**MENA** Trinity Middle East
& North Africa Review

# Our Team

**Editors-in-chief**: Tayeeba Ahmed and Aoileann Ní Mhurchú

**Deputy editors:** Isobel Duffy and Gloria Roberto

**Treasurer:** Cecilia Cronin

**Digital Editor:** László Molnárfi

**Social Media Manager:** Melina Rozehkhan

**Creative and Graphic Design:** Jade Brunton

**Senior Editor:** Clare Rigney

**Section Editors:** Freya Coogan, Cian Parry, Alina Kreynovich and Jack Torres

**Copyeditors:** Chloe Bosley and Nicholas Evans

**Public Relations Officer:** Beatrice Pistola

# Politics

## Kuwait and COVID–19: The Real Victims of the Pandemic

*Saoirse Joy*

"We should send them out… put them in the desert." - Hayat Al-Fahad

On the 11th March 2020, the World Health Organisation officially declared that the rapidly spreading COVID-19 virus be treated as a pandemic. A month later, on the 31st March 2020, Kuwaiti actress Hayat Al-Fahad publicly called for the deportation of all non-Kuwaiti nationals amidst the crisis. Al-Fahad faced widespread backlash from those claiming her comments were ignorant; however, the pandemic thrust Kuwait's migrant population into a period of fear and uncertainty that was categorised by job uncertainty, fear mongering, and sole blame for the spread of the virus within Kuwait. (Marie, 2020)

Migration to the State of Kuwait initially began in the 1930s-1940s, in order to meet the growing demands for labour associated with the burgeoning oil industry, and the additional infrastructure needed to facilitate the rapidly advancing society (Russell, 1989.) This continued to grow at an exponential rate from the 1970s as the escalation of oil prices lead to a massive growth in demand for foreign labour - by the 1980s, the migrant population made up 78% of the total workforce, (Birks, Seccombe, and Sinclair, 1986) and current figures estimate that Kuwaiti nationals make up only a third of the total population, and less than 20% of the total workforce population (Shah, 1986.) Kuwait's migrant population is predominantly made up of expatriates from other Arab countries, Africa, and South/ South - East Asia; the largest population of these originating from India, and Egypt respectively. Many of these people are employed in the low-skilled labour or domestic work, meaning they often face precarious working conditions, unsuitable living conditions, and financial instability. Language barriers, as well as negative racial stereotypes, have over time consolidated their place within Kuwaiti society firmly at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

The majority of these workers enter the region through the kafala system – the system of sponsorship that essentially gives private national citizens or corporations almost complete control over a foreign workers employment and domestic status within their respective countries. The system has faced widespread criticism - detractors of kafala have criticised the inherent structural vulnerability that the system perpetrates, as the worker's presence in their host country is entirely dependent on their work status, which in the case of migrant domestic workers (hereafter referred to as MDW's) ties their residential status to their contractual bond with their employer. The system, which has been consistently described as exploitative, and oppressive, has come to the forefront of public discussion in recent years, following anti-racism demonstrations in Lebanon in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States, and explosive denunciations of the treatment of migrant workers involved in the building of football stadiums for the World Cup in Qatar in 2022. While kafala technically extends to all migrants who enter the region under work permits, it is intrinsically upheld by a structure with its basis in racist ideology that deliberately classifies workers based upon their countries of origin. It is through this framework that health inequalities between not only nationals, and non-nationals begin to emerge, but also between migrant workers from 'desirable' countries, and those who are deemed to be lesser.

via anglocelt.ie

3
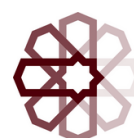
The barriers to healthcare faced by migrant workers are widely documented. Non-citizens are generally not entitled to free non-emergent care, and require some form of health insurance, or government issued health card in order to access affordable care in private clinics, or government hospitals, and although health insurance is a legal requirement established for recruiting agencies in order to import labour, the quality of health insurance varies widely based on cost, (Vital Signs Project, 2022) if even provided by the employer in the first instance. Additionally, access to health insurance is generally a right only afforded to those who are classed as legal occupants within the country. As of June 2022, there were 165,000 migrants classed as 'irregular,' (Shah & Alkazi, 2022) - be it through arrival to Kuwait through irregular channels, expiration of their work permits and visa, or most troubling, through the failure of their sponsor or employer to provide them with national identification cards or renewed health insurance.

The first case of COVID-19 was reported in Kuwait on the 24th February 2020 in a Kuwaiti national arriving from Iran. From that point onwards the prevalence of the virus seemed to be overwhelmingly present in the migrant, and non-national population of Kuwait (AlAhmad et al., 2020.) This fact is somewhat easily explained - COVID-19 is an airborne virus that spreads from person to person in close proximity. The migrant population of Kuwait who remained at the outset of the pandemic were largely those who could not afford the costs associated with leaving the country so suddenly - those employed primarily in low-income jobs in the construction or service industries. The living conditions that these migrants are subject to, even under normal circumstances are sub-par, but the pandemic only served to exacerbate them. Not only were this demographic significantly more at risk for contracting the virus, the discrepancy between the mortality rate of the national and non-national populous was vastly different. A study conducted in 2021 found that there was an almost 40% disparity between the percentage increase of expected mortality between Kuwait's and non-Kuwaiti migrants (AhAhmad et al., 2021) - meaning that the unpredicted excess deaths that occurred in the migrant population far overshadowed that of the Kuwaiti population.

There is no concrete medical or scientific explanation for this phenomenon; however, medical issues amongst the non-native Kuwaiti population are not a recent issue. Workers are often subject to cramped, and dilapidated living conditions - although technically legislation states that there should be no more than 4 workers residing in one room, (Jafar, 2021) this is widely reported to be disrespected. Areas on the outskirts of large residential areas have become rife with apartments that market themselves as specifically for the so called 'bachelors,' those low-income migrant men who are prohibited to bring their families with them to Kuwait. It is not uncommon that these apartments would house up to ten times the legal maximum, as pre-pandemic the majority of these men would be employed for shift work - meaning it was rare, if not impossible, that all tenants would gather at home together at once. At the outset of the pandemic, it became mandatory for everyone to remain in their homes except under extenuating circumstances. Living in small cramped apartments, often coupled with extremely poor ventilation, and little to no amenities served as a breeding ground for the spread of the virus.

Kuwaiti response to the situation proved only to exacerbate the situation, and demonstrated the underlying bias surrounding the migrant population that has allowed tensions to boil over. In order to counter the spread of the virus in heavily migrant populated areas, Kuwait established a number of detention camps in the Kuwaiti desert during a period of amnesty for undocumented workers in order to seek repatriation. The camps that were set up did little to alleviate the problem, or prevent the spread of the virus - instead it only magnified the conditions that allowed for the spread of the virus amongst the migrant population in the first instance. Not only were detainees subject to yet more cramped conditions while confined in these camps, they were denied access to running water, sanitary conditions, essentials such as food, primary healthcare, and tools to help keep them safe from the virus - such as masks, or sanitation materials (Ullah, 2020.)

MENA  Trinity Middle East & North Africa Review

Fundamentalism had a "simple and direct articulation" which spoke to the masses whereas the project for modernity had largely been out of touch with the wider population, confined to the elite (Sharabi 140). Islamism also promised "victory [to be] inevitable" which sits in contrast with 1967 (Sharabi 140). The rise of Islamism would not have happened as swiftly had the project for modernity succeeded. In the wake of failure and frustration, fundamentalism was a perceivable "antimodernist, utopian patriarchalism ... legitimate successor" that could only come about as modernity fell away (Sharabi 13). Despite the Kuwaiti government's promise to treat everyone for the virus, a Kuwaiti doctor is said to have received "informal instructions to transfer non-Kuwaiti patients to field hospitals where the only thing you'll find more than patients is cockroaches and dust," (Alshammari, 2021).

At the time, tensions surrounding the spread of COVID and the rising cases had come to a head and it was migrant workers who were shouldering most, if not all, of the blame for the spread of the virus. What we can see clearly here is how the cycle of inequality is allowed to perpetuate - migrant workers are already far more predisposed to illness and poor health due to the sub-par conditions in which they live and work. Upon the arrival of COVID-19, migrants are significantly more likely to contract the virus, due to their pre-established poor health, and additionally more likely to spread the virus due to the cramped conditions in which they live and work. When they have the virus, migrants are significantly more likely to die - due in part to their poor health, in part to the unsanitary, unsuitable conditions in which they dwell, and in part due to the reluctance of the government to facilitate proper care for non-citizens.

It has become impossible to discuss the nuances of Kuwaiti society, especially within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, without touching upon the claims of xenophobia and entrenched racism that the pandemic brought to the forefront of public discussion.


via Reuters

To call upon a blog post by young Kuwaiti professor Mai Al-Nakib that circulated online in May of 2020, "Racism and slavery, self-entitlement and corruption, education and healthcare in crisis, economy and environment on the brink — any one of these could bring down a nation-state. All of them together at once spells the end. This is where Kuwait stands today, without the leadership or a population intellectually and emotionally equipped to admit to the magnitude of the disaster, let alone to commit to its remedy," (Al Nakib, 2020.) The supposed self-righteousness of Kuwaiti nationals is technically only mere speculation - but speculation that is heavily documented. The reasoning for said feelings of superiority can be traced back to a number of factors, but ultimately, it is incredibly difficult to quantify how and why an entire nation of people has become to see themselves as more deserving. Some young Kuwaiti's, such as Al Nakib, suspect it comes from years of patting oneself on the back for the bare minimum. Others, such as Anh Nga Longva, surmise that Kuwaiti nationality, and Kuwaiti citizenship, was orchestrated in such a way to specifically become a commodity "not only to exclude the expatriates but also to organize and define the internal power relationships," (Longva, 1997) - power struggles that could be argued to have stemmed from continued colonial legacies within the region, and the terse geographical and political fight for control, and fight for resources.

The treatment of migrant workers within Kuwait has recently risen to the forefront of discussion due to a number of controversies that have rendered the issues impossible to ignore. Stories out of Qatar shocked the international community as it was revealed the inhumane conditions in which workers building FIFA World Cup arenas faced, which eventually led to the implementation of reforms such as a national minimum wage, aimed at the abolition of kafala (Campbell, 2022.) In Kuwait, the murder of a Filipino domestic worker at the hands of her 17-year-old employer's son made headlines in February of 2023 when it was revealed he had systematically raped her, and murdered her upon the discovery of her pregnancy (Ewe, 2023.)

MENA
Trinity Middle East
& North Africa Review

This is not a first for Kuwait - abuses are well documented, and ignored. Class hierarchies are played out along the lines of race, ethnicity, and gender in the form of the kafala system, the very system that informs every facet of life within Kuwait. One cannot adequately discuss any aspect of Kuwaiti social stratification without the knowledge of how kafala impacts and informs. The legality, and even worse, the cultural expectation of subjugation of a specific group of people based solely on the man-made idea of a hierarchy is impossible to shift without a total shift in thinking.

While this is no doubt in motion, there are some who resist this altogether - those who defend kafala as their right, and those who used the COVID-19 pandemic as a means of consolidating their self-imposed image of superiority. If the pandemic uncovered anything about Kuwait, it is that public health is very much informed by the position of the most vulnerable within society - I would question whether or not the system of kafala is strong enough to survive much more.


via gettyimages

# Bibliography

AAlahmad, Barrak, et al. "COVID-19 stressors on migrant workers in Kuwait: cumulative risk considerations." BMJ Global Health vol. 5 no. 7, 2020.

Alahmad, Barrak, et al. "Disparities in excess deaths from the COVID-19 pandemic among migrant workers in Kuwait." BMC Public Health, vol. 21, 2021, pp. 1-7.

Al Nikab, Mai. "I Banish You: Reflections on Kuwait." Los Angeles Review of Books, 6 August, 2020.

Alshammari, Yousef H. "All this death for money: Kuwait's migrant workers and the unchallenged dangers of COVID-19." The New Arab, 28 October, 2021.

Birks, J. S., et al. "Migrant Workers in the Arab Gulf: The Impact of Declining Oil Revenues." International Migration Review, vol. 20, no. 4, December 1986, pp. 799-814.

Campbell, Charlie. "'It's Rare To See Change Happen at This Pace.' A Global Backlash Is Forcing Qatar to Treat Migrant Workers Better." TIME, 16 December, 2022.

Ewe, Koh. "She Left Home to Work 5,000 Miles Away, But Was Killed and Abandoned in a Desert." VICE World News, 1 February, 2023.

Jafar, Nour. Plights of a Pandemic: The Disconnect Between Migration, Policy, and Practice in Kuwait. 2021. University of Pennsylvania. Master's Thesis.

Longva, Anh Nga. Walls built on sand: Migration, exclusion, and society in Kuwait. Routledge, 2019.

Mustafa, Marie. "Kuwaiti actress Hayat al-Fahd sparks controversy over COVID-19 crisis." Egypt Today, 2 April 2020.

Russell, Sharon Stanton. "Politics and Ideology in Migration Policy Formulation: The Case of Kuwait." International Migration Review, vol. 23, no. 1, March 1989, pp. 24-47.

Shah, Nasra M. "Foreign Workers in Kuwait: Implications for the Kuwaiti Labor Force." International Migration Review, vol. 20, no. 4, December 1986, pp. 815-834.

Shah, Nasra M., and Lubna Alkazi. "COVID-19 and threats to irregular migrants in Kuwait and the Gulf." International Migration, vol. 61, no. 2, 2023, pp. 138-153.

Ullah, Areeb. "'Like sardines': Migrant workers suffering in Kuwait's desert detention camps." Middle East Eye, 15 March, 2020.

Vital Signs Project. (2022). The Cost of Living: Migrant Workers' Access to Health in the Gulf. Vital Signs, November 2022.

# Threatening the 'Status Quo': the Historic and Contemporary Dangers of 'Religious Freedom' in Jerusalem's Holy Esplanade

*Rose Slocock*

Located in the Old City of Jerusalem, a sacred hilltop holy site has long served as a flashpoint of bitter and enduring division between the Israelis and Palestinians. Known to the Jewish people as Temple Mount, and to Muslims as Haram al-Sharif, the Noble Sanctuary is Islam's third holiest site after Medina and Mecca.

In Islam, the Esplanade's profound religious significance is vested in the Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa Mosque. The former contains the Noble Rock which leads to the Well of Souls where the dead can be heard waiting for judgement day. In Islamic tradition, the Prophet Muhammed was transported from Mecca to the great Al-Aqsa Mosque and ascended into heaven (Marjieh, 2022).

Jews venerate this same sacred compound, holding that it is where Abraham sacrificed his son, Isaac, and where God collected the dust to make Adam (Margalit, 2014). The holiest site in Judaism, the Dome of the Rock is of seminal importance in Jewish tradition, revered as the place where God revealed himself to King David. The two Jewish temples – Solomon's Temple and the Second Temple – are also understood to have been built here. It is believed that the third temple will be rebuilt on this same ground at the coming of the Messiah (Marjieh, 2022). For many, Jerusalem does not only have religious significance but has evolved as a nationalist symbol and an emblem of national revival.

**The History of 'Status Quo'**

Due to its religious significance in both Judaism and Islam, the Esplanade continues to be a major focal-point in the Arab-Israeli conflict. These prevailing tensions must be understood in the historical context of the measures and treaties negotiated to manage inter-faith and nationalist hostility. Following disputes among European states in the 19th century over religious sites in Jerusalem, these have since been governed by the 'status quo' arrangement - outlined in the 1852 Firman Decree issued by the Ottoman Empire. Such a precedent was internationally recognised in the 1878 Treaty of Berlin (Lapidoth, 1998).

Originally set up to protect access to Christian sites across Jerusalem, the 'status quo' was widened to include Muslim and Jewish interests. This effort to safeguard competing religious rights to these sacred spaces was further entrenched after the 1967 Six-Day War. In the Aftermath of Israel's occupation of the Old City, Jerusalem saw the first mass Jewish pilgrimage to the Old Mount since the second Temple's destruction (Barker, 2015). Wishing to avoid escalation, Israeli Defence Minister, Moshe Dayan, sought to solidly outline the individual entitlements of the Jewish and Muslim people in Jerusalem. Affirming the Jordanian Waqf Ministry's formal administration of these holy sites in an effort to avert potential clashes with the Muslim world, Dayan sought to re-assert Israel's commitment to the pre-established 'status quo' international consensus (International Crisis Group Middle East Report, 2015).

Crucially, Dayan strove to differentiate between the nationalist and religious dimension of the conflict. In attempting to extinguish any potential confrontation between the Muslim and Jewish religions, Dayan endeavoured to confine the Arab-Israeli clash over Jerusalem to a nationalist-territorial dispute. He consequently argued for Islam's right to exercise religious sovereignty (as opposed to national sovereignty) over Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, setting up the foundations of this historic agreement (Shragai, 2014).

Thus, the 'status quo' was formally recognised after 1967. In its most basic form, this international understanding prohibits all non-Muslim worship at the sacred compound but permits non-Muslim visitation. It also covers components such as access regulations, religious rituals and prayers, dress requirements and security protocols (ICG Middle East Report, 2015). Any alterations to these elements by one party violates the 'status quo' arrangement. Israel was therefore responsible for the site's perimeter security only, while the Jordanian-controlled Waqf wielded authority within the compound. This was formally recognised in the 1994 peace treaty between Israel and Jordan (Parker, 2023).

The 'status quo' must thus be understood as a legally binding framework which details specific and unique rights and obligations formulated over centuries of religious practice. It is considered as international law and consequently supersedes all aspects of domestic law (Marjieh, 2022).

Dayan's concession in 1967 demonstrated an alliance of interests between religion and state, which was only achievable due to strict teachings of the Jewish faith itself at the time; with God's divine presence understood as manifest in the Holy of Holies (the inner sanctuary of the Tabernacle), traditional rabbinical law forbids Jews from entering Temple Mount (Shragai, 2014). This Halakhic restriction was upheld at the time by ultra-Orthodox Rabbis and as a result, prohibiting Jewish worship at the site was not viewed as a matter of heated contention, with the lack of immediate interest in ascending Temple Mount enabling a period of relative stability.

### The Argument of Religious Freedom

However, with this consensus among Orthodox Rabbis surrounding the religious importance of the Halakhic restriction diminishing, in recent years, groups committed to overturning the 'status quo' are gaining support. Bolstered by increased financial backing, their growing influence is clear in their attempts to recast this issue as one of religious freedom. Fortified by Israel's 'Basic Laws' (which serve as the country's constitutional foundation), the 1992 law on 'Human Dignity and Liberty' describes the country as a "Jewish and democratic state", while the 1948 'Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel' places the concept of "freedom of religion" at its core (U.S. Department of State 2021 Report on International Religious Freedom, 2022).

