

## Reorientalizing the Middle East: The Power Agenda Setting Post-Arab Uprisings

Karim Malak  
Sara Salem

Claims to new or critical knowledge can often be non-performative. Building off of this assumption, this paper demonstrates the ways in which the 2010-2011 uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa have been analysed through approaches that claim to be critical and post-Orientalist and yet reproduce problematic assumptions about the region, revealing their connection to a longer genealogy dating back to Orientalism. This serves to sanitize the uprisings by virtue of a neoliberal agenda that reproduces the 'Middle East' straitjacket, in turn creating a typology not too different from realist analysis in the region that (re)posits 'Arab

exceptionalism.' Claims to being critical, or making a critical turn, are thus questioned in this paper through an analysis that shows how theory has been in the interest of power through the appropriation of native informants into the academic complex of think-tanks, Western donor institutions, and foreign media. Taking our cue from Edward Said, we explore how new approaches have presented themselves as critical and have disrobed themselves of their exotic and explicit racist discourse, despite the fact that the same assumptions continue to lurk in the background. Using Sara Ahmed's notion of the non-performativ-

ity of claims to being critical, we survey how the Middle East is being reshaped through these 'new' and 'critical' approaches that in essence are apologetic to neoliberalism and liberal governmentality at large. We show how minorities continue to be an intervention mechanism under the so-called 'freedom of belief' agenda, how the 'democracy paradigm' advances electoralism as freedom, and how rights-based approaches with their underlying (neo)liberal assumptions continue to determine gender politics and analysis despite postcolonial interventions.

By presenting a contemporary genealogy of Middle East studies and surveying calls for proposals for journal articles, media publications, Western think-tank reports, donor programs and Civil Society Organizations' (CSOs) expansion into the Middle East, this paper argues that this form of surveillance, though masquerading as 'critical,' builds off of neoliberal governmentality. This, in turn, molds a subjectivity that reifies the Middle East as a stagnant entity.

**Keywords:** Egypt; Arab Spring; Middle East; Orientalism; Neoliberalism; Copts; Women

### Introduction

The uprisings that spread across the Middle East and North Africa in 2010 and 2011 quickly gave rise to calls for analysis that could explain the supposedly unexpected events. Four years later, this drive for explanations and theoretical innovations has continued, within the pluralist celebration of 'the more the merrier.' This has not only occurred within academia, but also within policy-making circles.<sup>1</sup> No one has paused to investigate these analyses pedagogically and how they have had an effect on reproducing 'Middle East studies', as well as the term 'the Middle East'. As side debates rage on about interdisciplinarity and reflexivity within area studies, in particular Middle East studies (Wilson 855), the discipline as a whole remains unscathed and continues to be encapsulated in the paradigm of Eurocentrism (Massad 37-38). To add insult to injury, most analysis now heralds itself as 'critical.' This is precisely what this paper aims to probe: Orientalist representations of, that in turn shape, 'the Middle East' as anarchic, radical, misogynist, and on the verge of being a failed state. This representational move can mount a new attack by way of positing itself as critical, and in so doing, hiding its material ramifications as it furthers neoliberal policies.<sup>2</sup>

The performativity of claims to being 'critical' or new are important to assess, particularly in light of the increasing tendency to make such claims as protection against accusations of Eurocentrism. Sara Ahmed has noted that a claim to being critical can be just that: a claim, without substance, and therefore one that does not perform what it says it will. The non-performativity of a concept is important to trace: concepts and theories do not always perform in the ways in which they claim to perform. Claims to 'being critical' should always be probed, as a claim to being critical does not replace the act itself. Using examples from the post-uprisings period, this paper shows how the neoliberal agenda operates through this claim and in effect sanitizes the potential of the uprisings. However—and this is crucial—claims to being critical are non-performative in the sense of failing to perform a critical task; but they remain performative in other ways, notably in the way they reproduce certain assumptions and paradigms (ibid.). This two-fold process is what we address in this paper: on the one hand, we aim to demonstrate the non-performativity of claims within Middle East studies to be critical, new, or post-Orientalist; and on the other hand, we show how this non-performativity in terms of being critical still performs other functions that are often hidden,

namely the reproduction of the field of Middle East studies along the lines of an Orientalist Eurocentrism. Middle East studies seem to be predicated on the International Relations notion of Hobbesian 'anarchy' that it cannot move past, a point we will touch on later.

This paper thus seeks to probe these processes in order to demonstrate that the so-called 'critical turn' taken by many scholars within Middle East studies in fact relies on similar assumptions as previous work that has been categorized as Eurocentric or Orientalist. The non-performativity of the claim to be critical as well as the performativity of the reproduction of a Eurocentric Middle East will be probed through an analysis that focuses on three key areas of debate within Middle East studies: civil society and the democracy paradigm, gender justice through rights-based approaches, and the 'minority question.' The furthering of neoliberalism through claims to be critical occurs in each of these debates, which in turn continue to reproduce the Middle East in a Eurocentric manner.

