

DECEMBER 2021

# CURRENT HISTORY

A Journal of Contemporary World Affairs



## THE MIDDLE EAST

### Civilian Stresses

#### **The Indirect Tolls of Protracted Conflicts**

Jeannie Sowers and Erika Weinthal

#### **Druze under Pressure**

William F. S. Miles

#### **Taking on Disability Norms**

Christine Sargent

### Official Narratives

#### **Heritage and State in Oman**

Amal Sachedina

#### **Kuwait's Silenced Histories**

Farah Al-Nakib

### *Plus:*

#### **The Scramble for Post-Oil Survival**

Michele Dunne

#### **Back to Turkey's Wilderness Years**

Pelin Başcı

# CURRENT HISTORY

FOUNDED IN 1914

DECEMBER 2021

VOL. 120, NO. 830

## Editor

JOSHUA LUSTIG

## Associate Editor

MARK THOMPSON

## Senior Editor

WILLIAM W. FINAN JR.

## Copy Editor

SHERRY L. WERT

## Contributing Editors

CATHERINE BOONE

London School of Economics

HOLLY CASE

Brown University

URI DADUSH

Bruegel

DEBORAH S. DAVIS

Yale University

ALEXANDRA DÉLANO ALONSO

The New School

LARRY DIAMOND

Stanford University

MICHELE DUNNE

Carnegie Endowment

BARRY EICHENGREEN

University of California, Berkeley

C. CHRISTINE FAIR

Georgetown University

SUMIT GANGULY

Indiana University

MICHAEL T. KLARE

Hampshire College

MARWAN M. KRAIDY

Northwestern University

JOSHUA KURLANTZICK

Council on Foreign Relations

PAMELA McELWEE

Rutgers University

MICHAEL McFAUL

Stanford University

RAJAN MENON

City University of New York

JOSEPH S. NYE JR.

Harvard University

Ebenezer Obadare

University of Kansas

MICHAEL SHIFTER

Inter-American Dialogue

JEFFREY WASSERSTROM

University of California, Irvine

•

## COMING IN JANUARY

# Global Trends

HEADING INTO ITS THIRD YEAR, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to test prior assumptions about how the world works. States have exerted control over citizens' personal autonomy in ways little seen in peacetime, yet citizens have also resisted, often in seemingly irrational ways. In other aspects, the pandemic has brutally stripped away illusions of global order and cooperation, as the strongest have taken what they need to save themselves, leaving poorer nations at the mercy of the virus. *Current History's* January issue will cover these trends and more across the globe. Topics scheduled to appear include:

- **The Pandemic Breeds New Forms of Power**  
Engin Isin, Queen Mary University of London
- **Security, Migration, and the Pandemic**  
Fiona Adamson, SOAS University of London  
Kelly Greenhill, Tufts University
- **Aging, Inequality, and COVID-19**  
Kavita Sivaramakrishnan, Columbia University
- **Disability and Legal Autonomy**  
Chester A. Finn, Community Empowerment Programs  
Michael Ashley Stein and Hezzy Smith, Harvard Law School  
*Fifth in a series*
- **On the Frontier of Digital Currencies**  
Barry Eichengreen, University of California, Berkeley
- **Is the Shipping Industry Still Seaworthy?**  
Jean-Paul Rodrigue, Hofstra University

*Current History* (ISSN 0011-3530) (Online: ISSN 1944-785X) is published monthly (except June, July, and August) by University of California Press, 155 Grand Avenue, Suite 400, Oakland, CA 94612. See [online.ucpress.edu/currenthistory/pages/subscriptions](http://online.ucpress.edu/currenthistory/pages/subscriptions) for single issue and subscription orders, and claims information. Postmaster: send address changes to University of California Press, 155 Grand Avenue, Suite 400, Oakland, CA 94612. Copying and permissions notice: Authorization to copy article content beyond fair use (as specified in Sections 107 and 108 of the U.S. Copyright Law) for internal or personal use, or the internal or personal use of specific clients, is granted by The Regents of the University of California for libraries and other users, provided that they are registered with and pay the specified fee through the Copyright Clearance Center (CCC), [www.copyright.com](http://www.copyright.com). To reach the CCC's Customer Service Department, phone 978-750-8400 or write to [info@copyright.com](mailto:info@copyright.com). For permission to distribute electronically, republish, resell, or repurpose material, use the CCC's Rightslink service, available at [online.ucpress.edu/currenthistory](http://online.ucpress.edu/currenthistory). Submit all other permissions and licensing inquiries to [permissions@ucpress.edu](mailto:permissions@ucpress.edu). Copyright ©2021 by Regents of the University of California. *Current History*® and *History in the Making*® are registered trademarks. Periodicals postage paid at Oakland, CA and additional mailing offices. U.S. and Canada.

Printed in the United States by The Sheridan Press.

# CURRENT HISTORY

December 2021

Vol. 120, No. 830

## CONTENTS

- 339 Health and Environmental Tolls of Protracted Conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa** . . . . . *Jeannie Sowers and Erika Weinthal*  
Destruction of ecosystems, hunger, and disease are among the indirect effects of the region's drawn-out wars. They often inflict more harm on civilians than the actual fighting.
- 346 Disability Rights in the Middle East: Opportunities and Obstacles** . . . . . *Christine Sargent*  
Disability rights activists are working to change narratives and lower barriers to inclusion, but regional instability has slowed progress. *Fourth in a series on disability rights around the world.*
- 353 Repressive Erasure and Reflective Nostalgia in Kuwait** . . . . . *Farah Al-Nakib*  
By expunging inconvenient traces of the past—from the midcentury Golden Era to the Iraqi occupation—rulers seek to avoid accountability for the lost promise of modernity.
- 360 Forging Nationalism Through Heritage in Oman** . . . . . *Amal Sachedina*  
A long-ruling sultan built a robust heritage industry in a bid to unify a heterogeneous population and modernize the state. But some Omanis still look to an earlier age of Islamic governance.
- 366 As the Druze Go, So Goes the Middle East** . . . . . *William F. S. Miles*  
The small but enduring faith group has long been a bellwether across the Levant. Now local Druze and the diaspora are caught up in crises in Israel, Lebanon, and Syria.
- PERSPECTIVE**
- 372 As Oil Is Waning, the Times Are Changing** . . . . . *Michele Dunne*  
The endgame for fossil fuels portends more turmoil for the Middle East and North Africa, as regional powers scramble for survival. But coercion may prove to be less effective in a new era.
- BOOKS**
- 374 Perils of Turkey's Urban Wilderness in the 1970s and After** . . . . . *Pelin Başçı*  
A graphic novel written by a noted scholar takes on questions of authoritarianism, social change, and violence in a student's-eye view of the era leading up to the 1980 coup and its aftermath.

# CURRENT HISTORY

December 2021

*“Starvation, displacement, and the targeting of objects and activities essential to civilian life have been used as intentional strategies of war.”*

## Health and Environmental Tolls of Protracted Conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa

JEANNIE SOWERS AND ERIKA WEINTHAL

The effects of armed conflicts on the health of civilians and the well-being of ecosystems are remarkably understudied and yet evident to all who live through them. Protracted conflicts—those of long duration, or involving episodic periods of violence with no obvious resolution—are damaging to both people and environments in ways that are seldom adequately documented. Worse, because these costs are rarely if ever systematically analyzed or incorporated into policymaking, the decision to escalate or engage in a conflict is almost entirely uninformed by the human and environmental costs of the wars that have preceded it. These costs have been especially evident in the grinding conflicts across the Middle East and North Africa over the past decade.

It has long been known that more civilians suffer from disease, hunger, and other “indirect” effects of war than from direct violence. This is particularly true in situations of protracted conflict. The scale of the problem can be glimpsed in global assessments of food insecurity. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations tracks countries in “protracted crisis situations,” characterized by “recurrent natural disasters and/or conflict, longevity of food crises, breakdown of livelihoods, and insufficient institutional capacity to react to the crisis.”

In its 2020 report, *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World*, the FAO identified 22 countries that were in protracted crisis. Many were mired in various types of conflict, ranging from

regional wars to civil wars to high levels of one-sided violence involving armed groups. Large segments of these populations are “acutely vulnerable to hunger, malnutrition, disease, and disruptions to livelihoods over prolonged periods.”

The evolution of the international humanitarian system has, to some degree, helped reduce mass mortality from famine and infectious diseases in protracted conflicts. But traditional scourges persist in contemporary wars through mass displacement; widespread malnutrition, undernutrition, and areas of outright starvation; inadequate access to health and contraceptive services; outbreaks of cholera, diphtheria, diarrhea, and other diseases; and physical and mental trauma. These extensive costs of war exacerbate civilian exposure and vulnerability to intensifying climate change impacts, such as droughts, floods, heatwaves, and cyclones.

Reliable, cumulative estimates and analyses of the indirect burdens of war are still lacking, even though the technical capacities to provide better empirical documentation exist. News reports, interviews, and social media offer vivid accounts of human suffering, yet attempts at systematic assessment are left to ad hoc groups of academics, nongovernmental organizations, and public health experts. Despite governments’ commitments under international law to protect civilians by applying the principles of necessity, humanity, distinction, and proportionality in their military operations, they have few incentives to carry out post-conflict assessments. Parties waging war are more likely to politicize findings about the indirect effects of war or overlook the need for accurate data collection and dissemination.

---

JEANNIE SOWERS is a professor of political science at the University of New Hampshire. ERIKA WEINTHAL is a professor of environmental policy and public policy at Duke University.

Certainly, conflict undermines state-managed civil registration and health care systems that provide baseline data, while the lack of security creates great risks for public health monitors. Yet technical advances in geospatial imaging, remote sensing, drone technology, mobile phone applications, and statistical methods to estimate “excess” mortality, combined with the reach of humanitarian and emergency response actors, have made it possible to more accurately gauge the indirect costs of war.

Even more importantly, the knowledge and technical capacity to alleviate the hunger, disease, and trauma that accompany war are well established. As pediatrics and health policy scholar Paul Wise argued in a 2017 essay in *Dædalus*, “Simply put, in most areas plagued by war and chronic conflict, the causes of death associated with the indirect effects of war look almost identical to those associated with peace.” Public health experts understand the importance of measures such as effective vaccines and water, sanitation, and hygiene interventions for preventing many illnesses in countries afflicted by protracted conflict.

Political will and financial commitments to alleviate human suffering from the rising indirect effects of war-making have been largely channeled through humanitarian assistance. In the Middle East and North Africa, as of August 2021, there were 53 million people in need of such aid. The needs requiring the greatest amounts of donor support were food security, public health, water, sanitation, and hygiene. The conflicts in Syria and Yemen account for the largest shares of the budgets of humanitarian agencies operating in the region.

Despite an increase in commitments, the sheer intensity of the human needs generated by recent wars has often left donor pledges well short of what is required. This is particularly true in protracted conflicts where diversion and obstruction of aid is highly publicized and politicized, and where donor countries like the United States, Russia, and Saudi Arabia are directly involved in backing some parties to the conflicts by providing military support and actively engaging in military operations.

According to Martin Griffiths, the UN undersecretary-general for humanitarian affairs and emergency relief coordinator, the \$4.2 billion Syrian

Humanitarian Response Plan is “the largest and most expensive plan worldwide.” But as he noted in a September 2021 briefing to the UN Security Council on the humanitarian situation in Syria, only 27 percent of the plan has been funded.

## DELIBERATE TARGETING

The wars in the Middle East and North Africa since the 2011 Arab uprisings are not simply a story of the indirect costs of war imposed on civilians and the environments in which they live. Starvation, displacement, and the targeting of objects and activities essential to civilian life have been used as intentional strategies of war.

Both direct and indirect targeting of infrastructures that populations depend on for livelihoods and basic services have been a prominent feature of the recent wars, undermining civilian well-being and health. Severe indirect effects on civilians materialize when environmental infrastructures fail, when people lose income and employment, and when they cannot leave conflict zones due to sieges, blockades, and other internal or external limitations on movement.

Environmental infrastructures are the systems established to provide and manage flows of water, energy, waste, and food—modifications of nature to create habitable places. These systems depend on the skills and knowledge of people as much as physical capital, and they are designed for and operate well only within certain environmental conditions and parameters. Unexpected environmental change and war can both leave such infrastructure damaged, degraded, or inoperable.

The destruction of environmental infrastructure, whether intentionally or unintentionally, harms civilians and ecosystems. Contamination of soil and water occurs when waste treatment systems are either directly damaged or shut down due to loss of electricity. Protracted conflict in Gaza, for example, has resulted in high volumes of raw and partially treated sewage discharging into the Mediterranean Sea. Yet such impacts are often overlooked by an immediate focus on enumerating direct deaths and casualties from armed conflict.

Despite specific provisions in the 1977 Additional Protocol 1 of the Geneva Protocol to protect “objects indispensable to civilian survival,” and

---

*More civilians suffer from  
“indirect” effects of war than  
from direct violence.*

---

protections in international environmental law dating back to the 1972 UN Stockholm Conference, international humanitarian law provides substantial deference to the doctrine of military necessity. Moreover, economic policies that deliberately expose much of the population to hardship and deprivation—what the World Peace Foundation at Tufts University, in its work on the recent wars in Yemen and South Sudan, terms “economic warfare”—are not adequately accounted for in international humanitarian law or international criminal law.

Militias and militaries in the Middle East have not only degraded and destroyed environmental infrastructure essential to urban life and to the sustenance of rural livelihoods. They have also sought control of infrastructure to displace populations that may be sympathetic to the enemy. The environmental historian Emmanuel Kreike, in his 2021 book *Scorched Earth: Environmental Warfare as a Crime against Humanity and Nature*, has introduced the term “environcide” for “intentionally or unintentionally damaging, destroying, or rendering inaccessible environmental infrastructure through violence that may be episodic and spectacular . . . or continuous and cumulative.”

Such violence occurred during early periods of warfare in Europe, the Americas, and Africa, when militaries destroyed dams, weirs, terraces, farmland, granaries, and other human-environment systems that sustained communities. In contemporary Middle Eastern wars, however, such tactics have led to cascading impacts across much larger populations, particularly in urban areas relying on centralized electricity and water services. These scorched earth and siege tactics have been intentionally adopted by regimes and armed groups against civilian populations.

To document the “civilianization” of war-making, we compiled a dataset that tracks discrete attacks on water, energy, agriculture, transportation, and health infrastructure in Yemen, Libya, Syria, Iraq, and Palestine from 2010 to 2020. Since protracted conflicts in the Middle East have typically combined acute, periodic outbreaks of violence with more structural, long-term forms of “slow violence”—including economic measures such as sanctions, blockades, import restrictions, and limits on mobility—discrete attacks must be considered in the broader contexts of war and, where present, occupation. Targeting environmental infrastructure necessary for civilian life, both directly and indirectly, has in many of these

instances emerged as a clear and deliberate strategy of parties to the conflicts.

## WEAPONIZING HUNGER

After several decades of declining rates of hunger across the world, the recent increase in conflict and war, particularly in Africa and the Middle East, has produced a sharp rise in global food insecurity. Protracted conflicts have contributed both to food emergencies and to chronic forms of undernourishment and food insecurity. According to the 2017 FAO report on global food security, 75 percent of stunted children worldwide (almost 122 million) reside in conflict-affected countries.

The FAO also found that people living in protracted conflicts are two and a half times more likely to be undernourished than those living in conflict-free areas. Many countries experiencing protracted conflict are also heavily dependent on the agricultural sector; on average, over 60 percent of people in conflict zones live in rural areas where agricultural employment sustains food intake and household incomes, accounting for over 35 percent of gross domestic product. Where conflicts are compounded with climate-related shocks such as droughts, floods, and storms, the number of people classified as food insecure can rise quickly and dramatically.

Conflict interrupts the entire food supply chain, from production and harvesting to processing and transport. It increases food insecurity through multiple, compounding pathways, even where parties to the conflict do not deliberately use hunger as a weapon. These factors can include reduced economic growth and household incomes; rising prices for food and goods; rapid declines in the value of local currencies; disruptions to the agricultural sector and to imports of food, fuel, and other needed goods; and interruptions in health care, social services, water, and energy. The result is higher rates of childhood wasting, stunting, and hunger.

The evidence shows that in some of the post-2011 conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa, many parties have waged war in such a way as to dramatically increase hunger, malnutrition, and outright starvation. This has occurred through the direct application of violence, as well as the use of economic policies that undermine people’s ability to purchase and access food, water, fuel, and other resources essential to survival.

In Yemen, as in many situations of extreme hunger, a collapse in people’s ability to buy food

and fuel has been more salient than a lack of food per se. Most Yemenis rely on imported food, which requires that households have sufficient funds to purchase basic staples, and also that the importing system works smoothly. But the internationally recognized government of Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi and the Saudi-led coalition supporting it stopped paying public-sector salaries and welfare benefits in areas held by the Houthi movement after 2016. Both the Houthi leadership and the Hadi government delayed licenses, import certifications, and credits to food importers.

The Saudi-led coalition imposed a naval and air blockade to hinder arms transfers to the Houthis, causing delays in both commercial trade and humanitarian assistance. Food prices rose as purchasing power declined. Obstruction and diversion of food aid by Houthi forces and other armed groups further worsened hunger in the most vulnerable populations.