Although this is neither a constitutional clause nor statute, the argument for its defence has been used to justify non-Muslim worship at the Al-Aqsa compound. The main proponents are Temple Mount activists, a group of nationalist and ultra-orthodox Jews who reject the 'status quo', regarding it as their fundamental historic right to pray at the site. Prominent American Israeli Temple Mount activist, Yehuda Glick encompasses these views, asserting that "there is no reason in the world that at the only holy place for the Jewish people, a Jew should not have the right to pray" (Barker, 2015).

Consequently, religious Zionists continually criticise the government for failing to implement its sovereign prerogatives and ensure full freedom of worship for non-Muslims, with this radical segment of the political right increasingly appealing to both secular and religious supporters, and the liberal side of the political spectrum. Their movement has been propelled by Israeli measures, with the Supreme Court ruling repeatedly since 1993 that Israeli Jews have the right to pray at Al-Aqsa/Temple Mount. This went further in 2006, when the Supreme Court held that there cannot be blanket infringements of that right (ICG Middle East Report, 2015).

### Recent Challenges to the 'Status Quo'

With mounting tensions creating a dangerously volatile situation, there have been multiple incidents in the twenty-first century which have continued to erode the 'status quo'. A notable flashpoint was in 2000, when Israeli opposition leader Ariel Sharon entered the Jerusalem sacred space with six Likud Knesset members and 1,000 Israeli police, just before the election (Knell and Berg, 2023). With his visit triggering the second intifada – plunging the country into a violent five-year nationalist and religious conflict – his election to Prime Minister in 2003 oversaw the restoration of Jewish and non-Muslim access to the holy site without the agreement of Jordan (Marjieh, 2022). Disregarding this coordination of access, a central component of the 'status quo', such an act only precipitated further heated conflagrations.

In 2014, tensions were ignited after Temple activist Yehuda Glick was shot four times in an attempted assassination. In response, Israeli authorities temporarily shut off all access to the site, including for Muslims (Eisenbud, 2014). The highly inflammatory nature of this measure was encapsulated in Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas labelling the closure "a declaration of war", going on to urge Palestinians to use "any means" to protect the holy site (Margalit, 2014).

MENA  Trinity Middle East & North Africa Review

Over the following days with further riots and clashes at the compound, Jordan withdrew its ambassador to Tel Aviv in "protest at the increasing and unprecedented Israeli escalation in the Noble Sanctuary, and the repeated Israeli violations of Jerusalem" (Margalit, 2014). This was the first time Jordan had taken such an active step since the 1994 peace treaty with Israel. However, despite this, Israel has continued to maintain that no changes were being made to the 'status quo'.

The international response has only contributed to the increasing hostility both sides harbour towards one another. In 2016, UNESCO passed a major resolution regarding the sacred compound – Document 200 EX/25, known as the Occupied Palestine Resolution. This condemned Israel's increasing aggression and antagonism. It denounced Israel's illegal actions against the Al-Aqsa Waqf and called for restored Muslim access, demanding that Israel respect the Status Quo and end its attacks. This resolution sparked outrage from Israel due to its exclusive terminology, which called the site only by its Muslim name and spoke of it as a solely Muslim site (Marjieh, 2022).


AFP Photo

In contrast, Donald Trump's decision to move the US embassy to Jerusalem during his presidency was also seen as providing full support for Israeli sovereignty over the entire city, including the Arab parts and the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount. This was accompanied by his strongly pro-Israeli 2020 peace plan which stipulated the transfer of the compound's sovereignty to Israel (ending Jordan's custodianship over it) and calling for freedom of worship for non-Muslims at the site (Zalzberg, 2020).

Today, Israeli forces are stationed inside the holy site, exerting complete control over who enters the compound. Non-Muslims can only enter through the Al-Magharbeh Gate however, with the Waqf banned from wielding any authority over the Gate, militarised Temple Mount activists and Israeli extremists are no longer prevented from entering (Marjieh, 2022). During Ramadan in 2021, Israeli National Police entered Al-Aqsa Mosque on multiple occasions. In one instance, they disconnected the loudspeakers used for the Waqf's call to prayer after it disrupted an official Memorial Day service for fallen soldiers attended by Israeli President Reuven Rivlin (U.S. Department of State 2021 Report, 2022).

On another day, the Israeli police entered the compound equipped with stun grenades, rubber tipped bullets and teargas to disperse Palestinians they say were throwing rocks, while on 29 May last year, Israeli occupation authorities allowed 2,600 Israeli settlers who were part of the annual 'flag march' (celebrating Israel's occupation of the eastern part of the city in 1967) to storm into Al-Aqsa Mosque with Israeli flags and recite Jewish prayers (Marjieh, 2022).

**Today: Israel's Far-Right Government**

The erosion of the 'status quo' continues to set a dangerous precedent, with tensions only building with the establishment of the new nationalist government in Israel. On the 3rd of January 2023, National Security Minister, Itamar Ben-Gvir of the new cabinet directly challenged the international agreement by visiting the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound – his first public act in office (being sworn in only five days earlier). Surrounded by Israeli security forces (of which he is the head), Ben-Gvir's highly controversial visit has greatly inflamed relations with the Muslim people. The incident has already sparked international criticism, with the Palestinian foreign ministry wholly condemning "the storming of Al-Aqsa Mosque" viewing it as an act of "unprecedented provocation and a dangerous escalation of the conflict" (Pfeffer, 2023).
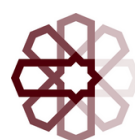
MENA Trinity Middle East & North Africa Review

This incendiary atmosphere is only exacerbated by Ben-Gvir's own outspoken personal views on what he deems as a raging sovereignty battle. Leader of the Jewish Power Party, his entrance into mainstream politics under Israel's new right-wing government has made the situation in Jerusalem increasingly combustible. Throughout his political career, Ben-Gvir has called for Jewish worship to be permitted at the site, making it known ahead of the November election that he would demand the introduction of "equal rights for Jews" in the Esplanade (Knell and Berg, 2023).

Ben-Gvir's actions in the sacred compound only fortify the demands of the far-right religious nationalist movement, bolstering Temple activists and religious Zionists calling for long overdue overturning of the 'status quo'.

The U.N. held an emergency session this year on the fifth of January due to increasing concerns over escalating tensions as the 'status quo' looks increasingly under siege (Magid, 2023). The formation of this new government – the country's most extreme right-wing administration in history – has enabled ultranationalist and ultra-orthodox Jewish parties to gain a major footing in influencing the direction of Israel's policy line towards Jerusalem (Berg, 2022). No longer simply wielding marginal support, the expansion of their authority to a position of political strength throws the whole future of the 'status quo' into question. There is a real danger of renewed violence erupting as these radical groups push for a greater Jewish presence at the holy Esplanade.

# Bibliography

Baker, Luke, 'Special Report on Jerusalem and Holy Rights', Reuters, 4 June 2015.

Berg, Raffi, 'Israel's most right-wing government agreed under Benjamin Netanyahu', BBC News, 22 December 2022.

Eisenbud, Daniel K., 'Jerusalem's Temple Mount closes to all visitors after shooting of Yehuda Glick', The Jerusalem Post, 30 October 2014.

International Crisis Group Middle East Report, 'Stabilising the Status Quo: The Status of the Status Quo at Jerusalem's Holy Esplanade', International Crisis Group, 30 June 2015.

Knell, Yolande and Berg, Raffi, 'Jerusalem: Palestinian anger over far-right Israeli minister's holy site visit', BBC News, 3 Jan 2023.

Lapidoth, Ruth, 'Freedom of Religion and of Conscience in Israel', Catholic University Law Review, 47 (1998), pp. 441-65.

Magid, Jacob, 'UN Security Council slated to meet on widely decried Temple Mount visit by Ben Gvir', The Times of Israel, 4 Jan 2023.

Margalit, Ruth, 'The Politics of Prayer at the Temple Mount', The New Yorker, 5 November 2014.

Marjieh, Mounir, 'Jerusalem's Status Quo Agreement: History and Challenges to Its Viability', Arab Center Washington DC, 7 June 2022.

Parker, Claire, 'What is the Temple Mount, and why did Itamar Ben Gvir's visit stoke tensions?', The Washington Post, 5 January 2023.

Pfeffer, Anshel, 'Israel Hardline minister Itamar Ben-Gvir visits Temple Mount in 'provocation', The Times, 3 January 2023.

Shragai, Nadav, 'The "Status Quo" on the Temple Mount', Jerusalem Centre for Public Affairs, 13 Nov 2014.

Zalzberg, Ofer, 'The Trump plan threatens the status quo at al-Haram al-Sharif', International Crisis Group, 9 March 2020.

'2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: Israel, West Bank and Gaza', U.S. Department of State, 2 June 2022.

# Houses of Straw: How Democratic Processes can Hide State Weakness

*Dennis Kostakoglu Aydin*

Iraq and Syria have a well-documented modern history of oppressive regimes. As is generally common in MENA, in Saddam's Iraq and Hafez al-Assad's Syria, legitimacy was determined by specific state policies designed to ensure social compliance with the existing regime. This is the traditional definition of legitimacy: the state's adherence to its citizens' demands and its ability to deliver those demands (Hossein Razi 70). However, this definition neglects the state's capacity to determine its own legitimacy (Anderson 14). As demonstrated in Syria, to garner popular support, these policies need to appear democratic; however, they are realistically not so, and instead are vehicles to manipulate citizens using state power (Kedar 45). This is facade democracy.

Alongside facade democracy, manipulation can occur through social contracts. The states are typically rentier states, where all of their income comes from exports- foreign states pay money ("rent") to the rentier state, to gain access to its often-valuable resource (for example, the world pays to import Saudi oil). The state then sets forth this social contract: the state alone will provide for its citizens and, using its great fiscal power, drive the economy. In exchange, the rulers will continue to rule and democracy will erode. This is the rentier state social contract. However, which citizens and the quality of aid are often dependent on patrimonialism, a type of aid acquired through individual connections to the state. Thus, legitimacy can be engineered through social contracts struck with the government. More democratically, it can also be provided through social movements, which can however be endangered by their volatility or erased by the state's use of façade democracy. Of course, the regime may also use security groups to directly control any opposition.


via AP/PA images

Patrimonialism allows the state's regime to build support by providing for certain citizens. (Theobald 550). Especially common in rentier states with strong welfare, a patrimonial state's legitimacy derives from its ability to control and provide resources to specific clientele, regardless of the demands of the broader citizenry (Lemarchand and Legg 152). Identity links such as tribal or religious affiliations determine receptors of state assistance, which comes not only in the form of welfare but also in opportunities to gain power (Eisenstadt 15). Patrimonialism is especially common in the military, which, holding physical power, is one of the strongest state groups (Eisenstadt 17). Participation in the military thus acts as a means by which individuals may improve their social standing and access state power. By being given opportunities as well as welfare, recipients of patrimonialism are more loyal to the existing regime.

In Saddam's Iraq, patrimonialism occurred along tribal lines. When Saddam seized control, he was assisted by military officers from his town, Tikrit, whose loyalty he could be assured of (Baram 94). More importantly, within the Ba'athist government, Tikritis were more easily promoted and enjoyed preference, and of that group, members of Saddam's tribe, the Albu Nasir, comprised a significant majority of the security forces (Baram 95). This included Saddam's Special Republican Guards, who acted as a "parallel army" to prevent coups from the official military (Hashim 24) (Quinliven 141). Similarly, the Syrian military was controlled by members of the minority Alawite group prior to the 1963 coup (Kedar 22) (Van dam, 32). During the intra-Ba'athist coup of 1966, the military Alawites, led by Gen. Hafez al-Assad, took power in Syria, elevating the Alawite minority to power (Pipes 10). Under Hafez's presidency, poor rural Alawites received welfare, while middle-class Alawites were given jobs in important state positions, as part of a plan to retain governmental loyalty to Hafez (Van Dam 79). Such patrimonialism is the method by which regime allies permeate the state, with their loyalty to it ensuring stability within the regime. This makes it easier for the regime to implement unified policies, including against its citizens.

To some degree, however, legitimacy of a state is also determined not just by the regime but by the capability of its citizens; to achieve this, states within the MENA region use a variety of indirect actions to limit public opposition and ensure complacency. Hannah Arendt defines power as the ability of groups to act collectively (Haldén 317). A democratic state is thus comprised of many groups, varying in ideology, who need to cooperate to form a state, and yet who are in constant competition to control power (Bermeo and Yashar 13-14) Thus, democracies occur as a consequence of citizen actors' beliefs and policies. (Ibid. 15) These beliefs manifest in social movements, and it is these movements whose success or failure the state may affect to achieve public compliance.

 Social movements act as official and sustained challenges to the state; they are the manifestation of a 'group purpose', with its members connected through social or identity links. (ibid. 21) However, these groups face several obstacles in achieving their purpose. Firstly, in the Middle East, success is sustained only when groups cooperate and remain organized (ibid. 21). Even after regime change, organizational failure, as shown in post-2003 Iraq, will result in parallel administrations who do not provide materially for the country's citizens; in Iraq specifically, the regional chaos induced by a weak central state allowed for greater Iranian control within the state as well as the rise of ISIS (Wozniak 161-2). Additionally, the existing regime, particularly if its legitimacy is questionable in the eyes of the citizens, will likely attempt to preserve itself by crippling public challenges. In Syria, loss of government legitimacy was, and remains, likely to endanger the ruling Alawi religious minorities; consequently, Hafez advanced a policy of Syrian unification as a preventative mechanism against sectarianism (Kedar 22). He specifically prohibited media mention of minority groups such as the Alawites or the Druze, erasing historically common sectarian divides in favor of a broader Syrian-Arab identity (Kedar 18, 28-9, 32).



via AFP

 Regimes may also respond to challenges by implementing policies designed to restrict the capabilities of movements (Bermeo 159-60). The history of the Iraqi state, for example, is marked by Kurdish uprisings, and Saddam's policy reactions to this errant minority often strove to erase the Kurdish identity (Stansfield 63, 68-9). In Iraq, official policy was preferential to the Sunni minority; however, state controlled media channels may also disseminate policies of limitation, as occurred with Hafez's Syrian unification policy (Stansfield 68-9). State policy can also focus on legitimizing power through their control over state elections, a tactic called façade democracy ("political pluralism" in Hafez's Syria and "democratic centralization" in Saddam's Iraq). Elections, being a means by which the people may act collectively to define the state, align with Arendt's definition of power. In non-democratic states, the existence and administration of elections highlights and thus legitimizes the coexistence of democratic ideals and authoritarian mechanisms (Kedar 47).

 Some regimes in the MENA region, in the implementation of façade democracy, manipulate official means of social change, such as elections, in order to maintain the status quo. In these states, the perceived existence of democracy is believed to be proof of social change and of the success of social movements; the regime, then, maintains its legitimacy as people accept its existence as the outcome they desire (Ibid. 44).  In Hafez's Syria, it was not the success of elections (referred to as referendums) but their existence alone that was meant to pacify the people: the state portrayed citizen participation in referendums as the collective action desired by social movements, ignoring the policies of who actually took power (ibid. 42-44).

**MENA** Trinity Middle East & North Africa Review

Hafez again distributed this message through his control over Syrian mass media (ibid. 44). Newspapers called on citizens to vote in order to maintain democracy; simultaneously, they demanded loyalty to the President as the progenitor of Syrian democracy via the 1963 coup. Continuation of the President's rule thus became associated with democracy and with freedom of opinion for the citizens.

Throughout his tenure, Saddam held several elections designed to impress upon the people a sense of collective action. These elections often took place during volatile moments in history, being held to ensure the legitimacy of Saddam's regime and to pacify the people, who were breaking apart as a consequence of sectarian identity differences. Like Hafez, Saddam professed a need for unity. Saddam also actually elected candidates- to positions which held no real power (Isakhan 106). The existence of Iraqi elections hampered the country's social progress by convincing the people that that progress was already achieved.

In summary, there are a variety of policies by which the state may indirectly achieve public complacency, and thus a semblance of legitimacy. Through façade democracy, control of the media, and as a result of the opposition's organizational failures, social movements against the regime are rendered less likely to succeed. It thus makes it easier for the state to convince its broader citizenry that democracy already exists under the current system, and thus surreptitiously gain its support.

However, when the citizens refuse to accept a state's false democracy, it may use its power to spread violence in order to retain control. Max Weber defines a state as a construct that monopolizes the use of force under legitimate means (Haldén 314). Since the state may acquire legitimacy through manipulation of the people's will, by using the state's security systems to control the type and extent of social challenges to the regime, the regime is able to directly control public opinion. Use of such state power is weak, as it fails to convince the people that they are the arbiters of legitimacy; to the citizens, the state then becomes openly illegitimate. This makes subsequent challenges more potent.

When authoritarian regimes suppress social groups, violence becomes increasingly likely, on the part of both the state and the people (Bermeo 25). Suppression of isolated social groups is more likely to succeed, and in the MENA region, challenges to the regime often occur along identity divisions (ibid. 18-19). For example, in Syria, Hafez's unification policy and the government's Alawi identity was rejected by the country's Sunni majority, who view the Alawi religion as heretical (Kedar 83-4). In the 1980s, the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood attacked the Syrian government on sectarian grounds; the government subsequently mobilized to arm Ba'ath party members and supporters (Van Dam 105). Hafez effectively used civilians as an ideologically motivated, private military force against the Brotherhood, who, in response, escalated attacks on the regime and Hafez personally. This eventually caused an uprising in the Syrian city of Hama (Ibid 107).

Through patrimonialism, the Syrian army, particularly the chain of command and the elite troops, were composed of Alawites. In a sectarian battle for the city, the army was able to brutally repress the Brotherhood (ibid. 111.5) (Danin). Hafez's scorched-earth policy was successful: religious opposition in the country was effectively crushed (Van Dam 116-7). Additionally, despite increased sectarian tensions, many citizens were willing to accept the subsequent peace offered by the regime (Danin). This severely limited the changemaking capabilities of oppositional social movements.

Saddam also enforced similarly repressive policies in attempts to maintain political hegemony; however, he did so not only against citizen opposition, but also against powerful members of his own state. After the 1968 coup, Saddam used his position to purge non-Ba'athist military officers as a means of disorganizing the military and crippling its power (Hashim, 19). Saddam's parallel military organizations used patrimonialism to curtail military strength; he staffed such organizations with ally groups, including Sunnis and members of Saddam's tribe, the Albu Nasr (ibid. 25).


MENA Trinity Middle East & North Africa Review

Furthermore, he deterred citizen attempts at regime change by attacking specific groups, and by arbitrary violence against any member of the public (EUAA) (Hashim, 26). To some degree, his attempts at control succeeded: despite being aware of the regime's injustices, Iraqi citizens could not affect real change and were thus forced to retain a level of Ba'athist loyalty (Ishkahan, 110).

