Middle East and Mediterranean Studies
Conference Report

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Special Sessions Summaries Prepared by Valentine M. Moghadam
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The International Affairs Program is one of the largest majors in the College of Social Sciences and Humanities at Northeastern University, which is located in the heart of Boston, MA, USA.

Middle East and Mediterranean Studies at Northeastern is an interdisciplinary program based in the International Affairs Program.

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MESA Special Session:
“The Arab Spring and World Politics in Year 6”

Boston Marriott, 19 Nov. 2016

Organizer: Shamiran Mako, Lecturer, Northeastern University
Chair and Moderator: Valentine M. Moghadam, Professor of International Affairs and Sociology, Northeastern University

The events that culminated in the Arab uprisings of 2011 altered analyses of Arab-region politics. While countries that constitute the Middle East and North Africa have been — and continue to be — home to longstanding authoritarian regimes, the uprisings and revolutions challenged previous notions of authoritarian durability. Republics, monarchies, secular, and theocratic countries across the region experienced varying degrees of instability sparked by protest movements calling for socio-economic and political change to the authoritarian status quo. Some regimes were overthrown following decades of rule; others acquiesced to citizen demands by engaging in various concessions; others heavily suppressed the protest movements in order to maintain their hold on power; Egypt experienced re-emergent authoritarianism following regime change; Syria and Yemen fell prey to an internationalized civil conflict.

The special session addressed several critical questions. If all states were authoritarianism, what explains the divergent outcomes? What has been the role of international factors and forces? In the wake of the election of Donald Trump as U.S. president, what position can we expect the U.S. to take? What are the implications for the region of the Trump proposal to end U.S. involvement in foreign wars and interventions? How might the Trump vision coincide or conflict with that of US allies in Europe and the Middle East?

Bassam Haddad — Director of the Middle East and Islamic Studies Program and Associate Professor at the Schar School for Policy and Government at George Mason University, and Executive Producer of Status Audio Journal — delivered a talk entitled “A Starter Kit for Explaining Divergent Outcomes of the Arab Spring.” He began by presenting an intriguing graphic. Haddad then argued that in considering the Arab Spring and its outcomes, the unit of analysis should be the individual cases, not the region as a whole. Historical context, he emphasized, is important. He then offered a set of research areas, noting that any explanatory factors needed to be understood as interactive and dynamic:

1. Regional cohesion, power, institutions, along with state formation.
2. Societal development: homogeneity vs. heterogeneity – this can work for or against regimes.
3. State-society relations: these can be thicker (Syria) or thinner (Libya)
4. Presence or absence of extremism
5. Political economy and sources of revenue – the strengths and deficits of oil-based and rentier states.
6. External relations (e.g., Bahrain was a US ally and received support, whereas Syria was not, hence the “Assad must go” mantra).

Lisa Anderson — past-president of the American University of Cairo, currently teaching politics and policy at Columbia — began with the observation that the dynamics of contested sovereignty in the region shape the implications of the Trump victory for post-Arab Spring politics in MENA. She reiterated the importance of the larger historical and global context, including state formation and the international order.
Sovereignty, she said, has always been contested in the region. Scholars of the Middle East have long examined how many of the state boundaries and institutions were imposed on the region by external powers, rather than being the outcome of domestic processes. After World War I the shift was from the Ottomans to European mandates, and “a European imperialist order” ensued in the region.

World War II saw a shift to ostensibly free-standing independent states in “a liberal international order.” For the MENA, a period of “benign neglect” in the context of a Cold War stalemate created the appearance of stability in the region. The late 1990s, she said, saw changes; in particular, the attacks of 9/11 were acknowledgement that the international order was no longer stable and capable of containing conflict and disorder. Then came the Arab Spring, which further revealed the uncertain and contested nature of sovereignty and statehood in the region, given the myriad forms of international interventions on the side of governments or rebels. Anderson underscored these developments as examples of the profound challenges facing the international order. Donald Trump, elected president of the United States and an avowed isolationist and protectionist, now walks out on this world stage and into the region’s turmoil.

Amaney Jamal – Professor of politics at Princeton University and director of the Bobst Center for Peace and Justice and the Workshop on Arab Political Development – picked up from where Lisa Anderson left off to focus on Trump and post-Arab Spring politics in MENA. She began by stating the importance regarding the Arab Spring “as a process” and offered several aspects that required greater attention. The years before 2011 were important, she said, characterized as they were by protests and other manifestations of popular dissatisfaction. Scholarship should take into account consequences tied to grievances and a sense of injustice. She also stressed the salience of political culture, particularly “the non-democratic culture and politics of elites”—who in many cases reversed democratic momentum. The region’s militarization has been, and continues to be, economically devastating. Democracy is now devalued in the region. As for the Trump presidency, Jamal is convinced that it will be bad for the slow process of democratization of the region, but also for women’s rights, as democracy promotion initiatives that promote democracy, political rights, and women’s rights might be at risk. She feels that another era of instability is in the offing.