In Syria, the government adopted a “kneel or starve” policy toward the largely nonviolent mass protests that spread throughout the country in 2011 and 2012. According to a 2019 report released by Damaan Humanitarian Organization, Global Rights Compliance, and the World Peace Foundation, since that slogan was first spray-painted on walls near checkpoints in the opposition-held city of Homs, the policy has entailed systematically besieging a series of opposition-held urban areas to compensate for the regime’s inability to recapture the cities with ground assaults. The regime cut off opposition-held neighborhoods’ water, waste services, electricity and fuel, and other supplies, while subjecting them to airstrikes and shelling that targeted bakeries, markets, communal kitchens, clinics, hospitals, and additional civilian sites. Once Russia entered the war with air support for the regime after 2015, Russian airstrikes also targeted civilian facilities in opposition-held areas, particularly hospitals.

While Syrians had been largely food secure before the war, the 2019 report argues that the urban sieges deliberately induced widespread malnutrition. Deir al-Zour, one of the earliest cities to revolt in 2011, was divided into zones controlled by Islamic State (also known by its Arabic acronym Daesh) and government forces from 2014 to 2017. Both Daesh and the regime cut off supplies to civilians, leading to reports of extreme hunger,

though the UN World Food Program conducted periodic air drops on both sides of the front lines.

The 2019 report also examined how the longest urban siege in Syria, lasting from 2013 to 2018, targeted villages and towns in eastern Ghouta, near the capital, Damascus. By 2017, a humanitarian needs assessment found that 36 percent of children there were stunted, and almost 12 percent were acutely malnourished.

In addition to using hunger as a weapon, the Assad regime indiscriminately used barrel bombs (crude incendiary devices, dropped from helicopters at close range, that spew fragments in all directions) on civilians in breadlines, markets, and residential buildings. In August 2013, the Syrian regime also fired rockets containing sarin gas that killed over 1,000 residents in eastern Ghouta, one of a number of credible reports of the regime using chemical weapons locally on opposition neighborhoods. The devastating impacts of such attacks have prompted ongoing efforts by some international advocacy networks to negotiate an international agreement to limit the use of explosive weapons in densely populated areas.

---

*Attacks on health care facilities in Yemen were devastating.*

---

## **GAZA’S FISHING CASUALTIES**

Often overlooked in studies of conflict and food security are attacks on the fishing sector. Given its importance in the region, restrictions on access to fishing waters can render livelihoods precarious. During the 11-day Gaza war in May 2021, Israel once again closed off access to the Mediterranean as a punitive measure, arbitrarily moving the boundary lines for permissible fishing.

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) estimated that the “complete disruption” to fishing activities in Gaza resulted in the loss of an estimated \$100,000 in income per day, a significant amount for an already struggling economy. Although Israel extended the fishing zone from 9 nautical miles from shore to 12 in July 2021 and then to 15 in September, this limit remains far short of the 20-nautical-mile zone established for Gazan fishing vessels by the Oslo Accords.

Due to the restrictions on access to offshore fisheries, the shallow fishing grounds that remain accessible are increasingly depleted. This reduces the number of fishermen who can make a viable living in what was once a vibrant industry providing a much-needed source of protein for Gazans. According to OCHA, over 10,000 fishermen were

registered in Gaza in 2000. Their number had dropped to 3,617 by 2019.

### FORCED TO FLEE OR STAY

In Aleppo, eastern Ghouta, Deir al-Zour, Zabadani, and other besieged urban areas in Syria, state policy imposed systematic deprivation on civilian populations to force them to capitulate to “evacuation” agreements. According to the 2019 report by Damaan Humanitarian Organization, the government used these agreements to concentrate opposition fighters and their presumed civilian supporters in the Idlib governorate in the northwest, in effect conducting forced population transfers.

The fragmented, multilayered conflict in Yemen has also seen large-scale population displacement. Between 2010 and 2019, more than 4 million Yemenis—over 12 percent of the total population—were displaced due to conflict, according to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Center. Another 188,000 were displaced by natural disasters, particularly flash flooding and cyclones. Many of them fled the front lines for temporary and informal camps vulnerable to flash floods, which forced families to move multiple times.

The intersecting pressures of hunger, conflict, and climate change on human security are even greater where people cannot escape changing conditions. The right to flee sieges and war-related violence is the bedrock of the international refugee regime. Although much of the focus on post-2011 migration from the region has been negative, driven by xenophobic fears in Europe and the United States, the reality is that the right to flee has been severely curtailed in some conflicts. Yemen, Syria, Libya, Iraq, and Gaza offer examples where limitations and controls on mobility have prevented many civilians from leaving. Those who do flee often face bouts of repeated displacement, internally and externally, and many are unable to find improved livelihood prospects.

### HIDDEN HEALTH IMPACTS

The increasing magnitude of health and pollution impacts associated with protracted conflict is sometimes visible, but not always evident in international health statistics compiled by UN agencies. Using a variety of publicly available health datasets, we compiled data on basic health indicators for Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Iraq, with Jordan added as a country that is not in conflict but has been a recipient of many refugees from regional conflicts.

We use this data cautiously, since aggregate national health statistics are often flawed, and numbers may be lacking entirely for areas in conflict. The data show that between 2011 and 2018, life expectancy at birth as estimated by the UN declined by two years in Libya and a shocking four years in Syria, while it increased one year in Jordan and Iraq, and surprisingly—and likely spuriously—increased two years in Yemen. Infant mortality rates continued to decline slowly over that time period, as they had during the previous decade across the Arab world. But the rate remained high in Yemen, the least developed country in the group, with a reported average of 43 deaths per 1,000 live births.

The costs of conflict are even more apparent in the spread of infectious and vector-borne diseases, particularly in protracted conflicts with high rates of displaced persons. Mass displacement forces more people to seek shelter in areas without adequate water, sanitation, and energy. They are often also increasingly exposed to vectors such as mosquitoes and sandflies. Poor nutrition increases vulnerability to a variety of water and airborne diseases. Although most countries in the region were making steady progress against tuberculosis, rubella, measles, and other infectious diseases, war slowed these gains by interrupting vaccination campaigns and health care, forcing communities to flee their homes for crowded informal urban housing and camps, and undermining the provision of essential services.

In Yemen, the ongoing cholera epidemic is the largest outbreak in modern history. The World Health Organization (WHO) reported 2.5 million suspected cases between 2016 and April 2021, with slightly under 4,000 deaths, a quarter of them children. Yemen has also faced outbreaks of dengue fever and diphtheria during the current conflict.

The scope of COVID-19 infections in Yemen is unknown, since testing and access to treatment and vaccines are not available to much of the population, but the number of cases is expected to be extremely large. Likewise, the pandemic continues to surge across other conflict-affected countries in the Middle East and North Africa. As of September 2021, hospitals across Syria were overwhelmed with patients both in regime-held areas and in the opposition-held northwest.

Due to the interruption of vaccine campaigns, other disease incidences may well rise. Whereas in 2010, 77 percent of Yemeni babies were



vaccinated for polio by the age of 1, this rate had dropped to 67 percent by 2018. In Libya, the drop was greater because coverage had been more comprehensive before the war; 98 percent of babies had been inoculated in 2010, but by 2019 only 73 percent were. In Syria, where 83 percent were vaccinated in 2010, only 53 percent were in 2018, improving slightly to 60 percent in 2019.

Polio had been basically eradicated in Syria, a middle-income country, but in 2019, 74 cases were recorded. Tuberculosis has remained stubbornly present across the region, with increasing cases in Iraq, Jordan, and Yemen in the past few years, and a sharp increase in Libya in 2019.

Displacement as a consequence and weapon of war, combined with natural disasters, has forced more people into contact with parasitic and zoonotic diseases that used to be comparatively rare in countries such as Syria. The resurgence of several types of leishmaniasis, a parasitic disease spread by over 90 varieties of sandflies, has been particularly evident in countries enduring protracted conflict. Endemic in Somalia, Sudan, and Iraq, cases of leishmaniasis spread during the past decade of conflict in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, and Libya, according to WHO data.

Representatives from UNICEF told us in interviews in 2019 that widespread internal displacement in Syria and lack of adequate interventions led to outbreaks of acute diarrhea and hepatitis in the second half of 2018. They also reported that due to the lack of rubble removal and waste management, along with overcrowding among internally displaced persons, outbreaks of leishmaniasis have become more common, including in Raqqa and Deir al-Zour in north-eastern Syria.

## HEALTH CARE UNDER FIRE

The WHO has reported over 500 incidents involving attacks on the health sector in Syria since 2015. An April 2019–March 2020 regime offensive backed by Russian forces, intended to retake Idlib province and the surrounding areas in northwest Syria, resulted in a barrage of attacks on health care infrastructure and medical workers. Amnesty International documented both air and ground attacks on 10 medical facilities, some allegedly involving Russian aircraft. (Such tallies do not account for other forms of violence or obstruction of health services in

Idlib.) Many of the health care facilities that came under attack were on a UN deconfliction list used by humanitarian organizations to share their locations with Russian, Turkish and US-led coalition forces to prevent them from being targeted.

In Yemen, our data show 197 incidents in which health care facilities were targeted between 2015 and 2021. This is a relatively small number compared with the 1,921 recorded attacks on agricultural infrastructure during this period, but attacks on health care were particularly devastating because Yemen has relatively few hospitals and clinics for its population size. Attacks on health care sites were most sustained in 2018 (43 incidents) and 2020 (41 incidents).

Most of the incidents recorded by the Yemen Data Project and the Civilian Impact Monitoring Project involved Saudi-coalition airstrikes, with the remainder attributed to shelling and clashes between Houthi forces (Ansar Allah) and their opponents. Ground forces, including Ansar Allah and a variety of other militias, shelled hospitals, abducted medical personnel and forced them to work at gunpoint, and used roadblocks and checkpoints to close clinics and block patients and doctors from reaching health care facilities.

Most airstrikes on health care sites in Yemen targeted public hospitals and clinics, but international humanitarian organizations such as Médecins Sans Frontières/Doctors Without Borders also found their clinics occasionally targeted. Since these organizations provide the Saudi-led coalition with geospatial coordinates for their health care locations through the UN deconfliction mechanism, such attacks signal either a blatant disregard for international human rights law or poorly functioning command and control inside the Saudi military. Moreover, the repeated targeting of the same hospitals and clinics over time suggests clear intent. Like some water facilities, markets, and bridges, many public hospitals were targeted two or three times.

Since 2000, Gaza has experienced three periods of intense Israeli bombardment in which civilian infrastructure has been destroyed (2008–9, 2014, and 2021). In May 2021, the bombing of Gaza's only COVID-19 testing facility severely hampered the ability of medical personnel to fight the pandemic. Damage to the power network during the

---

*Urban sieges in Syria deliberately induced widespread malnutrition.*

---

11-day war left some hospitals unable to function due to lack of electricity.

These periods of outright destruction of water, energy, and medical infrastructure obscure the decades of slow violence experienced by the Palestinian population in Gaza. Blockades and sanctions have prevented access to medical supplies and equipment, which are often held at the border. Intermittent closures at the two main border crossings (Erez with Israel and Rafah with Egypt) have limited the freedom of movement necessary to access critical medical care outside of Gaza.

## DEADLY POLLUTION

Environmental pollution, generated both from armed conflict and from the intensifying impacts of climate change, has also had major impacts on public health. From deliberately set oil and gas fires, and the fumes from makeshift oil refineries in Syria, to the smoke from wildfires that burned across the Mediterranean in the summer of 2021 from Algeria to Greece and Turkey, atmospheric pollution imposes short- and long-term health burdens. It shortens lifespans and limits childhood growth, increases susceptibility to viruses like COVID-19 that attack the respiratory system, and is particularly dangerous for young children and the elderly.

The extensive use of explosive weapons in urban areas in Syria, Libya, Yemen, and Iraq created vast volumes of dust laden with unknown materials, as well as mountains of rubble, both of which pose significant health risks that are poorly understood. Cities such as Aleppo, Mosul, Idlib, and Sana'a suffered the destruction of historic centers of trade and commerce, leading to mass displacement.

The steady accumulation of indirect effects of war on civilians has been no less life-threatening than bombing, shelling, and sniper fire, but it is often less visible than the deaths and casualties directly caused by such attacks. While much progress has been made on tracking civilian casualties of war, there is still more work to be done to account for the short- and long-term health and environmental consequences. This includes expanding our understanding of how war not only causes mass displacement, but also heightens vulnerability to hunger, disease, and conflict-induced pollution. These costs of war for civilians, particularly in terms of degraded health, are often harder to identify and may not be as evident in the short term.

## PEACEMAKING AND PUBLIC HEALTH

As some conflicts wind down while others persist, the Middle East and North Africa face grave challenges in restoring food security and addressing public health problems. The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly worsened food insecurity in the region, as it has around the world. Many families lost income from the containment measures necessitated by the pandemic. State fragmentation and competing centers of political authority in countries such as Yemen, Syria, and Libya have rendered a coordinated public health response to the coronavirus impossible.

The most vulnerable populations have been internally displaced in areas rendered inaccessible to humanitarian assistance by political obstruction and lack of agreement between rival forces. Decades of war have ravaged critical infrastructure and shattered economies, especially where blockades and sieges have prevented the movement of goods and people. Greater adherence to international humanitarian law, and rethinking how humanitarian and development assistance for critical infrastructure is deployed in protracted conflicts, would help ameliorate some of the health impacts.

To fully address these impacts, however, requires preventing and resolving protracted conflict wherever possible. The United States has not substantially reckoned with its outsized role in harming public health in protracted conflicts and occupations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Palestine. Meanwhile, Russian airstrikes in Syria deliberately targeted hospitals, bakeries, and other civilian objects. Saudi Arabia's disastrous air campaign in Yemen has not succeeded either in stopping Houthi advances or in deterring cross-border attacks inside the kingdom. Iranian support for Hezbollah, Hamas, Houthi forces, and various Iraqi militias further contributes to protracted conflicts in the region.

With arms transfers, financing, logistics assistance, and direct military involvement, international and regional powers have vastly increased the civilian impact and duration of these wars. As the largest military power in the world, the United States needs to revisit its long-term military and economic support for exclusionary regimes in the Middle East and North Africa, and examine the domestic interests that sustain militarized foreign policies. Preventing protracted conflict, and taking leading diplomatic roles in negotiating an end to violence, are critical public health measures. ■

“Across the Middle East, shifts are taking place in local disability narratives—the collective and quotidian ways that people make sense of and respond to embodied impairments.”

## Disability Rights in the Middle East: Opportunities and Obstacles

CHRISTINE SARGENT

**A**cross the Middle East, two key dynamics characterize contemporary disability rights movements: dynamism and fragility. Disability activism, new communication platforms, legislative interventions, and capacity-building reflect palpable currents of change and innovation—which are often driven by ground-up initiatives increasingly led by disabled persons’ organizations (DPOs). At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic and protracted crises stemming from war, displacement, underdevelopment, and climate change pose threats to health and well-being across the region, with especially grave implications for disabled persons and their movements.

**Disability  
and Equality**

*Fourth in a series*

Two dilemmas present themselves when writing about disability rights in the Middle East, and both involve defining terms. First are the tensions inherent in the category “Middle East” itself, which favors particular (neo)colonial cartographies while diminishing local projects of regional identity and placemaking. Depending on the organizational body one consults for inclusion and exclusion criteria, different versions of the Middle East emerge. One must also consider the profound economic disparities that shape life across a region encompassing some of the highest- and lowest-ranking nation-states on the 2020 Human Development Index.

Here, I follow the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) roster, which includes Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq,

Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. ESCWA’s Inclusive Social Development Section has generated two major reports on disability in the Middle East, in 2014 and 2018. These reports offer unparalleled data aggregation for developing a regional perspective.

The economic inequality and political heterogeneity that characterize ESCWA members directly pertains to the second definitional issue at stake: disability. The preamble to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) recognizes that disability is “an evolving concept.” (Adopted by UN headquarters in 2006, the CRPD opened for signatures in 2007. As of 2021, 182 countries have signed and ratified it; 9 remain signatories only, while 7 have taken no action.) Article 1 of the Convention offers the following definition: “Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.”

By embracing this definition, the CRPD created an authoritative global standard that affirms the fundamentally *social* nature of disability. The social model, as enshrined in the convention, represents decades of efforts by disabled activists and allies to unsettle individualistic models that situate disability in terms of individual tragedy or medical defect. Scholars and activists continue debating and revising the social model, seeking to better account for the complexities of embodied experience, to recognize disability’s intersectionality, and to challenge neoliberal and neocolonial co-optations of human rights discourses.

---

CHRISTINE SARGENT is an assistant professor of anthropology at the University of Colorado, Denver.

These concerns inform a current paradigm shift from disability rights to disability justice, which seeks to emphasize how intersecting oppressions inform ableist social structures and logics. The framework of disability rights, however, is currently dominant in the Middle East. (These distinct but overlapping frameworks remind us that theorizing and organizing reflect specific historical, economic, and cultural contexts.) Both approaches share an insistence on the social and political foundations of disability.