### Genealogy of the Literature Leading up to 2011

It is commonly assumed that post-positivist literature<sup>3</sup> has shown the weaknesses of positivism and led to the emergence of 'new' approaches that challenge its central

position (Smith, Booth, Zalewski 6). These new approaches are lauded for their critical and reflexive approach to knowledge production (Tickner). Despite this, these approaches continue to be dominated by the world hegemon: the US (Smith). The understanding of these 'new' approaches as critical and reflexive eschews the 'constructivist turn' that has been applied to the Middle East with largely the same apologia to the dominant benevolent hegemon, the US (Banai). Banai, for example, openly advocates, through a purely constructivist lens that problematizes norms, that the US should in fact engage in democracy promotion, but critiques the approach of President George W. Bush and openly commends that of President Obama. Some scholars have even made inroads using a critical security studies approach that utilizes 'speech-act', a similarly post-positivist approach that relies on discourse analysis. This approach serves to 'desecuritize' the Middle East, which by a sleight of hand is marked as inherently unstable, by linking it economically to the dominant and 'stable' democracy of Israel (Christou and Adamides, 2013). This ties back to Smith's claim that IR is produced as apologetic to the hegemon: in this case it is produced in service of the Middle East's policeman: Israel. These brief examples all show essentialized notions that

constitute the Middle East as war-torn and damned place while hiding neo-imperial Western intervention. It also furthers a neoliberal agenda and simultaneously adopts a racialized idea of Arabs as being savage, at times implicitly or explicitly calling for them to be tamed. This takes the form of either legal exceptionalism and pausing the Geneva Conventions (conditioning their applicability only to the civilized races); or at other times designating the Middle East as rampant with 'failed states.'<sup>4</sup> Both consequences of this designation and construction of the Middle East means that development requires the civilized West to enter benevolently whilst the neoliberal agenda becomes more hidden. Moreover, it is because of this that Eurocentric notions are reconciled with Islamists in order to further the Eurocentric goals of neoliberalism.

There is no clearer example of neoliberal discourse that seeks to be critical and new than the issue in which both articles were published: *Security Dialogue's* 2013 special issue titled *The New Middle East: A Critical Appraisal*. In this issue, Banai seeks to present a narrative in which rights and freedoms are the focus of the Arab Spring in which he constructs protestors as vying for those rights, as opposed to calling for social justice and protesting against neo-imperialism. This is precisely the general

argument of this paper: post-positivist approaches claiming critical knowledge and masquerading as novel in order to hide their neoliberal agenda. This serves to obscure the fact that the Arab uprisings have rejected such economic linkages to capital within the agenda of neoliberalism despite a sanitized version existing in the literature on the Arab Spring. Banai's argument meshes well with that of Christou and Adamides, from the same issue of *Security Dialogue*, as both have a gaping lacuna: they both neglect to mention the occurrence of events that demonstrate the clear opposition towards Israel throughout the Arab Spring. For example, in August 2011 Egyptian protesters nearly stormed Israel's Cairo embassy, climbing and breaching the top floor of the apartment complex housing the embassy to protest the death of Egyptian border guards caused by Israeli border guards pursuing militants near the Rafah border strip. Egypt threatened to withdraw its Ambassador from Tel Aviv and almost did, posting an online statement that it was withdrawing its ambassador, but later withdrawing it in a mysterious manner (Ahramonline). Such omissions of key events can only take place if a democracy lens is superimposed on the analysis that in effect prioritizes individual rights whilst omitting power politics and social justice

as analytical categories that obscure neoliberalism.

Banai performs this pedagogically in the parallel he draws between the Iranian revolution and the Arab Spring. Banai distinguishes the case of Iran in 1979 by saying that its failure was due to “[the] discussion [...] being in terms of anti-imperialism and social justice issues, and not about the future of democracy in Iran” (420). In this case Banai’s operational definition of democracy is one that firmly eschews anti-imperialism and the notion of social justice, replicating an almost Cold War-like McCarthyism. After this definition he goes on to lament the Arab Spring activists who do further the cause for democracy. This genealogy of democracy is extremely Eurocentric in casting democracy literature as being individualistic, liberal and furthering rights-based approaches whilst ignoring more accepted critiques, such as Dingwerth’s, for the need to probe areas where social justice can actually be a defining characteristic of ‘democracy’ as opposed to procedural definitions of democracy that live off electoralism.

But it would be foolish to think that Banai is alone in his definition, just as it would be foolish to think Banai (420) is critical because he can cite Robert Cox’s (129) famous phrase: theory ‘is always for someone and for some purpose.’ Banai just so

happens to elide his theory’s purpose and its Eurocentrism by critiquing that of others and calling for reflexivity. Indeed this is a clear instance of the non-performativity of a claim to being critical: while Banai cites Robert Cox’s argument about theory and power, and even calls for others to be reflexive, his own analysis clearly reproduces Eurocentrism and thus cannot be seen as critical. Banai’s ideas resonate well with US media. See, for example, responses towards 2012 socialist presidential candidate Hamdeen Sabahy from major US media outlets. The New York Times vilified Sabahy, who ended up coming third and missing the run-off elections by less than three percentage points from the second frontrunner Ahmed Shafik, for opposing the International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan and labeled him as “against the market” (New York Times). *Foreign Policy* similarly lambasted Sabahy with an odd feature piece title: “More Trouble for the IMF in Egypt.” It is precisely such depictions that show the prowess of the IMF in Egypt and the ‘irrationality’ of opposing such an institution that furthers Orientalism—and, importantly, neoliberalism—alongside developmental linear paradigms in order to help the ‘Third World.’ *Foreign Policy* has recruited native informants to similarly lambast Sabahy decrying his policies as “a far cry from what the country needs”