 However, after Iraq's loss in the 1991 Gulf War, the Iraqi Kurdish minority was able to take advantage of the state's weakness and establish autonomy within the state (ibid. 112). Before the war, Kurdish opposition to the Ba'athist regime had prompted Saddam to violently suppress the Kurdish population of Iraq, even to the degree of genocide. Thus, the development of a Kurdish state in Iraq was only possible because of consistent organization among the various Kurdish movements. In 1992, the Kurdish Regional Government was established, with its own media outlets outside of Ba'athist influence; it was consequently able to directly criticize the regime and to call for greater democracy. Yet the region's economic difficulties still force it to remain under Iraqi control, illustrating that limitations on collective action need not be purposefully implemented by the state.

In conclusion, legitimacy of a regime is often measured through the success of several policies common among authoritarian MENA regimes. For example, the state may use force to control opposition groups, although this can further escalate violence until there is a definitive victor, which need not be the regime. States have greater success with indirectly controlling social movements through façade democracy, although to some degree, success of such movements is also contingent on their unity and organization. Finally, the state can build legitimacy through patrimonialism, using identity links to control the regime and ensure loyalty. However, failure of these policies, while it may lead to the overthrow of the regime, need not induce democratic change- as shown in Iraq, if a dominant group doesn't hegemonize, greater instability is possible in post-regime states. In any case, then, the citizens' freedoms will suffer.

## Bibliography

Anderson, Lisa. 'The State in the Middle East and North Africa'. Comparative Politics 20,  no. 1 (October 1987), pp. 1-18.
Baltacioglu-Brammer, Ayse. 'Alawites and the Fate of Syria'. The Ohio State University Press,  November 2013.
Baram, Amatzia. 'Saddam's Power Structure: the Tikritis Before, During, and After the  War'. In Iraq at the Crossroads: State and Society in the Shadow of Regime Change,  ed. Toby Dodge and Steven Simon, 93-114. New York: Oxford University Press,  2003.
Bermeo, Nancy and Deborah Yashar, ed. Parties, Movements, and Democracy in the  Developing World. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2016.
Danin, Robert. "Remembering Hafez al-Assad". Council on Foreign Relations, 11 November  2021.
Eisenstadt, S. N. 'The Major Aspects of Political Structure and Process in Neopatrimonial  Regimes'. In Traditional Patrimonialism and Modern Neopatrimonialism, Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1973, pp.13-18.
EUAA. "Crimes committed during the regime of Saddam Hussein".
Haldén, Peter. Family Power: Kinship, War, and Political Orders in Eurasia, 500-2018.  Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2018.
Hashim, Ahmed. "Saddam Husayn and Civil-Military Relations in Iraq: The Quest for  Legitimacy and Power". Middle East Journal 57, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 24-32.
Isakhan, Benjamin. Democracy in Iraq. Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2012.
Kedar, Mordechai. Asad in Search of Legitimacy. Brighton, England: Sussex Academic Press, 2005.
Lemarchand, Rene, and Keith Legg, 'Political Clientelism and Development: A Preliminary  Analysis'. Comparative Politics 4, no. 2 (1972), 149-78.
Pipes, Daniel. 'Keeping the Alawis in Power'. In The Washington Institute Policy Papers:  Syria Beyond the Peace Process, 9-18. Washington, D.C: The Washington Institute  for Near East Policy, 1996.
Quinlivan, James. 'Coup-Proofing: Its Practice and Consequences in the Middle East'.  International Security 24, no. 2 (Fall 1999): 141-7.
Razi, G. Hossein. 'Legitimacy, Religion, and Nationalism in the Middle East'. The American  Political Science Review 84, no. 1 (March 1990): 70.
Stansfield, Gareth. Iraq: People, History, Politics. Cambridge: Polity, 2007.
Teti, Andrea, and Pamela Abbott. 'What do 'the People' Want?: The Demand for Democracy  in Six Middle Eastern States'. Arab Transformations Project (2017): 1-6, JSTOR
Theobald, Robin. 'Patrimonialism'. World Politics 34, no. 4 (July 1982): pp. 548-559
Van Dam, Nikolaos. The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society under Asad and  the Ba'ath Party. 4th ed. London, England: I.B. Tauris and Co, 2011.
Wozniak, Jesse. Policing Iraq: Legitimacy, Democracy, and Empire in a Developing State.  Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2021.

# Media and Literature

## Did the Rise of Islam and Islamism after 1967 Mean that the Arab project for Modernity had Failed? via. Hisham Sharabi's 1988 Neopatriarchy

*Ellen Aylmer*

Prior to 1967, the Arab world had been attempting to make strides towards a modern society, in their own project for modernity. Many societies in the Arab world were becoming increasingly secular and capitalist, hoping to emulate the supposedly modern West. It appeared to many that modernity, as they saw it, was just within grasp, and with a few tweaks the Arab world could be on par with Western ideals. But, "at the very moment that Arab patriarchal society appeared objectively ready for political change, it suffered a severe setback"; the humiliating defeat in the 1967 Six Day War, which created a widespread atmosphere of dejection and it was under these conditions that a "political reversal occurred" (Sharabi 159). This malaise gave rise to an increase in the influence and power wielded by Islam and Islamism, a relatively swift move back to traditionalism and away from secularism, and modernity (1). Did this ensuing rise in Islamism mean the project for modernity, which so many had dedicated their lives to, was a failure? Was the dream of modernity to be written off as exactly that - just a dream? According to Hisham Sharabi, yes.

In his 1988 book Neopatriarchy, Sharabi offers a social critique, seeking to create a "framework from which to understand" the varied factors which have created the failure of modernity in Arab society, and have resulted in the "paralysing trauma engulfing the Arab world", trauma which is still active today (Sharabi, ii; viii). However, the conditions of this shift towards Islamism are the same conditions which ensured modernisation would fail and rather than being an antithesis to the other, both modernity and Islamism are actors within the broader dominant force of neopatriarchy.

This neopatriarchy, argues Sharabi, is what perpetuates the "unravelling of the larger Arab society" (Sharabi vii). Sharabi's analysis makes founded, thought provoking commentary, ultimately illustrating that whether it be secularism or Islamism, both structures serve to reinforce the existing system of patriarchy. Despite his criticism, Saharbi ends his social critique with a note of hope, suggesting that an "inevitable victory" over neopatriarchy will occur (Sharabi 155).

But before we get to talk about hope, let us move backwards to the Arab world in the aftermath 1967. The supposed progress the Nahda (and other movements) had made towards modernity since Napoleon had opened the Arab world up to Europe seemed to have been in vain, what with the defeat in the Six Day War. The ramifications of this defeat were widespread, especially on the psychological level, with some even arguing that the trauma from this defeat is still active in the psyche of the region today (Melhelm). Neopatriarchy rises from this air of malaise and defeat, which is widespread across both the Arab world and intellectualism. From this state of being, a new wave of intellectuals arose, markedly different to the ones who came before them. Thinkers such as Taha Hussein and Mohammad Abduh, had belonged to traditions that were generally ones of hope, optimism and which believed in the success of their efforts. Of course there were the pessimists, but mostly there was hope. Many of the post-'67 thinkers serve as a contrast to this optimism, belonging to an overarching ideology of Arab self-critique. They saw the shortcomings where their predecessors had seen successes.

1. Sharabi seems to equate the two

Trinity Middle East & North Africa Review

Sharabi sits neatly within this tradition of self-critique, however his discussions and conclusions reach farther than just self critique, offering ideas to other ideologies, including Islamic feminism. Sharabi's key contributions include the coining and defining of the term neopatriarchy, critically analysing the failings of the generations before him. Additionally in outlining the "problematics"1 of Arab society, Sharabi created strict parameters against which to assess Arab society, successfully contributing to the framework he aimed to create (Sharabi 10). This three pronged approach can be applied ubiquitously, and I would argue is a very important contribution to the tradition of self critique and general studies of the region. You can, for example, use it as a guideline for the assessment of cultural productions from the region.

However, despite his contributions, I found the comparisons to Japan were grossly unfair, distasteful and not all that different to the way in which intellectuals of the vehemently criticised Nahda regime had used Europe as a standard to humiliate the Arab world against. For the purpose of relevancy, I'll keep my criticism short. There are two primary reasons I found this to be distasteful. First of all, Japan was a colonial power in its own region and did not suffer the same "cultural imperialism" as the Arab world had to contend with, and unmesh itself from (Sharabi 76). Second of all, in the modern day, Japan's society is stagnating (The Economist, 2023). Japan also seems to exist as a neopatriarchy as well. With time it has made the intention of his comparison to appear somewhat futile. I do understand that Sharabi was trying to illustrate that authentic modernisation exists, but I found it to be a lazy comparison. I also didn't appreciate that the 'Arab society' he refers to was never properly outlined. Manfred Sing's article which criticised self-critics for self-orientalising is relevant to Sharabi's book, though overall I ultimately found it was still a well written piece (Sing 149).

In the book, Sharabi states that modernity has to be viewed as a "mode of being" and should "help both the individual and the society realise their greatest potential" (Sharabi x; xi). If you compare modern cars of the 1950s to modern cars of the 2020s, there's very little in common with them, other than the fact they represented a marked shift to their predecessor and bettered themselves.

Or, in the words of Sharabi, "in its basic dimension modernity is a transitional process involving a movement from one mode of knowledge or paradigmatic structure to another radically different, a break with traditional (mythical) ways of understanding in favour of new (scientific) modes of thought" (Sharabi 10). Sharabi then breaks the idea of modernity down into three elements (2), which help to contribute to his framework of understanding, ultimately outlining that there isn't an empirical way to measure the modernity of a space; it isn't a "culture or a style of life"18, nor will tangible things like independence guarantee it (Sharabi 21; x). "The Nahda [amongst other groups] failed to grasp the true nature of modernity" and therefore the Arab project for modernity before 1967 was doomed to fail from the get go (Sharabi 6). Through this definition, Sharabi also sets Islam (mythic / tradition) and modernity (new / scientific) against each other, and he refutes this point again, suggesting that Islamism could only be kept at bay because 'modern' modes were succeeding, but that the failure of modern modes would enable Islamism to rise (Sharabi 10; 89).

This space for Islamism was created with the failure of such "new (scientific) modes of thought." epitomised by the defeat in 1967 (Sharabi 10). In the aftermath, Islamic fundamentalism (for the first time) "constituted a dominant" mode in the social and political world, illustrating this shift (Sharabi 136). Modernity and secularism, had failed, "thus fundamentalism, ... present itself as the alternative to capitalism and socialism [which had just failed] and the only valid doctrine for Arab society" (Sharabi 146). Islam stepped into the vacuum, a vacuum which would not have existed had the project for modernity succeeded. Islamism became an "attractive alternative" for those who had witnessed the failure of modernisation, because of its grassroots appeal (Sharabi 140).

2. Modernity as structure, modernization as a process, and modernism as the consciousness.
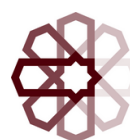
Fundamentalism had a "simple and direct articulation" which spoke to the masses whereas the project for modernity had largely been out of touch with the wider population, confined to the elite (Sharabi 140). Islamism also promised "victory [to be] inevitable" which sits in contrast with 1967 (Sharabi 140). The rise of Islamism would not have happened as swiftly had the project for modernity succeeded. In the wake of failure and frustration, fundamentalism was a perceivable "antimodernist, utopian patriarchalism ... legitimate successor" that could only come about as modernity fell away (Sharabi 13).



via Palquest.org

The rise of Islamism after 1967 clearly illustrates that the Arab project for modernity had failed. This illustration is primarily made in the way the two were characterised earlier as being opposing forces, and on one level this opposition sits true. However, through my understanding of Sharabi's book, I would argue that the Arab project for modernity and rise of Islamism are both illustrative of the success of neopatriarchy to keep itself alive. Both actors are ultimately contributing to the phenomena of "modernised patriarchy (neopatriarchy) [which] is the vehicle of patriarchal society's continuing attempt to keep modernity at bay", perpetuating the same cycles of distortion (Sharabi 48).

In particular, Sharabi illustrates the success of neopatriarchy using the Nahda movement which "not only failed to break down the inner relations and forms of patriarchalism, but by initiating what is called the modern awakening also provided the ground for producing a new, hybrid sort of society / culture we see before use today.... [it] only served to remodel and reorganise patriarchal structure by giving them modern forms and appearances" (Sharabi 4). The foundations for the rise of Islamism were laid, while simultaneously the Nahda helped neopatriarchy remain the dominant structural force. Similarly, the rise of Islamism is not a marked shift away from neopatriarchy but rather is "the product of the same deep rooted forces which produced the structure of neopatriarchal society" and that "it [Islamism] is as much the product of the age of imperialism as are "enlightenment" and "modernisation" (Sharabi 60; 71). All efforts within the earlier projects of modernity were reinforcing the very thing they promised to dismantle, and so too is Islamism.

The two actors, Islamism and the project for modernity, are cut from the same cloth, both representing a wider failure to seriously challenge underlying structures. I think, in accordance with Sharabi's thesis, what is more important to notice is not whether one mode proves the futility of the other, but rather that the project for modernity and Islamism are on some level equitable symptoms of the same "invisible disease eating at the centre" (Sharabi viii). The rise of Islamism illustrates a failure to achieve modernity, but so too does the Nahda itself, the petty bourgeoisie, the "culturally schizophrenic" intellectuals and the shortcomings of classical Arab culture–all which are products of neopatriarchy, which was in part caused by "inauthentic" development (Sharabi, throughout). Through this paradigm, the book can then be used to reckon with many of the other questions surrounding the relationship between Islamism and modernity in Arab society, and broader questions about the roles of various actors in the shaping and upholding of neopatriarchy.

I think it's interesting that Sharabi's principles are applicable 35 years after publication. While I fully appreciate the "specificity" of the book is distinctly Arab, and the framework is for Arab society, I think the way Sharabi went about analysing root causes of the problems could offer a model for Western thought to do the same (Sharabi 15). Western modernity (which is rapidly deteriorating) could benefit from being reckoned with in a similar fashion. Not everything Sharabi says is correct, and the book is distinctly lacking in specific examples, but a lot of his pontifications are accurate, and (unfortunately) retain relevance today. Sharabi ends the book by saying that he must "fight the pessimism of the intellect, [and] must hold fast to the optimism of the will" (Sharabi 155). I think Sharabi would be saddened to see that much of the world is grappling with an inherently contradictory structure, and the phenomena of the "dramatic widening of the gulf between rich and poor" is widespread (Sharabi 60).

The women's movement is also failing to seriously challenge the structures of neopatriarchy (Sharabi 154). Whether it be neo-patriarchy or maybe neo-feudalism or some other disease, the mode of being that was modernity has been lost on a wider scale than I think Sharabi would've wanted, and not just in Arab society but on a global level. Through this book, a number of assertions can be made, including the fact that the failure of modernity gave rise to Islamism, but more importantly the fact that both act to serve the same structural rot, and for real modernity to be achieved, neopatriarchy must first be dismantled.

# Bibliography

AMelhem, Hisham. "The Arab World Has Never Recovered From the Loss of 1967,"." Foreign Policy 5 (2017): 59-67.

Sharabi, Hisham. "Neopatriarchy: A theory of distorted change in Arab society." (1988): 8.

Sing, Manfred. "ARAB SELF-CRITICISM AFTER 1967 REVISITED." The Arab Studies Journal 25.2 (2017): 144-191.

# "There is no short of ugliness in the world": Politicising Illness in Forugh Farrokhzad's The House is Black

## *Shaadi Iris Ghorbani*

Forugh Farrokhzad's The House is Black begins with a statement of purpose. Preceding its 22-minute runtime, viewers are faced with black opacity and a warning that they are about to witness "An image of ugliness. A vision of pain no caring human being should ignore" (The House is Black). The darkness then lifts to reveal a woman with leprosy gazing into a floral mirror, partially blind and unblinking. The camera zooms in for what feels like a second too long.

The House is Black was released in 1963 and directed by poet Forugh Farrokhzad as a look into the often dehumanised and desolate lifestyles of those living in a leprosy colony near Tabriz, Iran. Its transcript cuts over shots from the colony and involves quotations from the Old Testament, the Quran, and Farrokhzad's own poetry to match its themes of daily survival and resilience (Roxanne 12). The video cuts showcase scenes ranging from fights to classroom conversations, and their mundanity acts as a testament to reveal the humanity of the shunned even through adversity and sickness. The House is Black is widely regarded as a precursor for the Iranian New Wave Movement, a cinematic category of Persian films known for social commentary and often simple subject lines cut by deeper themes (Henderson).

It would be impossible to review the below film without first delving into the remarkable life of Forugh Farrokhzad herself, who upon the film's release adopted a child from the colony and has a continued legacy as one of the most influential poets in Iran's history. Born in 1934 in Tehran, Farrokhzad's life was tragically cut short by a car accident three years after the release of her film, to a period of national mourning for her immense impact on Iranian poetry, film, and thought (Wolpe). Her life as a fourth child of seven and student in a girl's school for manual arts was a foil of the legacy she would later have as a feminist figure and iconoclast, and many of her works delve into the life she was thrust into through the oppressive social norms of patriarchal love and losing her child in the antiquated divorce proceedings that exist in Iran to this day.

IAt the time of The House is Black's release, typical audiences were more accustomed to the "Farsifilm" genre in cinema, making Farrokhzad's film especially important at a time when the silver screen was often used to portray a more shallow and archetypal narrative about prince-and-damsel stories (Mirbahktyar). Upon its reception in the mid-1960s, television was well on its way to colour and most broadcasts were switched to non-black and white (Richard). While this transition certainly took longer in Iran, the absence of colour only adds to the somewhat antiquated feel of the film and is—whether intentionally or unintentionally—an accessory to the landscape documented by Farrokhzad.

See, when watching the film, it's easy to forget that it was released in 1966 and not 1946. Farrokhzad's crew slowly zooms on the dilapidated conditions of the hospital and nearby school. Wooden structures and obsolete medical technology distract from the fact that many of the children videotaped would be just above middle-aged today.

Despite this, one of the film's loudest messages is assuredly one of humanization; Farrokzad's poetry is cut by clips of refreshingly mundane activities of residents. The film isn't a charity case: children are seen running and playing just as adults are seen fighting, and women are pictured putting on makeup and talking about their marriages. The narrative of the film as a documentary was new and political despite its seemingly humble thematics. I believe that Farrokzad did an incredible job doing this, and did so using a subversion gained through being female; she spread a strong message through innocuous scenes of daily life. Her voice-over of poetry spans the duration of the film and is only cut by a male voice —her film partner Ebrahim Golestan— who provides the occasional objective analyses of medical condition or prognosis. This furthers a message of the introspective and loving voice of the female interrupted by a masculine voice of reason.