As of September 2021, all ESCWA members have signed and/or ratified the CRPD. Iraq, Kuwait, Mauritania, Palestine, and Sudan have ratified or acceded to the convention without signing, whereas Lebanon has signed but not ratified. ESCWA states also vary in their adoption of the Optional Protocol, which establishes communication and inquiry procedures for violations.

The CRPD calls on member states to recognize the societal, environmental, and institutional barriers that disable. It obligates them to enact legislation that promotes the human rights of persons with disabilities and prohibits discrimination based on disability. ESCWA states have responded unevenly to this mandate.

Jordan's Law No. 31 of 2007 on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, for example, has already gone through a substantive overhaul since its initial passage shortly after the government signed and ratified the convention. Law No. 20 of 2017 was a response to demands by DPOs and civil society organizations for a revision more fully aligned with the terminology and spirit of the CRPD, to provide clearer mechanisms for integrating disability rights into and across existing legislation. But some countries have failed to update existing laws—since the 1980s in Libya's case, or since the early 2000s in Lebanon's.

Both older and more recent laws often rely on antiquated paradigms and terms. Oman's Sultanate Decree No. 63 of 2008 positions disabled persons as recipients of care rather than subjects with rights, and emphasizes rehabilitation. While rehabilitation can be an important tool for preserving quality of life, its centrality to the law risks an overly medicalized focus.

Palestine's Law No. 4 of 1999 defines a person with a disability as: "Any individual suffering from a permanent partial or total disability, whether

congenital or not, in their senses or in their physical, psychological, or mental capabilities to the extent that it restricts the fulfilment of their normal living requirements in a manner not usually faced by those without disabilities." This definition conveys a still-typical positioning of disability as located in the individual (in contrast to the CRPD's interactive and environmental emphasis).

There is a selection bias to my examples in this essay, which focus on Jordan, Iraq, and Lebanon. The economic and demographic profiles of the Gulf states render them somewhat unique, generating material and social conditions that depart significantly from their more populous and geopolitically vulnerable neighbors to the west. The relatively less urbanized North African states also face a different set of constraints and challenges than the smaller, densely urban states in the Levant. My own selective focus in no way implies a lack of important developments in either of these two subregions.

To capture the complexities of both the region and disability, we need to look across interconnected scales of social life. This means tracking between methods and sites, from transnational and global organizing to the development of state-level policy and civic activism, as well as the politics of care and constructions of personhood that inform everyday experiences of disability.

## SHIFTING NARRATIVES

Disability is part of the shared human experience, but it is shaped by specific material and social conditions. Across the Middle East, shifts are taking place in local disability narratives—the collective and quotidian ways that people make sense of and respond to embodied impairments. These changes reflect ongoing efforts by rights activists, expanding and deepening the role of disability rights in everyday life.

As ESCWA's 2018 "Report on Disability in the Arab Region" makes clear, data collection and accuracy remain major challenges. All reporting states documented notably low rates of prevalence that range from below 1 percent to just above 5 percent of the population. (The World Health Organization's 2011 "World Report on Disability" placed the average disability prevalence rate

---

*Some of the most glaring gaps  
between law and reality  
emerge in education.*

---

among adult populations at 15 percent, with a wider range of 11.8–18 percent between higher and lower income countries.)

Only three ESCWA members have fully implemented the Washington Group on Disability Statistics' Short Set (WGSS) of questions in their most recent national-level surveys. The Washington Group is one of the UN Statistical Commission's consultative "city groups." Its protocol aims to standardize and improve global disability data by focusing questions on degrees of capacity across six functional domains: vision, hearing, mobility, cognition, self-care, and communication.

Even among states using the protocol, estimates of prevalence can vary, because the Washington Group recommends that calculations include only those respondents who answer questions about capacity and functioning with "a lot of difficulty" or "cannot do [it] at all." But Jordan typically cites its national rate of disability as 11.4 percent of the population, including those who respond to WGSS questions with "some difficulty." If the WGSS recommendation is applied, the rate drops to an astonishingly low 2.7 percent of the population. Morocco and Yemen have similar patterns.

The use of screening questions, especially those including the word "disability," is still common in governmental and nongovernmental surveys across the region, creating a twofold problem. First, even the CRPD's standardized definition of disability inevitably relies on sociolinguistic categories to map the culturally constructed contours of bodies, minds, and persons. Interpretive differences pertain less to translational accuracy than to the fact that the labels of "physical, mental, intellectual or sensory" delineated in the CRPD possess their own philosophical, religious, medical, and popular genealogies. The WGSS questions offer one potentially effective way to recognize and accommodate the instability and specificity of the term "disability."

The second issue that makes screening questions problematic is stigma. Popular, academic, and organizational reports on disability in the Middle East often refer to a shared set of terms when describing attitudes, practices, and beliefs (often glossed as "culture") regarding disabled persons. These include shame, embarrassment, fear, and hiding.

In my own ethnographic research, I found that Jordanians frequently situated disability stigma in a teleological narrative of development and progress. In other words, there was remarkable consensus around the "past" having been worse and the present offering unparalleled opportunities and progress. But research by historians of disability in the Middle East like Sara Scalenghe and Kristina Richardson suggests more dynamic and flexible experiences of bodymind impairment and societal responses in the past. Additionally, social scientists like Benedicte Ingstad (who draws on work with community-based rehabilitation projects in Botswana) have argued that accusations of hiding people with disabilities can obfuscate and distort complex realities of caregiving, especially under conditions of material deprivation and hardship.

Nevertheless, concerns about family members restraining and hiding disabled persons from their wider social networks are documented in diverse sources and across the region. Such practices are often framed as vestiges of traditional mindsets.

Jordan's most recent shadow report on the implementation of the CRPD, submitted in 2017 by a coalition of DPOs and the King Hussein Foundation's Information and Research Center, documented multiple instances of disabled persons, especially those with intellectual or developmental disabilities, being chained and abused by family members or abandoned at residential institutions for unacceptable lengths of time—in some cases, for decades. These practices continue on a global scale, as shown in a 2020 Human Rights Watch report, "Living in Chains: Shackling of People with Psychosocial Disabilities Worldwide." Ultimately, confinement and restriction—whether stemming from logics of punishment or protection, or the sometimes blurred boundaries between them—are clear human rights violations.

Despite the persistence of such practices, disability representation, especially through popular and social media platforms, has played a transformative role in shifting narratives and norms. In Jordan, the state-run JTV channel airs the program *Yowm Jadid*, which frequently invites disabled persons and family member advocates to share their experiences and raise awareness about disability issues in Jordanian society. On the privately owned Roya channel, the program *Dunya ya Dunya*

---

*Unaffordable transportation and inaccessible buildings impede the ability to participate in society.*

---

features both informational and entertainment-focused segments centering the experiences of disabled persons and their families.

More recently, the virtual platform Habaybna.net, founded in 2017 by Reem and Mohammad Al Faranji, has worked to address the lack of up-to-date, reliable Arabic-language resources on childhood intellectual and developmental disability. The Faranjis relocated to Jordan after the winter 2008 Israeli bombardment of Gaza, when one of their sons, who was already experiencing language delays, stopped speaking entirely. Habaybna maintains a robust Facebook presence and provides links to an extensive YouTube channel, an article library, and an “ask an expert” direct phone line.

In Lebanon, the more controversial hidden-camera program *Al Sadma*, which first aired during Ramadan in 2016, featured several episodes designed to generate dialogue about ableism and disability stigma. As a program explicitly oriented around shock value, it raises questions about the ethics of enactment and simulation, yet the decision to call out normalized, public expressions of ableism is noteworthy. In a more academic vein, the open-access, bilingual English-Arabic journal *Kohl: A Journal for Body and Gender Research*, based in Beirut and Paris, published a special issue titled “Resisting Ableism, Queering Desirability” in the fall of 2020. What connects these otherwise distinct examples of cultural production is their desire to center disability and its attendant politics in everyday realms of experience and representation.

## ENVIRONMENTS OF EXCLUSION

Accessibility is a multidimensional concept that encompasses more than built environments, but the state of infrastructure in much of the heavily urbanized Middle East does have an impact on disabled persons. Whereas rural areas are noted for their isolation and inaccessibility, unaffordable transportation and inaccessible buildings in Middle Eastern cities impede many disabled persons’ ability to participate in society. A 2020 report by the World Health Organization’s Eastern Mediterranean Regional Office on health-related Sustainable Development Goals lists only five ESCWA states where the percentage of urban residents falls under 70 percent (Egypt, Morocco, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen).

In countries like Jordan, the lack of reliable and safe public transportation creates barriers for women, cited as one reason for their lagging

participation in the formal labor market. These issues are compounded for disabled women, who face heightened family resistance to their taking public transportation in general, as well as practical matters of accessibility and maneuverability. As a result, disabled persons—and especially women—must either rely on family members to help them exercise their right to mobility, or have the money to pay for taxis and drivers.

Amman’s Bus Rapid Transit project, now in its initial implementation phase after over a decade of delays, is an exciting development for the capital’s 4 million inhabitants (who represent 40 percent of the country’s total population). Although it faces hurdles in gaining public trust, the rollout offers reason for cautious optimism. The president of the Higher Council for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Prince Mired Raad Zeid Al-Hussein, has closely followed the project to ensure that the Greater Amman Municipality and its implementing partners remain committed to principles of inclusive design.

Accessibility cannot be reduced to material conditions. Across much of the Middle East, inclusive education remains both a rallying point and a source of major tension for policymakers, activists, and families. Some of the most glaring gaps between law and reality, between disability rights discourse and practice, emerge in relation to education. Inaccessible buildings and bathrooms pose challenges in and of themselves, but many of the barriers confronting disabled children might be framed more accurately as resulting from hostile institutions.

Administrators, parents of nondisabled students, and teachers can all create (and compound) the obstacles that continue to bar disabled children from exercising their right to education. The slow gains in inclusive education encapsulate the performative aspect of the post-CRPD disability landscape: documents, plans, and promises outstrip investments in practical and sustainable cultural, financial, and environmental adaptations. Angry and disillusioned families and students insist that politicians and analysts take more seriously the gaps between “ink on paper” and reality.

Although Jordan has extremely high rates of primary and secondary school enrollment, 79 percent of persons with disabilities do not receive any form of education. An estimated 10 percent of school-aged children are disabled, but statistics cited in the country’s most recent 10-year Strategy for Inclusive Education (2019–29) indicate

that only 1.9 percent of students with disabilities currently receive schooling services from either the Ministry of Education or the Ministry of Social Development.

Inclusion in Jordan still comes at a cost. Families are often asked by school administrations to pay additional fees to accommodate their child's disability, or they are tasked with finding (and compensating) their own shadow teachers. While these practices are technically illegal, change has proved difficult to enforce. But the situation in Jordan is by no means unique, and the country is arguably much better positioned than many of its neighbors to implement substantive reform over the next decade, given the level of government commitment.

## CONVERGING CRISES

Ongoing and emergent humanitarian crises continue to threaten well-being and security across the Middle East, with particularly dire consequences for disabled persons and for disability rights movements and organizations. Humanitarian crises not only pose serious and disproportionate dangers for disabled persons, they also create immediate and long-term disabling conditions.

Contributors to the DPO-led assessment "Disability Inclusion Among Refugees in the Middle East and North Africa" dedicated their work to Yemeni lead author Sam Al-Ghauri, who was killed in Sana'a shortly after the report's publication in 2016. This tribute speaks to the intersections of vulnerability and insecurity. Coordinated by the Arab Forum for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (AFRPD), the project sought to measure the gaps between the Guidance on Disability Inclusion issued by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and its actual implementation in humanitarian settings. Assessing local responses in Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Jordan, and Turkey, DPO teams identified the isolation of disabled refugees and displaced persons as a major obstacle to delivering humanitarian assistance and outreach.

Most refugees live outside camps—often in cities, but in conditions of high financial and social precarity. They are disproportionately affected by inaccessible urban infrastructures. The intersections between gender and disability, as well as the implications presented by different kinds of disability, render women refugees especially vulnerable to exclusion from services and outreach, while they simultaneously suffer from heightened psychological distress and risk of abuse.

The current situation in Iraq illustrates how prolonged and blurred boundaries between humanitarian emergency and everyday suffering create conditions of disablement, undermining disabled persons and DPOs fighting for political and social inclusion. In the past four decades, Iraqis have lived through the Iran–Iraq war, the Gulf War, the US invasion and occupation, and the rise and spread of Islamic State (also known by its Arabic acronym, Daesh). The widespread presence of explosive remnants of war and landmine contamination, decades of sanctions, and massive internal displacement have inflicted material and psychic trauma on the country's social fabric and infrastructure.

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), over 1 million Iraqis are still internally displaced, down from the more than 6 million displaced during the height of operations against Daesh (2014–17). Recent data from the UNHCR show that Iraq also hosts approximately 250,000 Syrian refugees, half of whom live in the northern city of Erbil. Official statistics on disability among these populations fluctuate wildly, but both local and international experts assume that Iraq's prevalence rates are significantly higher than the global average. In their 2019 report to the UN Committee on the CRPD, Iraqi representatives described Iraq as home to one of the largest populations of disabled persons in the world.

The Iraqi Alliance of Disability Organizations has been researching, advocating, and organizing since the earliest days of the US invasion. The English-language version of their website says, "We participated in the first demonstration on 12/4/2003 in front of the headquarters of the International Coalition Forces, in order to know the fate of more than 3 million disabled in Iraq."

In 2020, the Alliance advised IOM's Iraq mission on its disability inclusion strategy, vetting a list of over 50 DPOs. Although the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted a plan to visit and conduct fieldwork with DPOs across the country, the IOM team was able to conduct phone interviews with 81 DPO representatives located in Iraq's 18 governorates. These interviews provided key data for IOM Iraq's 2021 report "Persons with Disabilities and Their Representative Organizations in Iraq."

The gender imbalance among respondents in this survey (73 percent men) and the total absence of intellectually disabled persons reflect two recurring themes: disabled women and intellectually disabled persons face compounding barriers to

representation and inclusion. Notably, the report also excludes internally displaced persons and refugees due to a lack of identifiable DPOs in these communities. This point reinforces the AFRPD's finding that disabled persons in humanitarian situations often remain isolated from existing organizations and support networks.

In Lebanon, decades of disabled activism and community-building have long been undermined by the lack of a coherent state-level response. This dynamic has been worsened by the dire circumstances in Lebanon at present.

The Lebanese Physical Handicapped Union (LPHU), founded in 1981 and active during the entirety of the 1975–90 civil war, is a regional stalwart and model for nonsectarian and gender-inclusive advocacy. The landmark 1997 Oxfam publication *Gender and Disability: Women's Experiences in the Middle East*, edited by Lebanese activist Lina Abou-Habib, set an early precedent for intersectional, emancipatory research with disabled women and men.

But recurring political fragility, corruption, and lack of governance have created daunting barriers despite vibrant grassroots efforts by activists and families. Lebanon's current catastrophic collapse has been described by the World Bank as possibly one of the world's three most severe economic crises since the mid-nineteenth century.

This meltdown has inevitably affected all facets of life. Food prices have risen astronomically (over 500 percent), half the population has been pushed below the national poverty line, and a 2020 World Food Program survey suggests that over 40 percent of families are facing difficulties with access to food and other basic needs.

The lira has lost 90 percent of its purchasing power, disproportionately affecting the working and poorer classes, who are typically paid exclusively in local currency. But a widespread banking crisis has extended this currency crunch to the middle and upper classes as well. Of particular concern for disabled persons has been the consequent buckling of Lebanon's medical and pharmaceutical industries, especially with the onset of COVID-19.

The concurrent traumas of the pandemic and the Beirut port explosion on August 4, 2020, underscore the harrowing conditions in which disabled Lebanese find themselves. Resulting in over 250 deaths and thousands of injuries, the explosion was a disabling event. In an August

2021 essay for *The Public Source*, LPHU president Sylvanna Lakkis, who has led the organization since 2001, said the group's field visits found that at least 800 to 1,000 people were disabled in the explosion and its aftermath. Yet no official figures have been provided.

Lebanon's Law 196, passed in the aftermath of the blast, registered all disabled survivors for social security coverage while also affirming their coverage by Law 220 on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (enacted in 2000). But as *The Public Source* staff writers Karim Merhej, Kareem Chehayeb, and Christina Cavalcanti explain in the August 2021 piece, neither of these gestures has furthered the pursuit of justice. Law 220 relies on an outdated, medicalized framework that does not recognize many survivors as disabled, and its many aspirational commitments to disability rights (such as the right to education) have not been fulfilled in the absence of functional implementation mechanisms.

Meanwhile, Law 196 registered disabled survivors with the almost-bankrupt National Social Security Fund, whereas Law 220 grants full and free health insurance to disabled persons through the Ministry of Health. This contradiction has led both agencies to deny accountability. Each argues that the other is responsible.

This kind of situation is not unique to Lebanon. Attempts to mainstream principles of disability access and inclusion into existing policies and procedures require collaboration across ministries and agencies, which often creates stumbling blocks. But these organizational and structural challenges have proved especially immobilizing given the Lebanese government's current state of disarray.

## AXES OF SOLIDARITY

The dynamic developments that characterize disability rights movements across the Middle East reflect both established histories of collaboration and emergent axes of solidarity. The past two decades have seen a number of notable regional initiatives to promote both intergovernmental and civil society cooperation on disability issues.

