

McGILL JOURNAL of
MIDDLE EAST STUDIES

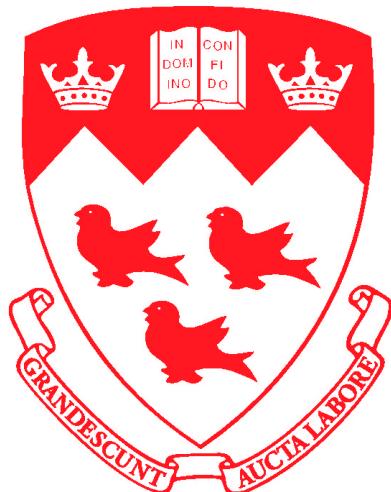
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A note from the editor:

Since its inception in 1992, the McGill Journal of Middle East Studies has offered a platform for students to showcase their scholarship on matters pertinent to the Middle East region and broaden the discourse on a number of related issues. Over the years, the Journal has evolved and grown considerably, with a wider range of contributions and readership. We received a record number of submissions from around the world for Vol. XIV and selecting only a handful was no easy task (a lot of coffee and spreadsheets were involved). However, with the launch this year of our new website as well as our blog, we now have an alternative venue to publish those articles that are still relevant and exceptional but not able to make it into the hardcopy of the Journal. Moreover, the comments section of the blog makes it possible for readers to engage with the articles, the authors and other readers more interactively.

Following last year's edition and the one before, both highlighting the most important facets of the Arab Spring and ensuing politics, this year's edition of the Journal looks at a different set of topics through new perspectives. The four articles featured in the following pages are authored by exemplary writers including a McGill undergraduate, Roark Lewis who examines the work of democracy-promoting NGO's in Jordan; writer and journalist, Emanuelle Degli Esposti who, through two essays, examines the role of the female body in Arab Spring protests as well as weblogs in Iran; higher education researcher Eunsook Park who in her article examines higher education in the state of Qatar. Two thought-provoking photo essays are also featured, shot by London-based photographer, Ariane Severin.

This year saw the publication of both last year's edition as well as this one (due to complications with last year's journal that had slowed down the production process). Despite the workload, numerous obstacles and very tight deadlines, our editorial team and our advisor Rob as well as all of our contributors worked diligently and always came through. I would like to thank you all for your hard work.

Mariam Chauhan
April 2013

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THE LIMITS OF DEMOCRACY-PROMOTING NGOS IN JORDAN

ROARK LEWIS

INTRODUCTION

The Justice Center for Legal Aid (JCLA) in Amman, Jordan, a non-governmental organization that seeks to provide pro bono legal aid and educate Jordanians on their legal rights, has a fascinating relationship with the Jordanian government. It promotes legal awareness and individual rights, two concepts very closely related to the democratic ideal of a rule-based system constraining those in power. The JCLA receives funding from international organizations that publicly claim to support full democratization in Jordan. However, the JCLA is still allowed to operate, and it maintains ties with former Justice Ministers and other members of the government. What explains the puzzle of the Jordanian regime allowing Western-funded, democracy-promoting NGOs to operate in Jordan, even as the regime is continuing to inhibit full democratization in the country?*

It is not a paradox. Rather, the regime's authorization of these NGOs complements the Jordanian regime's overarching survival strategy to maintain power. Allowing democracy-promoting NGOs fits into the regime's efforts to control the pace and nature of political change in the Kingdom. By permitting democratic activists to operate within strictly defined boundaries, the regime is able to monitor political groups, gauge public opinion, and deal with dissent. This is all part of the regime's strategy to co-opt pro-democratic NGOs and activists. The regime seeks to bring civil society activity out into the open, making it easier to monitor and influence. Also, Jordan's NGO policy serves to

* While the Arab Spring has presented challenges to the Hashemite Monarchy, the relations between NGOs and the Monarchy have remained relatively constant, with the Arab Spring not significantly affecting them. If the Arab Spring has had any effect, it has been to motivate the Monarchy to continue honing its policies of co-optation vis-à-vis democracy-promoting NGOs.

maintain alliances and aid networks with the West. Allowing Western-funded, democracy-promoting NGOs to operate helps the regime keep its “reformer” image in the West, and to remain a prime destination for foreign aid. Often, Western-funded, democracy-promoting NGOs are products of the “linkage” politics of aid between the Jordanian regime and the West, in which Western countries fund pro-democracy NGOs in Jordan to justify their military support to the Hashemite Monarchy.

