

## Dawn of the Declared Dead? On the Intellectual and Other Reasons for Launching a New Journal on the Middle East

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The question always arises when a fresh periodical appears—in this case, a new academic online journal on the Middle East: Is this needed?

It's not only out of modesty that the journal's future readers, and not its editors, should be the ones to answer this question. Nevertheless, this first issue gives us, as editors, the opportunity to introduce the original idea that led us to launch *Middle East – Topics and Arguments*, present its main aim and scope—and, of course, elucidate why specific attention is being devoted to *the intellectual* in its first key issue.

There were two main concerns that sparked our early discussions, looking

back two years to the editorial team's formative meetings.

The first question was: How can these as-yet largely, especially in Germany, independent disciplines, all under the umbrella of Middle Eastern studies but with their diverging histories and research approaches, be brought together in academic cooperation? Obviously, the crucial task here is the quest for *interdisciplinarity*, not just in theory but in application. As a step in the process of overall academic reorientation—not only in the humanities—interdisciplinarity has become a leading idea, which has surely found as many advocates as it has critics. In our personal case, interdisciplinarity is part of our immediate

academic environment, as all of us are affiliated with the Center for Near and Middle Eastern Studies at Marburg University, with its seven different subject areas ranging from ancient Near Eastern studies, Semitic studies, Islamic studies, and Arabic and Iranian studies, to Middle Eastern politics and economics. Due to this combination of expertise, not only the research objects themselves are often highly heterogeneous, but also the methodologies applied to the very same object may diverge strikingly—not to mention the various historical timeframes addressed. As a matter of fact, communication and exchange processes between the different disciplines—especially when entering into a joint project—are naturally characterized by contention and by conflict-provoking controversies. But at least in our case, friction has often led us to highly inspiring and productive debates that occasionally birthed an exciting idea—like this journal.

However, *Middle East – Topics and Arguments* is not only itself a product of these interdisciplinary exchanges, but also a manifestation of its leading thoughts: Our experiences led us to create a platform that actually welcomes the previously mentioned dialectics of friction and inspiration caused by interdisciplinary thinking. This allows for the clash of differing *Fachkulturen* (disciplinary cultures), as the

German language puts it. As mirrored by its title, this journal intends to initiate productive controversies and arguments on chosen topics with which our disciplines are all in their own ways involved, but maybe not yet connected to one another. For the purpose of discovering new, underappreciated, or even as-yet undetected intersections of debates actually taking place in different disciplines in the field of Middle Eastern studies, we decided to dedicate each single issue of this fledgling journal to one key topic, which we call “focus.” Gathering around this topic in focus, we support and invite authors to provide concise and focused contributions that critically reevaluate established scholarly traditions and think beyond entrenched disciplinary boundaries. And who do, as we do, not understand interdisciplinarity merely as a method that necessarily leads to consensus or even compromise, but rather to an animated, sometimes heated, or even playful debate that allows more than one answer to survive in the end. In that spirit, we introduced the column “anti/thesis,” in which two rivaling positions are juxtaposed, highlighting different lines of argument or competing narratives. This is also reflected in the column “close up,” in which a person who has not only constitutively contributed to the issue’s main topic, but

particularly stimulated and challenged academic debate, is portrayed.<sup>1</sup>

The second concern that arose during the course of our early conceptual brainstorming was the question of how to encourage our academic field to dare transgressing its regional boundaries and step beyond familiar Middle Eastern territory. Or, to turn this the other way around: How can we also be of interest for an academic public that is not primarily concerned with the Middle East, and participate in similar discussions taking place beyond our own research fields? We may then call this a quest for a *transregional* effort, which still remains underrepresented in the Middle East academic journal landscape. More precisely, the transregional approach we pursue does not primarily address comparative studies in the sense of juxtaposing two or three different regions regarding one problem or phenomenon, but—by taking the term even more literally—it rather aims to lift an issue’s question to a broader, comprehensive meta-level. Our column “meta” is therefore not only a playful acronym of the journal’s title, but also an innovative format that allows for discussing the main topic on a theoretical and philosophical basis. It bridges the various academic disciplines, contributing to each issue by transcending theoretical approaches used exclusively in one disci-