Preceding the CRPD, an ESCWA-sponsored conference, "Disability Conditions in the Arab World," held in Beirut in October 2002, resulted in 2003–12 being declared the "Arab Decade of

---



---

*Iraq is home to one of the largest  
populations of disabled  
persons in the world.*

---



---



Disabled Persons.” The conference identified ten disability issues for ESCWA states to prioritize, laying the groundwork for policy and legislative changes that would be given further impetus by the passage of the CRPD.

The Arab Forum for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, based in Lebanon, comprises national organizations and associations in 12 countries and serves as a regional representative to Disabled Peoples International. The Arab Organization for Persons with Disabilities, based in Cairo, represents another regional network of DPOs and has hosted several major conferences on disability in Arab states since the signing of the CRPD. Several North African states also belong to pan-African disability networks.

The Qatar Foundation for Social Work launched the “Doha Declaration” as the culmination of the 2019 Doha International Conference on Disability and Development. The influence of wealthy Gulf nations in regional disability politics remains unclear, as certain cultural and political divergences have emerged (such as the United Arab Emirates’ decision to begin using the term “people of determination” in lieu of “people with disabilities”). Nevertheless, the Doha Declaration reflects Gulf states’ increasing interest in contributing more to regional programs and conversations.

In their more on-the-ground capacities, international organizations like Humanity and Inclusion

(formerly Handicap International), Inclusion International, the Special Olympics, and robust transnational university partnerships and projects are also active in the region. They promote—while sometimes coming into tension with—grassroots family- and DPO-led projects and plans.

The current moment highlights the fragility and contingency of these developments. The immediately life-threatening aspects of COVID-19, the debilitating effects of “long COVID,” and the pandemic’s still-unfolding impacts on governance, civil liberties, and economic stability have created global conditions of uncertainty. These conditions are amplified by humanitarian emergencies occurring in various parts of the Middle East.

From Lebanon’s dismantlement through corruption and mismanagement, to inescapable aerial assaults on Gaza and steady dispossession in the West Bank, to devastating hunger and malnutrition in Yemen, such emergencies imperil disabled communities and generate traumatic forms of mass disablement at the same time. Given these obstacles, global partners—especially those implicated in the region’s current instability through imperialist foreign policies and colonial legacies—should support and sustain Middle Eastern movements for disability rights and the work that their defenders do under increasingly trying circumstances. ■

“The confrontational desire to forge a new Kuwaiti identity rooted in the pre-oil period required negating and dishonoring the memory of the decades that preceded the invasion, dulling the shine of Kuwait’s ‘Golden Era’ in public memory.”

## Repressive Erasure and Reflective Nostalgia in Kuwait

FARAH AL-NAKIB

In late February 2011, against the backdrop of popular uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, and Bahrain, Kuwaiti playwright Sulayman Al Bassam brought the original version of his play *The Speaker’s Progress* to the stage in Kuwait for three nights. The play is set in a fictional Arab state that has fallen under the control of a conservative totalitarian regime. All visual and sound recordings that did not conform to Islamic values have been banned, and reels of footage of plays and concerts performed during the country’s “Golden Era”—now deemed culturally unacceptable—were recently purged from the National Archive. Yet the regime, fearful of the emotions that could be unleashed by such charged relics, has opted to reconstruct a cleansed version of an iconic Golden Era performance of Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*.

The play-within-the-play is presented by an ex-playwright turned government apologist (the titular “Speaker,” played by Al Bassam himself) who explains to the audience why the original performance was immoral and contradicted the state’s Islamic values. But as the reconstruction progresses, the fictional actors—meant to be performing in a clinical, detached manner—gradually lose themselves in their comedic and romantic roles. Instead of conveying the regime’s stern message, they conduct a raucous celebration of the condemned material.

*The Speaker’s Progress* is a commentary on the tacit erasure of Kuwait’s own golden age of theater and music in the aftermath of the country’s conservative turn in the decades since the Iraqi

occupation of 1990–91. Although this erasure was not as blatant as in the play, art and music had been removed from government school curricula by 2011, and public concerts and performances were increasingly banned.

Al Bassam’s experiences following the Kuwaiti opening turned the premise of the play into a reality. The opening night performance was recorded on video by a team from Kuwait’s Ministry of Information. When Al Bassam requested a copy, the ministry refused to hand it over, alleging that the play included seditious material.

In the opening monologue, Al Bassam, in character as the ex-playwright, explains that the play about to be reconstructed is depraved and banned, and urges any audience member who is uncomfortable with that to leave the auditorium. He also states that the reconstructed performance is not, strictly speaking, a “public” event; no tickets were sold. Instead, “invitations” had been distributed. Before entering the theater, we audience members had been instructed to write our names on our tickets, which looked like invitations, making us participants in the performance. In Al Bassam’s real-life response to the officials’ refusal to hand over a copy of the recording, fiction became reality as he asserted that the invitation-only performance had not been a public function, and that he had the right to express himself freely in such a private setting.

In the play, fictional officials destroy footage of the country’s Golden Era that they fear might stir up public nostalgia for an immoral past. The real-life ministry officials’ refusal to release the recording of *The Speaker’s Progress* suggests a similar fear that the play might not only create nostalgia for a bygone era, but also spark questions about its blatant erasure. Without the video, the play’s

---

FARAH AL-NAKIB is an assistant professor of history at California Polytechnic State University.

message would not go beyond the audience members who attended the three performances in Kuwait. The official archive had been scrubbed, and the play became a self-fulfilling prophecy, signifying the erasure from national memory both of Kuwait's Golden Era and of attempts to revise or reclaim that era in the present. In the end, Al Basam reconstructed the opening night's performance by piecing together video recordings from audience members' mobile phones.

This episode reveals a wider truth about Kuwait: it is a country that expunges traces of its past deemed to serve no political purpose, or to present political challenges to the present. The willful forgetting of the past to serve the needs of the present—not only in acts of censorship but also in the absence of a will to record or remember the past—reflects what anthropologist Paul Connerton called “repressive erasure.” This process constitutes “the condemnation of memory,” particularly by totalitarian regimes that employ both overt and covert measures to delete, omit, and silence memories that might pose political threats. But as Connerton notes, casting such memories into oblivion has the paradoxical effect “of drawing attention to them, and so of causing them to be remembered.”

The condemnation of memory seeks not simply to destroy memory but to dishonor it, as in the state's clinical reproduction of *Twelfth Night* in Al Basam's play. It aims to suppress any public longing to revisit an earlier time.

The term “nostalgia,” coined in 1688 by Swiss doctor Johannes Hofer, was originally used to describe a feeling of homesickness and a longing to return home. With the advent of modernity and the speeding up of time through constant technological and economic change, nostalgia became more complex. Although modernity entailed a break with the past and a disdain for the old and traditional, progress made people long for what had been lost and created a desire to revisit time, as one can revisit place. But such lost times could only be revisited by being reconstructed through rituals and monuments, displayed in museums and treasured as family heirlooms. Through such physical traces, one could tour the past as though it were a foreign country. The repressive erasure of such traces and memories is intended to forestall nostalgic longing, particularly when touring

historical time could reveal something damaging about the present.

In Kuwait, the function of this repressive erasure most often is to prevent the leadership from being held accountable to its citizens. It avoids answering for either the unprecedented (and unearned) growth in the regime's power thanks to oil revenues, or the loss of the country to Iraqi forces in 1990—or the systemic failures that have left Kuwait far from the well-planned, efficient, democratic, and progressive nation the state had promised it would become with the advent of oil-driven modernization.

Kuwait has undergone three major moments of rupture in less than a century—the start of the modernization era in 1950, the Iraqi occupation of 1990–91, and the coronavirus pandemic of 2020–21—each of which has resulted in irrevocable socioeconomic changes. The first two events were used as excuses by the state to wipe the slate clean and start anew, with all traces of the past deleted from memory. We have yet to see if the pandemic will result in similar processes of repressive erasure.

The nation came under new leadership in the middle of the pandemic after the death of Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Jaber al-Sabah in September 2020, at the age of 91. He had ruled since

2006, after serving as foreign minister since 1963. Sheikh Sabah's brother, Sheikh Nawaf al-Ahmad al-Sabah, 83, succeeded him as emir. As the state attempts to steer the country out of unprecedented political and economic turmoil and a public health crisis, it is a fitting time to take stock of how Kuwait has dealt with its own past in the aftermath of previous ruptures.

## OIL AND MODERNITY

Acts of repressive erasure can be used to bring about a historical break. In Kuwait, this was most evident in the period immediately after oil-driven modernization began in 1950 with the creation of the country's first master plan. Over the next three decades, the entire port town, Kuwait's only urban settlement before oil, was demolished to make way for a modern city center. Kuwaitis moved out of their old mudbrick courtyard houses on narrow winding streets into large, single-family detached villas in vast residential suburbs built beyond the old city walls. The transformation of not only the

---

*This erasure is intended to prevent the leadership from being held accountable to its citizens.*

---

landscape but also the patterns and practices of everyday life was rapid, dramatic, and wholesale.

The most radical change was in the enhanced power and role of the state. The influx of oil revenues after the first barrels were shipped out in 1946 made Kuwait's rulers financially independent, and politically autonomous, for the first time in history. Before the discovery of oil, town merchants and shipowners were the main source of financial stability: they were the primary employers, they paid the import taxes that funded the town's institutions, and they underwrote many public services in their own neighborhoods. In 1938, when the emir, Ahmed al-Jaber al-Sabah, received his first royalty check from the Anglo-American-owned Kuwait Oil Company (KOC), the town notables forced the creation of a legislative council to have a say in how these new revenues would be spent. Within less than a year, the emir dissolved the council. He spent the ensuing decade establishing new state institutions under his family's leadership.

When Abdullah al-Salem al-Sabah came to power in 1950, he negotiated a new profit-sharing agreement with KOC. Kuwait's revenues increased exponentially. With these funds came unprecedented new roles for the state in every aspect of the country's social, political, economic, cultural, and urban development.

To justify this augmented state power without stirring up the kind of opposition that arose in 1938, state rhetoric after 1950 portrayed Kuwait's pre-oil age as a period of suffering and hardship. This constructed dichotomy between past and present implied that only the government, fueled by oil revenues, had the capacity to civilize the uncivilized past and to "make Kuwait the happiest state in the Middle East." The promise of "progress" needed to be confirmed by the memory of "poverty." If the past was associated with adversity, its erasure and replacement with the new and modern—and the state's role as the main agent of that modernity—would be easily accepted, and indeed welcomed, by the public.

The first National Museum, which opened in 1957, emphasized this contrast by displaying objects of everyday life before oil as relics of a primitive past that was being rapidly replaced by the gleaming new city just outside the museum's doors. The condemnation of the memory of a time when the balance of power between the rulers and the ruled tipped more toward the latter entailed not only erasing but dishonoring that past.

## FORGETTING THE OCCUPATION

Although it may affirm a break with the past, repressive erasure can also be used to deny the fact of a historical rupture. In Kuwait, this can be detected in the forgetting of the Iraqi invasion and occupation of 1990–91 in official memory discourses.

The attack on Kuwait's national sovereignty and the death and destruction that came with it was a traumatic experience. One way that societies come to terms with such collective traumas is through the creation of monuments and public spaces of commemoration. Post-liberation Kuwait engaged in a period of intense memorializing. Numerous monuments, memorials, and murals celebrated the return of freedom, thanked the allied coalition forces for liberating the country, and reminded citizens that Kuwaiti prisoners of war were still missing.

Yet as the country was rapidly rebuilt, physical traces of the occupation—villas with bricked-up windows that had been used by Iraqi snipers, burned-out houses with bullet-riddled walls where members of the Kuwaiti resistance fought back—were erased from the landscape, along with the painful realities of those seven months. Over time, even the monuments and murals that had sprung up across the city and suburbs after the liberation were subtly removed.

One monument incorporated the late-model Lincoln that belonged to Fahad al-Ahmed al-Sabah—brother of then-Emir Jaber al-Ahmed and former head of the Kuwait Olympic Committee—who was killed by the invading Iraqi forces on the morning of August 2, 1990. The car was raised on a granite pedestal, with a sculpture of a clenched fist bursting through its roof. The monument, which stood in front of the Olympic Council of Asia (OCA) building along Arabian Gulf Road in Salmiya, the main commercial district down the coast from Kuwait City, was painted gold and bore a plaque commemorating Fahad al-Ahmed as a martyr who died for his country. In 2005, construction began on a new OCA headquarters, and the monument was quietly removed. A couple of bloggers noticed it was missing in the early 2010s. After years of searching, one of them found it outside the only museum commemorating the invasion, the Kuwait House of National Works (also known as the Memorial Museum).

In 2014, a new Martyrs' Monument was unveiled in the plaza in front of the new OCA headquarters: a massive golden fist dedicated to the

hundreds of Kuwaitis who lost their lives during the occupation. Although the new sculpture looks similar to the original, the memory work it does is quite different. A fist protruding from a car on a roadside pedestal was out of place, demanding to be seen and reckoned with. It was a constant reminder of an uncomfortable truth: Fahad al-Ahmed was the only prominent member of the ruling family killed during the invasion. The rest of the family had fled to Saudi Arabia without warning, before the Iraqi army reached the city.

The new monument, by contrast, blends in with the plaza and the twin skyscrapers that tower over it. The golden fist is flanked by a falcon representing West Asia and a dragon that stands for East Asia. While the monument itself holds dual meanings—both of martyrdom and of Olympic unity and triumph—its location at the OCA places more emphasis on the latter than the former, helping to erase the uncomfortable memory prompted by the original sculpture from the public landscape.

No national museum has ever been constructed to commemorate the occupation. The Memorial Museum—which recounts in vivid and often grim detail the experiences of occupation faced by Kuwaiti civilians, resistance members, and POWs, with photographs and dioramas—is privately funded and operated. The Al-Qurain Martyrs Museum, also private, is housed in a destroyed villa in the residential neighborhood where the last major battle was fought between the Kuwaiti resistance and the Iraqi army.

The only official space in which the invasion is explicitly remembered is the newly opened Thekra Museum, housed in al-Shaheed Park. Both the park and the museum were financed by the Diwan al-Amiri, the executive office of the ruler. The museum contains a display of all the battles in which Kuwait has been involved throughout its history, the last being the Gulf War. This positioning of the Iraqi invasion and occupation of Kuwait within a broader narrative of battles in which various al-Sabah rulers successfully led camel cavalries in defense of Kuwait's sovereignty (the *raison d'être* of the ruling family since the election of Sabah I in 1752) obscures the fact that the 1990 invasion was the only time in the country's history that its independence was lost. The museum erases the unprecedented seismic rupture caused by the invasion.

To remember the invasion on its own terms is to reckon with the reality that Kuwait's rulers, historically charged with preserving national independence and sovereignty, unilaterally failed at that one crucial task. The popularly elected parliament had been unconstitutionally suspended by the emir since 1986. The government dealt with an unprecedented level of public opposition and resistance throughout 1990, as well as threats from across the border. Saddam Hussein erroneously believed that the Kuwaiti people would support his overthrow of their ruling family.

The failure to reach a diplomatic solution that could have prevented the invasion was a regime failure. As political scientist Mary Ann Tétreault witnessed firsthand, in the 1992 parliamentary elections (the first in the country since 1985), "opposition candidates talked frequently about the need to 'open the files' on the period prior to the invasion to expose who was responsible for the government's missteps and the military's failure." The Thekra Museum rewrites this history by turning the invasion into a battle won by Kuwait, just like all those that came before it.

---

*Kuwait has undergone three major moments of rupture in less than a century.*

---

## CONSTRUCTING AN IDENTITY

Despite this gradual forgetting of the invasion in national memory discourses, the desire to construct a distinct Kuwaiti national identity—emphasizing its historical difference from Iraq—became a critical imperative in the post-liberation decades. The Center for Research and Studies on Kuwait was established in 1992 to collect and document evidence of atrocities committed by the Iraqi forces, as well as to refute claims that Kuwait had formerly been an Iraqi province. Much effort and expense went into conducting research on Kuwait's pre-oil history to prove that it never was part of the Ottoman Empire, as Iraq had been.

Complementing this research was the growth of a national heritage industry, beginning in the late 1990s and expanding substantially in the early 2000s, that focused on refurbishing the few remaining pre-oil structures and turning them into museums. Among them were the old British Political Agency (the Dickson House) and old school buildings like the Mubarakiya and Sharrqiyya Schools. Parts of the historic *souq* area were turned into a "Heritage Market."

This sudden return to pre-oil memory in the post-invasion period can be read as expressing a political (and confrontational) desire to forge a national identity rooted in heritage. While perhaps stemming from a lingering fear of annexation by an outside enemy, this desire also reflects Kuwait's new siege mentality after the invasion: a feeling of being threatened from within as much as from without.

The perceived internal threat came from the presence of foreigners, who had outnumbered Kuwaiti citizens since the late 1950s, as in most Arab Gulf states. By 1990, non-Kuwaitis constituted 73 percent of the total population. During the occupation, the government falsely accused Palestinians—the country's largest and most integrated foreign population—of collaborating with the Iraqi occupiers. This led to the permanent expulsion of around 350,000 Palestinians from Kuwait after the liberation in 1991. Labeling the Palestinian community a fifth column deflected blame for the occupation away from the government and toward a foreign entity, once the Iraqis withdrew.