(Dahshan). These Orientalist narratives eschew the larger causality of opposition to Mubarak and Ben Ali’s regimes for their neoliberal agendas; as such narratives firmly exclude the Gafsa and Mahala worker revolts in Egypt and Tunisia in 2008 (Hanieh). Indeed the exclusion of worker revolts from much of the post-uprisings analysis clearly reveals the neoliberal underpinnings or these so-called ‘critical’ approaches.

Another aspect of this discussion is the famed ‘moderation thesis’ of Islamists (Lynch; Basly) which essentially remains little more than performativity to hide power politics. Interestingly this thesis not only hinges on taming the ‘Arab radicals’ but similarly on liberal ideas, rights-based approaches and individual freedoms. Rajaa Basly wrote a piece in Carnegie’s *Sada Journal* warning that:

[The] growth of fundamentalist Salafism puts al-Nahda in an awkward position, and may force it to reposition itself after the Salafists have led demonstrations chanting bigoted and anti-Semitic slogans, and attacked liquor stores and unveiled women.

Here there is a clear juxtaposition between Salafis (radical Islamists) and al-Nahda (moderate Islamists). Similarly,

take Middle East Foreign Policy Editor and George Washington Professor Marc Lynch's opinion on the 'polarization' of politics in Tunisia and reference to how al-Nahda were "unsure about how to grapple with the rising Salafi trend." This positing of a spectrum and the performativity of this fear factor automatically preempts any questions and ups the credentials of moderate Islamists. It also takes the Hobbesian idea of anarchy to new heights and attunes it to the Middle East by throwing radical Islamists into the mix, adding a cultural dimension to the IR argument. Such statements carry big omissions of assassinations of the opposition such as the death of Choukri Belaid, which was widely believed to be the work of the ruling party al-Nahda by way of tolerating increasing violence, Belaid's comrade—Abdel Nasser Laouni—accused al-Nahda directly of perpetrating the murder (al-Akhbar). Echoing Lynch some describe such Islamists as a "safety valve for moderate Islam" while simultaneously arguing that "[i]f it wasn't for the Brotherhood, most of the youths of this era would have chosen the path of violence" (Leiken 2007). This article, like most of the literature on the Arab Spring relied on the youth as a malleable category that has the power to shape Islamists and bend them to modernity. Basly's piece ended on a

similar note urging Tunisians to "balance modernism and traditionalism." Evoking "traditionalism" in such a blanket way without engaging it furthers anthropocentric colonial notions of essentialized native 'traditions' (Mamdani). Other like-minded think-tankers and native informants argue that this moderation is apparent in that the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) is taking "the long view," (Hamid). It is interesting that the racist-realist argument (Hobson),<sup>5</sup> manifested here in terms of the moderation thesis,<sup>6</sup> is made in the *Journal of Foreign Affairs*, the flagship publication of the Council of Foreign Relations think-tank, heir and previous namesake to the *Journal of Race Development*.<sup>7</sup> The genealogy attests to the once racial-turned-Eurocentric argument. The only way such knowledge can retain its 'critical' veneer is because it is placed alongside positivist realist literature that posits the Middle East as a sub-system with its own anarchic system. Here Bahgat Korany's critique of Robert Kaplan is important. It posits that the representation of the Middle East's anarchic relationship is exceptional. This realism has unveiled its racial underpinnings in which the savages are the impending threat and must be balanced against or kept in check. Examples of such racist-realist writing, as Hobson has triangulated with the eighteenth cen-

tury, insinuate with analysis of the conventional 'security dilemma' and the 'failed state thesis.' The persistence of such analysis is explained by the fact that pedagogically there are few security journals that are not borne out of flagship think-tanks or institutions where funding, and editorial managers, determine loyalty and direction. This problem has been so noticeable that other competitive journals have pointed it out. It is no surprise that these more independent journals are open-access, are not behind a pay wall and do not require membership fees.<sup>8</sup>

Expanding on the analytic qualities of realism and the 'security dilemma,' security in the anarchic world and its analysis becomes key. Egyptian native informant think-tankers write that Egypt's security problem needs to address rights-based agendas whilst simultaneously holding them to a worldwide counter terrorism goal that 'serves US interests.' This reconciliation is achieved by a racial performativity: the Egyptian 'crackdown' is ineffective and needs to be reworked with US assistance and European help, thus assuming that both players are neutral and professional with their own counterterrorism policies (Radwan). The racism is apparent in the assumption that only the White West can master safe, civilized policing tactics. An example of this is the way in

which racism creeps in when advocating the necessary Israeli 'deterrence strikes' against Palestinians, even if civilians. This racial othering happens by openly advocating the killing of civilians in violation of the great Eurocentric mantle: the Geneva Convention. This is something one would think in the twenty-first century would be taken as a *fait accompli*, but it shows precisely the double Eurocentric/racial bind: the Geneva Convention, a European creation, does not apply outside Europe because previously designated barbarians, Palestinian civilians, are a 'necessary' casualty to 'reel in Hamas' (Herzog). Palestinian civilians are willing to die as human shields, they have no feelings, they want to die, and therefore they deserve to die; the right to life enshrined in the Geneva Convention does not apply to them.