pline, while providing links between them. This we understand as a contribution to the greater project of leaving behind the concept of exceptionalism, which for a long time was attributed to the Middle East and academic studies concerned with this “entity.”<sup>2</sup> The relevance of such an attempt becomes exemplarily obvious regarding the current phenomenon of resistance movements and revolutionary upheavals taking place worldwide. This fact might inspire to trans-think the so-called Arab spring beyond its Arab borders, and to “go worldly” in speculating about common motivations, triggers, and contemporary perceptions of a *raison d’être* that is moving people today. And this concern directly leads us to this first issue’s key topic.

In the upheavals of the Arab Spring that have or are still taking place in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, and Syria—in differing magnitudes of violence and brutality—one puzzled and often frustrated concern was repeatedly articulated: “Where are the Intellectuals?” As just one of many examples, Syrian author Rosa Yaseen Hassan addressed this “question that remains since the beginning of the Syrian revolution” in her eponymous article, discussing the absence of Syrian intellectuals in the course of their country’s turmoil. What *the intellectual* is often accused of, or respectively what he accuses himself for, is his

failure to perform a specific social task attributed to the role of the intellectual: namely to function as the people's guiding voice in times of historical transformation. The Arab intellectual of today seems to withhold all duties assigned to him, as he is not, following Bamyeh's characteristics, popularizing complex intellectual systems for the benefit of his public, founding original systems of thought, or expressing existing public sentiments and attitudes in a systematic but accessible format (Bamyeh 2-3); and therefore neither having foreseen what is to come, nor providing the already revolting people with a pioneering ideology.

It is important to remind us here that the absence of the intellectual is not only being mourned for the very first time in the Arab world, but also correlates to a recurring debate in the 1970s in Europe. The decline of the "universal intellectual," who claims access to an overarching knowledge, truth, or moral, was both testified to and postulated by the intellectual vanguard of the time. When Jean-François Lyotard was digging a hole for the "tomb of the intellectual" and "his belief in a universal subject" in 1983, Michel Foucault had already proposed to replace this figure with a "specific intellectual" who contributes to a strategic shift of power in a defined field of activity (Ernst and von

Gehlen 233).<sup>3</sup> Contemporary "Western" discourse on the topic becomes increasingly apparent in the course of current social movements in Europe and the United States; journalists commented on the muted voices of so-called public intellectuals in the *Occupy Wall Street* protests. Maybe Slavoj Žižek is right to demand in his recently published article, "The Violent Silence of a New Beginning," the full support of protesters and simultaneously "non-patronizing cold analytic distance" of intellectuals toward these movements.

But aren't protests worldwide (whether taking place in the Middle East, Greece, Spain, the UK, or the United States) calling for a paradigm shift in our thinking about intellectual guidance in social contexts? Initially, aspects that influence our understanding of the intellectual's meaning, role, and function should be discerned and signified. Therefore, for this journal, the editors' approach to this topic shall be guided by three interrelated questions: Who is an intellectual? How is her action shaped? And where does it take place? The first question denotes the *persona* or social figure itself, which appears, often simultaneously, as an indistinct analytical category connected to its specific time and place, and as a self-defining term in the course of an ongoing intellectual discourse. For defining such a historical concept of the

intellectual, and accordingly the role assigned to her in society, requires deeper analysis of how and where this social figure is or has been active; a concern that is first and foremost related to the *regime* and the authorities in power. The regime's power over the ways cultural and social issues are addressed is one main concern of intellectuals' self-reflective discourse. How can one position oneself on national or religious ideologies; and how can public opinion be influenced, sometimes even under threat of death? However, often the respective authority—representing a limitative set of rules and laws—is seen as opposing a *public sphere*, which is often described as an environment for unrestricted discussion and opinion formation, where the intellectual's action effectively takes place.<sup>4</sup> Sociologist **Gil Eyal** demonstrates how rethinking the meaning and interconnectedness of these three areas of scholarly research—the *figure*, the *regime* and the *public sphere*—are important for future research. In contribution to the "meta" column, his article reveals how the notion "intellectual" is always stuck between an attempt to adapt it to current historical circumstances, and the never-ending preservation of its original historical meaning as "universal intellectual." Relating to Foucault's concept of the "specific intellectual," the author makes a plea for not

