family faced a lot of economic hardship and marginalization, in ways that they weren't always even conscious of. My father never really thought his Tunisian origins mattered in Israel, but they did. Realizing that really shifted my worldview and life trajectory. I discuss the importance of recognizing privilege, what it means to be a first-generation university student, and how being an "outsider" and*

*not part of the traditional Israeli elite affects one's perspective. I don't necessarily share all the personal details, but I think the examples I use and the ways I frame things make it clear that I'm speaking from a particular set of experiences. I find that helps students connect the material to real lives. I openly tell them about my previous career as a human rights and public interest lawyer and activist, before turning to academia. My belief that knowledge should be in service of social change infuses my teaching. I'm clear that I have political opinions that are on the left, and that my stances are public, such as on my Twitter. I prefer to be upfront so students don't have to guess where I'm coming from. I think my students appreciate the transparency, and it pushes them to be more reflective about their own positionalities. But it certainly means I likely get fewer right-wing students, as they know what to expect from me. I'm sure my identity and politics influence which texts I assign and how I frame them, but I do think it's important to include a range of scholarly perspectives, not just my own. My goal is to give them tools to critically examine the narratives they've grown up with and to wrestle with the contemporary situation and their own place in it. Being open about my background and commitments is central to my pedagogical approach. Hopefully it facilitates deeper reflection for all of us, even if some students inevitably disagree with my stances. Critiquing structures of power and connecting scholarship to lived experiences is core to my understanding of what sociology should be, both within and beyond the classroom.*

Dr. Gumuscu teaches *Contemporary Conflicts in the Middle East*, *Politics of the Middle East and North Africa*, and *International Politics of the Middle East* to a group of students that she characterizes as "quite progressive". Dr. Gumuscu feels that her positionality as an instructor from Turkey, not

near the territories in conflict, and yet still from the region, has been advantageous. She states:

*I'm from Turkey and do not have a personal connection to the conflict, arguably giving me a position of neutrality. Most students also appreciate that I'm from the region and am not an outsider teaching about the MENA.*

Bringing in the discussion on positionality can be tricky though and it is not found effective by all instructors. In introducing herself to the class, Dr. Pearlman focuses on communicating to students the scholarly experience that she brings to the topic:

*I tell them that I have lived in the West Bank, I have lived in Gaza, and I have lived in Israel. I studied Palestinian politics and I've studied Israeli politics and I've written books on these topics. I studied at a Palestinian university in the West Bank and at an Israeli university in Jerusalem. On the first day of class, more than emphasizing my own personal attachments, I try to establish my credibility. Of course, I have opinions and political commitments. We're on planet Earth. We watch the news, we watch politics, and we all have personal attachments and relationships that shape our stances. We're not robots! But here in this classroom, my job and my obligation is to be as fair and as scholarly as possible in providing readings that I think are credible, valuable, and present a range of perspectives. I want to provide knowledge and analyses so that students have the tools that they need to understand and to make their own judgments.*

Dr. Pearlman teaches in a private university in a suburb of Chicago. In her 15-person seminar on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict body, about a third of the students are Jewish, occasionally one or two students are Arab

or Muslim, and many are political science majors with very little background who are taking the seminar to satisfy a requirement. In this course, as well as in her lecture course on Middle East politics where she devotes three sessions to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, she finds that many students almost feel embarrassed by their lack of knowledge. She explains that they say things like, “I know this issue is really important and a lot of people have opinions, but I don’t know enough to have opinions. I wish I did but I don’t even know where to begin.”

Dr. Hammad has been teaching two courses at Texas Christian University that partially cover the conflict, namely *Modern Middle East* and *Women in the Middle East*. Dr. Hammad, originally from Egypt, describes her institution and the study body in the following way:

*The name of the institution speaks a lot about the nature of the university: It is Texas and it’s Christian.... The institution is historically and now predominantly a white institution. Our students are not only white but also conservative. The tuition is very high, so it also targets mostly economically comfortable students. Some students are probably not quite at ease with the material I teach, not only relevant to the conflict, but to other things, like, for example, the American role in Iraq, the American invasion of Iraq, the American policy in general in the Middle East. Some of them actually have a hard time processing it.*

In Dr. Hammad’s experience, talking about her positionality opens the door for a conversation with some students who feel quite isolated. In a recent example, a male, Jewish student from California and his mother, who are of Moroccan Jewish origins, grew up spending summers in Israel and his best

friend is of Egyptian Jewish origin. “There is no one around him to share his identity, and actually, he felt we relate.” Every once in a while, Dr. Hammad receives emails from former students about her critical perspective saying, “how difficult it was for them when they encountered this perspective, but how much they appreciate now and understand it.”