Joshua Landis – Director of the Center for Middle East Studies at the Department of International and Area Studies, University of Oklahoma – has been a frequent media commentator on the conflict in Syria and its regional ramifications. He began his presentation by noting that early calculations that the so-called “Alawite-dominated regime” would collapse quickly were proven wrong. They were based in part on the assumption that because Sunni Arabs make up 70 percent of the Syrian population and Alawites only 12 percent, Sunnis would win. The Syrian struggle, even if it turned into a war of attrition, would favor Sunnis who had larger numbers. But this turned out to be a mistaken calculation because Syria’s borders were not closed. The entire region became a battlefield. If we count the sectarian balance of the Arabs who live between the Mediterranean Sea and the Iranian border, Shiite Arabs predomin ate.

The Alawites could not “eat alone”; they needed and had the support of Syria’s Sunni economic elites. Thus many Sunni notables have “sat out the rebellion”, due to fear of alternatives and outcomes. Another reason is that the region’s Shia Muslims are larger in number and have stronger militaries than the common perception allows; their support has been essential to the resilience of the Syrian regime. For many Syrians and their regional allies, the presence of a “Western conspiracy” – comprised of the US, France, and the UK and their allies Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia – has stoked support for the Assad regime and resistance to the armed rebels. Landis noted that former U.S. official John Bolton’s November 2015
op-ed piece proposing the formation of a “Sunni state” as a bulwark against Syria, Iraq, Iran, and Russia was badly received.\(^1\) As for the Trump presidency and the Middle East, Landis noted Trump’s remarks critical of regime change in Iraq and Libya and destabilization of the Syrian regime. Trump’s Middle East policy might be significantly different from that of Obama: let’s focus our efforts on fighting to eliminate ISIS and let Russia continue to help Assad. What remains unclear, however, is how the Trump presidency will deal with the Iran nuclear agreement.

In the Q&A, questions and comments were posed about: the salience of cultural connections via academia and “soft power”, and how these might fare under a Trump presidency; the extent to which economic instability breeds political instability; whether we were on the brink of a new world order, given also the apparent decline of the European Union; and what the regional order might look like. In response, speakers noted Trump’s disparaging remarks about soft power and said there were fears that funding for such academic initiatives and programs could be lost. It was also noted that Iran was a U.S. ally until the 1979 Islamic Revolution, after which it was replaced by Saudi Arabia (as well as Israel). In recent years, Saudi Arabia has been moving closer to Israel. Iran challenges that alliance and wants to help usher the U.S. out of the Middle East. The U.S. wants to stay in and has been strengthening its ties to regional allies Qatar (where it has a military base), Saudi Arabia, Israel (to which billions of dollars in military aid were recently allocated), and Turkey. In particular, the U.S. will continue to focus on maintaining its foothold in the Persian Gulf and its oil, though it might allow Russian influence elsewhere in the region. Trump’s position on Iran is not good and is inconsistent with his view that the conflict in Syria has to end and that the focus should be on defeating ISIS. As for the coming world order, I noted that world-systems scholars such as Immanuel Wallerstein, Christopher Chase-Dunn, Terry Boswell, and Giovanni Arrighi, taking a longue durée perspective, have offered several scenarios: a multipolar system that could lead to chaos; U.S. reassertion of its hegemony over the capitalist world-economy; the emergence of China as hegemon; and – in a re-enactment of the early 20th century slogan of “socialism or barbarism” and a new version of what Chase-Dunn and Boswell have called “the spiral of capitalism and socialism” – an alternative, democratic socialist world order.

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Turkey's political history has been dotted with successful military coups, but the attempted coup in Turkey in July failed spectacularly. President Erdoğan, leader of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) blamed the coup on the U.S.-based Fetullah Gulen and his followers. The coup was followed by the imprisonment of those accused of leading or taking part in the attempted military coup, as well as purges of tens of thousands of Turkish citizens across various domains – the military, media, academia, the arts, and the judiciary – and the closure of newspapers and NGOs. While the Erdoğan government continues to defend its response to the attempted coup, the world has watched with concern as people lose their jobs, or are accused of having supported the coup, in a seemingly indiscriminate manner. A disturbing report indicates that violence against women increased in post-coup Turkey. The Women’s Parliament Group of the progressive pro-Kurdish HDP issued a statement decrying the “male-dominated militarist mentality” dominating Turkish politics and the ensuing violence. The University Women’s Collective, a feminist group, issued a statement that “The coup, the war, AKP’s backwardness or jihadist mobs ... they all target women.” An executive at the Trabzonspor football club, Veysel Taskin, tweeted: “The properties and the wives of the infidel coup-plotting bastards are spoils of war.” He later resigned after facing a backlash for his comment but his sentiment is likely not an isolated one.²