narrowing down the analysis to a specific social type but, rather, a *relational* analysis that aims to grasp the factors that structure an intellectual field. Along this relational analysis, Eyal deliberates how and where intellectuals intervene. To inform a more comprehensive approach that broadens the analytical frame by multiplying relevant agencies, modes, and targets of intervention, the author proposes the concept of “public interventions,” contrasting to the somehow redundant term “public intellectual” (13-24).

Clearly, the bemoaning of “public intellectuals” is, among other trends, linked to a yearning for “universal intellectuals” who speak truth to power through a set of universal values. But, at least regarding the Arab region, the historical emergence of the modern intellectual was not—compared to the European narrative of Zola’s protest letter “J’accuse”—sparked by a single founding document published by a man of letters. The “birth” of the *muthaqqaf* (intellectual) was triggered by a technological and economic modernization process starting in the late eighteenth century, and was above all propelled by the establishment of printing techniques that signaled a new dimension of publicity and the public sphere. Similar to seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Europe, a new public emerged in the

Middle East that consisted primarily of an ascending mercantile class or bourgeoisie demanding a new kind of cultural good.<sup>5</sup> A large body of scholarship in Middle Eastern Studies turns on research about these new kinds of intellectuals during the so-called *nahḍa* (renaissance), from the second half of the nineteenth century towards the early twentieth century (Abu-Rabi’; Boullata; Hamzah; Kassab, *Contemporary Critique*; etc.). This is the era of new cultural production of knowledge mainly through papers and magazines—and, with this, to the spread of novel concepts of state, culture, and communal life. The *mufakkir* (intellectual) and later *muthaqqaf* belong to these new intellectual figures; the scholar (‘*ālim*) and the man of letters (*adīb*) became the journalist (*ṣaḥafī*) and the public writer (*kātib ‘āmm*). Experts of different fields later maintained this new public role of a *muthaqqaf* as part of their own self-image (Hamzah 1).

The appearance of a new public sphere and how this affected the advent of the modern intellectual is one possible point of departure for evaluating the relation of intellectuals and their respective public. Recent scholarship entails a critical revisiting of the Habermasian “bourgeois public sphere,” concerning constructions of privacy and publicness as well as questions of identity and the neglect of religion

as possible factors having an impact on public discourse. For instance, el-Nawawi and Khamis argue that the public sphere in the Middle East today is not exclusively controlled by state censorship (which also induces practices of self-censorship), but that the public sphere is also a form of “public Islam.” According to the authors, “public Islam” is marked by a “diversity of intellectual contributions, thoughts, practices and civic debates,” where each sphere is represented by ‘*ulamā*’ (religious scholars) at its core (el-Nawawi and Khamis 29 ff.). In general, the ‘*ulamā*’, as managers of the sacred, are often understood as counterparts to the *mufakkir*, who is perceived as being secular. Yet, popular labelings of thinkers like Swiss-Egyptian Tariq Ramadan as “Muslim intellectual” start to blur this boundary profoundly. In his contribution, **Jan-Peter Hartung** takes this label seriously, and shows how the genuine concept of “Muslim intellectuals” as ‘*ulamā*’, who historically produced and administered hegemonic knowledge, lost any usefulness as analytical category. ‘*Ulamā*’ adapted to the changing landscape of knowledge production and the public sphere by entering into the same arenas and addressing the same issues as the *mufakkirūn*, a dynamic that consequently led to a melting of both categories. Discussing relevant sociological and philo-

sophical perspectives, Hartung concludes that both notions encompassed by the label “Muslim intellectual” differ to such an extent that their applicability to academic pursuit must be doubted (35-45).