It is clear that in the examples presented above, alternative genealogies that do not stop at the toppling of Arab presidents in 2010-2011 and that include a host of forces that are hostile to the neoliberal agenda are ignored. It is beyond the scope of this paper to detail these arguments, but other avenues of research have highlighted how there exists alternative historicizations of the Arab uprisings that tackle the issue of imperialism (Hanieh) and which problematize the issue of neoliberal policies (Elyachar), austerity

and structural readjustment (Alexander and Bassiouny).

### Triangulating Neoliberalism

The main thrust of the argument is that neoliberalism is represented as the only logical path to development. When Egyptian actors are seen as unwilling to comply with this, racist and Orientalist depictions are used to explain this supposed insubordination (to global capital). The key link between neoliberalism and 'Islamism' in general is that to move past previous Orientalist representations of 'Islam' as an ideology (Islamism), it must be seen to be market-compatible. This means for Islam to be palatable, and to disrobe itself of its previous depictions, it must be ready to accept austerity policies and be docile to foreign capital. This phenomenon is what Timothy Mitchell (2003), playing on Benjamin Barber's concept of "McWorld," calls "McJihad." It is a helpful way of understanding "the political violence the United States, not alone [...] has funded and promoted," by way of promoting Islamists. Mitchell argues "it would seem to follow that political Islam plays an unacknowledged role in the making of what we call global capitalism" (ibid.).

The attention that has been paid to Islamist forces post Arab Spring is particularly notable in relation to neoliberalism,

where Islamists were collectively promoted as the 'moderates' compared to the 'crazy socialists.' One example is the MB in Egypt pledging to honor Camp David while Hamdeen Sabahy called for its amendment and made his position against it clear. This is similar to Tunisia, where al-Nahda has accepted an IMF loan and begun restructuring its economy along neoliberal parameters. Due to the sanitized narrative of the Arab Spring and its various exclusions, few remember that the MB in Egypt also signed a Stand-By Agreement (SBA) with the IMF under MB president Mohammed Morsi.<sup>9</sup> Islamists in the Arab Spring are heralded as a group that have been oppressed for too long – despite the fact that socialists too have been similarly oppressed—and that have been portrayed as coming back for their glory. Out of this comes the moderation thesis in relation to Islamists, which is little more than a euphemism for neoliberalization. This sleight of hand is performed in two parts: first Islamists in both Egypt and Tunisia sought to play off fears that rising Salafist movements represented a threat to the political order and that socialists were 'against the market,' thus calling for both to be excluded. In this sense, such Islamists stand to actually gain by fanning the flames of extremist Islamism by positioning themselves as 'moderate' relative



to rising Salafists and outlandish socialists. Embracing the notion of 'moderate Islamists' allows Western academics to be presented as critical and post-Orientalist, because they have overcome their othering of Islamism as a whole. This embracing was seen in the West's silence over Egypt's MB violence and extrajudicial usurping of power by a constitutional declaration that declared Morsi immune to judicial review in order to pass an authoritarian constitution, as well as the silence over the violence that followed. This was in addition to the police-sanctioned attacks against a funeral procession outside the Egyptian Coptic cathedral in 2012 that resulted in the police attacking the cathedral itself with teargas. In Tunisia in 2012, this was mirrored with a strike and mass protests following al-Nahda's move to arrest opposition figures. Tunisia differed from Egypt in that a concession was eventually given with a new coalition government.

There is a clear attempt at white-washing even in how foreign governments chose to intervene in the Arab Spring: through representing bilateral aid as technical, neutral and value-free. That is why there is a Westernized Arab audience that continues to ask why Western aid is not forthcoming, demonstrating that the debate is already set within the parameters of aid being seen as welcome. In a rare

show of frank yet outright Orientalism, Republican Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina noted on CBS' *Face the Nation* (Hill) that:

What would happen if we cut off the aid is that Western tourism ends in Egypt for the foreseeable future for as far as the eye can see [...] Western investment comes to a standstill. Egypt becomes a beggar client state of the Arab Gulf states. Egypt's future is really damned [...]. We're the strongest nation on earth. Everybody that sides with us tends to do better than people we oppose.

This is a civilizational and Orientalist representation in that the strong US can bend Egypt's arm in order to make it beg, because it is seen as on the point of becoming a failed state. This is similar to Hobson's idea of the Eurocentric nature of the 'failed states' thesis and the paternalistic attitude and form of intervention it invites. It involves a doctor-patient cancer metaphor in which the doctor must first break the patient's body and defense in order to cure him of the 'disease.' It is interesting, but not surprising, to see that liberal Egyptian opposition figures, such as Mohamed El Baradei, through the invitation of Western media, discuss Egypt through these

parameters, identifying it as being close to a failed state.<sup>10</sup>

Neoliberalism's *inclusion* of 'political Islam' has been inundated with a logic of accumulation of foreign capital and austerity politics. This representation continues to Orientalize politics in a bid to disfranchise socialists who are—to borrow from the New York Times—"against the market." This post-Orientalist notion continues that performativity; to be post-Orientalist is to perform a novelty that claims a departure from, but performs that very function of, Orientalism.

