



Discursive Challenges: Power, State Legitimacy and Counter-narratives in the Arab World

Conference organised by the AHRC-OWRI consortium 'Cross-language dynamics: Reshaping community' and by the Institute for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (IMEIS), Durham University, 9-11th June 2020.

RATIONALE

In the MENA region, and even more so in the Middle East, political legitimacy of the existing governments remains contested. Most notably, the ruling elites and the national borders – along with the resulting imposition of a national identity – are still considered by many as manufactured as these were imposed by European powers in the aftermath of the First World War. The shadow of Western powers never really stopped hanging over the region, reinforcing the popular sentiment of being ruled over by a distant elite. Local elites, apparently detached from transparent and openly-contested processes of political control, were seen as tied to Western providers of finance, economic opportunity and of course security. The elites' political and economic power was seen as underwritten by outsiders rather than their own citizens. The wave of popular protests that spread across the region like wildfire from December 2010 was a blatant example of the perceived lack of political legitimacy. The flame of protests may have appeared as extinguished following the social disasters in Libya, Syria and Yemen, but a rise in protests across the Arab region since 2018 – whether in Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon or Sudan – illustrate that the hunger for an end to corruption, for accountability, the rule of law and a voice in determining the fate of the country concerned remains unsatisfied. But it was in Iraq and Syria where decades of chronic authoritarianism created a transnational power vacuum that was quickly filled with a myriad of armed groups drawing on a religious discourse to destabilise the established order.

Of these, the Islamic State (IS) promoted a form of Islamic populism in the form of violent struggle aimed at securing freedom from the domination of foreign powers while restoring dignity and regaining tangible resources for an Ummah conceived to

be both downtrodden and homogeneous. In that sense, the Caliphate represented a reformist post-modern response to failed governance, the popular disenchantment in politics and ruling elites, and to the perceived threat to Islamic historical and socio-political heritage in the MENA region.

Yet if the Arab Spring and IS' disruptive campaign were symptomatic of the structural sclerosis that paralysed the MENA, both dynamics apparently failed to bring about radical changes and to shake up the established order. In fact, states and regimes remained tenacious in their hold on territory and power, even in Yemen and Libya where the state system is crumbling, partially due to the systemic pressure posed by the great power at the core of the international system. Since 2010, only Tunisia and Egypt experienced changes in their systems of governance. In Egypt, less than a year after Muhamad Morsi was elected the first president since Hosni Mubarak's resignation, he was deposed by a military *coup d'état* that was followed by a violent crackdown on the mostly jobless youth. Democratic practices did not last long in the country and eventually, military-led rule was re-installed. And Tunisia, while it offers a case of peaceful and *a priori* successful transition from Ben Ali's authoritarian rule, the country remains vulnerable to transnational jihadi groups who find a safe-haven in Libya, while it struggles to durably establish a strong and legitimate democracy. In Syria, Bashar al-Assad achieved a *tour de force* by staying in power with either the blessing or neglect of the world's most powerful countries. Similarly, and although popular unrest continues across Iraq, including the Anbar province, Iraq did survive the rapid military offensives of IS in 2013 and 2014. The country retained its territorial integrity, taming the Kurdish political parties that sought to achieve greater independence after their valuable and decisive military support against IS. Finally, the country of the two rivers remains ruled by a government that nurtures its privileged relationship with Iran. In other words, after years of war, Syria and Iraq are still ruled by what is disparagingly referred to as 'the sect', a perception that has also been in reverse in reference to Bahrain where the protests of the Shia majority against a Sunni ruling minority were suppressed in 2011. In several Gulf Arab monarchies, lack of transparency of the political process may seem to inhibit close analysis of power legitimacy, but this does not mean that these societies are not dynamic and their citizens passive, and nor does it mean that their political elites are oblivious to the consequences of forces demanding change elsewhere in the region. Finally, while the constitutional monarchies of Jordan and Morocco were able to reform their systems sufficiently to be able to respond constructively to the demands of their populations, they remain vulnerable to dissent against the practices of the ruling elite and their associates. It is apparent therefore that political legitimacy remains contested across the MENA region. Moreover, the division of the Iraqi and Syrian territories into sub-

state entities ultimately failed and both countries eventually remained united and under the control of their central authorities.

This, in short, is a region in turmoil rather than in transition.

The prime aim of this conference then is to understand the dynamics of the protests gripping so many states and communities in the Arab region and also the current challenges to regime legitimacy – traditionally held by a strong central authority – in the MENA region. We would like to explore how the sources of legitimacy multiplied and diversified following the erosion of state power across the region, and how new actors contributed to altering the *nature* and *narrative* of this legitimacy. To that aim, we would like to invite researchers from different disciplines and countries to reflect on the transformation of legitimacy in the MENA region following the Arab uprisings. We would like applicants to consider the transformation of legitimacy through the lens of discourse – the discourse of the ruler and that of the challenger and the ruled. We particularly welcome papers using discourse as a methodology and we also encourage the submission of insightful papers focusing on other parts of the Muslim world for comparative purposes. We encourage graduate students to put papers forward and present alongside the many distinguished and established colleagues who we hope will be contributing to the conference.

It is anticipated that the conference's proceedings will form a strong collection of essays to be published with a major international publisher.

All queries should be addressed to the OWRI-IMEIS conference assistants in the first instance please:

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**NOTE: Proposals and abstracts must be submitted by Friday, 17th of
January 2020**

PROVISIONAL PROGRAMME

10 June Day 1 – The Transformation of State Order

09:00 – 09:15	Registration & morning beverages
09:15 – 09:30	Welcome and Opening Remarks
09:30 – 12:00	Panel I: Authoritarian Order in the Middle East
12:00 – 14:00	Lunch and <i>Sir William Luce Lecture, Trevelyan College</i>
14:15 – 16:15	Panel II: Authoritarianism under Attack
18:30 – 21:30	Conference Dinner

11 June Day 2 – Legitimacy Transformed

09:00 – 09:15	Registration & morning beverages
09:15 – 10:45	Panel III: The Resurgence of Islamist Movements
10:45 – 11:00	Tea and Coffee Break
11:00 – 12:45	Panel IV: Islamists in Power
12:45 – 13:45	Lunch
13:45 – 15:15	Panel V: The IS Order
15:15 – 15:30	Tea and Coffee Break
15:30 – 17:00	Panel VI: Reactions to IS
17:00 – 17:45	Final Reflections: Legitimacy in a Post-Islamist Environment
18:00	Participants depart

Conference Organising Committee:

Juline Beaujouan, Dr Carly Beckerman, Sarah Clowry, Laura Cretney, Prof Anoush Ehteshami, Prof Clive Jones, D Marzieh Kouhi, Dr Amjed Rasheed