MENA Trinity Middle East & North Africa Review

At the time, criticisms of Reza Shah Pahlavi were deeply looked down upon and the film at its core is a critique despite the film receiving funding from the Shah (Salemy). In a period where it was of utmost importance to tout westernisation as a sign of progress, the Shah had commissioned Golestan's film company to produce films on technological advancements, contributing to Farrokhzad's prior experiences filming oil wells and car machinery. This made it an especially bold move when the film is opaquely a critique, and begins with the lines "There is no short of ugliness in the world. If man closes his eyes to the world, they would be even more" (The House is Black). Viewers open their eyes to the archaic nature of the colony, and through its mundanity, Farrokzad reveals the often heartbreaking lives of residents. When asked to name beautiful things in a classroom, the children name games, moon, and sun— then when asked to list ugly things, they name hands and feet. Even children are shown to recognize and learn to see leprosy as undesirable, yet are pictured experiencing childhood under a semblance of normality. In this, Farrokzad maintains the dignity of the children while remaining critical of the situation outside of their control that they exist in, a situation exacerbated by the ornate banquets of the Shah overshadowing the lives of his constituents. While it is worth mentioning that Farah Pahlavi built the first semi-autonomous leprosy community one year before the film's release, most hospitals and villages including the ones filmed at the time were either run or ran by Christian missionaries due to Jesus Christ's compassionate treatment of those with leprosy in Luke 1:14 (Salemy). When meeting after a live screening with the Shah and Farah Pahlavi, their tears of sympathy was later considered by Farrokzad as "A most pathetic scene" (Salemy).

As a viewer, it was a pleasure to read and reflect on Farrokzad's words as the film progressed, and while the videos were simple in content to allow better comprehension of prose, their simple nature could be a whiplash-inducing foil to her often dark messaging.

There is a greater meaning portrayed in the film than that of the resilience of those with leprosy. The community in many ways depicts Iran- an Iran reflected but met with hope and perseverance of citizens. Hamid Dabashi, professor of Iranian studies and Comparative history at Columbia University states that the firm shows a "brutalized history" of Iran, saving metaphorical scars for physical ones and using a cast of those physically showing effects of the regime (Bekhzad). The only time Golestan's signature objectivity is broken is when he repeats that "leprosy is not incurable", emphasizing the hope left for many of the colony's residents (The House is Black). Despite this, the hardship faced by the Iranian people is constantly alluded to throughout the film- "our being, like a cage full of birds, is filled with the moans of captivity. And none among us knows how long he will ask....like doves we cry for justice and there is none" (The House is Black). The very act of these words being uttered through montages of children playing and mothers feeding their children shows the mundanity of suffering through daily life and injustice. Preceding a scene where a boy plays ball with his friends and showcases a very real smile, one is asked by a teacher why he must thank God for having a mother and father. He responds with "I don't know, I do not have any" (The House is Black).

MENA Trinity Middle East & North Africa Review

The film ends with a somewhat cautionary message, likely pointed at the Shah. A man on crutches moves toward the camera, with Farrokhzad saying that "we wait for light and darkness reigns" (The House is Black). The man continues walking towards the camera, eventually reducing the film to blackness. A gate is closed against a deluge of people with leprosy, covered with the message "Leper Colony". The jovial students are asked to make a sentence with the word "house" in it, and they come up with "The house is black" (The House is Black). The "blackness" alluded to in the film is a genius allusion in the way that it too mirrors the blackness of leprosy scars. Blackness appears to be the lives of those living in the colony, and yet they still find mundanity and joy in its consistency.

Their 'curable' illness of both leprosy and the wider Iranian citizenry is left unsettled thus showcasing the resilience of those who experience it at the hands of oppressive forces outside of their control. When asked about potential suicides within the colony, Farrokhzad stated that "The lepers when going to the colony have passed the disappointment stage. They have accepted life as it is. I have seen more people there attached to life and loving to live than anywhere else." (Salemy).

Forough Farrokzad's The House is Black earns its legacy as a film ahead of its time by showcasing an environment far behind its time. It relies equally on sound and vision to get its compelling message across, and viewers accurately feel as if they are watching a message to the Shah. Its subject matter hides behind a cloak of apolitical, but this could not be further from the truth as it reveals a ceaseless resilience despite equally ceaseless suffering. Just how leprosy is stated as curable, however, is the suffering of the Iranian people, not a sentencing. The house, as the film states, may be black— but perhaps the home is not.

## Bibliography

Abu-Lughod, Lila. "Contentious Theoretical Issues: Third World Feminisms and Identity Politics." Women's Studies Quarterly, vol. 26, no. 3/4, 1998, pp. 25–29.

Charrad, Mounira M. "Gender in the Middle East: Islam, State, Agency." Annual Review of Sociology, vol. 37, no. 1, 2011, pp. 417–37. Annual Reviews, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.012809.102554.

Golley, Nawar Al-Hassan. "Is Feminism Relevant to Arab Women?" Third World Quarterly, vol. 25, no. 3, 2004, pp. 521–36. JSTOR.

Grami, Amal. "Islamic Feminism." Contemporary Arab Affairs, vol. 6, no. 1, 2013, pp. 102–13. JSTOR.

Schulz, Dorothea E. "Scholarship on Gender Politics in the Muslim World: Some Critical Reflections." Islamic Studies in the Twenty-First Century, edited by Léon Buskens and Annemarie Van Sandwijk, Amsterdam University Press, 2016, pp. 109–34. DOI.org (Crossref), https://doi.org/10.1515/9789048528189-007.

# Intersections of Islamism and Patriarchy in Woman at Point Zero
*Beatrice Pistola*

Woman at Point Zero is a novel written by Nawal El Saadawi published originally in Beirut in Arabic in 1973. This novel is based on the author's meeting with Firdaus, a female poisoner in the Qanatir Prison before her execution. This first person's account of the prisoner's life explores, through Firdaus' experiences, the role of women in the patriarchal society of Cairo and their oppression. She described it to be 'more or less a real story with some imagination' (El Saadawi 1992). At the time, after being fired as both the Editor in Chief of the magazine Health, which was closed down due to political pressure, and the Director of Health education, Saadawi was conducting her research on Neurosis in Egyptian women (Cooke M. VI). This is when, through the prison doctor, she found out about Firdaus and after several failed attempts, she managed to meet her and interview her (Cooke M. VII). The book, like most works by Saadawi, was banned in Egypt because of the ongoing tension between the author and the government following the attempted publication of Women and Sex in 1969, where she openly criticised the widespread practice of female circumcision in Egypt and 'society's fixation with virginity' (Cooke, R.).

Nawal El Saadawi is one of the most influential feminist intellectuals in the Arab world as well as an advocate for women's rights both in Egypt, her country of origin, and abroad. In 1982 she founded the 'Arab Women's Solidarity Association', which was outlawed less than a decade later, in 1991 (Cooke M. VI). Living part of her life in exile, Saadawi taught in universities in both Europe and the United States before going back to Egypt in 1996. In 2004 she presented her campaign as a candidate for the Egyptian presidential elections, advocating for human rights, greater freedom and democracy (Cooke M. VI). However, just one year later, she was forced to withdraw her candidacy due to political instability and government persecution. After winning several prizes and receiving numerous honorary degrees from universities throughout the world, she died in 2021 in a hospital in Cairo (Cooke M. VII).

Saadawi defined herself as a social-feminist and, as an anti-capitalist, did not believe that the feminist struggle can be won under a capitalist system, which she believed was where the root of women's oppression lies (Fariborz). In terms of the influence of religion on Egypt and on the role of women in the country, Saadawi was of the opinion that "the root of the oppression of women lies in the global post-modern capitalist system, which is supported by religious fundamentalism" (Fariborz). Therefore, although Islam plays a part in supporting the patriarchal system in place, the oppression of women in the context of Egypt cannot entirely be traced back to religion. The roots of the patriarchal society presented in Woman at Point Zero seem to go beyond Islamic fundamentalism, which was not as popular at the time of Firdaus' childhood. In the book, the author is critical of the use of religion as a discourse to justify the oppression of women, but does not situate this problem in Islamism but rather in a societal structure that originates from before. For the author, religion was a private matter and its politicisation did not benefit society in a wider sense because religion should not be used as a discourse to gain political power (Akkawi). She was against fundamentalism of any kind, whether Christian, Jewish or Islamic, as she believed women were the first targets of oppression in their political agendas (Akkawi). Furthermore, she considered the use of the veil as a tool of oppression for Muslim women in political discourses (Nassef). She strongly opposed the Muslim Brotherhood and described them as both backwards and reactionary, harmful to Egyptian politics and society (Etezadosaltaneh and Kabir).

The time of publication of this novel is attributed particular importance because the 1970s, after the loss of the Six-Day War against Israel in 1967, saw the rise of conservatism and religiosity throughout the Middle East. Before these events, Egypt, ruled firstly by Nasser and then by Sadat, saw the separation between religious institution and state, in an attempt to modernise the country.

IThe 1967 defeat opened the doors for new intellectual thoughts and activism which aimed to criticise Arab societies in an attempt to address and explain the failure. This is reflected in Woman at Point Zero's revolutionary tone and its aim to challenge the essence of Egyptian society by breaking down its faulted structure through the life experiences of Firdaus. .


via Reuters

Nawal El Saadawi, a revolutionist since birth, was highly critical of the corruption of religious systems and the role they played in the oppression of women. Rather than being critical of Islam itself, she was concerned with the institutions built around it, such as Al-Azhar, which she (1) considered a 'dangerous reactionary force' (Akkawi) . According to the author, this institution, by censoring studies and books and choosing not to educate the youth on important themes such as rape and gender inequality (2), was controlling the religious discourse (Akkawi). Saadawi's secular socialism, which advocated for the separation of religion and state, and her fight for the alleviation of women's oppression can be considered incompatible with the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood, who advocated for strict rules on female dressing, change of the school curriculum for girls and thorough instruction on topics considered "proper" for a woman (Freer). Saadawi believed that gender and class divisions, as well as religious fundamentalism increased corruption in Egyptian society (Cooke, R.). Children who were born in lower class families did not have the possibility to progress in their career, promoting the stagnation of society.  With the increase in gender division, even educated women would often end up working at home while trapped in an arranged marriage or dedicating their lives to prostitution (Cooke, R.).

(1) Although the author was not critical of Islam itself, she did not agree with the restrictions on critiquing religion that were imposed  in Egypt because built around anti-liberal notions which promoted censorship (Akkawi 2021).
(2) While the power of this institution was suppressed during Nasser's rule, they were still very influential in censorship and religious education

This is reflected in Woman at Point Zero, where Firdaus' secondary school diploma was not valued because of her gender and since her uncle refused to send her to university, her only options were to either stay in her arranged marriage or find a way to make a living by herself, a difficult task in the patriarchal society she was living in. However, even though the Muslim Brotherhood believed in the merging of religion and state, which went against Saadawi's political stance, the modernisation project at the time of Nasser and Sadat came with increased censorship and banned most of Saadawi's books and other publications (Fariborz). Therefore, if her work and similar projects by other authors were banned, it can be said that the project for modernisation in place before 1967, through an intellectual scope, did not grant freedom of speech and did not encourage the education of the population on certain topics. If modernity had not failed in terms of infrastructures and economy, the government had failed to modernise the society, explaining Firdaus' incapability to escape the patriarchal system she seems to be trapped in. Therefore, the project for modernity can be said to have failed long before the rise of Islamism in the context of Egypt.

This book, reflecting Saadawi's role as a radical feminist, places every man, with no exception, into a patriarchal framework whereby he is given the right to abuse, both emotionally and physically, the protagonist. The novel aims to show that all men are equally implicated in the framework, all the way from her childhood, with her father, to her imprisonment, with her pimp. This framework is entirely created by men, who, being in positions of power, are given the right to trap women into a system that automatically subjugates them to men. Certain female characters, such as Sharif, Firdaus' uncle's wife and her mother, are also recruited in this patriarchal system of oppression, leading to the ideological notion that choices made by women are not necessarily feminist choices.
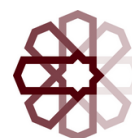
Woman at Point Zero aims to show how certain female characters perpetuate the patriarchy in an attempt to oppress one another . This comes from their internalisation of stereotypes that have been constructed and imposed upon them by men (3). Even the women that are not recruited in the patriarchal system do not show powerful solidarity, with the exception of the protagonist's teacher in school. This framework places the victim, in this case Firdaus, in a position of fear, used as a justification as to why she has never stabbed a man before. Moreover, the rooted misogyny of Egyptian society, which attributes little importance to women's discourses and fosters the protagonist's passivity towards her own life events. What makes this novel particularly revolutionary is that it is not limited to narrate Firdaus' life story, but it rather aims to criticise Egyptian society as a whole. Firdaus could be any woman and her master could be any man, they serve as representatives of their respective genders . Due to the symbolic nature of her role, Firdaus is therefore a martyr for Egyptian women upon her death. The uncompromising behaviour of the protagonist, which eventually led to her execution, is the only radically feminist possible outcome to this patriarchal system Egyptian women are trapped in. Asking Firdaus to apologise for the killing of a man is forcing her to submit to the system, but she chose freedom. This book encourages women all throughout the world to resist, rather than coexist, with the patriarchal system imposed upon them.

 By identifying religion as a facilitator for the oppression of Arab women and the breaches of human rights, Saadawi did not believe in the coexistence and compatibility of the two in any Arab society (Akkawi). As explored throughout the book by analysing the events of Firdaus' life, the most pious men, also part of the patriarchal system in place, use religion as a justification for the oppression of women and gender based violence.

(3) Nawal El Saadawi admitted in an interview that she considered Sadat's wife a woman against women because of her work against women rights within Egypt and her participation in the fragmentation of the local feminist movement. According to the author, Sadat and his wife advocated for the separation of women, classes and religions, which is what led to religious fundamentalism. Therefore, these characters from Woman at Point Zero play a similar role to Sadat's wife in the patriarchal framework (Cooke, R. 2015).

Firdaus' uncle did not agree to let her study in university because a 'man of religion' would not let his niece spend time in the company of men. Moreover, when Firdaus rushed to her uncle's wife after being physically assaulted by her husband, her aunt, who is also rooted in the patriarchal system, reassured her by saying that 'it was precisely men well versed in their religion who beat their wives. The precepts of religion permitted such punishment' (Saadawi 59). Additionally, it appears by reading the novel that Islam sets an  expectation for the behaviour of women which often leads to their oppression, promoting notions concerning women's obedience to men, with disobedience often leading to rape and other punishments. Woman at Point Zero also criticises the institution of Islamic marriage, which is described as 'the system built on the most cruel suffering for women' (Saadawi 118). As proven by both Woman at Point Zero and her book The Fall of the Imam, she is very critical of corruption in Arab societies and considers the interconnection of politics and religion to be one of its main causes (Akkawi). Woman at Point Zero, however, should not be interpreted as a window into the timeless nature of the Islamic religion but instead as a series of events which need to be placed into their respective historical contexts (Balaa 243) (4). This distinction is important, because it shows that the novel does not intend to criticise Islam, as believed by Islamists, but to rather explore how it has been used as a discourse to facilitate the patriarchal system, contrary to the Arab widespread perspective on Nawal El Saadawi, who is locally believed to write for the West (Fariborz; Balaa 236-253) (5).

 (4) The author believed President Sadat to have greatly contributed to the widespread corruption in Egypt (Cooke, R. 2015).
(5) This, according to the author, is because her work is censored in Egypt and the majority of the Arab World, meaning that Western media outlets are the only platforms that offer her complete freedom of speech. In Egypt, she has barely been able to speak on national television or write articles for the national newspaper, her work is limited to the small opposition newspaper, explaining why she gained more visibility outside of her country of origin (Cooke, R. 2015).
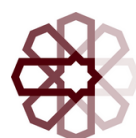
**MENA** Trinity Middle East & North Africa Review

While it is true that the novel plays into some Western Orientalist stereotypes of the region, it also challenges others (Balaa 250). For instance, Firdaus does not reflect the Orientalist stereotype of the silent and obedient Muslim woman that is often marginalised both in real life and as a character in other Arab intellectuals' novels. The protagonist of the novel is a woman, and her life events are central to the narrative. The publication of this novel, as well as Firdaus' agreement to speak to Saadawi, are themselves acts that aim to challenge the patriarchal system and authoritarian political structures of Egyptian society. Woman at Point Zero gives voice to the voiceless and space to the marginalised.

Overall, it can be said that Woman at Point Zero by Nawal El Saadawi perfectly reflects the radically feminist nature of the author and her concerns with the politics of the time. By telling the story of Firdaus, Saadawi managed to critique Egyptian society and the role of religion in promoting the patriarchal framework that men and women are part of. According to the novelist, religion was often used to justify the segregation and oppression of women, proven in the book by Firdaus' aunt's reaction when she came home looking for help after her husband abused her. Moreover, the author goes on to criticise the institution of the Islamic marriage and the corruption in Arab societies, which, as stated in various interviews, she believes to be encouraged by fundamentalist ideologies (Akkawi).

Her work is highly criticised as it is said to fuel the Western Orientalist narratives on the Middle East and Islamic religion, but after a deeper analysis, it is clear the author is trying to break stereotypes (Balaa 236). Firdaus challenges the patriarchal system rather than subduing to it and by accepting the death penalty rather than apologising for the killing of a man she becomes a martyr for women in Egypt. The book does not aim to explore the timeless nature of Islam but it rather tries to show how religion has been used as a discourse to oppose change (Balaa 240). Even though the author believed that Islamic fundamentalism worsened the condition of women, the problem is considered structural rather than dependent on the rise of Islamism (Fariborz). This book, published in 1973, explores the life of a woman who was born long before the rise of Islamism after 1967, but who was still unable to escape Egyptian patriarchal structure. This problem can be attributed to different factors including the lack of freedom of speech during Nasser and Sadat, which prevented people from being informed in regards to important societal and intellectual issues (Fariborz). Therefore, even though Islamic values were used as a justification for the oppression of women, the structural issues which prevented modernisation originated from before and cannot be attributed entirely to Islamic fundamentalism.

# Bibliography

Akkawi, Hala. "An Introduction to Nawal El-Saadawi's Controversial Views on Religion, Politics, Women, and Death." WatchDogs Gazette, 6 April, 2021.

Balaa, Luma. "El Saadawi Does Not Orientalize the Other in Woman at Point Zero." Journal of International Women's Studies, vol. 19, no. 6, 2018, pp. 236-253.