The portrayal of Mohammed Arkoun as an “intellectual in revolt” by **Ursula Günther** gives one impressive example of this doubtful categorization. Mohammed Arkoun understood himself as “reflective researcher,” which implies being devoted to critical theology but never leaving secular philosophy behind. Although he is a paradigmatic intellectual in the first place, popular Western media frequently had imposed on him, and still continue to, the label “Muslim intellectual,” while—at the same time—he has been accused of Westernization and betraying his own cultural heritage by orthodox Muslims (63-67). Hence, Mohammed Arkoun was very much aware of the pressures intellectuals like himself must answer to. In his talk given on the conference “Intellectual Debates in Islam in the New Global Era,” Arkoun declared two pressures as crucial for the prospective of intellectual activity: the pressure from above, i.e. the state, and the pressure from below, i.e. public opinion, especially on the part of fundamentalist Islam.

This “pressure from above” is certainly one crucial point of contention that

in the past preoccupied Arab intelligentsia (and still does). How to behave and position oneself towards those in power, namely the nation-state and its propagated ideology? In her contribution, **Leslie Tramontini** illustrates one example of inner-intellectual controversy by examining the self-perception of the intellectual's role in the Iraqi cultural scene during and after Baathist rule (1963-2003). By tracing the discussion back to the 1980s, she unfolds a mental atmosphere characterized by control, censorship, and committed conformity. Faced with these conditions, a division occurred between those intellectuals putting their creative activities into the service of the nation, and those still trying to oppose official ideology in their work. As strongly shown by the author, inner-intellectual dispute didn't cease, but continued after 2003, when the line of who's inside and who's outside—committed to or against the system—was blurred again (53-61).

For an outside observer, it might appear as obvious that the state, as censor and oppressor, is responsible for the absence of intellectuals in public debate. The downside of this is that the state as active producer of elites is often dismissed. Iran provides an example of a state in need of defining and nurturing its own intellectuals through state institutions. After the Is-

lamic Revolution, the Iranian government alienated Western educated professionals, while political measures were not initially introduced to stop progressive brain drain, which the country is still witnessing today. But as Iran experienced the largest loss of human resources in all of Asia, a political change of heart took place: In her contribution, **Julie S. Leube** explores how the Islamic Republic aims to counteract this development through the establishment of the National Elites Foundation. Through examining the foundation's structure, programs, and target audience, she shows how the definition of the officially nurtured elite is characterized by a merely technical understanding that disregards the role of opinion-making intellectuals as part of a country's elite (46-52).

Besides the power of the nation-state and its propagated ideology, popular and academic discourse present another explanation for the absence of intellectuals in a crucial time of turmoil and chaos, such as the Arab Spring. Middle Eastern societies are quite commonly attributed with some kind of societal malady—this “Arab malaise” is regarded as common narrative of a society finding itself in a state of weakness in the face of Western invasion. The intellectual preoccupation with this malaise shifted from demand of political reform and progress in the nineteenth cen-

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tury toward a revival of cultural heritage in the post-independence era.<sup>6</sup> As Abdallah Laroui stated in his famous critique *The Crisis of the Arab Intellectual*, intellectuals after World War II and especially in the 1960s turned to a “quasi-magical identification with the great period of classical Arabian culture” (156). The quest for identity, authenticity, and orientation inspired a whole intellectual tradition, in the course of which “Arab intellectuals” are often denoted as “organic intellectuals” articulating their culture's concerns, emotions, and experiences in a language the masses could not express (Kurzman and Owens 13; Solty 111).<sup>7</sup> Even though the upheavals of the Arab Spring came as a surprise for many intellectuals, some of them had described a new trend toward democratic and humanitarian issues in intellectual debates in the Middle East. **Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab** therefore states in her contribution to this issue that “intellectuals were very much in tune with the deep transformations of their societies, and that their critical writings expressed on an intellectual level what the protestors are voicing today on the political level” (26-34). She describes a “critical turn” in post-independence Arab thought with shifting priorities, from “essentialism to agency, from identity to democracy, and from ideology to critique.” Notably, Kassab convincingly argues that this turn