At other times, however, Dr. Hammad’s Egyptian identity is also put into questions by her students:

*So, student evaluations sometimes actually say, “If she is upset about American policy in the Middle East, why doesn’t she go back to the Middle East?” And I think, I wish to tell them, “If you’re happy with the American policy in the Middle East, why don’t you go live in the Middle East?”*

## 2. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Most of our interviewees do not teach a class exclusively on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Rather, they cover the conflict through broadly Middle Eastern themed classes. One aspect that the scholars emphasize is that they use the same conceptual frameworks, terms, and theories throughout their classes and do not designate special lenses for this topic. Depending on the discipline and the specific foci of the course, these concepts and theories do differ, obviously. However, it is still possible to use the most-commonly used analytical frameworks as European imperialism and colonialism, and nationalism.

As a historian, Dr. Hammad explains how she designs her courses around certain concepts that she considers key in understanding the conflict:



*In the modern Middle East class, I start by exploring where the problem originated. By this point, we have already covered European imperialism in the Middle East, the Arab Renaissance (Nahda), and state adjustments for self-defense, which James Galven refers to as “developmentalism” in the textbook. This background allows students to easily grasp the context of Europe, the Middle East, and Palestine. In my courses I emphasize that the issues in the Middle East were not unique to the region; they were part of a broader transformation. This includes European imperialism and the contribution of Jews in the region to the Renaissance. It becomes clear to the students that the origin of the conflict was largely imposed from outside, particularly by Europe, rather than being inherent to the Middle East or Palestine. We discuss how developments in Palestine before the accelerations that led to the establishment of Israel following WWII paralleled those in Egypt, Iraq, and Syria, focusing on the Renaissance, adjustments, and European imperialism.*

Dr. Pearlman states that while acknowledging the sensitivities and identities that some of her students might have surrounding this topic and asking her students to be respectful of these sensitivities, she adopts the same approach in all her political science classes regardless of the subject and does not treat this conflict differently. Dr. Pearlman states:

*I try to teach it just like I would teach any political science class, which is by focusing on the principles we bring to social science. What is evidence? How do we assess evidence? What are theories? How do we apply theories to make sense of the social and the political world? That has been my approach, to try to be as academic and as analytical and as rigorous as possible, and not put this topic in its own special category.*

### **3. ADOPTING A HISTORICAL APPROACH**

The interviewees agree that it is impossible to teach about this conflict including the current events without paying attention to history and covering considerable historical facts. Therefore, the consensus is to provide a historical context starting from as early as the end of the 19th century, early 20th century and the British mandate (1918-1948). All interviewees also discuss the current events while contextualizing them within history.

Dr. Pearlman states that her historical approach also applies to the talks she gives:

*I take a tremendously historical approach when teaching about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This is true not only in my classes but in every talk I give on the subject. For example, I’ve given several talks related to Israel and Palestine since October 7th, and I start every single one in the 19th century. I don’t know how to approach this topic unless I start with Ottoman Palestine and the beginnings of the Zionist movement in Europe.*

Although all four scholars adopt a historical approach, what aspects of history will be covered, how history will be interpreted and how students will perceive the history will significantly vary. Dr. Berda’s extremely diverse community of students is a testament to these multiple realities. Dr. Berda explains:

*Since the escalation in October, there are two different timelines people are operating on. For Israelis, everything revolves around what happened on October 7th - the hostage crisis, the quarter million people who had to evacuate their homes in the north and south, and the sense of trauma. Meanwhile, in Gaza and to some extent the West Bank and East Jerusalem, their time-*

*line revolves around the events since the beginning of the war and the tens of thousands of deaths since then amidst the starvation and devastation there. Navigating what is possible and impossible to discuss on campus right now is extremely volatile.*

#### **4. MOVIES-DOCUMENTRIES-NOVELS**

The scholars we interviewed report using strategies of critical pedagogy and utilizing movies, documentaries and even novels as supplemental course material. Sources of critical pedagogy offer many advantages to instructors. First, they break the routine and capture student attention to an issue/scenario. As digital natives, the new generation of students greatly appreciate course material other than text. The downside is this type of material could direct students' attention to other topics away from the course content. Therefore, it is best to be paired with a list of questions for students to consider.

Second, visual sources, including maps, pictures, cartoons, movies, and documentaries help many students who have never been to the region begin comprehending the subject matter and its complexities. Instructors have many options to choose from based on the course objectives. A suggested list is recommended by some interviewees in the Appendix.