Cooke, Miriam. Foreword. Woman at Point Zero by Nawal El Saadawi. ZED Books, 2015 pp. VII-VIII.

Cooke, Rachel. "Nawal El Saadawi:'Do You Feel You Are Liberated? I Feel I Am Not.' The Guardian, 11 October 2015.

El Saadawi, Nawal. Woman at Point Zero. Translated by Sherif Hetata. Zed Books, 2015.

Fariborz, Arian. "Interview with Nawal El Saadawi." Translated by Jennifer Taylor. Qantara, 2014.

Etezadosaltaneh, Nozhan and Kabir, Arafat. "Q&A with Nawal El Saadawi." International Policy Digest, 2 March, 2014.

Freer, Courtney. "The Influence of Islamist Rhetoric on Women's Rights." London School of Economics Middle East Centre, 20 December 2017.

Johnson, Angela. "Interview: Speaking at Point Zero: Talks with Nawal El-Saadawi." Off Our Backs vol. 22, no. 3, March 1992 pp. 1-7.

Nassef, Ahmed. "EGYPT: El Saadawi: 'The veil is a political symbol'." Greenleft, Issue 574, 17 November 1993.

Smith, Sarah. "Nawal El Saadawi Obituary." The Guardian, 22 March, 2021.

# Art and Photography
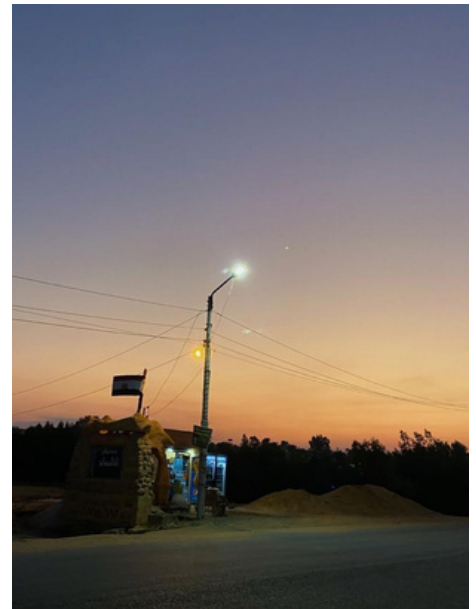
## A Journey Through Egypt

*Beatrice Pistola*


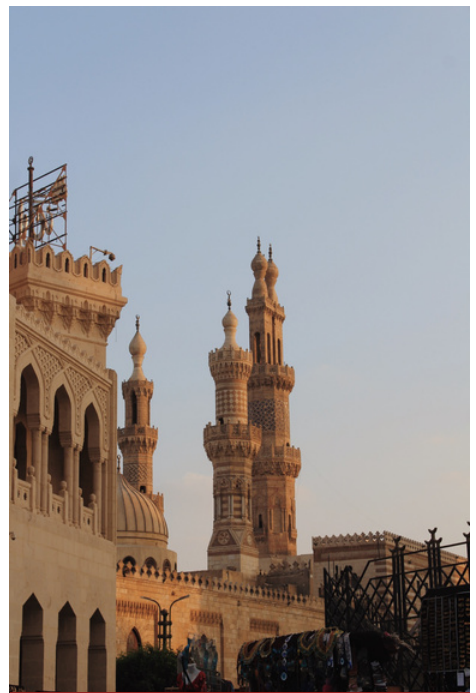Tunis Village, Faiyum


Siwa Oasis


Tunis Village, Faiyum

*Ellen Aylmer*


Cairo


Giza


Cairo

# Visiting the South of Morocco

*Beatrice Pistola*


Panoramic View from the Kasbah of Agadir Oufella on the Atlas Mountains


Walking around the New Medina of Agadir, rebuilt after the 1960 earthquake

*Tayeeba Ahmed*


A view of Marrakesh's Medina at midday from the rooftop at Shtatto, a unique restaurant combining traditional Moroccan cuisine in a delicious style brunch.


Painted plates for sale hanging on a wall in the old city of Marrakech
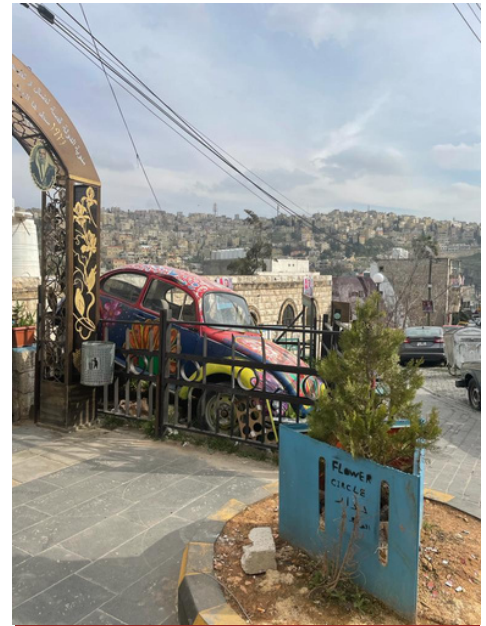
# A Weekend in the Jordanian Capital

*Tayeeba Ahmed*



Skyline view of Amman from Citadel Hill


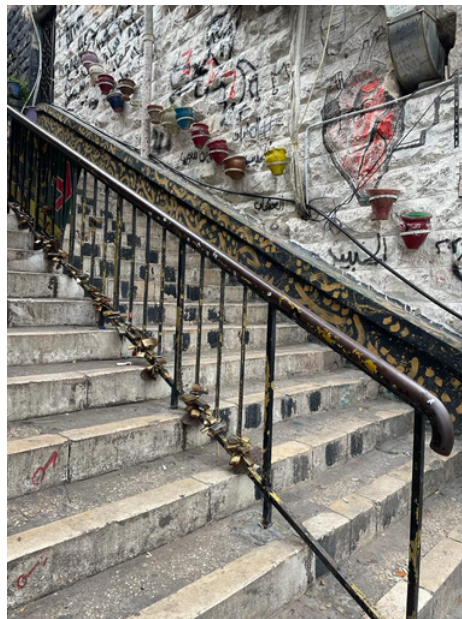
Nighttime on Rainbow street



Painted car on flower circle

*Tayeeba Ahmed (Images 1&2), Rebecca Cleere (Image 3)*



Palestinian owned shop established in 1960



Steps in Amman city center with art and locks adorning it



Busy street in Amman on a cloudy day

# Walks around the Tunis Medina

*Tayeeba Ahmed*





*Beatrice Pistola*

## The Crisis of the White Christian Identity and Its Role in Modern–Day European Islamophobia

*Faye Madden*

According to Cambridge Dictionary, an identity crisis is defined as "a feeling of being uncertain about who or what you are". With the rise of globalization and mass immigration worldwide, the issue of certain populations suffering from "identity crises" has become more prevalent in the political landscape, particularly in the West. In the last decade, Europe has experienced mass migration into the continent, with many of these migrants being Muslim refugees escaping conflict in the Middle East. This unprecedented migration has created an atmosphere of public vitriol from Europeans, particularly White and Christian Europeans, who feel as if their identities and place in society are under threat. We have seen major political changes occur across the Western world as a result of these fears. In several countries, right wing political parties have exploited these contentious circumstances to gain popularity. The "othering" of Middle Eastern and North African refugees by European politicians and media has led to political polarisation and fearmongering. It has become clear that preconceived ideas of identity have heavily contributed to discriminatory rhetoric which has been propagated against certain religious and ethnic groups.

A significant aspect of the societal "identity crisis" seen in many European countries is the relationship between national identity and race. Since the early 2000s, Europe has experienced mass immigration into the continent due to various conflicts in the Middle East, notably, the humanitarian crisis of Syria in 2011. Between 2004 and 2011, approximately 200,000 to 300,000 people annually claimed asylum in the EU. In contrast, 1.3 million people claimed asylum in 2015 alone (Georgi, 96-117). With the influx of Middle Eastern refugees into European countries that have historically been predominantly white, the Muslim population has been racialised and "othered" and labeled as the sole culprit regarding issues surrounding the migration crisis (Prandana).

Certain political figures in Europe have voiced concern that White majorities found in many European nations have begun to shrink. Jörg Meuthen, former co-leader of AfD, a major far-right political party in Europe, has claimed the party is against racism and xenophobia yet he also stated that "in some German cities, I struggle to find Germans on the streets" when he commented on the mass migration of Muslim refugees into Germany (Germany's AFD) This comment alone succinctly displays the views of many right-wing individuals in Europe – if you are Muslim, you are not truly European. Furthermore, being White is a fundamental, non-negotiable feature of being a European. This is evident in racist rhetoric targeting the growing Muslim community in Western politics and media These purported beliefs that the national identities of Western nations are being threatened by mass migration have exhibited that patriotism for many Europeans isn't rooted in their country's history, cultural traditions or language – but in their Whiteness.

Religion and differing religious practices have historically been a point of discrimination and prejudice throughout European history and more recently, it has been a notable feature in Europe's crisis of identity. In the 1950s, in the midst of the period of economic recovery that followed World War Two, Europe was facing a major labour shortage. Several European nations developed agreements with predominantly Muslim countries such as Turkey and Morrocco to recruit workers to come work in Europe. The aim of these agreements was that these immigrant workers would be employed in Europe, they would send their earned wages to their families back home before eventually returning to their home countries after a number of years.



MENA — Trinity Middle East & North Africa Review

However, contrary to these plans, many of the immigrants that were recruited ended up permanently settling in Europe and their families followed (Goerzig, C., & Al-Hashimi, K, 75-90). By 2011, over 12 million Muslims were living in Europe. The Muslim population in Europe only further increased following the migration crisis of 2015 where millions of Middle Eastern refugees flooded into the continent. Islam and the Muslim community in particular have been victim to harmful stereotypes and hate speech as result of their religious practices and beliefs. This is partially due to the ostensible cultural differences Muslims might have with the average White Christian European. These differences include diet, views surrounding modesty and their religious holidays and celebrations. In recent years, there has been political pressure to limit the presence of Islam in Europe and demonstrations against the public celebration of Islamic holidays such as Ramadan (Perocco, 25-40).  This islamophobia however has been dismissed by many Europeans who claim Muslims are "victims of their own culture" and that the societal discrimination the Muslim community suffers is self-inflicted due to their "way of being". It is the pervading belief that the contrasting elements of Islam do not fit the traditional mold of how a European should act so therefore Muslims in Europe have caused their own social exclusion and harassment.

 A misrepresentation of the Islamic view of women is often cited by Western figures who use it to criticise the religion. It is widely purported that on a fundamental level Islam does not see women as autonomous and regards them as the property of their fathers or husbands. However, in the Quran, a woman is described as "a completely independent personality and [she] can make any contract or bequest in her own name." (Rahman). Despite this, Islam is still targeted by political and media figures who label the religion as "anti-women". Right wing politicians like Geert Wilders, leader of the Netherlands' right-wing Freedom Party, have framed their islamophobia as a progressive cause. Wilders has called for the Quran to be banned in the Netherlands as he believes the book is discriminatory against women and the LGBTQ+ community (Goerzig, C., & Al-Hashimi, K, 75-90). It is notable that Wilders has never spoken against the Bible, which contains similar sentiments that could be deemed anti-gay and misogynistic.

Islamic authoritative texts are undoubtedly used by some Muslim authorities to justify hatred and violence against women and LBGTQ+ people however the same dynamic can be observed among Christians and in many other religions. Evidently, this Islamophobia does not stem from a place of concern for women or the LGBTQ+ community, it is merely a hollow display of bigoted identity politics that aims to undermine a religion which has been specifically targeted by the media and many political groups who do not believe that Muslims deserve a place in European society. .

 We can also see these Islamophobic policies that masquerade as 'progressive' in France, where the government has banned girls under the age of eighteen from wearing a hijab in public. The bill, which was passed in 2021, prohibits "any dress or clothing which would signify inferiority of women over men" ('Law against Islam'). The bill, argued as a protection of women's liberty, legally takes away the choice of Muslim girls in France to wear a hijab. In attempt to limit the religious freedoms of Muslim women in France, the French government have also limited the fundamental right of French women to wear whatever they choose. This Islamophobic hijab law can again be linked back to the crisis of European identity. Women choosing to cover themselves under religious grounds is seen as a foreign and archaic concept by Western societies. Instead of accepting these cultural and religious differences for what they are, right-wing women's groups have been emboldened by the widespread islamophobia seen in European politics and media. They have used this hatred to force Muslim women to comply with France 's secular beliefs and idea of women.

 The palpable sense of identity crisis amongst White Christians across Europe is rooted in white supremacy. However, with globalisation and the relatively easy movement of people due to transport developments a shift in ethnic demographics and the integration go immigrants is an inevitable reality for Europe.

This hatred and hate speech witnessed in the past decade in response to the influx of Muslims in Europe will prevail as long as the identity of being White and Christian remains a fundamental condition of Western identity. In order to address this hatred, Western societies must not only address the false notions of inferiority and ideas of Orientalism attached to those of a Muslim or Middle Eastern and North African background but also gradually dissolve the false ideas of superiority attached to White, Christian Europeans.

# Bibliography

Al Jazeera. (2021, April 09). 'law against Islam': French vote in favour of hijab ban condemned. Retrieved December 9, 2022, from https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/9/a-law-against-islam

BBC. (2020, February 11). Germany's AFD: How right-wing is Nationalist Alternative for Germany? Retrieved December 9, 2022, from https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-37274201

Cambridge Dictionary - Identity crisis. (n.d.). Retrieved December 6, 2022, from https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/identity-crisis

Georgi, F. (2019). THE ROLE OF RACISM IN THE EUROPEAN 'MIGRATION CRISIS': A HISTORICAL MATERIALIST PERSPECTIVE. In V. Satgar (Ed.), Racism After Apartheid: Challenges for Marxism and Anti-Racism (pp. 96–117). Wits University Press. https://doi.org/10.18772/22019033061.9

Goerzig, C., & Al-Hashimi, K. (2016). A Puzzling Historical Context. In Radicalization in Western Europe: Integration, public discourse and loss of identity among Muslim communities (pp. 75-90). Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge. Retrieved December 8, 2022.

Perocco, F. (2018). Anti-migrant Islamophobia in Europe. Social roots, mechanisms and actors. REMHU: Revista Interdisciplinar da Mobilidade Humana, 26, 25-40.

Prandana, A. (2018, May 18). National Identity: Identity Politics in Hungary's refugee influx of 2015. Retrieved December 9, 2022, from https://hi.fisipol.ugm.ac.id/en/iis_brief/national-identity-identity-politics-in-hungary-refugees-influx-of-2015/

Rahman I, A., Prof. (n.d.). Women in the Quran and the Sunnah. Retrieved December 10, 2022, from https://www.iium.edu.my/deed/articles/woman_quran.html#:~:text=In%20Islam%20a%20woman%20is,liberty%20to%20choose%20her%20husband.

# The Role of Religion in Political Discourses in Algeria from its Colonisation to its Democratisation

*Douce d'Andlau*

According to the U.S. government, the total population of Algeria is estimated at 41.7 million (July 2018 estimates), of which more than 99% are Muslim. Islam has historically had a major influence on Algerian politics and society and is therefore intrinsically associated with Algerian 'Arab-Islamic' identity. Located in the heart of the Maghreb, between Morocco and Tunisia, Algeria is situated in the middle of two major geographical areas: the Mediterranean to the north and Sahara to the south. Being the largest country in Africa, Algeria is four times larger than France. The French conquest of Algeria in 1830 ended in 1847 with the submission of Emir Abd el-Kader . French colonisation both facilitated the birth of an important European settler-colonist community and of an indigenous nationalist movement whose insurrection led to the Algerian War (1954-1962) and, eventually, to the country's independence. The National Liberation Front (FLN) emerged successful in the wake of the war and went on to become the ruling party. With its socialist project the FLN received military aid from the USSR and governed the country under a single party regime until 1989. The democratisation of the regime in the 1980s, under Chadli Bendjedid, following major protest movements, came to an abrupt end with the start of the civil war in 1991. Algeria then saw a period of conflict between the military, which continued to hold power, and various Islamist groups. In 1999, the election of Abdelaziz Bouteflika assisted in bringing order. However, Bouteflika ruled as an autocrat over Algeria and, after four successive terms, had to relinquish power on April 2, 2019. This article primarily discusses the role religion plays in political discourses in Algeria from its colonisation to its democratisation.

The Algerian colonial period from 1830 to 1962 was characterised by a desire to assimilate the "natives," or the populations existing in Algeria before the arrival of the French. Since being colonised , these natives had become French, but they were not French citizens.

If they wanted to become French citizens, they had to renounce Muslim personal status, a set of legal customs derived from the Qur'an, Sunna and local traditions of Islamic Jurisprudence that governed private affairs, marriage, divorce, custody, , inheritance, the legal status of children and so on and so forth . For the majority of natives, giving up this status meant being a traitor to their origins or a poor believer. In this way, Islam, being an oppressed religion, became an important aspect of Algerian nationalism during the colonial period as a mobilizer of nationalist resistance. Algeria was a heterogeneous nation with various social, political, and cultural practices, however Islam united differing factions under the banner of the anti-colonialist struggle. The assertion of an Algerian identity was thus achieved through Islam, which gradually transformed into a political nationalist movement. In some cases, Algerian Muslim institutions attempted to justify colonial domination to protect their interests, but by 1936, the first Algerian Muslim Congress was held. This marked the beginning of a reformist religious movement articulating political demands. However, these demands were primarily related to freedom of worship and language without questioning colonial domination. In short, a French Algeria but relatively respectful of Islam. Therefore, Islam became a strong symbol in a society that had been shaped by more than a century of French occupation. It led to the creation of a cohesive community around both a shared religion and a shared culture and thus laid the foundation for the development of a national identity that opposed the French government.

According to Maddy-Weitzman, 20 to 30% of the Algerian population speak Berber. However, the Algerian state chose to base the new national identity on its 'Arab-Islamic' identity, excluding linguistic and religious minorities. Thus, after independence, Islam was used as a means of legitimising the authority of certain rulers by conceiving religion not as a belief but more as a source of moral and social values that could be manipulated to suit the interests and objectives of the state in control.