In this context, the turn to pre-oil heritage in the decades after the invasion helped invent a new image of a past Kuwait that was homogeneous, autochthonous, harmonious, and consensual, uncontaminated by the foreign influences that flooded the country after the advent of oil modernization in the 1950s. The new focus on cultural heritage deepened the perception that “outsiders” were a threat not only to Kuwait's sovereignty and security but to its very identity. Yet this identity, rooted in an idealized image of pre-oil Kuwait, omitted the more challenging memories of that period (such as the 1938 opposition movement), which had been intentionally forgotten in the decades after the discovery of oil.

## ERASING THE GOLDEN ERA

In 1986, a booklet published by the Kuwait News Agency to commemorate the quarter-century since independence in 1961 characterized that period as “a great political, economic, and social leap, conferring upon Kuwait a distinct position alongside the civilized and developed world states.” But in 1990, it became brutally clear that none of the state-led achievements of the so-called Golden Era had been enough to protect Kuwait and vouchsafe its sovereignty. The country was annexed, and its government overthrown, in just a few hours.

The confrontational desire to forge a new Kuwaiti identity rooted in the pre-oil period required negating and dishonoring the memory of the decades that preceded the invasion, dulling the shine of Kuwait's Golden Era in public memory. Part of the process of condemning the past was eliminating all physical traces of that period from public view.

This sudden erasure was brought about, as before, with demolition. Now the target was the modernist cityscape constructed in the decades after 1950. When I returned in 2008 to conduct my doctoral fieldwork on Kuwait's urban history, I saw that half of the commercial district of Salmiya developed in the 1960s was being demolished. I raised my concern about this with a man in charge of one of the country's new pre-oil heritage villages. He responded, “Good, let them get rid of the buildings that came up after oil. They don't represent our heritage.”

This time, public memory has not been so eager to follow official memory discourses. Over the past twenty years, as Kuwait's midcentury modernist landscape has been demolished as completely as was the pre-oil landscape that preceded it, a public nostalgia for the Golden Era has emerged. It seems to be resisting both the erasure and the dishonoring of that era. This resistance has been most explicit among young architects who tried to protect several iconic modernist buildings—like the 1960s chamber of commerce, the 1970s ice-skating rink, and the 1980s Sawaber public housing complex—from demolition, citing their historical and nostalgic value.

Although some old buildings survived and have been renovated into high-end art galleries and commercial establishments, for the most part attempts to rescue the early oil cityscape have failed. Much of the blame is placed on the realities of the real estate market: the exorbitant value of land in areas like Salmiya and Kuwait City makes the demolition of low-rise midcentury structures and their replacement with high-rise towers much more lucrative than renovation.

Yet when it was being constructed in the decades after 1950, Kuwait's urban landscape was designed to serve as the definitive symbol of the country's newfound modernity, highlighting the state's role as the main agent of modernization. World-famous modernist architects like Jørn Utzon, Arne Jacobsen, and Kenzo Tange were commissioned to design new state buildings; everyday spaces like movie theaters, beach clubs,

hotels, and shopping districts were regularly promoted in magazines, newspapers, and postcards. They were hailed as the linchpins of Kuwait's cultural modernity, securing a prosperous future.

## RECOVERING TRACES OF THE PAST

We must look beyond the vagaries of the urban land market to make some sense of that rapid turnaround from celebration to condemnation. Other tangible traces of Kuwait's Golden Era that have been uncovered, such as magazines, photographs, postage stamps, and postcards, offer clues. The critical responses such relics have stirred up suggest why it is in the state's interest for that era to be collectively forgotten.

In 2011, Kuwaiti art duo Hamad al-Saab and Ali Sultan held an exhibition at the Sultan Gallery entitled "Reminiscing Kuwait II: A Tale of a Country." Al-Saab and Sultan had taken a collection of old magazine articles and pictures, mostly from the 1950s and 1960s, and reinvented them as pop art. As the artists put it, this archive represented "a time when Kuwait was on its way to being an Arab utopia through the vision of its enlightened leaders." By taking their audience through a journey of different aspects of Kuwaiti lifestyles between 1936 and 1964, the artists "let you decide where we were, where we are, and what went wrong along the way." The images they chose captured the spirit of the Golden Era, while the captions they added reflected disillusionment with the period since.

Many of the images were taken from the Cairo-based magazine *Arab Observer*, which dedicated its February 1963 issue to Kuwait: a "land of promise." The articles emphasized Kuwait's pioneering role in the Middle East in areas like education, culture, economics, and politics (1963 was the year of Kuwait's first parliamentary election).

To the artists, these images from Kuwait's Golden Era exposed the failed promises of the early oil decades. The future that Kuwaitis, once so admired by their fellow Arabs, were optimistically working toward—to be "the best planned and most socially progressive city in the Middle East," according to the country's first master planners in 1950—never materialized. Like Al Bassam's play from the same year, the 2011 exhibition was thus "both a celebration and a requiem" for an unfulfilled past.

---

*The turn to pre-oil heritage after the invasion helped invent a new image of a past Kuwait.*

---

Like al-Saab and Sultan, Kuwaiti artist Aseel al-Yaqoub wanted to avoid an uncritical, nostalgic lamentation for an idealized lost era when she, too, began exploring traces of Kuwait's past. She works with postage stamps, which she calls "a vivid expression of [a] country's culture and of its ideas and ideals." Stamps from the Golden Era include images of iconic buildings representing institutions of the modernizing state, as well as commemorations of major international conferences, sporting events like the Olympics, and new state-sponsored organizations like Kuwait Airways and the Boy Scouts, among many other themes.

While studying these images, a "melancholic feeling" began to stir inside al-Yaqoub, which she interpreted as nostalgia for a time she never lived through: "I began developing symptoms of utopian conceptions of ideal development." She began to cut up the stamps and reassemble them into new collages, "altering the national artifacts and images with my own narrative." The collages were shown at a 2018 exhibition at the Sultan Gallery in Kuwait.

To a stamp commemorating Education Day in 1968, al-Yaqoub added a fragment of a 1966 stamp celebrating the opening of Kuwait University, as well as a boy and a girl cut out of a 1966 Mother's Day stamp. In al-

Yaqoub's collage, it appears that the boy and girl are about to kiss, but the stamp is cut away between them to prevent their lips from touching. This collage is titled *Prevent Mixing*, the English translation of the law passed by the Kuwaiti Parliament in 1997 to segregate Kuwait University by sex.

Al-Yaqoub says that she cut up the original Golden Era stamps with a scalpel to remind herself "that these utopic images were never achievable." This is a somewhat different interpretation from that of al-Saab and Sultan, for whom such images represented a future ideal for Kuwait that was attainable, and indeed *had* been attained for a time, until something "went wrong along the way."

When Kuwaiti author Mai Al-Nakib first discovered Ali Rais's 2009 annotated compilation of postcards from the 1920s to the 1970s, she saw that the images "did not correspond with the image of Kuwait currently circulating as 'fact,' 'truth,' or 'reality.'" But they did produce in her "an uncanny sense of familiarity." She interprets them as constructing a "phantasmic" national narrative of Kuwait's

sociopolitical agenda during the period after the advent of oil—the phantasm being “an effect of the imagination confronting what has not necessarily been fully actualized but what may yet come to be.”

Rather than asking “how such images align with or stray from whatever they ostensibly depict,” Al-Nakib sees the postcards of Kuwait’s early oil decades—images of the country’s new hospitals and schools, paved roads and landscaped parks, oil refineries and police departments, department stores and cinemas, beaches and art deco architecture, young female nurses in training (without hijabs or niqabs) and young male artists painting in high school—as having “pushed the limits of the national imagination.” Like the magazines and newspapers al-Saab and Sultan found, and the stamps al-Yaqoub worked with, the postcards reveal not only what Kuwait had actually become in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s as a newly modernizing state, but also the prospect of what it could still become: a modern, democratic, and culturally open nation.

### SUPPRESSED EXCITEMENT

In its Golden Era, Kuwait was a regional leader in theater, art, and education, the first Gulf city to be adorned with urban masterpieces designed by world-famous architects, and had a constitution and a parliament before any other Gulf state had attained independence. But it was also, above all, a time of possibilities, experimentation, and optimism; a time when the future was still open, not yet foreclosed. Kuwait at that time was in what Ian Fleming—who visited in 1960—called a “State of Excitement,” the title of his unpublished book about the country.

As with other aspects of Kuwait’s past, including the Iraqi invasion, the early era of development is not taught in history classes in the public school system, where the arts education once celebrated in magazines and postcards has also been removed from the curriculum. The absence of any state-constructed museum or public site commemorating the Golden Era also contributes to its erasure. But why is the period that was once so celebrated being erased from sight and condemned from memory?

As with the invasion, the willful forgetting of that era shields from accountability those who made themselves responsible for fulfilling the promises of modernity. They avoid answering for the fact that Kuwait never became the best-planned or most socially progressive state in the Middle East, and that it no longer demonstrates the potential to fulfill that promise.

The most personal evidence I have that the state is not interested in reckoning with its many shortcomings and failures is the fact that my 2016 book, *Kuwait Transformed: A History of Oil and Urban Life*, has been banned in Kuwait. From poor planning and corruption to divide-and-rule housing, citizenship, and electoral policies, my book shows why Kuwait never fully became the progressive state that Abdullah al-Salem envisioned in 1950. Banning my book was one more example of how that era has been erased from public memory.

### NOSTALGIA’S POTENTIAL

There is a tendency to view nostalgia as simply a longing to go back to a perceived “better time” at the expense of the present or future. But working toward a better future arguably requires some understanding of, and reckoning with, our various pasts—as Mai Al-Nakib argues, “in order to shore up our capacity to interrupt the ruinous presentism currently strangling any chance of change.” That is not something we can expect from official memory discourses in Kuwait, but there is potential in nostalgia to open opportunities for such reflection.

The late scholar Svetlana Boym distinguished between two main types of nostalgia: restorative and reflective. Restorative nostalgia “proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps.” This is the stuff of national heritage discourses shaped around two main plots: the return to origins, such as an invented image of a homogeneous pre-oil identity, and the alleged conspiracy of “outsiders,” be they invading armies or foreign workers, who aim to destroy that identity. Restorative nostalgia does not claim to be nostalgia at all, but rather is presented as truth and tradition; it “takes itself dead seriously.”

Reflective nostalgia, on the other hand, is a contemplative longing that “draws us to think about the ambiguities of change.” It is a longing not only for a lost past, “but also for the unrealized dreams of the past and visions of the future that became obsolete.” The creative work of Kuwaiti artists and writers reveals that reflective nostalgia can be ironic and humorous, and “that longing and critical thinking are not opposed to one another.” Resisting the condemnation of the past can help remind Kuwaitis, as Mai Al-Nakib puts it, “that change is always possible, that openness to change, even radical change, is good, and that the outcome of daring national experimentation could be positive.” ■



“The statist aim was to use heritage to produce a singular conception of national history in order to render political, religious, and ethnic differences inconsequential.”

## Forging Nationalism Through Heritage in Oman

AMAL SACHEDINA

In 2006, a Kuwaiti journalist asked Sultan Qaboos bin Said how he had managed to unify the heterogeneous population of Oman, which he had ruled since 1970. Qaboos gave a reply that would be widely cited: “Heritage with modernization.”

Why would this combination have been the formula for national unification? The answer may well have been demonstrated in the wake of Arab Spring protests that overtook key urban centers in Oman in 2011 and 2012. Lambasting the forces of Westernization, the state responded with economic compensation packages and harsh security clampdowns, as well as slight political reforms.

However, state institutions also hosted a barrage of symposia and workshops, organized youth groups, and planned an infrastructure to intensify the emphasis on heritage discourse and the values and principles it imparted. These were conceived as establishing the conditions for cultivating national histories and goals among citizens, in ways that would allow them to creatively deliberate and act in the face of destabilizing change in the present. At the same time, heritage was intended to keep Omanis rooted to the ethical precepts of citizenship and ensure that they steered clear of Islamist attachments to what was deemed a regressive history, one grounded in the words and deeds of the Prophet and his companions.

In his 2012 book, *Heritage: Critical Approaches*, Rodney Harrison suggests that the ubiquity of public heritage sites in Europe and North America is a response to a “sense of crisis and uncertainty,

which has grown in significance in contemporary post-industrial societies . . . in the midst of technological, environmental and social change.” A heightened sense of loss and nostalgia led to the wholesale acquisition of memories through preservation of the outmoded and disused.

Although many forms of historic preservation in the West may be explained in this way, as a response to the threat of losing something invaluable through the shift to postindustrial society, this is not the primary logic of heritage in the Arab world. Here, heritage cannot be separated from the hegemonic operations that carved the Middle East regional landscape into nation-states—the impact of European colonial governance, the forms that resistance movements assumed, the subsequent state-building efforts, and Euro-American military and cultural neo-imperialist ventures under the auspices of the global capitalist economy. The effects of these geopolitical struggles have been felt in the political rise of Islamist movements, sectarianism, and localized human rights activism, and through softer power via the wide dissemination of Western television, movies, music, and styles of dress.

In Oman, two kinds of temporal logic have been at work. Most scholars delving into modern nation-state-building in Oman have circled around the notion of the *nahda* (awakening or renaissance)—the period that began when Qaboos ascended the throne. This has been heralded as a time of progress that built the foundations of a modern nation-state, in contrast to the preceding period, characterized as a time of poverty, isolation, and tribal conflict. Such a temporal framework positions the sultan as the creator of the state’s political authority. By establishing the modern state infrastructure as the basis for his

---

AMAL SACHEDINA is a professorial lecturer in anthropology at American University and the author of *Cultivating the Past, Living the Modern: The Politics of Time in the Sultanate of Oman* (Cornell University Press, 2021).

territorial authority, he instilled feelings of indebtedness in his subjects.

On the one hand, the *nahda* was construed as a sharp break from the immediate past. The introduction and standardization of modernist institutional and infrastructural forces in Oman has been portrayed as entirely different from, and better than, what came before. As with the narrative of Renaissance-era Europe's recovery from a barbaric past, Oman was thought to be reemerging from the dark times that followed the 1856 breakup of its maritime empire on the East African coast and the Indian subcontinent.

On the other hand, a different temporal logic was at stake, one that viewed the past in terms of continuity rather than fracture. Since Oman's inception as a modern state in 1970, its heritage industry has been propagated through museums, exhibitions, cultural festivals, and the restoration of its castles and citadels. The material forms of old mosques as well as traditional objects, notably the *dalla* (coffee pot) and the *khanjar* (ceremonial dagger)—which were once integral to daily living, enabling sociopolitical interactions and governance among local communities in the pre-1970 era—now saturate the public and private domains as national icons.

These material forms and architectures have become a standardized public vocabulary, seen in large-scale reproductions on traffic roundabouts or featured repetitively in educational media, currency, and postage stamps. These iterations are part of a mode of producing histories that carve out the spatial and temporal terrain of the nation-state. Historical sites and material objects alike have been tethered to fundamental and enduring values of national life—creativity, entrepreneurship, pluralism, hard work, cosmopolitan interaction, and family ties. These values now define the ethical compass of the modern Omani citizen, who must adopt this conception of tradition in order to navigate the unknown shoals of modern living.

As in the rest of the Arab–Persian Gulf region, explanations for the pervasive presence of heritage in Oman tend to refer to the rise of a new form of polity—the nation-state. Sociopolitical elites felt the need to create a new mode of collective consciousness and to mitigate the uncertain effects of rapid modernization brought about by sudden oil wealth. Heritage, according to this scholarly

approach, is no more than a fabricated form of history that papers over reality, and cannot be relied on for any kind of essential truth. The familiar forms that public heritage institutions assume—from museums to textbooks—are taken to be the work of Western professionals, and thus purged of any genuine sense of the past.

This assumption parallels French historian Pierre Nora's approach in his influential work *Les Lieux de mémoire*. Nora argued that sites of memory, once co-opted by the top-down official discourse of the state, allow people only to invoke the past, rather than to genuinely experience it. True memory is lost; that which replaces it, "heritage," is perceived as a form of manipulation that serves to alienate the populace from "authentic" spontaneous recollection.

Yet the question remains: Why would the sultan consider heritage and modernization to be such a potent combination for establishing unity among a heterogeneous population? Did heritage in fact establish Omani unity, forging the people as a collective on the basis of the sultan's benevolence, or did it alienate them? We might try approaching these questions differently by thinking of heritage as a constructive force, in terms not of its veracity but of its wide-ranging effects.

---

*A different temporal logic viewed  
the past in terms of continuity  
rather than fracture.*

---

## LOGICS OF GOVERNANCE

In his 2000 book *Provincializing Europe*, Dipesh Chakrabarty argued that even as practices such as heritage may have been constitutive in the production of postcolonial modernity in former colonies, histories were put to use in ways that cannot be assimilated to dominant Euro-American models. Western professionals in museum design and curation techniques might have contributed to the entrenchment of globally familiar forms of heritage in Oman (and elsewhere), but the nature of these strategies was by no means uniform. They were structured to secure very different governance regimes, which selected histories in accordance with the challenges they faced.