### **Civil Society and the Democracy Paradigm: The Case of Democracy Promotion**

Democracy and civil society have been recurrent themes in debates on the Arab uprisings. They are conceptualized as being of particular importance to the region's future, and thus in need of being strengthened. However, much of these debates clearly reproduce a Eurocentric and liberal teleology that hide specific assumptions about what democracy and civil society actually are, and that also hide the connection between these assumptions and the furthering of neoliberalization. In spite of the continuing use of Eurocentric understandings of democracy and civil society, there remains the claim of being critical and new. It is thus important to in-

terrogate this, and show that in fact there is continuity and not disjuncture in the ways in which democracy and civil society are imagined.

Despite being one of the buzzwords of our times, 'democracy' is rarely clearly defined by scholars or writers who work on the contemporary Middle East. It seems to be the case that it is presented as though it has no underlying assumptions: a concept that simply makes sense. The aim in this section is to unpack what 'democracy' is and how it is represented in reference to the 2010-2011 uprisings, and in turn what it meant by 'democracy promotion,' an activity directly linked to civil society.<sup>11</sup> Indeed it is clear that the form of democracy that is usually referred to is, first, one among many, and second, the form that is most conducive to neoliberalism by way of electoralism and fascination with representationalism through elected representatives as opposed to a notion of accountability. In other words, what is at stake here is the representation of democracy such that the globalized standard today is revamped. Procedural democracy becomes the top priority, as this fosters continued neoliberalization, and this favouring of procedural democracy occurs at the expense of other conceptualizations of democracy. As argued by Tagma et al., this demonstrates a clear liberal bias: "The understanding of

democracy displayed here is clearly at odds with other understandings of democracy—such as radical democracy, which sees politics as consisting of lengthy and open-ended contestations, or social democracy, which is suggestive of social justice, solidarity and egalitarianism" (386). As mentioned in the first section of this paper, the dominant conceptualization of democracy thus ignores neo-imperialism and social justice whilst focusing on electoralism. Moreover, this dominant conceptualization articulates specific conditions as necessary for the 'transition' to democracy, most notably: a free market, a 'strong' civil society, human rights, and a host of individual civic liberties.

In the literature on the Middle East it is assumed that civil society is the 'private sphere' whose function is to exist as a space of freedom that restricts the power of the state, conceptualized as the organs of government. The state in Arab contexts is represented as particularly authoritarian and thus in need of an especially powerful civil society that can restrain it. Altan-Olcay and Icduygu note that civil society organizations are seen as outside of the state, mediating the relationship between citizens and the (authoritarian) state. Thus civil society organizations are seen as organizations that bring about tolerance, peace and civility (159). As NGOs started

to proliferate across the Arab world, they began to be conceptualized as a possible counterbalance to authoritarian states. As Islah Jad writes, "The expansion of NGOs is widely viewed as constituting the development of an Arab 'civil society' that can contain the authoritarian state and as a healthy sign of real, 'bottom-up' democracy in the region" (177). Jad also notes, however, that the proliferation of NGOs may also be viewed as a new and growing form of dependency on the West.

Indeed the link between civil society in countries like Egypt and democracy promotion confirms this relationship of dependency. Democracy promotion has become one of the pillars of American foreign policy and democratization has been central to the conditionality imposed on Middle Eastern countries by international actors (Stivachtis 102). As argued by Stivachtis, democracy promotion cannot but place countries on a civilizational hierarchy and create unequal relations within international society (111). Civil society in postcolonial contexts has constituted one of the main mediums through which democracy promotion is spread, which has rendered civil society as one of the most crucial spaces in 'post-revolutionary' Arab countries. Following this, civil society has been posited as essential to democratic transitions and thus any events perceived



as 'attacks' on civil society are seen as negatively affecting the prospects of the Arab uprisings themselves. The centrality of civil society means that the literature on its role in Arab countries is extensive, particularly among think-tanks. Hisham Hellyer, a Brookings fellow who boasts expertise on the region, has written that "civil society is critical to Egypt's transitional process—because it does jobs that no one else has the time or inclination to do. Egypt is a stronger country if civil society is stronger." In a post for USAID, Mahmoud Farouk—Director of Egyptian Center for Public Policy studies—writes: "While Egypt's civil society plays an important role in defending civilian rights and promoting development, civil society organizations frequently find themselves under criticism. Our contributions are belittled. Our work is obstructed. Our motivations are called into question." He suggests that the solution to this is to produce films that explain to Egyptians what civil society is. The Atlantic Council, arguing in a similar vein, has even suggested that Egyptians do not yet understand the role and importance of civil society: "The fact is that civil society as a legitimate (and beneficial) zone of activity separate from the state is not yet a widely accepted concept in Egypt." They go on to call for a fair NGO law that is rational and that allows for freedom of expression. It is

