Introduction: Colonial to Postcolonial Masculinities in the Middle East and North Africa

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A crisis in masculinity may have catalyzed the grassroots uprising of 2011 in Tunisia—which, in its turn, inspired grassroots uprisings in Egypt, Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain. Muhammad Bouazizi had been harassed numerous times by corrupt municipal police while pursuing his livelihood as a street vendor in an impoverished southern region of Tunisia, but the last straw was when a policewoman slapped the twenty-six-year-old man. Bouazizi set himself on fire on December 17, 2010. The photograph that onlookers took of his burning body circulated via mobile phones and social media and became a rallying image as Tunisian protestors organized around human rights and an end to police brutality in the long-standing dictatorship. Bouazizi’s street vending helped him to provide, however meagerly, for his mother and siblings after the death of his father, in a country with high unemployment. The Middle East and North Africa (MENA), a region that is better termed ‘Southwest Asia and North Africa,’ contains many authoritarian states with high levels of government corruption, police impunity, double-digit unemployment, underemployment, and high poverty rates. At the same time, most cultures in this region² construct ‘breadwinner’ as an important role for males, despite much flux in that concept, and even though women have been ‘breadwinning’ in increasing numbers for decades now in nearly all of these countries. The combination of these factors—authoritarian states, high unemployment, and men’s sense of self that is invested in breadwinning—makes for high levels of stress in many men around the issue of their masculinity. At the other end of the Arab Spring’s trajectory, the counter-revolutionary Islamist group, often mockingly known among Syrians and Iraqis as ‘Da’esh’ (an Arabic acronym derived from the Arabic name of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant/ISIL), gains recruits in part by banking on the frustrated concepts of masculinity of alienated men who cannot find adequate livelihoods and therefore cannot marry and can scarcely help out their natal families (this in no way means that all or even most men facing such conditions end up in extremist groups). The group provides these marginalized and jobless men with income and an outlet for efficacious action, as well as with an ideology for dominating women (Packer). In a sense, then, various anxieties around masculinity may well be at the hub of several crises in North Africa.
Grassroots uprisings during 2011 in many Arabic-speaking countries, as well as the 2009 Green Movement in Iran and the 2013 Gezi Park protests in Turkey, showed that a new wave of questioning is simmering in the millennial generation in the MENA region, questioning that touches nearly everything about the status quo ante—masculinity included. In Iran, “rebellious young people . . . view their bodies and the articulation of their sexuality as a site of resistance against the government” (Yaghoobi, 53). Frequently absented from Orientalist-inflected global-media accounts and from masculinist local accounts of these events, women played crucial roles in the 2011 uprisings at the grassroots level, where they started. In Egypt, Asma Mahfouz’s vlog—especially her call to assemble in Tahrir Square on January 25—helped to spark the revolution (Fahmy, 373). Women laborers were a key part of the April 6 Youth Movement, which from 2008 laid the ground for Egypt’s uprising (Naber, Fall 2011, 11). In Syria, Suheir Atassi repeatedly calling men and women together in street protests during January, February, and March 2011 laid the ground for later protest organizing in Damascus (Human Rights Watch, 2011). Syrian human rights lawyer Razan Zaitouneh, with her Violations Documentation Center (VDC), became a focal point in the uprising, for both men and women—well before Zaitouneh’s iconic status for anti-regime Syrians rose even further because of her abduction from the VDC office in Douma on December 9, 2013, reportedly by Islamist militia Jaysh al-Islam (Human Rights Watch, 2016). Before the Syrian uprising militarized in autumn 2011, women were leading two of the first four coalitions composed of local protest committees. Bahraini activist Maryam al-Khawaja continues to be a prominent voice for the Bahraini protest movement from abroad, her father and her sister imprisoned by the regime (Nallu). At the same time, the urgent need for continued gender struggle in the revolution arena was highlighted when eighteen women in Cairo’s Tahrir Square, protesting the still-authoritarian conditions in Egypt after the 2011 Revolution succeeded in deposing president-for-life Hosni Mubarak, were arrested and subjected to virginity tests by the interim authority. The interim authority administered the ‘test,’ or gender-based torture method targeting women, in collusion with the accusation that the women were prostitutes, a charge aimed at undermining their protest actions (Amnesty International). This form of sexualized torture was declared illegal by a Cairo administrative court later that year (Butt and Hussein). However, the violence against women protesters continued; when the square filled on July 3, 2013, as Muhammad Morsi, Mubarak’s civilian successor as president, was ousted, multiple women were subjected to mass sexual assault by
men in the square (Kingsley). The testimony of a female member of Operation Anti-Sexual Harassment/Assault, a grassroots activist organization formed by Egyptian women and men in 2012, describes going into the pressing crowd with her Op-Anti-SH teammate to try to rescue a woman they had spotted being mob-assaulted, then becoming separated from her teammate and alternating between being pushed to the ground and facing suffocation or raising herself up and facing sexual assault as men tried to grope under the many layers of clothing she had worn in preparation (Operation Anti-Sexual Harassment/Assault, Testimony from an Assaulted Op-Anti-SH Member). She describes the look of horror (at the assault) of one man whose face met hers as he attempts to stop the other men. Women, whose actions and voices were initially heard and effectual in that rupture moment at the dawn of the uprisings, were then subjected to violent, sexualized attempts to shove them aside from its center and silence them, and the overall trajectories of many of the uprisings toward militarization ultimately marginalized the very women whose work had built the uprising. These charged moments show that in MENA as elsewhere, gender role change is (again, and continually) shifting, with some men right in step with it and others vehemently pushing back. They also underline the need to bring research on men up to speed with research on women of MENA. With its primary focus on masculinities in semiotic discourses and cultural production, this volume contributes to an aspect of that research.