The conceptualization of national history as heritage has propagated a highly contingent configuration of ideas and practices concerning the past. Oman's heritage policies were formulated from 1970 onward to respond to context-specific struggles between different religious, socialist, and

Western imperialist coalitions in the region in order to secure the institutional bases of a modern, dynastic sultanate.

In Oman, an understanding of the past is enshrined within the organizing logics of governance, deployed to minimize minority differences as well as to regulate religiosity. These governing strategies emerged from a nineteenth- and twentieth-century historical context in which Oman was part of Britain's informal empire. The region now called Oman was divided between a coastal sultanate with its center in Muscat, dependent on British armed forces, and the Ibadi Imamate in the country's tribal interior. The two were embroiled in sociopolitical tensions over the first half of the twentieth century.

The Ibadis are a sect distinct from the main Sunni and Shia branches of Islam. They have predominated in the region since the eighth century; unofficially, they still constitute the largest sect in the country, with a slight majority. The imam of the Ibadi community was supposed to be chosen through *shura* (mutual consultation) by the *ahl al-hal wal 'aqd*—elders, scholars, and tribal leaders of the community.

The twentieth-century Imamate was centered in the city of Nizwa and arose in direct opposition to British regional influence. Drawn by the prospect of oil on Imamate lands, sultanic forces, aided by the British, overthrew the Imamate in 1955 and created a new polity called the Sultanate of Muscat and Oman. It would be known as the Sultanate of Oman from 1970 onward.

Sultan Qaboos's ascension to the throne was the result of a British-backed coup that deposed his father amid civil conflict and anti-imperialist socialist uprisings in the country's north and south. Starting in the 1970s, the government deployed a series of regulatory strategies to quell these conflicts, defining the parameters of modern state-building. One of them involved heritage institutions and practices. The statist aim was to use heritage to produce a singular conception of national history in order to render political, religious, and ethnic differences inconsequential.

This task was considered urgent given that the histories of particular minorities, such as the Lawati (a Shia group with ties to Sind, in Pakistan) and the Baluchi (with roots in Baluchistan, in Pakistan and Iran), were entwined with British informal rule in the region through their roles in trade and the military. Rather than perpetuate historical

tensions and conflicts, the state purged these pasts, rendering them invisible in the public domain. In their place, it constructed a new history—an all-encompassing framework that emphasized labor as the key to being a cosmopolitan Omani citizen.

## TRANSFORMING TRADITION

The official religious tradition of Oman continues to be Ibadism, but it is closely regulated and overseen by a state-appointed mufti. Since the 1970s, the state has restructured Ibadi Islam by depoliticizing the historical specificity of its governing doctrines (particularly the Imamate) and jurisprudence. Instead, the basic principles of Islam are emphasized, a common ground that creates a de-sectarianized mode of religious propagation in the public sphere. This depoliticization has entrenched a hereditary sultanate in place of an imamate chosen by elders of the community.

Official heritage objects and monuments whose images are widely reproduced today, such as the Nizwa Fort and the *dalla*, were not always conceived primarily in terms of their symbolic significance. They assumed their taken-for-granted representational roles as symbolic icons through a process of purification—one that separated them from the ties that had bound them, in their original utilitarian roles, to the Ibadi Imamate and its way of life.

The Imamate was centered in Nizwa from the twelfth century to the twentieth century. Nizwa Fort served administrative, military, and judicial roles, housing the court of justice and arbitration, the prison, the madrasa for future jurists and scholars, and living quarters for the imam and his students.

The *dalla* was part of the hierarchical layout of the *sabla*, a traditional social forum for gatherings and arbitration, presided over by neighborhood elders. The most senior of those present were served first. Coffee lubricated readings and discussion of histories of the *salihin* (righteous or pious), which were held up as moral and ethical yardsticks for assessing the conduct of daily affairs. This was a mode of history holding that everyday interactions and relationships could be assessed on the basis of authoritative and exemplary forms of justice and morality from the past, embodied by the lives of virtuous forebears such as former imams, as well as the Prophet Muhammad and his companions.

From the 1970s onward, the *dalla* and Nizwa Fort, among other objects and sites on display as

official national heritage, became part of a different mode of history, a new set of ethical practices, and a model for aesthetic appreciation—all of which translated into a series of abstract values and principles meant to substantiate the Sultanate. Accompanying the *nahda* era's social and economic transformations in the Omani landscape, these sites and objects were transfigured into texts. This operation dematerialized the type of work they had once performed, reconfiguring the boundaries between history, polity, and the public domain. The terrain of the Ibadi Imamate was subsumed by that of the Sultanate of Oman.

In their embodiment of idealized attributes of civilization and culture, these tangible objects, now national symbols, connect past and present on a plane of transcendental values beyond the narrow confines of historically specific social, political, and religious practices. Simultaneously, these ideals have political ramifications in their material embodiment as coffee pots, architectural elements, water jars, or silver jewelry. They lend themselves to a depoliticization that naturalizes the national narrative and the accompanying values that these objects now symbolize, organizing ethical reflection and action in ways consonant with the official past.

---



---

*Ibadi Islam has been restructured  
by depoliticizing the historical  
specificity of its doctrines.*

---



---

## NEW FOUNDATION

These pedagogical practices present the national past as integral to Oman's modernity. This new institutional history has displaced the elected Ibadi Imamate and its notions of history, religion, and ethics as a recognized source of local knowledge, making way for a nationalized sultanate. Through heritage practices and their matrix of institutions, infrastructures, and knowledge, the locus of authoritative time in the modern sultanate has been transferred from an exemplary past, predicated on divine salvation, to an uncertain future that calibrates the past into a series of immanent and worldly principles and values.

Certain histories—British informal governance in the region, the British military and political alliance with the Sultanate against the Ibadi Imamate, and ethnic involvement in these conflicts—have been purged from popular memory and the institutionalized public domain. A common history permeates the public sphere, ranging from school textbooks and museums to monuments at key historical sites for Omani minorities, such as the

fortified Lawati enclosure (Sur al-Lawati) on the shores of the Muscat/Matrah district.

This history encompasses Arab and non-Arab groups alike, sanitizing the sociopolitical differences that emerged among minority communities from South Asia, Persia, and East Africa in their roles as merchants, soldiers, and administrators during the Sultanate–Imamate conflicts of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The histories and lifeways of ethnic groups such as the Lawati go unrecognized, while their contributions are absorbed into the nation-state's singular historicism.

The result is an institutionalized conception of culture and civilization, grounded in the process of becoming Omani through productively laboring on the nation's lands and waters. This differentiates Oman from the more autochthonous sense of belonging that is tied to citizenship in other Gulf countries, such as Kuwait or the United Arab Emirates, based in Bedouin tribal pasts, family genealogies, or desert values. Oman's approach is more expansive and malleable, enabling foreigners to become citizens (at least in theory) if they live in Oman for twenty years and speak Arabic.

Unofficially, it is well known that only elite expatriates would be allowed citizenship after those twenty years. In what is considered a difficult bureaucratic process with little transparency, those with the right connections and backgrounds receive citizenship more often than those who contribute their labor to Oman's prosperity.

Nonetheless, the official narrative promises a leveling of hierarchies, building political and social unity on the basis of the sameness of citizenship. In the process, through the work of heritage, symbols such as the forts, the *dalla*, and the Sur al-Lawati have palpable political effects. The pivotal role of Britain's informal governance of the Gulf region has been crowded out of official memory. Tribal genealogies and their hierarchical regimes have been effaced. All non-Arab groups are absorbed into an all-encompassing narrative framework that transforms them into Omanis, shearing them from historical and cultural specificities that threaten the ongoing construction of a common national grammar.

Heritage has become the exemplary public site for the regulation and reconfiguration of Ibadism, which is still the official sect of Oman, through

transcending any kind of sectarian doctrinal specificity. Under the modern state, “Differences between Sunni and Ibadi Muslims are subsidiary issues that are of little eternal consequence and in no way impede Muslim unity,” in the words of Ahmad al-Khalili, the grand mufti of Oman.

Such history practices create an understanding of culture and civilization that produces a new, normative understanding of Islam. New modes of marking time and history define the ethical actions necessary to become a modern Omani. The public domain is organized around national norms for time, language, religion, ethnicity, and citizenship, shaping a unified national ethos and way of life. These ways of reasoning about the past are promoted through heritage institutions, creating a social and political space within which the citizen-subject is cultivated.

### RETHINKING THE PAST

With the material plenty brought about by the oil boom, ethnic communities were a focus of a set of state institutional techniques designed to regiment Omani subjects. Since the 1970s, however, the new sultanate has also regulated its citizen-subjects through contradictory notions of Arabness. In contrast to an idea of history anchored to heritage institutions and practices, this notion of being an Omani Arab is also linked to tribal relationships and genealogies. Tribal sheikhs and their lower ranks (often hereditary positions, endorsed by the Ministry of the Interior) have become integral to the bureaucratic state, reporting to the local *wālī* (governor) and assuming an intermediary role between communities and the government.

The enduring significance of ancestral genealogy and its impact on hierarchical social standing are manifested in everyday documentation (passports, property deeds), marital ties, and social and workplace interactions. Lineage purity rooted in the Arabian Peninsula has become an integral component of national belonging, even as ethnic and religious differences have been neutralized through an institutional history rooted in “Omani civilization” and a de-sectarianized Islam. As a result, many minority groups, including the Lawati and the Baluchi, claim genealogical links to tribes in the Hijaz region of the Arabian Peninsula.

To the extent that Omanis’ sense of material history has been informed by heritage discourse, it is equally conditioned by the reach of state power into social life in other ways, including the

process of socioeconomic modernization that has transformed the urban landscape and brought in thousands of overseas workers. Even as heritage-making promotes the uniform ties of citizenship and civic values, it also has become a way for younger Omanis to address the social and economic inequalities brought about by state-driven modernization, as well as ethnic and tribal hierarchical discrimination.

Many of the people I encountered during my stays in Nizwa and Muscat from 2009 to 2018 were struggling to make ends meet—working more than one job, coping with rising living expenses, and delaying marriage as a result. The utopia promised by heritage discourse made little sense in the face of growing unemployment, the high cost of living, and government corruption amid the declining price of oil at the time of the Arab Spring protests in 2011. In their cities’ historic cores, people perceived a gap between the utopian values promoted by heritage projects and the realities of daily life.

People’s responses to the state’s competing governing rationales—heritage practices versus the tribe—emerged as alternative understandings of their ties to major historic sites. For Nizwanis, these ambiguities created a space for critique and action that evoked a nostalgia for life under the Imamate. Some criticized the deleterious impact of privatized restoration and tourism projects.

Old photographs (kept on mobile phones and computers) from the pre-1970 era kept alive memories of the Imamate. This had little to do with longing for the return of a lost mode of governance. The images stood for a simpler community-oriented way of life, when neighbors and kin personally guaranteed economic welfare, work security, long-term stability, and moral upbringing.

Meanwhile, liberal assumptions of equality among Nizwanis and other Omanis—established through heritage discourse, citizenship, and the global human rights regime—tangled with the continuing importance of the tribe and genealogical history in social life and marriage. This led to questions about the conflictual relationship between Islam and a tribal, hierarchical mode of sociality, as well as the proper place of religion as part of personal status law.

For non-Arab communities, such as the Lawati, the contradictions between the state’s governing rationales and their accompanying attitudes toward the past created a space within which their own ideas of history and memory

strengthened. This space became a forum for debate in their attempts to develop their own sense of belonging in Oman.

The paradigms that national heritage institutions follow may be global, but the roles they assume in nation-states—and their modes of articulating and manifesting the past—are historically specific within a changing trans-regional geopolitical economy. The struggles and debates they stir vary with this context. By managing the relationship between past, present, and future—in short, through time management—Sultan Qaboos bin Said inaugurated a modern state that reorganized religious, ethnic, kin-based, and ideological differences. Yet the historical consciousness and national ethic engendered by this operation have created their own set of paradoxes and problems.

After Sultan Qaboos's death on January 10, 2020, he was succeeded by his cousin, Sultan Haitham bin Tariq. The new sultan had been minister of heritage and culture for nearly two decades, from 2002 to 2020.

Given Oman's paucity of oil and natural gas reserves compared with other Gulf states, the

government faces fiscal and economic challenges. Recent demonstrations as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic and high unemployment appear to have expedited reforms that were already under way to diversify the economy, in an effort to mitigate the effects of the pandemic. The measures include an emphasis on heritage and ecotourism initiatives, among other ventures to boost employment and create new jobs. Simultaneously, the new government has undertaken austerity measures, trimming the state budget and laying off civil servants.

There is a renewed focus on privatization initiatives and the outsourcing of public services through public-private partnerships. These include heritage and historic preservation programs, in a trend that had already begun in Nizwa in 2017. Local Nizwani merchants are pursuing the transformation of historic residential neighborhoods into tourism and heritage enclaves. Although heritage still appears to be a state priority, it is increasingly pursued as a privatized business enterprise for the health of the overall economy. ■

“The region’s paradoxes are crystallized in the multiplicity of political and security dilemmas faced by the adherents of this demographically diminutive religion.”

## As the Druze Go, So Goes the Middle East

WILLIAM F. S. MILES

Belief in the oneness of God  
Exalted be His essence  
And the manifestation of this oneness in the  
totality of creation  
Is the primary point of departure  
And the culmination of all religions.  
—Epistle 58 of the Druze *Epistles of Wisdom*

When a huge fortune comes their way, a Christian  
would build a huge mansion, a Muslim would go  
to Mecca on pilgrimage, and a Druze? A Druze  
would simply buy more weapons.  
—Lebanese Druze folk saying

Between the ennobling Druze message of humanity’s divinely bestowed oneness and the Druze proverb about the existential need for self-protection through arms lies a chasm of history, politics, and Middle Eastern enmities. Coupled with the mystique surrounding the supposed “secrecy” of the Druze, this contradiction between theology and realpolitik is a veritable microcosm of the Middle East. The region’s paradoxes are crystallized in the multiplicity of political and security dilemmas faced by the adherents of this demographically diminutive religion. Given its history as a bellwether of regional religious and ethnic politics, we may aver that as the Druze go, so goes the Middle East.

From a historical vantage, the emergence of the Druze religion and community can be traced to eleventh-century Cairo. In 1017, Caliph al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah let it be proclaimed that he was a long-awaited incarnation of the divine presence in human form. Among al-Hakim’s early followers were Neshtegin al-Darazi and Hamza ibn Ali. Although it was Hamza who eventually

assumed the mantle of “the call” following al-Hakim’s mysterious disappearance in 1021, it was the repudiated (and probably assassinated) Darazi whose name came to be associated with followers of the new faith.

From a theological perspective, however, the origins of Druzism go back to the beginning of time—or rather, are timeless. *Tawhid*, the core principle of the Druze religion, affirms unity between divinity and humanity, between the cosmic and the commonplace. It holds time to be eternal and cyclical, not circumscribed and linear. *Tawhid* also teaches that truth has unfolded through the successive revelations of different religions. Nor does the passage of time, or even the death of a Druze person, mark a chronological endpoint: the principle of *tanasukh* holds that when a Druze dies, she or he is instantly reborn within the body of a newborn Druze of the same sex.

For centuries after the emergence and expansion of Islam in the Middle East, such beliefs marked the *Muwahidun* (unitarians), as the Druze prefer to be called, as mystics at best, heretics at worst. That some of their beliefs emerged from a suspect sect of a “deviant” denomination—the Ismaili offshoot of Shia Islam—did not burnish their image among the “mainstream” Sunni. That they have kept their scriptures, the *Rasa’il al-Hikma* (Epistles of Wisdom), under close wraps—literally as well as figuratively—has given rise to a reputation for secrecy. So has their own demarcation between those Druze who have chosen ritual initiation and thereby access to the holy books—the *uqqal* (or “enlightened ones”)—and the *juhhal* (“ignorant ones”), whose more secular lifestyle and outlook places the Epistles out of their reach.

Chased from Cairo, followers of *Tawhid* took refuge in the mountains of the southern Levant. Alternately neglected and ill-treated during the

---

WILLIAM F. S. MILES is a professor of political science at Northeastern University.

Ottoman period, they formed precarious alliances with other non-Muslim minorities of the region, notably Maronite Christians. But another Druze ethos—loyalty to whichever state under whose rule the Druze live—ensured that the age of nationalism did not foster among them an irredentist movement for sovereignty (with one partial exception).

World War I, European colonialism, the Zionist project, and decolonization thus left the Druze in different straits in their three respective major host nations—Lebanon, Syria, and Israel. (There is also a small Druze community in Jordan.) Navigating the shoals of internal politics in those homelands, as well as the region's interstate tensions and conflicts, poses ongoing challenges to the identity, loyalty, and survival of the Druze. Most recently they have faced the Syrian civil war, the Lebanese economic collapse, and the Israeli nationality law of 2018.