difficult to miss the paternalism in many of these articles and statements. Indeed Charles Dunne, Director of the MENA Freedom House project, in a hearing on "The Struggle for Civil Society in Egypt" stated: "My deepest concern here is not for me but for Egyptians themselves. Having served there as a Foreign Service officer for three full years, I came to love the country, and its people. They deserve better. Unfortunately that's not what they're getting." This paternalism, linked to the clear liberal underpinning<sup>12</sup> of such organizations, should be seen as problematic and worrying, rather than as the only solution to the problems in Arab societies. Thus it is clear that while claims to being post-Orientalist are being made, they do not in actual fact perform a critical act and continue to reproduce Western liberal assumptions about what constitutes democracy and how civil society can be used to democratize Arab societies.

### **Gender Equality through Rights-Based Approaches**

Discussions on gender and sexuality have been central in the literature on the 2010-2011 uprisings, as gender continues to be a key indicator of civilizational standards.<sup>13</sup> This is not a new phenomenon, and dates back to the start of the European colonial project. Following this, the countries of the

Middle East and North Africa continue to be scrutinized based on how far up the ladder they are with regards to gender equality. Gender equality here is conceptualized according to Rights-Based Approaches (RBAs) that construct women and unorthodox sexual orientation typologies as special groups with specific problems. The solutions proposed to said 'problems' are presented (and in turn represented) as though they are universal and neutral, even though they often reproduce liberal notions of gender equality. This is despite the fact that feminism as a discipline has undergone several 'critical turns,' the most recent of which led to intersectionality.<sup>14</sup> These approaches are represented as being new and thus distinct from previous approaches that were more likely to reproduce Eurocentric assumptions about gender. It is precisely this performativity of being 'new' that is important to probe in order to show how many of the same assumptions underlie these 'new' approaches.<sup>15</sup>

During the 2010-2011 uprisings it became increasingly common to hear statements about women and either their presence or absence within the protests. The main problem with such statements is that they reproduce a classic liberal feminist trope: that of the separation between the public and private spheres alongside secular/re-

religious binaries. Any transgressions or non-transgressions of this separation thus become important to the analysis, as is clear from articles such as Jessica Winegar's in *American Ethnologist*. In this article she 'contrasts' women's experiences at home with the images of the Egyptian revolution in Tahrir, largely dominated by men, and implicitly laments the fact that although women are major social actors, they were unable to take to the streets and protest, for a variety of reasons. In one scene she explicitly lays out the dichotomy between men protesting and women cooking (while watching the protests on television): "Yet here Mona (her neighbor) and I were, on what was sure to be a defining day in Egypt's nascent revolt, cooking in the kitchen." In another part she speaks of questions she received from friends abroad asking her "where the women are?" and details her discomfort with discussing gender and Arab women with friends back home who may not be as familiar with the contextual specificities and thus may have stereotypical understandings:

Early on in the uprising, many of us foreign academics and journalists in Cairo started to receive e-mail inquiries from abroad asking us, "Where are the women in the revolution?" We always have

to struggle between our suspicion of these kinds of questions, loaded as they are with very particular presumptions about and desires for women in the region, and our own feminist interest in women's activities.

This therefore positions her as critical compared to her friends back home, and as someone who is familiar with the context. Thus we see here the representation of being critical that is, in effect, non-performative. Despite this, her article clearly reproduces a liberal understanding of the clear separation between private and public as a *key element of society*. Thus the point here is not whether this separation exists or not, or whether women protested or not, but rather that the entire argument serves to solidify the view that the public/private sphere is deterministic of social relations and that it prevents women from doing what they really want to do: protest in the streets. In order to do this, she ignores the literature that deals with the role of women workers and Egyptian protest movements (Beinin and Lockman; Beinin; El-Mahdi), as well as the literature that problematizes the over-emphasis of public and private spheres in gender analysis (Okin; Chinkin; Landes; Joseph). On the other hand, some posited the presence of female protesters as positive

because they show that "the Arab world has come around to the Western world's ways of treating women," and contrast the negative situation of women before the uprisings with the empowered positive situation of women during the uprisings, thus positing a progressive linear teleology (Sjoberg and Whooley, forthcoming). The negative situation is often explained through culturalist reasoning. Culturalist representations remain predominant in much analysis on the Arab world in gender. This holds true for think-tank literature as well. For example, in a research paper for Brookings Shadi Hamid writes: "The prevailing culture in the Arab world, for now at least, does not view women the same way that Western cultures do. In other words, getting to gender equality is probably going to take a very long time" (Good).