Syrian queer folk and their allies were also a vital part of the early nonviolent uprising in the Syrian streets. In 2010, the Assad regime had arrested groups of gay men in sweeps in Damascus (“Gays Join the Syrian Uprising”). According to Mahmoud Hassino, who is Syrian, gay, and out, “the regime started a homophobic campaign to say that the revolution is immoral because people who own the news channels, which are supporting it, are homosexuals. They went further by saying that everyone who is active in the revolution is gay” (Luongo).

Homophobia, though perhaps as present there as anywhere, was not a prominent characteristic of the nonviolent phase of the Syrian uprising. By 2012, after the uprising had begun to militarize, homophobia was evident in Syrian-grown armed rebel brigades and when, in 2013, Islamist extremists from Da’esh (ISIL) joined the armed rebellion, public executions for alleged homosexuality became their all-too-frequent practice; one website keeps a tally (Outright Action International). In October 2017, well after the initial grassroots uprising in Egypt had been commandeered by Islamists and the military in quick succession, Egyptian authorities conducted an arrest sweep against gay men in the wake of the Cairo concert by the Lebanese band
Mashrou’ Leila, which has an openly gay member, Hamed Sinno. On one hand, the fact that the band, which “had been outspoken about LGBTQ issues in their music and public statements” (Holsiln), managed to snag a Cairo gig attended by 35,000 concertgoers is a significant indicator of ongoing change in social attitudes. On the other hand, after a photo of a concertgoer waving a rainbow flag went viral, the regime of Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi proceeded to arrest dozens on charges of ‘debauchery’ in an anti-LGBTIQ sweep, an appeasement of conservative social attitudes. Change, powerful pushback—but a residual increment of change, nonetheless: these developments around heteronormative, as well as queer, male gender roles place an array of issues about masculinity at the center of current debates about the future of state and society in Southwest Asia and North Africa. This volume is about masculinity, inclusive of queerness, not centered around queerness—but MENA queer and trans issues can no longer be relegated to afterthought status in any book about masculinity anywhere.