## RIVAL CLANS OF LEBANON

Although Syria hosts the largest number of Druze, Lebanon lays claim to the spiritual heart of Druze-land. Hasbayya, located at the foot of Mount Hermon, is to the Druze what Jerusalem is to Jews and what Mecca is to Muslims. There, the major Druze center of study, the Khalamat al-Bayyada, attracts students of *Tawhid*. Most Druze of Lebanon—approximately 350,000 in all, or 5.3 percent of the population—dwell on and around the heights of Mount Lebanon.

In the words of scholar Yusri Hazran, Druze claim to have been the true “founding fathers of the Lebanese state,” a distinction contested by the much larger Maronite community. The Druze pan-Arab narrative elevates a twelfth-century Druze emirate and a seventeenth-century luminary and leader, Fakr al-Din II, as the glorious era and towering hero of early Lebanese nationhood. This represents a challenge to a Maronite narrative celebrating that group's pre-Islamic Phoenician origins. The rivalry has sometimes turned violent. A mid-nineteenth-century civil war that originally pitted peasant Maronites against Druze landholders was a forerunner of the late-twentieth-century civil war that also involved Muslim denominations.

Lebanon's once-emulated, now wobbly (if unla-mented) system of postcolonial consociationalism

recognized the Druze as a significant element of the population. It was a system that for decades maintained a peaceful *modus vivendi* among 18 otherwise mutually wary and competitive ethno-religious groups by means of a fixed allocation of the positions of president, prime minister, and legislative speaker among the three largest groups (Maronite Christian, Sunni, and Shia). According to this unwritten National Pact, which has endured since 1943, the army chief of staff must be a Druze—as has been the case up to the present.

The most recognizable Druze face today—not only in Lebanon or the Middle East but worldwide—is not this general's but rather that of the onetime militia commander and still incumbent leader of the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP), Walid Jumblatt. Now 72, he first came to global media attention during the early stages of Lebanon's 1975–90 civil war; his denunciations of the Syrian occupation in the early 2000s returned him to the international stage.

Walid is the son of intellectual and politician Kamal Jumblatt, an important figure in attempts to “Druzify” Lebanon's historiography. Walid succeeded his father both as Druze defender and PSP leader when Kamal was assassinated in 1977. The execution was most probably carried out or contracted by Syria. Walid

inherited his father's pro-Palestinian politics and anti-Syrian (or at least anti-Assad) outlook, as well as his secularism. Although certainly no friends of Hezbollah—family members have been threatened by the Shia militant group—neither Walid nor his son and presumed successor Teymour is a friend of Israel.

The Jumblatts are hardly the only prominent Druze family in Lebanon. Both their long-time rivals, the Arslan clan, and the Wahhabs have periodically challenged them for predominance. Like the Jumblatts, each family has a political party associated with it: the Lebanese Democratic Party (LDP), headed by Talal Arslan, and the Arab Unity Party (AUP), with Wiam Wahhab at the helm.

Iran and Syria have cultivated both the LDP and the AUP. But the major force creating cleavages among the Druze of Lebanon is Hezbollah. This “divide the Druze” strategy has provoked violent clashes between the PSP and the LDP, resulting in fatalities. The gravest incident occurred in Qaber Shemoun in June 2019, when the convoy of

---

*The age of nationalism did not  
foster an irredentist  
Druze movement.*

---



Refugee Affairs Minister Saleh al-Gharib, an LDP notable, came under fire from PSP elements; two were killed.

Not even the Druze religious establishment in Lebanon has been able to maintain strict neutrality. As the predominant Druze *hamoula* (clan), the Jumblatts long enjoyed the imprimatur of the Spiritual Druze Council. Since Hezbollah has favored and empowered the AUP and LDP, however, the council's evenhanded criticism of inter-Druze violence indirectly downgrades the hitherto privileged status of the Jumblatts and the SDP.

Whenever Lebanon's economy collapses, sectarian tensions resurface, and the Druze revert to a position of vulnerability. This was the context in August 2021, when Hezbollah militants fired missiles at Israel near the Druze village of Chouya. Local Druze beat the launchers of the rockets, after which Druze sheikhs in Chouya and Hasbayya (the major Druze religious center) received threatening letters, and Druze merchants in Sidon were forced to leave their homes and had their goods confiscated by Shia.

With the exception of the Shia, Druze are the least prosperous of Lebanon's ethnoreligious groups. Many still make ends meet by cash cropping and manual industrial labor. In the current economic crisis, some of the relatively well-to-do agriculturalists have been reduced to selling their surplus on the streets. But even Druze college graduates complain of the chronic difficulty of finding jobs in Lebanon commensurate with their education and skills.

## SQUEEZED IN SYRIA

Although Lebanon originally was both the demographic as well as the spiritual center of the Druze, Syria has long since eclipsed its smaller neighbor. Over 500,000 Druze dwell under Syrian sovereignty, with Jabal al-Duruz (Mount Druze) in the southern part of the country as their epicenter. During French rule, a measure of administrative autonomy was granted in the 1920s to the people of Jabal al-Duruz, at variance with the general Druze rule of eschewing the trappings of statehood. Yet a Druze leader, Sultan Pasha al-Atrash, battled the French for Syrian sovereignty and became the icon not only of Syrian nationalists, but of anticolonial Arabs throughout the Levant.

As an ethnoreligious minority in a state dominated by another such group with shared links in Shia Islam—the Alawites—the Druze occupied

a relatively secure place in the Syrian Arab Republic during the presidency of Hafez al-Assad from 1971 to 2000. That sense of protection under a regime headed by members of an otherwise vulnerable fellow minority, reinforced by the Druze doctrine of loyalty to whichever state its followers inhabit, translated into fealty to Assad himself. Even after decades of Israeli occupation, including annexation, of the mostly Druze Golan Heights, the Druze there continued to back the Assad regime and to identify with Syria. This loyalty endured after Hafez was succeeded by his son Bashar in 2000.

When the Arab Spring gave way to civil war in 2011, it scrambled the Syrian ethnoreligious checkerboard for the Druze both inside the Golan Heights and in Syria proper. Initially, the democratic character of the opposition (as incarnated by the Free Syrian Army) inserted a wedge between those Druze following traditional lines of support for the Alawite Assad regime and others attracted by the notion of a democratic opening. The latter were targets of deadly retribution by the Syrian army. But both camps, the loyalists and the democratizers, were blindsided by the hijacking of the revolution by Islamist forces, who regarded both the Assad regime and the Druze as enemies—the former as secularists, the latter as heretics.

This led to the tragedy of Suwayda, a predominantly Druze city along the Jordanian border in southwest Syria. After enjoying de facto autonomy as a result of Damascus' distraction during the civil war, its aspirations of semi-isolation, if not neutrality, crashed in 2018. Fighters who had pledged allegiance to Islamic State (ISIS) stormed the city with firearms and suicide bombs, killing over 200 civilians and taking more than 40 Druze hostage.

Three years before the Suwayda massacre, 20 residents of the Druze village of Qalb Lawza in northern Syria were murdered by fighters from Al Nusra Front. Although Al Nusra and ISIS are rivals, they share a deadly disdain for the Druze. Meanwhile, the Assad regime has not only failed to protect the Druze but is increasingly viewed by them (as well as by many other victims of the civil war) as incompetent, indifferent, complicit, or overreaching. Druze militias consequently have come to wage a two-front battle, against both Islamist extremists and the state.

Hezbollah is exploiting these divisions. Two prominent leaders of a Druze political group with a self-defense wing called Sheikhs of Dignity have been assassinated, one allegedly at Assad's behest and the other presumably by Hezbollah. Attempts

by Iran, Russia, and the Druze of Israel to influence events in Suwayda and elsewhere, amid the rising insecurity resulting from the civil war, have also contributed to the splintering of Syrian Druzeland.

Israel's covert involvement in the Syrian war has in part been driven by Israeli Druze lobbying on behalf of co-religionists. At the same time, the Israeli policy of transporting wounded Syrian anti-regime (but not ISIS) fighters across the border for medical treatment has incensed some Druze. Both in Israel proper and in the Golan Heights, some Druze have attacked Israeli ambulances carrying such casualties.

### END OF ISRAEL'S BLOOD PACT?

In Israel proper, the status and outlook of the Druze are dramatically different from that of their co-religionists in the Golan Heights. Whereas the latter are increasingly divided between those adhering to traditional loyalty to Syria and those seeking protection from a state of civil war and hostile Islamists, the former have enjoyed more security, prosperity, and respect than their brethren elsewhere in the Middle East.

The respect stems largely from the contributions of Druze men conscripted into the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). They have served disproportionately in combat units, at a higher percentage than Jewish Israelis. Consequently, the proportion of Druze soldiers who have fallen in defense of the Jewish state is also high relative to their population. Druze officers have occupied some of the highest-ranking positions in the IDF. Beyond the security complex (in which their native Arabic is considered an asset), Druze have excelled in several other sectors, including education.

Solidarity between Druze and Jews in Israel has long been encapsulated in the Hebrew phrase *brit damim*, or "blood pact." In part, this is an expression of brotherhood in arms. But many Israeli Druze also impart a theological spin to the relationship, emphasizing that the highest of God-sent messengers recognized by the Druze was Moses' father-in-law and confidant, Jethro.

Druze prominence in Israel is notable given the group's small population, both absolutely and relatively. In Israel proper (that is, not counting the four Golan Heights villages of

about 26,000 residents), the 115,000 Druze inhabit just 18 northern villages and constitute 1.6 percent of the country's population. This is half of the proportional Druze presence in Syria and about a quarter of that in Lebanon. Israeli Druze represent just 8 percent of the worldwide Druze population, well below those in Syria and Lebanon (43 percent and 40 percent, respectively).

The confidence and accolades accorded to the Druze in Israel by the Jewish majority and establishment have not erased grievances within the community, both deep-seated and recent. Take Beit Jann, for instance. On the outskirts of this Druze settlement of 12,000 stands a war memorial for more than 50 sons of the village who, since 1948, have died in uniform defending Israel. In 2013, Beit Jann made headlines when its students had the top pass rate for the nation's baccalaureate exams. But back in 1987, the village had been in the news when dozens were injured in land protests pitting local agriculturalists against the Israeli Parks Service. In 2020, vil-

lagers again clashed with police over demolition orders for buildings constructed on land zoned for farming.

Following Israel's independence—two decades before the West Bank, Gaza, and the

Golan Heights came under Israeli rule—land in Arab sectors was appropriated for state purposes. Though Druze enjoyed relatively privileged treatment on account of their overall support for the Zionist goal of a Jewish state, they were nevertheless subject to the appropriation. Nor are they exempt from the residential zoning restrictions about which Palestinians are more commonly known to lodge complaints.

However much Druze are recognized for their valor and sacrifice while serving in various branches of the Israeli security sector, once discharged and competing in the job market, they rarely benefit from the *proteksia*, or informal network of patronage, that boosts Jewish veterans. Budgetary inequities at the local government level, resulting in lower funding for public services, are another complaint shared by Druze as well as Arab activists.

These simmering frustrations pale in comparison with Druze outrage in the wake of the 2018 nationality law's passage. With no exception for

---

*In the West, Druze have jettisoned  
the doctrine of hiding one's  
identity and faith.*

---

the Druze, the law explicitly limits the right to national self-determination in Israel to the Jewish people, and elevates the principle of Jewish settlement to “a national value.” It also disestablishes the Arabic language—the native tongue of the Druze—from its previous status as an official language. Hebrew alone is now accorded that status.

Both in mass demonstrations (well attended by Jewish opponents of the nationality law) and in private conversations, Druze have expressed reactions to the nationality law ranging from hurt and anger to befuddlement and a sense of betrayal. Druze commonly use such phrases as “second-class citizens” and “mercenaries” to describe how the law degrades their status. Until 2018, Druze felt comfortable living within Israel’s self-definition as a state that is simultaneously “Jewish” and “democratic.” The nationality law, for them, clearly tips the balance in favor of the former.

In July 2021, Israel’s Supreme Court rejected challenges to the nationality law, ruling it to be constitutional. Israeli Druze leaders, legislators, and activists are still hopeful that the law will be either amended or complemented by another one that recognizes the Druze for their national service and grants them equality.

In the immediate aftermath of the nationality law’s passage, three Druze officers resigned their commissions. In Beit Jann, bereaved parents demonstrated in 2018 against the law at the war memorial bearing their children’s names. Some even called for an end to their surviving and future offspring’s military service.

A former member of the Knesset (Israel’s parliament) from a non-Zionist party—Jabar Asakla of Hadash—says more Druze are resisting conscription than previously. Other former and sitting Druze legislators insist that their grievance is not with Jewish citizens, but with the government headed by then-Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for pursuing the law for partisan gain. (One Druze Knesset member, Ayoob Kara, voted for the law, along with his fellow members of Netanyahu’s Likud party.) Even if there is general Druze dissatisfaction because of the law, there is little likelihood of mass resignations from the IDF.

## DIASPORA DRUZE

Both theologically and demographically, the Druze are everywhere. From the deepest recesses of the “secret” teachings emerge inklings of transmigration of the soul throughout the planet and perhaps even the universe. More easily verifiable is

the presence of Druze beyond the Middle East, stemming from a late-nineteenth-century migration pattern mirroring those of other minority groups under pressure at the time. A combination of sectarian violence, Ottoman conscription, and economic hardship pushed Druze (along with Christians from the region) to try their luck overseas. Most were male—the Druze migratory gender imbalance was the highest of all faith groups.

Lebanon alone lost approximately 8 percent of its overall population to emigration. Although a census of “Syrio-Lebanese” living abroad in 1921–22 did not provide data categorized by religion, we do know that South America—the region that absorbed the largest share (36 percent) of those nearly 700,000 emigrants—attracted significant numbers of Druze. To this day, there are associations of Druze in Argentina, Brazil, and Venezuela; roughly 60,000 Druze live in Venezuela alone. Anglophone countries—notably Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States—account for about 80,000 of the Druze diaspora. Druze in these countries, too, have organized into nationally based associations.

Combined with those living in the Middle East, the global Druze population is estimated at one million. Since conversion into Druzism has been proscribed since 1043, propagating the faith and community has become a reproductive challenge for the Druze diaspora, especially in open Western societies where assimilation and intermarriage are common. Hence the organization of annual “conventions” that aim to bring together Druze teenagers and young adults from across their respective countries.

Websites of the London-based Druze Heritage Foundation and Los Angeles-based Druze Worldwide serve as postmodern tools for unifying the global Druze community. The former emphasizes the “transnational” nature of the Druze and their “multi-religious” Arab and Middle Eastern roots. The Druze Worldwide website hosts the magazine *Al Fajr* (The Dawn). Its mission statement speaks of transcending pressure for conformity while assisting “with the evolution of our culture [and] unique destiny.” In the West, that evolution includes jettisoning *taqiyya*, the doctrine of hiding one’s Druze identity and faith in contexts where persecution otherwise would result.

Yet diaspora Druze in the West have taken with them the general ethos of loyalty to the nation in which they reside. This includes strict neutrality regarding the politics of their countries of origin.

*Al Fajr*, for example, describes itself on its masthead as “a nonpolitical communication vehicle for the Druze community worldwide.”

Such aspirations of political neutrality are impossible to fully achieve in practice. How, for instance, should one refer to the state in which the Druze of the Galilee reside? Diasporic Druze authors and bloggers originating from Lebanon and Syria favor “Palestine,” notwithstanding the preference of the Galilean Druze for “Israel.” A semantic compromise is sometimes made by using “Palestine/Israel” or “Israel/Palestine.” Such linguistic gymnastics underline how difficult it is for the Druze to establish a unified trans-Middle Eastern identity, at least as long as Israeli-Palestinian relations remain fraught. This is why diaspora Druze organizations go to great lengths to maintain an apolitical image.

## BRIDGE BUILDERS?

One of the most endearing and popular hobbies I observed while living in a Druze community to conduct research in the Galilee was bird-raising (including Arabic-speaking parakeets). In a metaphorical sense, the Druze are themselves a kind of bird: the proverbial canary in the coal mine. As a minority in every country they inhabit, the Druze are particularly vulnerable to the rise of ethnonationalism and religious fanaticism in their respective countries of residence and citizenship. Thus they have been targets of sectarian violence by Maronites in Lebanon, have been attacked by extremist Islamists in Syria, and have had their citizenship devalued by nationalist Jewish legislators in Israel. When religious and political temperatures rise in the Middle East, it is often the Druze who suffer first, if not the most.

This is one reason to pay attention to the Druze: one can gauge the level of equity, justice, and democracy in a Middle Eastern nation by how well they are faring. It is true that not all Druze are spiritual seekers of unity, or even religious practitioners. Still, as an ethnoreligious minority in a region where both ethnicity and religion frame rulership, governance, and policy, the treatment of these unitarian occupants of a middle space between Islam and Judaism is a good indicator of the overall tolerance, if not inclusivity, of their host regimes. Unlike the Yazidis, Bahais, and Chaldean Christians in Iraq, Iran, Yemen, and Turkey, the Druze in Syria, Lebanon, and Israel—though currently facing some of their most difficult situations in recent times—are mainstays of their

respective countries. They are not about to disappear.