#### **5. PREPARING THE CLASS FOR EXPECTED DISAGREEMENTS AND SETTING UP THE PARAMETERS OF DISCUSSIONS**

While disagreements are normal, expected and welcomed in a classroom where political and social topics are discussed, as instructors, it is our responsibility to make sure that all students feel they are included in the discus-

sions, their views and identities are respected, and the classroom discussions are productive. In the current environment where the *neutral middle ground* seems to be shrinking, the polarization is accelerating, every word we use is being scrutinized, and the freedom of speech is coming under threat, this is not an easy task.

All four scholars interviewed for this article recognize the growing tensions in the classroom. As such, they adopt carefully selected strategies to preempt and contain tension that would undermine student learning. It is also important to remember that many campuses in the U.S. have staff on campus especially designated to train students and faculty to have conversations about sensitive topics. They can be invited to the classroom before the topic is introduced. It's not clear (probably unlikely) if some academic institutions in the MENA region have a similar set up.

Some institutions seem to have prepared their campuses to hold conversations about sensitive topics better than others. Middlebury's *Engaged Listening* project is one of them. Dr. Gumuscu explains how the project was helpful in containing the tension although it was not successful in completely prevent it. She states:

*I have been trying to follow the dialogic classroom model since 2021 when I joined Middlebury's Engaged Listening project, which aimed to improve faculty's facilitation skills for difficult conversations in their classrooms. Since I have been teaching politics of the MENA, I took part in this initiative to improve my facilitation skills. The dialogic classroom model I follow includes community agreements for respectful exchange of views, agreements to disagree with civility, listening exercises, practicing different question styles (questions of curi-*

osity), and structured dialogue once or twice during the semester. This dialogic design complements the academic material I teach on the region, including the nature and the history of the Israel-Palestine conflict, and asks students to share their personal stories, personal connections to Israel and Palestine, and their fears and hopes. I tailor our dialogue questions to the region's conjecture as well as our campus climate. For example, in the Spring of 2021, I built a dialogic classroom around the Politics of the MENA and facilitated two dialogues after teaching my students dialogic practices. I intended to have only one dialogue on Israel-Palestine at the end of the semester (the dialogue question was: Share a personal experience that shaped your perspective on the conflict). As we approached the end of the semester, another war erupted in Gaza in May 2021; amidst this new cycle of conflict, our campus was thrown into a deep controversy. Different student groups clashed with each other. To respond to this campus controversy, I decided to facilitate a second dialogue about how we talk about Israel/Palestine on our campus. While the first dialogue was about the region and students' connections to Israel or Palestine, the second dialogue took the issue much closer to home and centered on our own challenges intertwined with the conflict in the region (the dialogue question was: When have you felt pulled in different directions on our campus controversy?). Students' reactions during the debrief and self-reflection were quite positive. They appreciated the safety of the dialogue setting and having the opportunity to hear others' views and stories in a dialogue facilitated by a professor.

All scholars also state that they find it helpful at the outset to outline the parameters of what is and what is not allowed in the classroom. Dr. Berda, for instance, emphasizes that the classroom needs to be a safe place to

have a conversation and that her students are exposed to multiple perspectives. Dr. Pearlman sets up the parameters by telling everyone to be respectful of sensitivities:

*And I try to acknowledge, usually on the first day of class - the first day of the seminar or the first session within the lecture class - that this is a topic that brings up a lot of passions and a lot of emotions. It often taps into identities that students hold dear. It's a topic to which many students in the class have deep personal attachments. I want to be respectful of those and I hope everyone will be respectful of those. And we're also hear to learn, to analyze, and to understand.*

Dr. Hammad sets up the parameters of the discussions at the very beginning by welcoming all questions and comments and clarifying what will not be tolerated:

*When I introduce the theme of the Arab-Israeli conflict in my classes, I always encourage students to ask any questions, share perspectives, or make comments. Particularly, I emphasize that I would feel like a loser if they hesitated to share a question or a comment with me or the class. I make it clear that everything is welcome - questions, comments, critiques, perspectives, whatever. However, I strictly do not allow any form of anti-Semitism, Arabophobia, Islamophobia, etc. It's important to remind students that this conflict cannot be a vehicle for any form of racism. This approach helps students reflect and process their language, and it creates a space for open discussion and critical thinking, which is essential for understanding complex issues like this.*

When tension starts building up, one possible strategy is to bring the attention back to the text. Dr. Pearlman continues:

*In my experience, it's actually a lot less common for tensions to arise in the classroom than people expect. When they arise, they rarely relate to course materials. Instead, the greatest sources of tension are things that people are bringing from outside class — current events, identity concerns, personal attachments, or emotions. Rarely do I find that students do a reading and say, "Oh, this reading made me so upset." So if there are tensions, an instructor can try to bring the class back to the academic core, which is readings and our discussion of the readings. And if the discussion starts to go in a direction that you, as the instructor, don't think is productive, you can always reign it back in and say 'Let's turn to p. 145. What is the author arguing here ...'"*

On her first day of class in the seminar, Dr. Pearlman has students read a short article from a news source that talks about how this conflict generates intense emotions and passions. Then the class discusses what emotions and passions the conflict creates. This allows students to address the reality of the feelings Israel and Palestine elicit, but also invites them to take a social science approach to scrutinizing those feelings as a kind of puzzle to explain. Dr. Pearlman finds this approach useful:

*You recognize that tension is a part of this discussion, but then immediately put on your social scientific, analytical hat. We have a discussion - why is it so? Why does it create so much passion? Some people say, well, because religion is involved, or because of the long history of the conflict, or because so many actors are involved, or because of the sheer cumulative effect of violence. We have that discussion on the first day, and I find that students often refer back to it throughout the course.*

Undoubtedly, the events unfolding since October 7th and the casualties on both sides will significantly increase the tension in the classroom posing further challenges to all instructors. Dr. Berda explains the general feelings in Israel and the difficulty of teaching to her extremely diverse students:

*Because one of the things that I think people don't know so much about is that on the seventh of October, it wasn't just the attack of Hamas. It was also the total failure of the Israeli state and the summation of public services. Despite knowing that you can't hold 5 million people without rights, despite everything that I know from my research and from activism. At the end of the day there was always a sense that if something happens, the worst could be avoided, and that people would come to save people. And, just you had this thing where for hours and hours and hours people were left alone. Complete abandonment without security forces coming to help them without. People were calling on the phone or sending messages: "Where is the state? Where is the military?" And I think the sense of abandonment is one of the most traumatic things for Israelis, but of course it's turned most Israelis completely callous to Palestinian suffering.*

Dr. Berda adds that she is "approaching it all more slowly and carefully now—not politically careful, but treating it all as a traumatic situation in a sense. I give more time for students to process things with each other." Dr. Berda continues:

*My approach in the past was very critical. I would tell my students that I know how explosive the material is, but that we're opening things up, opening wounds, and we're going to be able to talk about it - not just the Israeli-Palestinian issue, but also issues like the internal colonialism of Jews from*

*Arab countries and Africa within Israel. But I don't think I'm going to do that in quite the same way going forward. One thing I'm going to do more of is allowing students to figure things out more for themselves through questions about the origins of the situation and how debates have shifted over time. I also intend to give more time for students to discuss in groups and learn from each other's experiences and interpretations of the readings.*

## Conclusion

This article has shared the pedagogical strategies and experiences of five scholars who regularly teach the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in their classes. As the war continues, and the tension continues to rise in the region, we know there is no shortcut to overcome the difficulties in the classroom and create perfect settings conducive to learning. We also know that such a classroom could only be present once a peaceful and just solution agreed by both sides is found to this conflict. Until then, it is our hope that our readers find these strategies inspiring for their courses. ♦

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## APPENDIX: Sources Recommended by Interviewees:

### Background

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Various pieces from *Foreign Affairs* and *Journal of Democracy*, various podcasts like *Ezra Klein*, *Today Explained*, and *Democracy Paradox*

# MENA POLITICS

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## MISSION STATEMENT

The Middle East and North Africa Politics Section is an academic society at the American Political Science Association (APSA), established in 2018 to support, develop and publish research on the politics of the MENA region utilizing interdisciplinary methodological, theoretical and empirical tools. It seeks to fully integrate the rigorous study of the politics of the Middle East with the broader discipline of Political Science, to serve as an institutional home for the community of political scientists dedicated to the Middle East, and to incorporate both scholars from the MENA region and diverse scholars from the United States into the global study of Middle East politics. The section's bylaws and diversity statement can be found on its website, <https://apsamena.org>.

MENA Politics is the official newsletter of the APSA-MENA section. It is a biannual publication devoted to publishing new research findings, hosting productive debates, and highlighting noteworthy developments among the scholarly community. It is managed by the chief editors with the joint confidence of the editorial board and the APSA-MENA section.

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