For the future members of the FSI movement, the post-independence state's attitude towards Islam did not correspond to their vision of a proper Islamic society: "The Algerian state of 1962 had nothing to do with what had been projected on the first of November 1954, for which we had taken up arms: an independent state founded on Islamic principles. The state that has risen before our eyes was founded on secular, socialist principles. This was a serious deviation." By embodying official Islam, the state had control over the interpretation of Islam, which could not be diverted to serve as a rallying symbol for oppositional movements anymore. After the Algerian civil war of 1992, the FLN emphasised Article 2 of its Constitution, establishing Islam as the state religion. Public funds were used to support this mandate and indirectly impose its political influence on the religious sphere. This is exemplified by the fact that all persons working in a mosque are considered state employees. Finally, unlike Iran and its theocratic state, the Algerian state is rather headed towards a process of secularisation, which does not mean a denial of Islam but rather a historicization of it for the sake of the reinforcement of the Arab Islamic national sentiments. Algerian law clearly demonstrates the impact of religion on politics. Proselytising non-Muslims is forbidden, converts to another religion have no right to inheritance, marriage between a Muslim woman and a non-Muslim man is forbidden, and Islamic religious education is compulsory until secondary school. Consequently, in modern Algerian society, religious identity is intrinsically associated with political identity as a unifying national force and a powerful political asset.

"El islam houa el hal" which can be translated as "Islam is the solution" is the political message of the FIS, the Islamic Salvation Front (1989 to 1991),. The victory of the FIS in the 1990 municipal elections and in the 1991 legislative elections (where they won a ⅔ majority in the assembly) highlights the discontent felt by a part of the population since independence.

Through its use of the Muslim cultural background and a rather radical discourse, the FIS expresses its opposition to the ruling elite considered to be corrupt. This movement is inspired by the Intifada and the Iranian revolution to set up a new social and political life based on Islam and thus put a stop to the process of secularisation. As a result, Islam shifted from a medium of exclusive state control to a medium of political opposition by Islamic nationalists. It is the result of a growing gap between the development of a globalised country with secular values and a regime that considers itself the bearer of Islamic traditional values. The Islamist ideology of the FIS, among others, is a means of expressing a malaise, especially among young people who are in the globalised where traditional social and religious practices have been disrupted. Youths find in this Islamist ideology stable representatives responding to a demand for social justice as well as a feeling of belonging in a country where the transition from a rural to an urban society has destroyed the sense of community and left individuals isolated. Their political agenda was only formed in opposition to the "westernisation" of the country incarnated by a strong figure. Political Islam is particularly echoed by the "hittists" (unemployed youth) and members of the FIS who seek in Islam a rallying call rather than a quest for spirituality. Because the FIS was not a purely religious movement and used persuasion rather than power and pressure to convince, it allowed a broad range of populations to find their way in. While the FIS was soon banned, it continued to be a highly influential illegal movement, sometimes stepping into the shoes of the state when certain public services were not being provided, further underlining the feeling of abandonment among some local communities. From the 2000s onwards, the radicalised political Islam movement fizzled out, overwhelmed by external and internal tensions and no longer reflecting the regime alternative desired by the younger generations. This decline was part of two reactions, an increasingly communitarian and restrictive Islam or a complete rejection of Islam for a world of overconsumption.

MENA Trinity Middle East & North Africa Review

Islam has played an important role in the political life of Algerians from the time of colonial domination to the recent period of radical social upheaval . The use of Islam and its cultural and historical symbolism allowed to guide a nationalist struggle for independence and, later, to legitimise a government through the use of political Islam. It is therefore not Islamthat is behind these populist Islamist movements but the cultural identity that it conveys. In 1987, Kaeb Yacine resumed his thoughts on the construction of the Algerian nation: "Arab-Islamic Algeria is an Algeria against itself, an Algeria foreign to itself. It is an Algeria imposed by arms, because Islam is not made with candy and roses. It was done in tears and blood, it was done by crushing, by violence, by contempt, by hatred, by the worst abjection that a people can bear. We see the result."

## Bibliography

Addi, Lahouari. "Islam Politique et Démocratisation En Algérie." Esprit (1940-), no. 184 (8/9) (1992): 143–51. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24274811.

Akturk, Sener. "Religion and Nationalism: Contradictions of Islamic Origins and Secular Nation-Building in Turkey, Algeria, and Pakistan." Social Science Quarterly 96, no. 3 (2015): 778–806. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26634190.

Andézian, Sossie. "Sciences sociales et religion en Algérie : la production contemporaine depuis l'indépendance." L'Année du Maghreb, no.24 (2021). http://journals.openedition.org/anneemaghreb/7325.

Baily, Ellen. "Algeria." Salem Press Encyclopedia, (2022).

Entelis, John P. "Religion and Politics in Algeria: Conflict or consensus?." Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations, 12:4 (2001): 417-434. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0959641020089907.

Labat, Séverine. "Islamisme et mouvement social en algérie." Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire 79, no. 3 (2003): 3-18.

Larousse, s.v. "Algérie.", https://www.larousse.fr/encyclopedie/pays/Algérie/104806.

Maddy-Weitzman, Bruce. "Arabization and Its Discontents: The Rise of the Amazigh Movement in North Africa." The Journal of the Middle East and Africa (2012): 109-135.

Mujtaba Ali, Isani " Religion, rationalism and civil war: The case of Algeria." African Security Review, no. 29 (2020): 346-363. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10246029.2020.1843510.
Oussedik, Fatma. "Religion, Gender, and Violence in Algeria." The Brown Journal of World Affairs 6, no. 1 (1999): 191–97. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24590231.

 "Rapport 2018 sur la liberté de religion dans le monde," United States Department of State • Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, (2018).
Sahia Cherchari, Mohamed. "Indigènes et citoyens ou l'impossible universalisation du suffrage." Revue française de droit constitutionnel 60, no. 4, (2004): 741-770.

# Interrogating Personal Status : How and Why the State Co-opts Religious Law

*Freya Coogan*

In this essay I examine Personal Status Codes (that relate to marriage, divorce, custody, inheritance, nationality and paternity in Morocco, Tunisia and Lebanon) as cultural articulations of patriarchy. My first claim is that religious law is not a substantial basis from which to legislate for Personal Status Codes (PSC). My second claim is that the characterisation of these patriarchal legal interpretations as coloured solely by a rigorous understanding of authoritative religious texts or as preserving freedom of religious belief is a rhetorical device that lends existing political motivations moral weight and greater authority.

## An Introduction: Laying Out the Contradictions

'Women's rights' are not a monolith. In practice, the rights of gender minorities everywhere will be different depending on how various facets of identity such as class, ethnicity, religion, undocumented status, gender identity, sexuality, marital status, imprisonment and single parenthood are politicised by state and society. Therefore we can establish that some, but certainly not all, Moroccan, Tunisian and Lebanese women have been increasingly able to participate in visible institutions of the public sphere, universities, the workplace, the judiciary and public office in particular.



I defend these claims in three parts:

1. Firstly, I show how patriarchal interpretations have been imposed onto texts since the earliest years of Islamic scholarship, illustrating the unreliability of bodies of religious law as a basis for PSC.
2. Secondly, I show how 'Freedom of Religious Belief' is used as a rhetorical device to deflect responsibility for human rights violations in an international legal context by Morocco, Tunisia and Lebanon.
3. Thirdly, I discuss how religious law, and in turn, sectarian laws, have historically been exploited as a rhetorical device to cloak the political motivations of successive ruling elites. I show how the activity of civil society has challenged or consolidated the goals of this discursive tactic.

Despite this, the private status of women remains severely restricted (Moghadam, 480) and PSC violate the central provisions of international humanitarian legislation (the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child) that has been ratified by each of these countries. Activists in the Maghreb have long argued that there is a clear conflict between the public status of women as free and equal citizens as outlined in the constitutions of these countries and their private status wherein they are deprived of equal rights (Guide to Equality in the Family in the Maghreb, 17-19).

The only legal precedent for current PSC are clauses alluding to 'the Sharia' in Tunisia and Morocco or to 'Sectarian Power-Sharing' in Lebanon, as the principal source of law, however, any constitutional clause guaranteeing equality should, in theory, take precedence over PSC that are inherently discriminatory (Guide to Equality in the Family in the Maghreb, 17-19). 'Collectif 95' argued that our understanding of the Sharia has been shaped by male interpretations wherein cultural and political persuasions have been historically imposed. (Guide to Equality in the Family in the Maghreb, 13-16) Meanwhile, feminists in Lebanon have long disputed the theory that PSC preserves sectarian 'co-existence' by guaranteeing 'religious freedom' (Geha, 9-28). With these arguments in mind, I dispute that religious law is a substantial basis upon which to legislate for PSC. These case studies illustrate an important trend in how political elites have in different contexts, instrumentalised religious PSC to consolidate control in much the same way.

**Part 1. Engaging with Patriarchal Interpretations : An Inescapable Feature of Religious Law**

In disputing religious law as a substantial basis for PSC and Family Law, I begin with two case studies illustrating how two of the foremost scholars of prophetic Hadith, Abu Dawud Al-Sijistani and Muhammad Al-Bukhari, have curated culturally-informed patriarchal readings of hadiths by omitting crucial corrections. Both the Maliki and Hanafi schools of jurisprudence in Sunni Orthodoxy rely heavily on Sunna to legislate for PSC and to regulate the lives of women. Fatima Mernissi points out that well-authenticated hadiths and corrections regarding the position of women issued by A'isha have been left out of Sahih Al-Bukhari (Mernissi, 61-81). She presents a hadith from the prophets' companion Abu Hurayra that says:

*"three things bring bad luck, house, woman and horse".*

Al Bukhari presents this hadith three times from different chains of narration, giving the the illusion of a stronger hadith (Mernissi, 76). Mernissi points out that A'isha disputed this hadith. In fact, both her and the Caliph Umar denounced Abu Hurayra as an unreliable narrator.

A'isha is documented warning that Abu Hurayra frequently "related hadith that [he] never heard" (Mernissi, 72). What is significant here is that even where there is testimony of A'isha, who is undoubtedly one of the one of the foremost figures of religious authority in Sunni Islam, the prophet's favourite wife and the only person to live inside the first Mosque, Al-Bukhari, in the compiling of hadiths imposed his own personal judgment and neglected essential corrections that conflicted with his sympathies for the patriarchal assertions of Abu Hurayra. Mernissi describes Abu Hurayra's hadiths as focusing on "the polluting essence of femaleness' (Mernissi, 70) as well as consistently contradicting those of A'isha (Mernissi, 72). If we look to Sahih Al-Bukhari we can find numerous hadiths narrated by Abu Hurayra that have hugely restrictive implications for womens' freedom of movement (Al-Bukhari, Hadith 194) and their credibility in matters of paternity (Al-Bukhari, Hadith 297).

However it is not just Sahih Al-Bukhari that gives credence to Abu Hurayra's hadiths while omitting Aisha's corrections. In Sunan Abu Dawud, a hadith is attributed to Abu Hurayra where he stated that the prophet had said:

*"The child of zina is worst of the three."* (Abu Dawud, Hadith 3963)

Left out of this compendium are A'isha's corrections as follows:

'*Urwah narrated: It reached 'Aisha that Abu Hurayra related that the Messenger of Allah said, "The child of zina is worst of the three." She said, "May Allah have mercy on Abu Hurayra, he erred at hearing and erred at relating it; the hadith was not in this meaning. Actually there was a man who hurt the Messenger of Allah and it was mentioned to the Prophet that besides what he had done he was also born out of zina. Thus the Messenger of Allah said, "He is worst of the three."* (Al-Tahawi, Hadith 910)
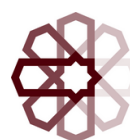
A'isha's correction indicates that any reference to the man in question as a 'child of zina' was merely coincidental and that the prophet's declaration was condemning the man's actions towards him, proclaiming that they were worse than the sin of his parents (Cheema, Are Children Born out of Wedlock Condemned in Hadith?). Though still condemning sexual relations outside of marriage, the inclusion of A'isha's correction mitigates the implications of this hadith hugely (in that it cannot be used to further stigmatise children born out of wedlock) in comparison to how it is reported by Abu Dawud. Two things are significant here; firstly, the corrections attributed to A'isha, who is the more reliable source, leave no room for doubt about the original meaning of what the prophet said, and yet two of the foremost fuqaha chose to ignore these corrections that did not preserve a patriarchal narrative. Secondly, A'isha denounced Abu Hurayra as someone who consistently fabricated hadiths, calling him unreliable. This should, naturally, call any of his hadiths into question as unsubstantiated, and yet he and others like him as identified by Waqar Akbar Cheema (Al-Halabi, Hadith 19802, 19808, 19809, 27375, 29555), (Al-Albani, 117-120) (Al-Din, 6319) are included and drawn upon again and again in legislation that dictates the rights of women along with children born out of wedlock in the 21st century.

Not only is existing fiqh a shaky legal basis from which to derive legal instruction due to the historical imposition of patriarchal opinion thereupon, it is inherently problematic for the State to co-opt fiqh and to use it as a basis upon which to deprive women and gender minorities of the basic human rights granted to them by the State's own constitutions and by international humanitarian law. The imposition of patriarchal motivations onto texts at both levels has myriad consequences for the social norms it shapes, for the kinds of legislation it has historically been used to justify and for the stigma that it promotes against women, forcing them into vulnerable positions as a result. It is upon the basis of the Sunna that the 2004 Mudawanna makes no demands of unmarried fathers to provide "moral or material responsibility" (Berwick, 'Single Mothers in Morocco') towards their children born out of wedlock (Code De La Famille, Article 148). Upon the same basis is the justification for the lengthy, expensive judicial procedures that Moroccan women must engage with to petition the father of a child for a DNA test, a request that to this day is rarely granted.

Similarly the Tunisian PSC relies on notions of female inferiority propagated by the Sunna to justify its unequal inheritance laws that will automatically be imposed unless it has been stipulated otherwise in a will. I will show fiqh in practice, as well as confessional religious law, is used selectively to promote the interests of the State.

**Part 2. How the State uses Religious Law to Shirk Accountability**

When Morocco and Lebanon first ratified the CEDAW, they made reservations to Article 2 and Article 16 among others. Article 2 is a thorough clause that obliges countries to abolish gender-based discrimination and to incorporate protections for gender equality into law. Article 16 asserts the equal rights and obligations of women and men with regard to choice of spouse, parenthood, personal rights and command over property. These reservations were, in Morocco's case, made on the basis that they conflict with 'Islamic Sharia' and in Lebanon's case made on the basis that they conflict with the existing PSC, something that Fazaeli and Hanisek note is framed as an appeal to Freedom of Religious Belief (FORB) (Fazaeli and Hanisek, 93-116). In the myriad of other reservations made to the CEDAW by Morocco, Tunisia and Lebanon against Articles 1, 9 and 15, (regarding international oversight, nationality and women's capacity to freely enter legal contracts) allusions are made as to the incompatibility of these directives with existing PSC or Nationality Laws. Fazaeli and Hanisek note that 'Islamic Sharia' in this case is never substantiated and that there is no coherent Islamic argument (Fazaeli and Hanisek, 93-116). They make the point that many Muslim Majority Countries, Tunisia among them, have since withdrawn reservations initially made on this basis of a conflict with 'Islamic Sharia' signal to Fazaeli and Hanisek that neither these 'Islamic reservations' nor 'State-interpreted Islam' are:

"*necessarily directly related to the sincerely held beliefs and practices that are encompassed by FORB"* (Fazaeli and Hanisek, 93-116).

These conclusions draw further attention to the inherently political nature of 'Islamic Sharia' and 'FORB' as legal justifications used by any State to enforce a political agenda which violates human rights. Although the State co-opting fiqh to justify its patriarchal PSC is inherently problematic, we see that in the international arena there is no attempt to justify Personal Status Codes. 'Islamic Sharia' and 'FORB' are used as rhetorical devices to shirk accountability, undermine the object and purpose of the CEDAW while still benefitting from the boost in international reputation that comes with its ratification. I maintain that it is important to contrast the consociational Lebanese example with the Islamic Moroccan and Tunisian example in order to show the similar underlying mechanisms wherein religious law is used broadly as a rhetorical device by all three countries to the same end.

Women belonging to each of these sects have different and separate Personal Status Laws and thus different and separate rights. Actors within the Lebanese Power-Sharing System, although free agents, are highly incentivised to preserve the power-sharing system as it crucially enables a corrupt network of clientelism built on kin-ties and sectarian alliances. Although political disagreements do not fall along sectarian lines, sectarian elites commonly co-opt popular claims of government corruption and neutralise them by re-directing them at another sectarian party (Geha, 9-28). For these elites the PSC acts as a linchpin of sorts that mandates the Lebanese population be discriminated along sectarian lines. These elites insist that PSC preserve freedom of religious belief and argue that they are necessary to preserve peaceful 'co-existence' post-Civil War.



### Part 3. Historical Instrumentalisation of State-Religion and Stumbling Blocks to Reform

### 3(a) — Lebanon

PSC in Morocco, Tunisia and Lebanon exist as a part of a larger system where they are shaped or reshaped according to the interests and values of groups in power and negotiation with civil society. Lebanon's PSC is the result of an accumulation of political decisions that stretch back to the Ottoman Empire beginning with the Mutasarrifiya, codified under the French Mandate into the National Pact in 1943 and reshaped in the 1989 Taif Accords. The 18 confessionals recognised in the Lebanese Personal Status System are: Alawite, Armenian Catholic, Armenian Orthodox, Assyrian Church of the East, Chaldean Catholic, Coptic Orthodox, Druze, Greek Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Ismaili, Jewish, Roman Catholic, Maronite, Protestant, Sunni, Shi'a, Syriac Catholic and Syriac Orthodox.

Because the Lebanese government relies heavily on foreign aid and remittances, it has had to appear to acquiesce to international humanitarian law for the sake of its international reputation without meaningfully reforming the PSC. It does this by co-opting legislation like the CEDAW and de-toothing it by creating parliamentary committees and state-feminist associations such as the National Commission for Lebanese Women. These initiatives cannot make meaningful policy contributions (Geha , The Myth of Women's Political Empowerment). Depending on how it mobilises, the activity of civil society can, when aligned with political will, lead to reform.

For example, large NGOs in Lebanon have had some success lobbying the government for reform of laws around domestic violence and sexual assault, however in the case of PSC their activity can prove futile, or even detrimental to reform as we will see is partially true in the Moroccan case. Their main function, as the state collapses and municipal functions deteriorate, has been service provision and knowledge production. The reformist approach that has historically been taken towards PSC reform only serves to legitimise the state's empty initiatives (Geha , The Myth of Women's Political Empowerment). I argue that regardless of how efficiently feminist civil society lobbies the corrupt government for PSC reform, it poses too much of an existential threat for elites to ever give on it. Oxfam's in-depth report on the feminist movement in Lebanon identified a rift between the reformist approach that larger NGOs have taken and the radical approach that looser feminist collectives have taken. It is telling, then, that a commonly held point of view of more radical women's collectives in Lebanon is that the only way the PSC will be reformed and secularised is by overhauling the power-sharing system.