In addition, precisely because the Druze occupy middle ground between Muslims and Jews, they are potential bridge-builders between Arabs and Israelis, Palestinians and Zionists. (During his stint as Israeli minister of communications, Druze Ayoob Kara took a leading role in the 2020 normalization of relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates.) To be sure, in the eyes of Islamists and other intractable enemies of the Jewish state, Druze service as soldiers and interpreters for the IDF compromises the evenhandedness of the group as a whole. And the Israeli nationality law might temporarily dampen the enthusiasm of some Druze to serve as what some might consider diplomatic mercenaries.

Still, as a transnational religion without sovereigntist aspirations, the Druze can play a part in international conflict-resolution processes. Less than two months after the Israeli nationality law passed, 54 Druze spiritual leaders illegally travelled to Syria to visit fellow Syrian and Lebanese sheikhs, meet with families whose relatives were killed or taken hostage by ISIS, and visit Druze holy sites. When conditions in Lebanon and Syria improve, such Druze clergy might help pave the way for peace talks among the governments of their respective states. In the meantime, Druze like Zeidan Atashi (the first Israeli non-Jew to represent Israel as a diplomat overseas) will continue to advocate for Druze mediation between Jews and Muslims in Israel proper.

Finally, a more robust role for the diasporic Druze could be salutary both for their original homelands and for their adopted nations. Geographically (and, increasingly, generationally) distant from the periodic conflagrations of the Middle East, Druze in the Americas, Australia, and Europe can make a double contribution, as suggested by the likes of Zeidan Atashi and the Lebanese-born American physician Anis Obeid. In their host communities, they can leverage the mystique of their legendary “secret” religion by revealing the message that is no secret at all: that no one group is spiritually superior to another, and that world peace is a human as well as divine imperative. In the Middle East, the retransmission from the West of that message from descendants (or reincarnates) of one of the region’s most intriguing offshoot faiths—whose members’ preferred name for themselves is *Banu Ma’ruf*, “The Generous Ones”—might just get a better reception than it did a thousand years ago. ■

# As Oil Is Waning, the Times Are Changing

MICHELE DUNNE

Every day in the news from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), one can find evidence of the massive changes that are coming. The signs began gathering even before the pandemic.

The Kuwaiti finance minister announced in August 2019 that his government did not have enough cash on hand to pay public sector wages beyond October, setting off a sharp debate over how far to dip into the Future Generations Fund to cover current expenses. In February 2020, the International Monetary Fund issued a report on fiscal sustainability in Gulf Cooperation Council states, judging that economic diversification was far behind where it should be. It predicted that the region's current reserves of wealth would be depleted by 2034 unless government spending was cut back.

While the Arab countries, particularly the wealthy Gulf states, might long have considered themselves insulated from global trends, recent events show that this is no longer true, if indeed it ever was. Mass protests, the pandemic, and climate change are all buffeting the region. Rising temperatures and water shortages will make some areas uninhabitable and create food insecurity. Among the climate-related trends most consequential for MENA is the changing world energy picture: the role of oil and gas is gradually diminishing compared with renewable sources.

Supply shortages and price hikes in the autumn of 2021 may recall times when analysts worried over peak oil, predicting when oil production would max out and be unable to meet global demand. But the resemblance is misleading. The question now is not peak oil production but peak demand—the point at which global demand for oil will begin to decline, eventually making it not worth taking out of the ground. Forecasts differ; some believe peak demand is still 20 years away, some estimate 10 years, and some think it is already here. The International Energy Agency

(IEA) said in March 2021 that due to the spread of electric vehicles, global demand for gasoline might never return to pre-pandemic levels; a May 2021 IEA report suggested that this could be true for oil overall. Demand for natural gas might grow for another 15 years or so before also declining.

These changes in global energy markets have profound and understudied implications for the politics as well as the economies of the entire region. Put simply, the 2011 and 2019 waves of protest were just the beginning, and the region will almost certainly experience massive socio-economic and political disruption, for good or ill, in the coming decades. Whether they rely on hydrocarbon revenues directly, or indirectly through political rents, governments are aware that their past modes of buying social peace are unsustainable. And they are taking unprecedented steps in domestic and foreign affairs to try to maintain control.

Reports by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and other organizations show that Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and many other states are deploying increasingly harsh physical coercion and high-tech surveillance against their own citizens. At the same time, they are trying to cultivate nationalist sentiments and project images of socioeconomic progress. Many are spending beyond their means on public sector employment, cash handouts, and more in a bid to keep their citizens quiet.

In foreign affairs, MENA states are trying to stay in power by diversifying their alliances as well as outmaneuvering each other. The UAE, for example, has made rapid and surprising moves to secure its position at the expense of its longtime ally Saudi Arabia. Not only did the UAE withdraw from the joint intervention in Yemen, leaving the Saudis holding the bag, but Abu Dhabi also changed its oil strategy. After years of keeping much of its oil in the ground for future generations, the UAE in 2021 suddenly decided to ramp up production to profit while there was still strong demand—which set off a conflict with Saudi Arabia inside OPEC.

---

MICHELE DUNNE is a nonresident scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and a Current History contributing editor.

Nor is the competition confined to oil. Saudi Arabia in February 2021 announced that within three years it would stop doing business with international companies that did not situate their regional headquarters in the kingdom. This move was clearly aimed at firms that so far have preferred to be based in Dubai or Abu Dhabi.

Even more consequential for the region was the UAE's major foreign policy move, normalizing relations with Israel in August 2020. Whatever the lofty rhetoric of the "Abraham Accords," the main impetus for the UAE appeared strongly correlated to concerns about waning international interest in the Gulf as oil declines. Through the accords, the UAE hitched its star to Israel as the strongest military, economic, and technological power in MENA, one that—unlike the United States—was not going anywhere.

In doing so, the UAE outflanked Saudi Arabia (unable to take such a step toward Israel due to objections from its larger, more religious population, as well as from King Salman himself) and thereby raked in rich benefits from the United States, including sophisticated arms. The UAE also paved the way for Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan to normalize ties with Israel. Morocco, like the UAE, used the deal to secure a strategic benefit from the United States (in this case, recognition of its claim to Western Sahara) at the expense of its own regional rival, Algeria.

## UNHEALTHY INFLUENCES

The Gulf states (especially the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar) played outsized regional roles over the last decade. Flush with cash from the high oil prices of 2010–14, they deployed financial power in Egypt while engaging in military action in Bahrain, Libya, and Yemen in order to steer outcomes of the 2011 uprisings. The Gulf states were by no means the only external actors, and their motives differed—Qatar supported the elected Egyptian government of President Mohamed Morsi, whereas the UAE and Saudi Arabia financed a 2013 coup to bring him down. But the net effect of their interventions was to complicate and frustrate any possibility that citizens in these countries would throw off authoritarian rule and establish accountable governance.

The UAE and Saudi Arabia also tried to intervene politically and economically in Sudan during the second wave of the Arab Spring in 2019. But their effort to promote military rule met with mixed success due to resistance from Sudanese civil society forces, which drew support from the African Union.

Tunisia has emerged as the most recent case in which Gulf states saw an opportunity to undermine an experiment in post-authoritarian governance. Between 2011 and 2015, Tunisians struggled long and hard, largely on their own, to forge a new political system, which they enshrined in a liberal constitution of which they were justifiably proud. Yet that new system failed miserably to deliver improved prosperity and governance or reduce corruption.

Amid disillusionment with the political class, Tunisians in October 2019 elected a new president: Kais Saied, a curmudgeonly law professor with no political experience who disagreed with key aspects of the constitution. When the economy tanked due to lack of tourism during the pandemic and a weak government botched the vaccine rollout in the summer of 2021, Saied saw his moment to capitalize on public discontent and dissolved the parliament. Gulf states lavished political support and financial largesse on Saied, apparently with the hope of shutting down the lone democratic beacon surviving from the 2011 revolutions.

A collapse of Tunisia's democratic experiment would be unfortunate for its citizens and all of MENA, which badly needs new political models. But such a failure is unlikely to signal an enduring return to the region's political status quo ante. As signs of the end of oil proliferate, more efforts to find alternatives to authoritarian rentierism can be expected.

That might mean more large-scale public protests against corruption, economic hardship, and repression breaking out when "people at some point get tired of being tired," as an Egyptian friend of mine said recently. Change could also come in the form of military coups or wars, and life for many citizens in the region might get much worse, for at least a time, as old political elites struggle to hold on despite disastrously poor performance—as appears to be the case now in Lebanon.

What was once a regional race to develop oil and gas is transforming into a race to secure foreign backing and acquire the means of technical and physical coercion. Although dispiriting, this is more a symptom of change than the substance of change itself. Countries that were rich in oil or gas will eventually cease to dominate their neighbors, and it is not clear how far their investments abroad and sovereign wealth funds will carry them. Countries rich in human resources may well become relatively more powerful in the post-oil era. The advantage will go to those whose governments treat their citizens as assets to be cultivated rather than threats to be contained. ■

## Perils of Turkey's Urban Wilderness in the 1970s and After

PELIN BAŞCI

Growing up in Turkey during the 1970s, it was not easy to find Marvel comic books about superheroes whose unique skills swiftly resolved social problems. Instead, one could read a fascinating array of faux-Western comics with characters like Tom Miks, Teksas, and Zagor. (“Lucky Luke” also requires mention, though technically this Belgian comic was slightly different.) Spaghetti and other Western-style comic strips were hits among young Turkish fans of graphic novels. They disseminated the well-known, ultimately fake trope of a “civilization” at war with the presumed “empty wilderness,” the *tabula rasa* of the “West” with its cowboys, open frontiers, federal forts, and scalping “Indians” who always “burst onto the scene” unexpectedly.

In cinema, the genre was localized. Turkish Westerns played out the good, the bad, and the ugly against the context of 1960s decolonization movements and social struggles, juxtaposing righteous bandits against wealthy landlords and the authoritarian state. Western remakes launched the career of beloved rebel filmmaker Yılmaz Güney through films like *Kovboy Ali* (1966). Güney went on to forge an illustrious career as an actor and director whose sharp criticisms of feudalism, patriarchy, socioeconomic injustices, and the oppression of Turkey's Kurds earned him the ire of the state and the adoration of revolutionary youth. In 1982, two years before his death in Parisian exile, Güney and his co-director Şerif Gören shared the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival (with Costa-Gavras) for their film *The Way*. In its part-prophetic and part-retrospective

### Turkish Kaleidoscope: Fractured Lives in a Time of Violence

Story by Jenny White;  
art by Ergün Gündüz  
Princeton University Press,  
2021

vision, the film offered a first glimpse into what has become post-1980 Turkey.

A few exceptions aside, writers on modern Turkey have not done justice to culture and society during the Cold War, even though the late twentieth century, especially the 1970s, was one of the country's most dynamic eras of change, particularly urbanization. During this period, as unauthorized shacks (*gecekondus*) built overnight by migrants covered the urban landscape, major public universities such as Hacettepe and Middle East Technical University also came of age.

More women than ever before sought higher education and prepared for public employment. Publishers translated books, televisions entered homes (the public television network began broadcasting nationwide in 1968), and new ideas, from landing on the moon to Marxism and Islamism, became common parlance.

Jenny White and Ergün Gündüz's masterfully written, meticulously illustrated, and expertly produced graphic novel *Turkish Kaleidoscope* reminds us that not only the coup of 1980 but also its backstory still demand investigation. Set in the black-and-white universe of comic strips, the work charts out a new path for reassessing the 1970s. There are thematic convergences with Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2000), but *Turkish Kaleidoscope* offers more than a humanized story of a dehumanized nation. Straddling between literary fiction and thick ethnography—White has displayed expertise in both fields—through the lives of a group of students, the book presents the story of the long and bloody path to the 1980 coup and beyond.

*Turkish Kaleidoscope* probes questions of authoritarianism, patriarchy, the cult of personality, and violence. It illustrates the urban wilderness that catalyzed struggles between the rich and the poor, peasants and urbanites, university

---

PELIN BAŞCI is a professor of humanities and Turkish studies at Portland State University.

students and intelligence officers. The introduction contextualizes the ensuing vignettes within the whirlwind of rural to urban migration, demographic and material transformation, and growth in mass education. The university (in this case, Ankara's Hacettepe, where White studied in the '70s) emerges as the site of personal, social, and ideological confrontations, raising pointed questions: What drives people to factionalism and violence? How can organizations that thrive on patriarchal relations (like some revolutionary factions of that time) change society?

The book offers lessons about the political nature of the personal, the loss of ambiguity, and the language of violence. Its main characters hail from provincial Turkey and strive to build connections in the country's capital. They search for love, acceptance, friendships, and economic footholds. Ideological and political linkages provide them with networks of solidarity and influence in the anonymity of the big city. The intensity of such engagements led to a great number of splinter groups, as evidenced by the long list of organizations (particularly on the left) presented in the book's aptly named "Incomplete Glossary of Factions and Parties."

The fact that personal relations and internal conflicts are articulated in the idiom of ideology does not mean that the ideological content itself is insignificant. It only suggests that experiences and stories that resonate with people are what steer them toward the left or the right. One lesson the book imparts is that radicalization is difficult to sustain; social transformation is often slow but persistent. Another lesson it could have brought home is that no society is intrinsically violent unless its worst instincts are played on by irresponsible politicians and by great powers fighting their proxy wars. That lesson should resonate with the English-speaking audience in the post-Trump years.

## HUMAN COSTS

*Turkish Kaleidoscope* opens an anthropological window for viewing a dynamic period of change in Turkey's social landscape, rather than a screen for projecting the geopolitics of the Cold War. The revolutionaries emerge as secular would-be heroes who fought for a manifest destiny that the rest of society did not fully appreciate and was quick to

abandon in the wee hours of September 12, 1980. In the end, the book suggests, the revolutionaries swiftly gave up the fight, too.

But who were the winners? The 1980 coup unhinged the republic's secular institutions, replacing them with a "Turkish-Islamic" establishment. It opened up the country's protected economy to world markets, prioritized privatization, and replaced planning for the public good with the accumulation of individual wealth. It destroyed anyone standing in the way, the least of whom were the student and labor activists flocking around campuses, factories, and shantytowns.

These human rights abuses ushered in the socioeconomic makeover of the country into neoliberal Turkey. Thousands of people were taken into custody and put on mass trials. Many were brutally tortured, and some were executed. Thousands more became refugees. The street fighting between left and right (and, I should add, the provocateurs) that was endemic in the 1970s had come to an end with the coup. The economy began to recover. But the human cost was substantial.

The nation traded one kind of globalism—that of ideas and ideals—for another of goods and services.

After a long period of silence, which was partly enforced and partly embraced in complicity, the impact of

the coup has finally become a subject of public debate since the 2000s. Films and telenovelas like the 2006–8 popular hit *Remember, My Darling* have portrayed aspects of it. Even those who criticize the takeover agree that it was a total success in redesigning society and eradicating leftist opposition. The critical vacuum was filled by Islamists and proto-fascists who presented themselves as the spokespeople of the underdog. The downtrodden who now comprised the urban majority needed an outlet for their resentments. Reaching them continues to be essential to holding onto power. Even those who stood to benefit from the coup present themselves as its victims.

As for the fallen, the outlawed, and the disillusioned, their bravado is memorialized in popular culture. A season finale of *Remember, My Darling* depicted the May Day 1977 mass shootings in which dozens were killed in Istanbul's Taksim Square. (This event is also captured in *Turkish Kaleidoscope*.) The episode dramatizing the violence against leftist demonstrators featured Cher's

---

*After a long period of silence, the  
1980 coup has finally become  
a subject of public debate.*

---



1966 recording of “Bang Bang, My Baby Shot Me Down” as the title track.

Caught between the United States and the Soviet Union, between dreams and memories, between the desire to create a “little America” and the determination to carry the mantle of anti-imperialist struggle, Turkey’s youth, especially on the left, were also metaphorically shot down by elements of their own society. The gunfighters moved on. Even the external allies of the left were no help: the workers in Poland were seeking to overthrow socialism, and the Soviets were sending troops to far-flung destinations such as Afghanistan.

From the white Renault cars driven by the Turkish police in the ’70s to factional posters covering the city walls, from the façades of campus buildings to the interiors of middle-class households, Ergün Gündüz’s images faithfully recreate the folkloric details of a lost world. They illustrate the story of the modern nation being constructed in the wilderness of the city, with the most compelling episode taking place in the 1970s. Gündüz’s realistic details and dramatized sound effects are reminiscent of Turkish Western strips,

rather than their nationalistic counterparts, which mythologize implausible characters from Central Asia like Tarkan or Karaoğlan. White and Gündüz resist visual valorization and highlight doubt, shock, and vulnerability in thought, speech, and action.

For those who like their graphic novels in the spaghetti Western style, no cavalries show up unexpectedly in *Turkish Kaleidoscope*. For better or for worse, the gunfighters win in the end. The Gezi Park protests of 2013, which are covered in colorful detail, serve as an obvious epilogue. The demonstrations, which began in Istanbul, quickly spread to other cities, becoming Turkey’s biggest antigovernment protests in recent years. They announced a new generation’s determination to defend secular democracy against authoritarian encroachments.

The journey has taken us from old spaghetti Westerns with their fallible heroes and lovable villains to the current Hollywood standoff between immaculate superheroes and impeccable supervillains. One wonders if the complex social demons of our times can be conquered by either. ■