At stake is Turkey’s democracy – which, paradoxically, was claimed by the coup-makers, the government, members of Erdogan’s ruling party, and those in civil society who opposed Turkey’s coup but also oppose Erdogan’s authoritarianism. From a feminist perspective, the coup and its aftermath revealed a type of “clash of hyper-masculinities”. The ongoing conflict between the Turkish state and its military, on the one hand, and Kurdish militants (the Turkish PKK and the Syrian YPG) on the other, adds another dimension to Turkey’s gendered crisis of democracy. These complex issues were discussed by a distinguished group of panelists, who approached the crisis from within varied disciplinary and conceptual frameworks.

Fatma Muge Goçek

Born and raised in Turkey, Prof. Goçek received her Ph.D. from Princeton University and since then has been a Professor of Sociology and Women's Studies at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Her most recent sole-authored book is Denial of Violence: Ottoman Past, Turkish Present and the Collective Violence against the Armenians, 1789-2009 (Oxford University Press, 2015). Her talk, "Trajectories of Violence in Contemporary Turkey", began with Ottoman and Turkish history, tracing the emergence of state violence and societal silence from the Armenian Genocide to the Kurdish massacres that continue to this day. As such, what is happening in Turkey is a consequence of the inability of state and society to break the cycle of violence by acknowledging past and present injustices. There are historical continuities, she said, and the legal context is also pertinent. She also informed the audience that because she signed the January

² See http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/turkey/23072016?mkt
2016 “peace petition”, she has been put on a blacklist and so she prefers not to travel to Turkey at the present time, especially in light of the post-coup climate.

Prof. Goçek writes and speaks of the trajectory of violence from the Armenians to the Kurds and poses the questions: Why have military coups been so normalized in the republic’s history? Why has the military been so powerful and visible? Her answer is that there must have been some foundational violence – and she settled on the Armenian genocide as precisely that violence. (I would add that this would be analogous to the USA’s “original sin” and foundational violence of slavery and the uprooting of the native population.) She noted that Mustafa Ismet Inonu and others who were perpetrators of the violence became leaders of the Republic. Prof. Goçek has been tracking and tracing the violence, and a particular form of Turkish nationalism, to the current ruling party’s approach to the Kurds. In general, nationalism as an ideology poses an “us” versus “them” in black-and-white terms. In particular, contemporary Turkish nationalism cannot countenance any difference from a homogeneous Turkish-speaking Sunni Muslim population.

YEŞİM ARAT

Professor and Chair in the Department of Political Science and International Relations at Boğaziçi University, Istanbul, Turkey, Prof. Arat has published widely on questions of women’s political participation, Islam, and democratization in Turkey. She also contextualized the coup, but in her case she drew attention to the context of previous coups in Turkey – those in 1960-1971, 1980, and 1997 – and to the unintended consequences of the coups in Turkey.

She began by stating starkly that in Turkey today there is one-man rule. The separation of powers, she said, had already eroded before July 2016. She then went on to discuss how the various coups in Turkey’s history always have had unintended consequences. The 1960 coup was an attempt to bring the Republican People’s Party back. The 1971 coup was Justice Party and it curbed civil liberties that had been enshrined in the 1960-61 constitution; the party system was fragmented. The 1970s decade was one of weak coalitions. The 1980 coup leaders followed from the civil violence and sought to bring stability and order but opened the door to Islamists; both the secular left and the secular right became fragmented. The coup in particular was against the Left. The 1997 shut down of the Refah (or Welfare) Party paved the way for AKP to come to power in 2000. Implying that the Gulenists, previously allied to the AKP and Erdogan, were indeed behind the July 2016 coup, she concluded by noting that “the coup empowered a former ally that now has become thoroughly emboldened” and has pursued a fierce backlash.

Aslı İlşız

Assistant Professor of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies at New York University, Dr. İlşız’s academic work includes studies of refugee and emigration integration; nation branding; liberal multiculturalism; alliance of civilizations and image wars; and law and authoritarianism. Her book project under review at Stanford University Press is entitled Humanism in Ruins: Biopolitics, Culture and the Entangled Legacies of the 1923 Greek-Turkish Population Exchange. She also recently finished a piece that analyzes the politics of stability from the 1980 military coup to today, and is currently working on a new manuscript on nation branding.
and civilization. In her talk, she addressed the issue of authoritarianism and law with a special focus on the 1980 coup d’état and its broader implications.