The indicators often used to 'measure' the status of Arab women usually rely on key liberal feminist assumptions regarding gender equality. Ranging from the status of Arab women's employment<sup>16</sup> to the number of Arab women present in government bodies,<sup>17</sup> these indicators measure women's access to the market and to political power that is limited precisely because of the absence of social justice. The World Bank report on the Arab Spring and women even posits that Arab women

are having a hard time balancing their family life with work, bringing to mind the exact trajectory of Eurocentric feminism that occurred elsewhere. These indicators have become the accepted currency of measuring gender equality, and are made concrete by indexes such as the Global Gender Gap Report. The United Nations Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) also acts as an important determinant of the status of Arab gender relations, despite the fact that it is part of the problematic attempt to universalize a Eurocentric human rights discourse.<sup>18</sup> Importantly, these measurements in effect create civilizational hierarchies that rely on gender. To conclude, it is notable that despite several critical turns within gender studies the field of gender and the Middle East continues to be represented by liberal assumptions and culturalist analysis. Thus even new work published after the most recent critical turn towards intersectionality in effect reproduces older civilizational narratives of gender. This is clear both in discussions on the presence/absence of women during the uprisings as well as the use of sexual rights to delegitimize causes, thus clearly demonstrating the non-performativity of the critical turn. Alternative approaches that center Marxist or postcolonial understandings of gender are one

way out of simplistic reductionism and the representation of civilizational hierarchies based on gender and sexuality. These would instead emphasize materiality, social justice and anti-imperialism as important lived realities for Middle Eastern women, and unpack the ways in which these were part and parcel of the Arab uprisings.

#### **Copts and the 'Minority Question'**

The constraining influence of Rights-Based Approaches can also be seen in relation to understanding events including their favorite advocacy target: minorities. It is especially odd—perhaps not so much when the continuity of Orientalist practices of racism and Eurocentrism are revealed—that think-tankers continue to advocate a one-size-fits-all approaches to 'equal citizenship' whilst hiding power dynamics (Malak, forthcoming). This is reflected in the literature that talks about how the 'Arab Spring' provided an opportunity for equality and failed; blaming it on the region's inherent 'democracy deficit' and placing it within a transition to democracy paradigm. This paradigm posits the 'minority problem' in the whole region as a fait accompli: that Arabs just have an issue with those who are not Muslim. This obstacle is not deconstructed, nor is it probed as a colonial artefact. Moreover,

even some of those 'minorities' are othered, think-tankers claim, in the sense that their decisions to support Arab rulers are "strange" despite being victims (El-Essawi). By performing this tempocentrism<sup>19</sup> that obscures the colonial legacy and attributes community strength based on size and censuses, this classic RBA, which rests so firmly on individualism, means that in the literature the 'minority problem' persists. It persists under the racist designation of the *sui generis* 'minority problem' with its other namesake of 'sectarianism'.<sup>20</sup> The continuation of Orientalism in the literature is so strong that chauvinistic attitudes towards Copts in Egypt - for example the categorization of a 'wealthy minority' (ibid.), a typical neoliberal problem—is blamed on Egyptian society's inherent sectarianism rather than neoliberalism.<sup>21</sup> Often such Orientalism is reinforced by yielding to Eurocentric foreign entities such as the Catholic Church or the Anglican Church as the 'critical' voices that "predicated extremists [would be] filling vacuums left by the ousting of autocratic regimes" (ibid). This aims to impose European tempo-historicism by transplanting the Church-State clash and separation onto the Arab world as the only remedy. Not only is it blatantly obvious that the Church-State clash is a result of the European Enlightenment, but its remedies are



### Sara Salem

is a PhD candidate at the Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, Netherlands. Her research interests include feminism, post-colonialism, critical theory and political economy in the MENA region. Her current research is focused on the role of various elite groups during the 2011 Egyptian uprising.  
**email:** Salem@iss.nl

This was done with Fukuyama's same deterministic attitude but not in an end of history thesis, but in an end of the Orientalism thesis. The ultimate irony, and sad reality, is that Orientalism is alive and well.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> A clear example is a 2012 US Institute of Peace report, that stated the following: In February 2011, a workshop at Stanford University cosponsored [sic] by USIP, George Washington University's Institute for Public Diplomacy and Global Communication, and Stanford's Liberation Technology Program discussed the state of the art in empirical research and theory development relevant to the emerging Arab struggles. The scholars, activists, and representatives from technology companies particularly focused on the new data that might be used to address these urgent theoretical questions. In September 2011, a similar group convened at USIP in Washington, D.C., alongside senior U.S. policy officials to present new research to a public audience and to continue the conversation in a private workshop.

<sup>2</sup> Neil Lazarus has argued that postcolonial approaches fixate on the representational aspect of Orientalism and fail to grasp the materiality of representational politics. We subscribe to Lazarus' take and locate Orientalist politics within the representation of an anteriority of the Middle East using a materialist outlook can move past this impasse. We also show how continued Orientalist representations further a neoliberal agenda.

<sup>3</sup> The post-positivist turn denotes a theoretical approach that does not subscribe to objective and neutral formulations of knowledge as reflecting an external reality, but instead one that looks at performativity. Judith Butler captures this point succinctly: "performativity seeks to counter a certain kind of positivism according to which we might begin with already delimited understandings of what gender, the state, and the economy are." For more see Judith Butler ("Performative Agency" 147).

<sup>4</sup> Hobson has been among the first to say that World politics at the international level have a Eurocentric discourse performed through the concept of the 'failed state' as a civilizational burden similar to the 'white man's burden'. This argument has not been made with respect to the Arab uprisings before.