While these recent events suggest that constructions of masculinity are in flux, what this volume suggests, in all its variety, is that masculinities are always in a process of being constructed. There is no ‘before’ that was a stable gendered environment. The early twentieth century in the Middle East and North Africa saw a swirl of older Ottoman-era and Qajari-era concepts of normative masculinity along with a plethora of new ideas reconfiguring masculinity, moving from Nahda\(^5\) models to masculinities under the Mandate and decolonization struggles of the mid-century, then toward the coups and dictatorships of the third quarter of the century in much of the Arabic-speaking world. Dominant norms in masculinity, and resistances to them, shifted in Turkey with the rise of the Young Turks and the inception of the modern Turkish state in 1923, and in Iran from the Qajari state’s demise and the Constitutional Revolution to the Pahlavi dynasty and then to post-Islamic Revolution changes. In the Arab world, Nahda models of masculinity themselves formed under the European colonial influence at which they chafed, and were not timeless and unchanging prior to modernity. For example, Nahda-era masculinity rigidified against more flexible (but not necessarily better) earlier attitudes toward male same-sex desires and practices, which colonizing and Orientalist discourses typically highlighted as part of the inferior nature of ‘Oriental’ males. At the other end of the century, as Frédéric Lagrange has noted, “[t]he limited treatment of same-sex relationships in modern Arabic literature in contrast to classical literature is somewhat puzzling” (Lagrange, 174). Afsaneh Najmabadi explores a parallel shift in nineteenth-century Qajari culture, when “homoeroticism and same-sex practices
came to mark Iran as backward; heteronormalization of eros and sex became a condition of “achieving modernity” (Najmabadi, 3). Besides heteronormalization, other configurations linking male identity to modernizing nationalisms began emerging over a hundred years ago. Zeynab (1913) by Muhammad Husayn Haykal is among the first Arabic novel, and with it Arabic national narrative right away has the trope metaphorizing a fertile woman into the land of the nation, whose honor men must protect. Our contributor Amal Amireh, in earlier work, has shown that the cost of this metaphor is paid by women, because “the national story becomes the story of possession of the land/woman by a man” (Amireh, 751) and female subjectivity is not centered in such a narrative. In Iran, nation, or vatan, is not a young woman but a mother figure whom the sons must protect (Najmabadi, 125). Different in their specifics, both tropes equally imagine the modern national citizen in a protective male role, leaving the presence of female citizens an enigma to be puzzled over. Perhaps even this is reactive to the ways in which colonial discourses themselves metaphorized the colonized territory of MENA as a (veiled) woman to be possessed; perhaps the nationalist is metaphorized as a man because of anti-colonial nationalist discourse’s will to power over a position of being victimized (emasculated) by colonialism, as theorized in numerous works by Frantz Fanon. The dichotomy of ‘tradition verses modernity,’ in any case, is outdated, or at least needs more precision, because usually what is signified by ‘tradition’ is itself a product of older shifts in masculinity. This volume hopes to problematize antecedents of masculine formations in a specific geographic region.

1 We problematize the term ‘Middle East’ in the text that follows.

2 In much of the world, as well as in MENA, ‘breadwinning’ is, to varying degrees, historically associated with masculinity.

3 As of late 2019, Zaitouneh is still missing.

4 The international ‘#MeToo’ movement against sexual harassment is another such highly charged moment, accompanied or followed by great pushback, which features women’s voices being heard efficaciously in a context where they have not usually been given equal weight.
The Nahda: a term referring to a period of cultural renaissance beginning roughly in the last quarter of the nineteenth century in Egypt and other parts of the Arabic-speaking world, encompassing philological research, literary and journalistic activity, religious reform, and Arab-nationalist political awakening. When the Nahda period ended is open to interpretation and differs depending on the country; it can be said to go on until roughly World War II, or to the era of decolonization struggles.


Every educator reading this is hereby enjoined to tell their students to think harder if they are about to use the notion of ‘tradition versus modernity’ to frame their course papers.