is not characteristic solely for Middle Eastern societies, rather indicates the moment when approaches of cultural and political decolonization turn from fixating on “the other”—the colonizer—to reassessing internal liberation policies common in various post-colonial societies. Evaluated in the new context of intellectual Arab self-criticism, Kassab notes that some of today's Arab intellectual voices provide evidence that inwardly turned self-accusation after the big defeat of 1967 is again turning outward, into greater concern with political matters. Her argument is similar to an idea articulated by Elias Khoury—who invented the term “third nahḍa” to signify the third intellectual awakening after the first historical *nahḍa* at the turn of the century, and a second *nahḍa* in the period after 1967. The intellectual output of this “third nahḍa” is not concerned with a distinct political program addressing a particular group of citizens (e.g. nationalism, socialism, fundamentalism), but rather with the question of universal human rights such as equality, justice, and freedom (Khoury, *Min ajl nahḍa thālitha*). Nevertheless, the renowned Lebanese author—himself being a leading representative of the Arab intelligentsia, and very much affiliated with the idea of relentless intellectual self-criticism—found himself in deep awe of people's braveness in Tunisia, Egypt, or

Syria. For him as an intellectual, the testimony of their actions allow for no other attitude than humble appreciation and a deep hope in the next generation (Khoury, *Inverted Worlds*; “Naḥwa mudawwana”).

As editors, we feel that these six articles—particularly in their synthesis, through which several linkages and intersections are revealed—might initiate a process of rethinking our topic in “focus” and contribute to a broader understanding of the people we call “intellectuals”—in the context of the Middle East, but also beyond its borders. Nevertheless, we are well aware that contemplating this controversial figure implies a complex of aspects that could hardly be taken into full account in one single issue. (For instance, the role of gender relations remains underexposed.) Ultimately, this present edition sheds light on the Arab-speaking part of the Middle East, with an excursion to Iran, and concentrates on the region's modern history as cradle of the “intellectual.”

So, was all the earlier talk about both an interdisciplinary and transregional attempt too ambitious? On the one hand, academics typically only grudgingly publicly confess intellectual failure, particularly when starting a new project, instead tending to turn all doubts into forthcoming successes. On the other hand, self-criticism is an integral part of our daily academic du-



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ties as well. On that note, the editors strike a blow here for daring something that might turn out to be difficult, complicated, or perhaps even impossible. However, this journal is and should remain a work-in-progress, and with its first issue and indeed its "meta" topic, we do hope to pave the way for future issues, coming closer in our search for discovering new, underappreciated, or even so far undetected intersections in a self-reflective quest for a both interdisciplinary and transregional attempt at further thought about the Middle East.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Special columns like "anti/thesis" or "close up"—as well as book reviews and interviews—are optional and therefore not necessarily included in each issue. For example, in this first issue the "anti/thesis" column is absent.

<sup>2</sup> The editorial board of *Middle East – Topics and Arguments* retains a broad understanding of the Middle East, which includes North Africa, the Levant, the Arabic Peninsula, the Gulf region, along with Turkey and Iran, and neighboring countries, as well as Middle Eastern and Muslim communities outside the region.

<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed history of the rise and fall of the classical intellectual figure in Europe, refer to Gil Eyal's contribution to this issue.

<sup>4</sup> The normative concept of "public sphere" was developed by Jürgen Habermas in his groundbreaking work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (*Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*) in 1962, had since frequently been debated as place and target of intellectual action by academics and intellectuals alike.

<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed account of the development of a public sphere in the Middle East, refer to Jan-Peter Hartung's article in this issue.

<sup>6</sup> For the development of intellectual discourse in modern Arab thought, refer to Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab's contribution in this issue.

<sup>7</sup> For a critical reading of the "Arab intellectual" as "organic intellectual", see Bamyeh 9-20.

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