<sup>5</sup> Hobson's argument that imperial era racism was repackaged into realism, through anarchy, as a feature of the international world provides an accurate genealogy of how this theoretical notion polices non-Eurocentric parts of the world today.

<sup>6</sup> For examples of works that cite the US promotion of 'moderate Islamists' and the failure of the 'moderate thesis' see: Zaheer Kazmi.

<sup>7</sup> For a concise history of the racial underpinnings of political science in general and the development of the Journal of Race Development see Robert Vitalis ("Making Racism Invisible"; "Birth of a Discipline").

<sup>8</sup> See call for papers by the journal titled *Security*. Humanities and Social Science Net Online, 24 Apr. 2014. Web. 1 Sept. 2014. <<http://www.h-net.org/announce/show.cgi?ID=213237>>.

<sup>9</sup> The IMF deal has been frozen after a change of power in Egypt on June 12, 2013 that saw the ouster of Morsi, only a 'staff level agreement' was signed under Morsi in November 2012 with the remainder of the deal to be negotiated and ratified by the incoming parliament resulting in the delay as late as June 2013. For more see: "IMF Reaches Staff-Level Agreement with Egypt on US\$ 4.8 Billion Stand-By Agreement." *IMF Press Release 12/446*. International Monetary Fund, 20 Nov. 2012. Web. 3 May 2015.

<sup>10</sup> See CNN correspondent Becky Anderson's interview with Mohamed El Baradei and her Orientalist question if Egypt is a 'failed state'. "El Baradei: Egypt is a 'Failed State.'" Online video clip. *Youtube*. Youtube, 14 Feb. 2013. Web. 3 May 2015.

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→ <sup>11</sup> The definition of civil society is contentious, despite an apparent agreement in the literature on the Middle East, where it is most often referring to the representation of non-governmental organizations. A more Marxist definition, on the other hand which needless to say is not represented at all, would argue that civil society refers to much more and that it encapsulates almost all non-state institutions and actors including most importantly classes outside the ruling class. For the sake of this argument, however, we assume that civil society represents non-governmental organizations.

<sup>12</sup> Indeed Dunne went on to state: "Egyptian NGOs committed to democracy could play a major role in steering the government to liberal political change, and drawing the attention of the world to its successes and shortcoming. But the government of Egypt has moved swiftly to forestall this possibility."

<sup>13</sup> For more, see: Towns ("Status of Women"; "Civilization").

<sup>14</sup> There is a debate surrounding the question of what exactly intersectionality is: an approach, a framework, a methodology, or a discipline. In this paper we treat it as an approach to gender analysis.

<sup>15</sup> A clear example of this is the ways in which intersectionality, although posited as post-positivist and critical, often reproduces liberal identity politics and thus continues to perpetuate Eurocentrism. For more, see: Carbin, Maria, and Sara Edenheim. "The Intersectional Turn in Feminist Theory: A Dream of a Common Language?" *European Journal of Women's Studies* 20.3 (2013): 233-248. Web. 3 May 2015.

<sup>16</sup> See: World Bank. "Missing Voices: Gender Equality in the Arab World." *Worldbank.org*. World Bank, 14 Mar. 2014. Web 3 May 2015. See: Ghanem, Hafez. "Inclusive Growth after the Arab Spring." *Brookings.edu*. Brookings, 30 Jan. 2013. Web. 3 May 2015.

<sup>17</sup> See: Mabrouk, Mirette F. "The Precarious Position of Women and Minorities in Arab Spring Countries." *brookings.edu*. Brookings, 1 June 2012. Web. 3 May 2015.

<sup>18</sup> For example, see: "Poll Ranks Egypt Worst Arab State for Women." *Project on Middle East Democracy*. POMED, n.d. Web. 3 May 2015.

<sup>19</sup> The term tempocentrism coined by John Hobson designates the temporalization of politics such that certain periodizations and linearity is favored, making explanations that can arrive to the present neatly. For more see Hobson.

<sup>20</sup> The use of the problematic analytical concept of 'sectarianism' is widespread in the literature. See Tadros.

<sup>21</sup> These attitudes arise out of the uneven and combined development of capitalism in which a rising class is ostracized by way of singling out a particular trait of that class. In this case it is that of a Coptic Christian businessmen-Naguib Sawiris- often the same ostracization can be at play with female businessmen and members of different class factions of the ancien régime. Examples of such attitudes towards other groups of society after intense implementation of neoliberalism include anti-Chinese sentiment in Indonesia after IMF imposed conditions in 1997. For more see Klein (Shock Doctrine).

<sup>22</sup> Kabir Tambar details how the question of the community group of Alevis continues to be sidelined because minority groups as recognized by the treaty of Lausanne are only defined along a religious axis. This shows the precarious nature and limits of the concept of 'minority.' Tambar details how other mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion of subjects, in the transition from empire to state better grasp and locate such representations that are outside the nation-state. One can use Tambar's concept of belonging and representation and apply it to Copts in Egypt to better grasp dynamics of topographic inclusion and the representations of 'Coptic communities' as opposed to the continued persistence of the 'Coptic question' vis-à-vis the state. For such nationalist representations that describe an impasse between the state and Copts see Issandr El Amrani ("Coptic Question").

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