The legacy of the 1980 military coup, she said, is visible today with the AKP itself along with the Turkish-Islamist synthesis. One aftermath of the coup was a 10 percent threshold for parliamentary representation – a high bar compared to the parliamentary systems in most European countries. This occurred because the targets in 1980 were “deviant ideologies” – or Marxists – as well as the once-powerful trade unions. The 1980s also saw cooperation with the IMF. The 1983 National Cultural Report, Prof. Iğsız said, recommended dealing with labor organizations and regenerating education in part by building more mosques. She informed the audience that a well-known Turkish scholar, Serif Mardin, took part in formulating that report. Prof. Iğsız argued that those pre-existing structures and regulations, and the “creeping authoritarianism over time”, paved the way for Erdoğan’s centralization of power.

**Levent Köker**

Levent Köker is Hans Speier Professor in the Department of Sociology in the New School for Social Research. Before joining the New School, he was a professor of public law and politics in Ankara. Since 2007, he has been writing extensively on constitution-making and democracy. Some of his articles have been published in *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, Political Theory, Constellations, and Insight Turkey*. At MESA he spoke on "Legitimizing Illegality: Continuity and Change after the Putsch", and speculated on the longer-term consequences of what could be the constitutionalization of an all-powerful presidential system in a “Bonapartist” state.

He emphasized the systematic violations of the Constitution (“illegality”), a trend that had begun much earlier but which gained momentum after the putsch. What also emerged after the July 15 coup attempt was a social and political base of support for Erdogan even broader than that of the AKP’s/Erdoğan's electoral victory in November. This, in his view, amounts to "legitimizing illegality". But perhaps the main reason for this growing support is "the Kurdish question". He asked: Is this process of legitimizing illegality essentially the collapse of the notion of rule of law and of a legal order? Is Turkey moving toward a kind of fascism? Violations of constitution and the law have become routinized since the 2013 Gezi Park protests. The curfews enacted after Gezi park protests is one example of legitimizing illegality. So are the deaths that have occurred by those defying or ignorant of the curfews.

Erdoğan was elected president by popular vote for the first time and felt very emboldened. The pro-Kurdish progressive party HDP took 13% of the vote in June 2016, a development alarming to the “protectors of the Turkish establishment.” The lifting of parliamentary immunity of HDP deputies is another example of legalizing illegality. Although the Constitutional Court declared its legality – not surprising, given that the court has always been an arm of the state – Köker argued that the act is wholly unconstitutional. A third illegality he mentioned was that after the coup, the government declared a state of emergency. In effect it created a kind of “state of exception”, one outside the law (as theorized by Agamben). There have been many decrees that have the force of law but have now gone through parliamentary approval, indicative of the rise of hyper-presidential and authoritarian rule. Finally, Köker also mentioned that the conservative, nationalist nature of the majority of society helps Erdogan hold on
to power and expand it. One solution to this state of affairs lies in sanctions and actions by the Council of Europe.

The Question and Answer period generated a rich discussion. One question had to do with whether the coup was indeed carried out by Gulenists – with the unintended consequences described – or if the purges and concentration of power were in fact entirely anticipated, especially if it comes to pass that Erdoğan had a hand in it. Other questions had to do with the role of external factors and prospects for a change in the current state of affairs. It was noted that the AKP enjoyed its “golden age” of 2002-2007 largely because of the European Union’s support and Turkey’s expected membership. When the EU changed the rule of the game for membership, this empowered and emboldened the AKP. Prof. Iğsız added that early on, economic growth also had helped the AKP, but economic conditions have been deteriorating since 2013. In addition, the “branding” of Turkey for tourism and investment has largely failed. She feels that these difficulties could dissipate Erdoğan social base of support.

In the meantime, the voices of resistance are faint, and dissidents engage in what James Scott called the “weapons of the weak.” At the same time, hundreds of students have been jailed and there has been considerable de-unionization. The potential sites of resistance have been weakened. Prof. Goçek noted that most of the organized resistance comes from the Kurds – largely the PKK, though this is counter-productive. A solution to the longstanding Kurdish crisis in Turkey would be federalism, which is the norm in Europe and North America. But the Turkish state and the political establishment do not support this. Meanwhile, the state adamantly opposes a Kurdish autonomous region in northern Syria and spends more energy fighting the Kurds in Syria rather than ISIS. Indeed, it was noted that Turkish authoritarianism is partly driven and encouraged or justified by the crisis in Syria. Still, it was argued that the Kurds hold the key to Turkey’s future, and as such they must remain organized and resistant.