### 3(b) — Morocco

In Morocco more than any other case study, rhetoric around divine right to rule and Islamic institutions have been used actively by the state to immobilise opposition and consolidate control (Benomar, 539-555). The three traditional religious authorities since the 16th Century in Morocco have historically been: the monarchy, the urban ulema and the rural religious leaders. Rhetoric around 'Sharia' was essential to both to Istiqlal's nationalist discourse and to the Monarchy's legitimacy, together, in the decade following Moroccan independence these two institutions repressed the traditional ulema in the hopes of elevating the monarchy as the exclusive site for symbolic production (Benomar, 539-555). Many of these ulema lost their political independence during this period as they were integrated into state bureaucracy (Benomar, 539-555).

The Moroccan PSC, the 'Mudawanna' was one of these symbolic departures from the segregated legal system of the colonial past (Schriber, Codifying Polygamy). In practice it re-iterated and re-emphasised colonial era tropes that reinforced an association between Maliki Islamic law and Personal Status that did not lead to any meaningful reform for women (Schriber, Codifying Polygamy).

To this day, the Monarch cannot afford for the religious arena to be an active site of contestation. The monarch maintains both the parliament (as a class of dependent elites) (Schriber, Codifying Polygamy) as well as his own legitimacy as "Commander of the faithful" based his status as a Caliph and descendant of Muhammad.

'*King Muhammad V inaugurated the Mudawwana project by declaring that "the greatest means to make our Moroccan society happy is to establish sharīʿa of justice among its people…. Crown Prince Hassan (later King Hassan II) remarked, 'I personally do not consider the goal of this Mudawanna as either a religious or Islamic legal goal. Rather, I consider it as supporting the social foundations in which Morocco lives in the twentieth century."* (Schriber, Codifying Polygamy)

Thus it was important that the Mudawanna be perceived as both consistent with Maliki tradition, emphasising a sense of continuity with the Islamic past while also being seen as adhering to current family values. The result is a Code that remains vague on issues like polygamy and divorce without outlining clear procedures for them. Ari Schriber describes the Mudawanna as having :

"*lacked both a firm theoretical basis and a clear directive for application which came from an unwillingness to muddy the project's symbolic value."* (Schriber, Codifying Polygamy)

King Hassan, in the 1980s, was careful to resurrect the state-aligned ulema so as not to leave a religious 'vacuum' that could be filled with political Islam (Benomar, 539-555). The handover from King Hassan to King Mohammed VI is where we might draw a comparison to the Lebanese example. With feminist civil society growing ever more vocal and unified, as well as willing to advocate for Islamically derived re-interpretations alongside radical Islamist civil society that dismissed the monarch's traditional claims to religious authority, Mohammed VI had to give the illusion that feminist civil society's demands were being met, in essence co-opting them using the rhetoric of a comparatively 'moderate' Islam to that of political Islam | (Cavatorta and Dalmasso).

The 2004 Reforms to the Mudawanna were pushed through by the King at a time of widespread reactionary anti-fundamentalist sentiment following terror attacks in Casablanca. Much like in Lebanon where historical institutions and civil society's demands are co-opted by elites for personal gain to consolidate a government masquerading as a democracy, King Mohammed VI reinforced the Moroccan model of autocracy through his co-optation of feminist demands, using it as a blow towards his islamist opponents. The rhetoric of patriarchal fiqh is a crucial device for the Moroccan Monarchy to preserve its sovereignty and thus its willingness to acquiesce to the demands of feminist civil society that jeopardise its religious authority will always be limited.

### 3(c) — Tunisia

Although Tunisia's 1956 PSC or 'Majallah' provided scaffolding for the 1958 Moroccan Mudawanna, it differs in that it explicitly outlawed polygamy, outlined specific procedures for divorce and stipulated that marriages require the consent of both parties. The Majallah and the reforms that have followed it all crucially rely on the justification of ijtihad (Yacoubi, 254-274) with Bourguiba and Ben Ali having justified them with what has often been referred to as 'feminist' readings of Hanafi and Maliki fiqh. The package of policy that includes the Majallah and Tunisian abortion laws are seen to be the backbone of Tunisian 'state-feminism'.

Unlike in Morocco where political Islam came quite late to the scene and where demands of feminist civil society weren't properly co-opted by state-led Islamic institutions, the Majallah, since its inception was an aggressive top-down reform designed to allow the state to co-opt its own vision of feminism that was inherently associated with its particular brand of anti-islamist nationalism. Although more progressive than Morocco and Lebanon, the Majallah, is inherently limited in its capacity to fully protect the rights of women and children due to its apologetic premise that it is a product of ijtihad. This tactic, similarly to Morocco, was instrumentalised by the state to target many Tunisian women involved in Islamist movements (Yacoubi, 254-274). Yacoubi makes the point that an anti-Islamist state-feminism was instrumentalised as a part of a culture of systemic sexual assault where veiled women were harassed and brutalised (Yacoubi, 254-274).

Another essential point Yacoubi makes that we might compare to the Lebanese case is how the Majallah's good reputation abroad served as a way for Ben Ali's government to direct international attention away from human rights violations. As she puts it :

*"The [Personal Status Code] forged the reputation of Tunisia and became its business card"* (Yacoubi).

Lebanon uses both its post-war 'consociational' government structure as well as state-led feminist initiatives to formulate a narrative of peaceful co-existence and modernisation that until recent years served to deflect international scrutiny from endemic corruption. The current President of Tunisia, Kaïs Saïed has notoriously deployed state-feminism as a smokescreen to distract from his anti-democratic takeover of government functions appointing Najla Bouden Romdhane as the first female prime minister while curtailing her powers. He also relies on this narrative of Tunisian exceptionalism in regards to women's rights to distract from his calls for black Tunisians, undocumented migrants and refugees to be arrested and deported inciting racist violence and invoking the 'Great Replacement' theory. Problematic as the 'Majallah' and its subsequent reforms have been, the protections it offers are still essentially vulnerable in the wake of the collapse of short-lived Tunisian hopes for democracy. There is widespread opposition from Islamist civil society claiming that their underpinnings are too remote from 'traditional' interpretations of the sharia. This has forced bigger coalitions in feminist civil society to take a defensive stance and hampers their ability to lobby for reform or secularisation (Yacoubi, 254-274).

### Conclusion

The essay shows how patriarchal inclinations have consistently been imposed both in the formulation and compilation of religious texts and in the co-optation of texts as a basis for Personal Status Law. It firstly shows how they are imposed upon the earliest formulations of hadith with the example of conflicting opinions of Abu Hurayra and A'isha.

MENA Trinity Middle East & North Africa Review

Secondly it shows how they are imposed at the level of fuqaha reviewing and compiling hadith into authoritative texts with the examples of Abu Dawud Al-Sijistani and Muhammad Al-Bukhari. The essay illustrates that regardless of the legal evidence, fuqaha have historically imposed their personal opinions onto religious texts. Thirdly the essay shows how this sentiment carries over into how the Moroccan, Tunisian and Lebanese States have codified and reinforced patriarchal legal structures like PSC by co-opting fiqh and religious law in order to consolidate political power at various points in the last century. These States have maintained the historical patriarchal institutions of PSC not out of sincerely held commitments to Islam or to Freedom of Religious Belief, but because it has served their political interests.

With this in mind the essay acknowledges how these States have at times partially yielded to civil society in order to co-opt and neutralise it all the the while bolstering their international reputation. These conclusions are significant as they show a trend in how 'religious law' has historically been shaped and re-shaped to bolster the interest of ruling elites and to override constitutionally guaranteed human rights. The conclusion of this essay reaches far beyond these case studies and this tactic of weaponising and imposing interpretations on religious law is similarly used systematically by Algeria, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Brunei Darussalam, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Niger, Malaysia, Maldives, Oman, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Syria ((Fazaeli and Hanisek) to enforce restrictive PSC, limit women's basic freedoms and to excuse and perpetuate femicide and structural and physical violence against women.

# Bibliography

Al-Albani, Silsala al-Ahadith al-Da'ifa wa Mawdu'a, Vol.10.
Al-Bukhari, Abu Abdullah Muhammad Ibn Isma`il, Sahih, Book 62-64 of 97. No.5  (Findaway World : QNS Academy, 2022)
Al-Din, Nasir, Da'if Jami' al-Saghir, (Beirut: Maktab al-Islami ).
Al-Sijistani, Abu Dawud, al-Sunan, (Riyadh: Darussalam Publishers, 2007)
Al-Tahawi, Abu Ja'far, Sharh Mushkil al-Athar, (Beirut: Resalah Publishers, 1994)
Benomar, Jamal, The Monarchy, the Islamist Movement and Religious Discourse in Morocco, (Third World Quarterly ,Vol. 10, No. 2, Islam & Politics,1988)
Berwick, Lucilla, Single Mothers in Morocco: Social Stigma and Struggle for Identity (SOAS, 2017)
Cavatorta, Francesco and Dalmasso, Emanuela, Liberal Outcomes through Undemocratic Means: the Reform of the Code De Statut Personnel in Morocco. (The Journal of Modern African Studies 47, no. 4, 2009)
Cheema, Waqar Akbar. "Are Children Born out of Wedlock Condemned in Hadith?" ICRAA.org. Islamic Centre for Research and Academics, August 26, 2022. https://www.icraa.org/are-children-born-out-of-wedlock-condemned-in-hadith/#_ftn2.
Al-Halabi, 'Ali Hasan 'Ali, et al., Mawsu'at al-Ahadith wa al-Athar al-Da'ifa wa al- Mawdu'a, (Riyadh: Maktaba al-Ma'arif, 1999)
Fazaeli, Roja and Hanisek, Joel, Human Rights, Islam, and Debates around CEDAW, (Religion & Human Rights 16, 2-3, 2021)
Geha, Carmen, Co-optation, Counter-Narratives, and Repression: Protesting Lebanon's Sectarian Power-Sharing Regime. (The Middle East Journal 73, no. 1, 2019).
Geha, Carmen, 'Civil Society and Political Reform in Lebanon and Libya : Transition and Constraint.' (Routledge, 2019).
Geha, Carmen, The Myth of Women's Political Empowerment within Lebanon's Sectarian Power-Sharing System (Journal of Women, Politics & Policy, 2019)
Mernissi, Fatima, The Veil and the Male Elite : A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam. (Addison-Wesley Pub, 1991).
Moghadam, Valentine, Gender Regimes in the Middle East and North Africa: The Power of Feminist Movements (Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society, Volume 27, Issue 3, 2020).
Schriber, Ari, Commentary: Codifying Polygamy in the 1957 Moroccan Mudawwana (Islamic Law Blog, 2017) https://islamiclaw.blog/2017/09/27/codifying-polygamy-in-the-1957-moroccan-mudawwana/#_ftn1
Yacoubi, Imen, Sovereignty from Below : State Feminism and Politics of Women Against Women, (The Arab Studies Journal , Spring 2016, Vol. 24, 2016)
Collectif 95 Maghreb-Égalité, Guide to Equality in the Family in the Maghreb (Women's Learning Partnership for Rights, Development and Peace, 2005).
Royaume de Maroc, Code De La Famille: Version consolidée en date du 4 février 2016, (Ministère de la Justice et Des Libertés)

# History

## Conquest and Conversion: The History of Egypt's Religious Conversion After the Arab Conquest
*Mohamed Aharchi*

The conversion of Egypt to Islam came about as a result of the Arab conquest in the early to mid-7th century AD. While the conquest happened quickly, the religious conversion itself was not instantaneous. Rather, there were waves of conversions that ultimately led to the complete conversion of most of Egypt's population. These conversions represented an important theme in Egypt's history, and their impact changed the course of the country. Understanding the history of religious conversions in Egypt is therefore vital to understanding the country itself.

Prior to the Arab conquest, Egypt was part of the Eastern Roman Empire, or the Byzantine Empire. The official religion was Christianity; thus, most Egyptians were Christians. The Arab conquest brought about a lot of change with it, from administrative to cultural and religious. Accordingly, Islam became the official religion of the state. The conquest also manifested in several varying types of religious conversions, both from one sect to another and from one religion to another. This essay seeks to examine the waves of religious conversions that occurred in Egypt after the Arab conquest of the 7th century. Additionally, this essay will explore the debates that exist within academia on the subject of Egypt's conversion and the challenges that are faced within the field.

To begin to understand the history of religious conversions in Egypt, one should analyze the country's political context on the eve of the Arab conquest. Egypt was ruled by the Eastern Roman Empire, later called the Byzantine Empire, for over 600 years at the time of the Arab conquest. During this period, the Romans adopted Christianity as the official religion of the empire in 313 AD and, in the same century, the empire was split into two - East and West. This long history of subjugation by a formidable Christian Empire paved the way for most Egyptians to become Christian by the end of the 6th century (Mikhail 53).

However, it is important to note that several sects of Christianity were practiced in Egypt at the time, although they existed in discord and proselytized for their respective sects (Mikhail 55-58). The most prominent sects included the pro-Chalcedonians and the anti-Chalcedonians. The Byzantine rulers of Egypt were pro-Chalcedonian while most of the native population of Egypt was not, which would come to play an important factor in the development of the early conversions.



Wall painting of the martyrdom of saints, Coptic period
via smarthistory.org

The Arab conquest of Egypt meant a new authority began ruling a country with a distinctly different religion. While the Byzantines and Egyptians were both Christian, they were not of the same sect, so many Egyptians were forced to convert under Byzantine rule. Unlike the Byzantines, the early Arab conquerors did not force conversion on local people and allowed them to continue practicing their own religions. However, the local population was not equal to the Arab conquerors, and they were forced to pay a poll tax, called jizya, in exchange for the freedom to practice their religion. This arrangement was seen by many anti-Chalcedonians, or Copts, as more merciful than what they had to endure under Byzantium (Juynboll 164). Additionally, the pro-Chalcedonians were supported by the now-bygone Byzantine authorities, forcing them to be seen as conspirators with the enemy.
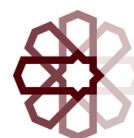
This led to the first wave of conversions after the arrival of the Muslims; many Greek pro-Chalcedonians converted to Coptic Christianity, leading to the resurgence of the Coptic church as the dominating religious sect in Egypt, and a minority converted to Islam (Mikhail 59-60). Several other influences spurred this wave, including that many wanted to integrate and assimilate into the new order of the country. They also lacked a patriarch and support from Byzantium. Furthermore, becoming Muslim meant being part of an emerging Empire whose official religion was Islam. Consequently, conversion to Islam unlocked many new opportunities for converts and enhanced their social mobility (Simonsohn 199).

The second wave of conversion was slower and less noticeable, occurring during the end of the Umayyad and early Abbasid periods. This was due to the social stigma that accompanied converts (Mikhail 68-70). Since most of the population was still Christian, converting to Islam was seen as abandoning God in pursuit of earthly pleasures. This attitude persisted throughout the early Abbasid period; however, it gradually became less apparent. There are many reasons for the de-stigmatization of conversion (Mikhail 71-72). For one, the number of converts was increasing. This, coupled with the influx of Arab Muslim migrants from the Arabian Peninsula, was enough to make a robust community that one could join once they converted. Moreover, an existing tolerant Muslim community that mixed with the Christian locals normalized the existence of the religion and therefore normalized conversion to it. Also, Muslim converts were less likely to be left isolated by their family and community. The coming of the Abbasids additionally aided the de-stigmatization immensely. Their policies were relatively egalitarian and less discriminatory in comparison with the Umayyads, as Abbasid rulers in Egypt treated converts in the same manner as they treated all other Muslims. The stagnation of Coptic religious education has also been credited for contributing to the change in attitudes toward conversion (Mikhail 71-72).

The above-mentioned reasons also paved the way for more conversions to occur in the third wave of religious conversions. Furthermore, the lack of proper Christian education led to individuals seeing both religions in the same light (Mikhail 74).

The two religions already shared many similarities in mythology, codes of ethics, and traditions, so when a Christian Egyptian had to choose one, the decision would most likely be in favor of Islam due to the latter offering many social benefits. Additionally, further de-stigmatization and normalization of conversion to Islam made it easier to make the decision to convert, thus the Coptic church began losing followers in favor of Islam.

Notably, scholarship regarding religious conversion in Egypt in the early Islamic period is not very rich. As a result, scholars have found it difficult to get ahold of texts or other forms of evidence that comprehensively recorded the process of conversion. The scholarship also finds it difficult to determine the particular reasons that motivated conversions. For instance, many scholars agreed that the poll tax, jizya, was the main reason that drove the first wave of conversions (Frantz-Murphy 323-24). However, later scholars would not give all the credit to the poll tax but would provide other reasons (Simonsohn 200).

The gaps in information do not stop here, more problems arose with the topic of taxation in early Islamic Egypt. Although the available tax records are relatively expansive, taxation seems to have been inconsistent, suggesting that the various regions in Egypt paid different taxes at different times. This was because some of those regions were taken by force, while others were taken by treaties, allowing inconsistent taxes and jurisdictions to be implemented in each region (Anderson 69). Additionally, the Umayyads imposed the jizya on Muslim converts regardless, which might have demotivated other Christians from converting to Islam. Evidently, the financial burden associated with different religions was a minor factor in encouraging conversion in the early caliphate in Egypt. Rather, religions' sense of community and belonging motivated converts. This sense of community was dominated by the Coptic Church, and Coptic Orthodoxy became the dominant religion in Egypt following the Arab conquest. Another challenge for understanding early conversions is that many of the sources that documented them only came centuries after, mostly during the Abbasid and later periods.
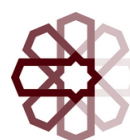
MENA Trinity Middle East & North Africa Review

Consequently, the scholars who attempted to quantify these conversions potentially lacked adequate sources for their research as both time and bias obscured the accuracy of their evidence. For example, many Coptic works such as "The Apocalypse of Athanasius" depicted the changes in the lives of Christian Egyptians following the Arab conquest, however, this source has considerably exaggerated the events that it depicted as a way of warning other Copts. As such, such sources should be examined with a critical eye.



Painted niche from the monestary of Saint Apollo at Bawit
via National Geographic

A lengthy period of diverse conversion processes followed the Arab conquest of Egypt. There were many differing reasons that encouraged people to convert. and numerous types of conversion - from one sect to another and from one religion to another.

Studying the history of religion is crucial because it offers the converted community in Egypt a new set of principles and identities, which went on to shape their lives and consequently the community that they live in. By understanding the history of religious conversion one can understand the community itself. This field of study could also be used to bridge some of the historical misunderstandings between the followers of the two religions.

# Bibliography

Anderson, J. N. D. "Conversion and the Poll Tax in Early Islam. By Daniel C. DennettJr. Harvard Historical Monograph No. XXII, 1950. Pp. Xi, 136, Including Bibliography and Index. 16s." *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. 83, no. 3–4, Oct. 1951, pp. 220–220. *Cambridge University Press*, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0035869X00104952.

Frantz-Murphy, Glayds. "Conversion in Early Islamic Egypt: The Economic Factor." *Muslims and Others in Early Islamic Society*, Routledge, 2004.

Juynboll, Gautier H. A., translator. *The History of Al-Tabari Vol. 13: The Conquest of Iraq, Southwestern Persia, and Egypt: The Middle Years of 'Umar's Caliphate A.D. 636-642/A.H. 15-21*. Illustrated edition, State University of New York Press, 1989.

Mikhail, Maged S. A. *From Byzantine to Islamic Egypt: Religion, Identity and Politics after the Arab Conquest*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014.

Simonsohn, Uriel. "Conversion, Exemption, and Manipulation: Social Benefits and Conversion to Islam in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages." *Medieval Worlds*, vol. medieval worlds, Jan. 2017, pp. 196–216. *ResearchGate*, https://doi.org/10.1553/medievalworlds_no6_2017s196.

# Nation Building at a Cost: Examining the Relationship between 20th Century Islamic Feminist Movements and Postcolonial Nation Development in the Middle East
*Alex Nagin*

As colonial powers gradually departed from the Middle East during the latter half of the twentieth century, the soon-to-be nations of the region were tasked with building a national story. While the roles that Muslim women played in Middle Eastern society varied somewhat across the region, their female identity was one of the most crucial tools used not only to construct a national identity but also to cement a connection between religion and state. Subsequently, the relationship between Middle Eastern women and nation building has proved to be a defining and ongoing setback for Islamic feminist movements in several regards.1 Firstly, the common representation of the Muslim woman as essential to exclusively the domestic needs of her family has been used to draw ideological contrast to the widely disdained West (Charrad, 425). Thus, the association between anti-Western sentiments and Middle Eastern social values rests largely upon the role of women in society. As Tunisian sociologist Mounira M. Charrad contextualises, relegating women to domestic activities acts as a sort of unifying juxtaposition between East and West, Islam and secularism, and coloniser and colonised, which has united Middle Eastern nations while delegitimising the message and goals of Islamic feminism (Charrad 425). Consequently, because methods of nation building in the Middle East have historically revolved around religious identity and the role of women within this identity, Islamic feminists have been confronted with attempting to spread their message against the interests of Middle Eastern governments and Islam as a combined force (Grami 109). In response to these circumstances, Islamic feminists across the region have adjusted their tactics to advocate for women's equality within the framework of dedication to Islam and to the state, while not associating these efforts with contemporary Western conceptions of feminism (Grami 110).

In review, examining the history of both Muslim women and Islamic feminism is essential to establishing a comprehensive understanding of the complicated process of nation building, all in the larger context of their continuous struggle for social, political, and economic equality.

One of the primary aspects of twentieth-century Middle Eastern nation building that has restricted the efforts of Islamic feminism is what Charrad describes as the metaphor of "the nation as a family and women as mothers of the nation" (Charrad 422). This metaphor effectively captures the nationalist mood of many Middle Eastern nations in the late twentieth century, as it demonstrates the way in which men and women were expected to do their part—by subscribing to strict and rigid gender roles—when creating nations that were culturally distinctive and independent from the West. Part of this cultural distinctiveness, in turn, had to do with the rejection of calls for women's rights. In other words, the phrase 'feminism' came with the association of the Western infiltration of Middle Eastern society. As a result, many Middle Eastern governments adjusted their social and economic policies which siloed women into the corners of society while men took a more affirmative grip on postcolonial institutions of power throughout the region. One intriguing example is Egypt, which adapted to more capitalist economic policies as it developed into a partially independent nation as the twentieth century progressed (Golley 530). However, through this economic development—specifically greater job market competition—women gradually became unemployed and were driven back into their homes where they were forced to carry out more domestic responsibilities (Golley 531). Not only was it physically challenging for Egyptian women to organise because of how they were often restricted to the home, but it also proved difficult to overcome the widespread confusion among male religious and political leaders between the desire for individual rights and allegiance to Western ideology and societal values.

---

1 I use the terminology 'Islamic Feminist Movements' as to not be reductive to the fact that over the duration of Middle Eastern history there has been no singular movement that precisely connects manifestations of feminism in countries across the region. Rather, 'Islamic Feminist Movements' is used in this essay when overarching ideas or generalisations are and can be made. See Amal Grami, "Islamic Feminism".
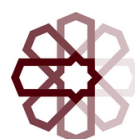
**MENA** Trinity Middle East & North Africa Review

While feminist efforts in different nations across the Middle East have taken different forms and found different results, a common theme of defining feminism within the context of Islam had emerged, hence the movement's label of 'Islamic feminism' and not merely 'feminism'. In order to disassociate from Western feminism while striving for similar goals, —access to education, reproductive healthcare, and economic rights— Islamic feminist movements have needed to overcome the perception that their desires stand in contrast to the cultural and religious fabric of their respective nations.



Demonstration for women's rights in Tunis
Via New York Times

To do this, Islamic feminists have aimed to reorganise methods of religious practice and expression to fit their advocacy in a way that prompts less of a reputation of impiety. This begins with rereading the Qur'an, which, as Charrad notes "gives women an opportunity to deploy religious texts in defense of their rights" (Charrad 428). Specifically, this strategy includes the belief that Islam is not an inherently oppressive religion towards women. Rather, this approach recognises the reality that the Qur'an is a tolerant and egalitarian text, which has been continually appropriated by religious leaders throughout the course of modern Middle Eastern history, especially during the period of decolonisation and nation building in the mid-to-late twentieth century (Charrad 428). The most common manifestation of this reinterpretation of the Qur'an revolves around the debate concerning the veil, and whether or not veiling should be considered a form of oppression. As Islamic feminist movements across the region have demonstrated, the veil can act as a source of empowerment.

Furthermore, along with the aforementioned feminist reinterpretation of the Qur'an comes crucial historical context. For example, veiling is a concept that is not historically exclusive to Islam; prior to Islam becoming the main religion of the region, the veil was a symbol of high class and power. In fact, veiling in some regions globally was not even exclusive to women; Charrad notes records of male veiling in Bolivia (Charrad 429). Thus, the Islamic feminist recalculation of veiling is a powerful and telling example of how the construction of modern Middle Eastern nation-states function under merely an interpretation of Islam and the Qur'an, as opposed to the allegedly textually accurate version of the faith.

Although much of the historical opposition to Islamic feminism has come from Middle Eastern governments, Islamic feminist movements have faced other stymieing barriers, including other women. That is, those who do not associate themselves with the struggle for equality or the discontent that Islamic feminists have expressed about the oppression they experience. As professor and historian Amal Grami of the University of Manouba in Tunisia discusses, some Middle Eastern women oppose Islamic feminist efforts because it poses a threat to the protection that men provide for them (Grami 108). The lack of trans-regional cohesion between Islamic feminist movements in the Middle East, subsequently, is a significant factor in the general lack of progress that they have made. Language is the first and most fundamental element of this issue—while I use the terminology 'Islamic feminism' in this essay, there is not an agreed-upon name for these movements among historians or even those who lead the movements themselves. As Grami notes, some see terms such as 'Islamic feminism', 'Muslim feminism', and 'religious feminism' as identical, "while others see them as a sign of the confusion between terms such as feminist and feminine, Islamic and Islamist (Grami 109). The absence of cohesive branding and messaging has prevented the creation of a common feminist movement and narrative in the Middle East. In turn, this has allowed for Islamic feminist movements in the Middle East to be cast aside and associated with Westerness by those in power without question or widespread criticism. Thus, the suppression and silencing of Islamic feminist movements are a crisis of perceived legitimacy before anything else.

MENA Trinity Middle East & North Africa Review

Above all else, it is critical to understand that Islamic feminism is unique in that its proponents have had to carefully navigate societies where their subjugation has often been seen as part of a larger national story. Not only does this make the history of Islamic feminism unique from any other global women's rights movement, but it illustrates how the concept of feminism adapts to religion and culture. As Islamic feminists have expressed, it is not Islam that oppresses them. Instead, it is the history of nation building that forced them into a structure that limited their rights and individual potential at the cost of national pride and independence. While Islamic feminist movements have not seen nearly as much progress as those in other regions, one must keep in mind that their task is taller.

Middle Eastern governments that have (an interpretation of) Islam enshrined in their governmental institutions have made it difficult for feminists to truly penetrate the sources of inequality in the Middle East without being labelled as traitors. In review, the history of feminism in the Middle East is essential because it serves as a reminder that building a nation can come at a cost for women, something that is too often overlooked when examining how the borders of the Middle East developed into how they exist today.

Whether some Middle Eastern governments seek to address it or not, it is clear that women will not remain silent about their oppression. Now, as the brave women of Iran continue to teach us day after day, the women of the Middle East will not blindly accept their oppression, and they won't tire easily.



Via Arab Center Washington DC

## Bibliography

Abu-Lughod, Lila. "Contentious Theoretical Issues: Third World Feminisms and Identity Politics." Women's Studies Quarterly, vol. 26, no. 3/4, 1998, pp. 25–29.

Charrad, Mounira M. "Gender in the Middle East: Islam, State, Agency." Annual Review of Sociology, vol. 37, no. 1, 2011, pp. 417–37. Annual Reviews, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.012809.102554.

Golley, Nawar Al-Hassan. "Is Feminism Relevant to Arab Women?" Third World Quarterly, vol. 25, no. 3, 2004, pp. 521–36. JSTOR.

Grami, Amal. "Islamic Feminism." Contemporary Arab Affairs, vol. 6, no. 1, 2013, pp. 102–13. JSTOR.

Schulz, Dorothea E. "Scholarship on Gender Politics in the Muslim World: Some Critical Reflections." Islamic Studies in the Twenty-First Century, edited by Léon Buskens and Annemarie Van Sandwijk, Amsterdam University Press, 2016, pp. 109–34. DOI.org (Crossref), https://doi.org/10.1515/9789048528189-007.

# Race in Colonial North Africa and its Modern Legacy

*Alex Vilarin*

---

"Race" as a concept has been used for centuries as a manner with which to differentiate and subjugate populations around the world. Othering people based on racial markers, who look slightly different and practice unfamiliar customs, begins a process of dehumanisation, where no common ground can ever be reached because of how different one group perceives the other to be. As has been seen in the colonial sense, the process of othering has been used by European settler states in order to control and organise their colonies, and it has enabled Europeans to dominate native populations despite being outnumbered by them. Interestingly, when the French began their colonial expeditions in the mid-nineteenth century, they exerted power over their North African colonies by employing a process of othering that allegedly juxtaposed the values of French society.

Since the French Revolution at the close of the 18th Century, French society has struggled with the ideas of equality between men. With the loss of the majority of their remaining colonies under Louis XV, the French state was no longer an empire. Instead, it focused almost exclusively on internal affairs and that of Europe, and its influence no longer reached the Americas or India (Davray, 245-64) .1 During this time, the republican values of "individual and collective liberty, political rights, and of class equality" became commonplace throughout France and were even regarded as a distinct part of French culture (Knight, 103-15). However, as the 19th century progressed, France became interested in the prospects of colonisation and its economic benefits. In this period, the English Empire continued to expand, although the Thirteen Colonies achieved independence, and the inherent wealth from imperial exploitation increased in tandem. In addition, the Barbary States that existed in North Africa were widely considered nuisances due to their frequent attacks on merchant vessels and enslavement of European sailors and villagers when their slave vessels raided coastal settlements (Davray).

The initial invasion of Algiers gradually transformed from a punitive expedition against the pirates of the Barbary Coast into total colonisation of the region, replete with thousands of settlers from mainland France and other areas of Europe who flooded to Algeria as part of the French government's efforts to turn the Algerian coast into a major food-producing region of France. These newly arrived settlers almost immediately faced the apparent contradictions between the French value of equality and the assumed racial hierarchy inherent to colonial societies. Throughout the periods of the Third and Fourth Republics, the French establishment attempted to balance the supposed equality of the French government with the reality on the ground in the colonies.



The French Conquest of Algeria
via Musée de L'Histoire de France

However, it would be incorrect to assume that these instances of discrimination were isolated to the colonies, as "the French colonial archive clearly establishes that imperialism and the invention of race did not happen in faraway places, out on the colonial frontier; they were fundamental aspects of Western imperial modernity" (Taoua 43-55). The government put forth an informal hierarchical system that balanced the social superiority of the French settlers with the desire to civilise and westernise the populations of North Africa. This was achieved by placing the white settlers, or pied-noirs, at the top of the racial caste system, followed by locals who had sufficiently engaged with French culture to be seen as civilised, followed by those who had resisted French culture and were classified as primitive and indigenous (Marker 1-23).
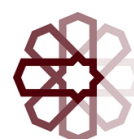
As the Third Republic transformed into the Fourth Republic after the Second World War, the language became even more convoluted, as the French sought to further mask, but not necessarily repeal, any discriminatory policies while promoting a new constitution that guaranteed racial equality, "rhetorically prohibiting differentiation between its citizens on the specific basis of race at the same time that it codified two different citizenship statuses that were unevenly distributed among white and nonwhite populations in the French Union" (Marker). In addition, the change of language from Empire to Union suggests something that all member states were willingly a part of, which clearly was not the case for the majority of native populations that had been conquered and colonised so recently in the past. These glass ceilings and double-speak were characteristic of the French colonial approach, especially in North Africa, and eventually resulted in the native populations being weary of the lack of promised reform and revolting in the Algerian War.

In the case of the Imazighen, the French and later Algerian governments attempted to deal with them in different ways. When they assumed control of North Africa, the French believed that the Amazigh people, separate from the Arab majority, were only reluctantly observant of Islam and the other cultural customs of the area, and would therefore be more receptive to European concepts. As the Amazigh people had long existed in North Africa, predating the Muslim conquests, the French reasoned that they would be more culturally similar to their French neighbours across the Mediterranean basin than their Arab overlords who had originally come all the way from Arabia and brought their religion and culture with them (Derderian). They established different codes of law for the Arab and Amazigh populations through the 'Berber Decree' in 1930. "This decree was meant to institutionalise two different legal systems in Morocco: one for the Imazighen, deriving its essence from the local customary laws, and one for the Arabs, based on the Islamic law or the 'Shariâa" (Aissati 57-69). As a classic example of divide and conquer, the decree sought to enhance the visibility of cultural differences between the two groups to allow the gradual 'pacification' and 'civilising' of the two populations through the introduction of French cultural institutions.

While the Amazigh populations would never achieve the cultural prestige of the pied-noirs – immigrants from France to Algeria – many were still given French education and embraced elements of French culture, much to the chagrin of the Arab community. In fact, "the contact of Amazigh with the French culture and academic institutions is often used by opponents of the Amazigh movement as a piece of evidence that this movement is inspired by colonialists. The fact that the early Amazigh writers were among the most ardent opponents of French colonialism is simply, but not surprisingly, ignored" (Aissati). French-educated Amazigh people were among the first and most prominent opponents of the colonial movement, in both their home countries and in France, where many had moved in order to work as labourers and became increasingly opposed to the colonial rule (Derderian). The French Communist Party and other left-leaning parties were particularly supportive of the decolonisation movement and provided support to the burgeoning intellectuals that found themselves in France, attempting to influence them through the internationalist ideology.

After achieving independence from France, the new North African states set about creating their own new national identity. Throughout the colonial period, the French – as with most colonial powers – had sought to rule by division, pitting the groups against each other in order to make them more manageable. These divisions that were created made it far more difficult to create a unified identity, especially with the unequal amount of French influence in the different regions, so they instead turned to something that had long caused the French fear. The "French [were anxious] about Islam and the power of religious leaders to politically influence Muslims in the colonies. African leaders were well aware of this and addressed the issue directly," opposing the secular values of France and promoting a new Islamic and Arabic identity that erased many segments of the country like the pied-noirs and the Imazighen, who they viewed as subversive and a threat to the unity of the country (Boittin et al.).
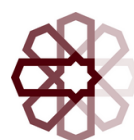
By attempting to wholly reject the French past of the countries, and recreate the Islamic culture that existed pre-colonisation, they alienated large portions of the country that were also indigenous, including the Amazigh population, the North African Jewish population, and anyone else that did not fit their narrow definition of national identity (Derderian). It also negated the positive and significant contributions that members of the Amazigh community made in resisting the French colonial apparatus during the struggle for independence.



Algerians carry Algerian and Amazigh flags in demonstration via Arab Reform Initiative

As El Aissati says, "it follows then, according to this view, that anyone advocating any sort of separate or different identity is working in the same direction, that is, supporting a colonial ideology" (Aissati). This persecution of Imazighen has continued to the modern day, with detractors still claiming that they were agents of colonial oppression in the period before independence, and Lounes Matoub's assassination in June 1998 underscores the continued debates surrounding national identity in Algeria and throughout North Africa.

The French colonisation of North Africa was a comparatively short colonial venture when compared to many areas controlled by the British and Spanish. Nevertheless, the differences that they exposed between the native populations have not easily resolved themselves, whether in France or in North Africa, and the issues that they utilised to bolster their campaign of dividing and conquering will continue to reverberate throughout the region for the foreseeable future. In addition, as the values of Westernisation and secularism have been firmly put on the side of the coloniser, there seems to be little chance that they will be implemented in the near future.

# Bibliography

Aissati, Abderrahman El. "Ethnic Identity, Language Shift, and The Amazigh Voice in Morocco and Algeria." Race, Gender & Class, vol. 8, no. 3, 2001, pp. 57–69. JSTOR.

Boittin, Jennifer Anne, et al. "Hierarchies of Race and Gender in the French Colonial Empire, 1914-1946." Historical Reflections/Reflexions Historiques, vol. 37, no. 1, Jan. 2011. DOI.org (Crossref), https://doi.org/10.3167/hrrh.2011.370104.

Davray, Henry D. "France in North Africa." Journal of the Royal Society of Arts, vol. 74, no. 3820, 1926, pp. 245–64. JSTOR.

Derderian, Richard L. North Africans in Contemporary France: Becoming Visible. Palgrave Macmillan US, 2004. DOI.org (Crossref), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-06698-5.

Knight, Franklin W. "The Haitian Revolution." The American Historical Review, vol. 105, no. 1, Feb. 2000, p. 103. DOI.org (Crossref), https://doi.org/10.2307/2652438.

Marker, Emily. "Obscuring Race." French Politics, Culture & Society, vol. 33, no. 3, 2015, pp. 1–23. JSTOR.

Taoua, Phyllis. "The Effects of Censorship on the Emergence of Anti-Colonial Protest in France." South Central Review, vol. 32, no. 1, 2015, pp. 43–55.