In this paper, the goals of the Jordanian regime will be listed, and the strategies used to achieve those goals will be described. The legal system in which civil society and NGOs operate in Jordan will be explored in detail. Building on this analysis, Western aid and Western-funded NGOs will be located in the context of the regime’s survival strategies and system of control. Within this framework, three illustrative examples of Western-funded, democracy-promoting NGOs will be examined. It will be argued that they are the products of the regime’s strategy for authoritarian control, its relationship with Western countries, and the tensions between Western values and ideals and the Jordanian government. Lastly, the role of democracy-promoting NGOs in mobilizing democratic opposition will be assessed. It will be argued that they play negligible roles, as they are pro-regime and transparent by design. Opposition in Jordan is instead mobilized through other vehicles that are independent and able to evade constant state surveillance.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND NGOS IN JORDAN

As demonstrated by 20 years of half-hearted democratic reforms, the Hashemite Monarchy is not an agent of political reform, but rather an opponent of substantive democratization. In the 2011 European Intelligence Unit (EIU) Democracy Index, which measures 165 countries’ levels of democracy, Jordan ranked 118th, placing it in the category of authoritarian regimes.¹ Since their inception under Hussein in 1989 in response to economic crisis and riots over rising food prices, democratic reforms have been used to maintain the regime’s grip on power.² The regime has sought to use political liberalization to gain legitimacy and to ensure that it controls the pace of change in the Kingdom. Thus, instead of being a catalyst for change, these democratic reforms have been a tool for authoritarian entrenchment.

The system is designed to empower the King and his support bases at the expense of opposition.³ While there are parliamentary elections, the electoral system operates under the “one man, one vote” system, which over-represents pro-Monarchy East Bank populations and under-represents Jordanians of Palestinian origin, many of whom support the opposition Islamist Action Front.⁴ The King thus appoints the prime minister and cabinet members. Further undermining parliament’s sovereignty, the King also retains control over the security forces and foreign policy.⁵

Despite King Abdullah II’s pro-democratic and reformist rhetoric in speeches and publicity campaigns to domestic and international audiences, reforms have continued to stagnate – and even backslide. Since his ascension to the throne in 1999, King Abdullah has exercised his right to replace the prime minister 12 times and has frequently dissolved parliament. And as evidenced by new laws to censor the internet, the continued concentration of power in the King’s hands, and maintenance of gerrymandered districts that over-represent pro-Monarchy rural areas, the Jordanian regime actively stifles democratic participation and individual freedom in order to maintain its grip on power.

As part of King Hussein’s pre-emptive liberalization in 1989, the regime allowed an expansion in civil society and NGO activity. Many observers saw the increase in the number of NGOs as a promising development that could advance the prospects for democracy and liberal political expression. However, as postulated by 19th century German political theorist and philosopher Max Weber, the quantitative expansion of organizational activity does not necessarily entail its qualitative significance.⁶ There is no clear relationship between civil society and democracy, and in some cases, such as the Weimar Republic, civil organizations facilitated the demise of democracy.⁷ Additionally, empirical evidence in the Middle East shows that NGO activity does not always lead to more democracy. NGOs had operated in countries throughout the Middle East for 20 years before the Arab Spring, yet they played negligible roles in mobilizing protests.⁸ Often, NGOs were created or co-opted by authoritarian governments who sought to create the outward trappings of civil society and democratic political life.⁹ And if NGOs are indeed non-governmental, laws in authoritarian governments in the region severely hamper the activities and impact of these organizations.

NGO activity in Jordan follows this regional trend. In his analysis of NGOs in Jordan, Quintan Wiktorowicz argues that the efficacy of NGOs in promoting democracy is contingent on the underlying political context. He argues that what was framed as “liberalization” and Jordanian progress on the democratic front was intended to strengthen the Jordanian regime’s control over society.¹⁰ This fits into Foucault’s framework for political control, which states that political power does not rely on raw coercion, but rather entails partitioning space into units that can be monitored and regulated.¹¹ Thus we can interpret the Jordanian regime’s policy towards democracy-promoting NGOs as part of its strategy to bring such activities into the open and ensure that they operate according to the regime’s rules.

In a process that Wiktorowicz calls “administrative co-optation,” the Jordanian regime uses a swathe of laws designed to make civil society activity outright onerous. This system of control stems from the Law of Public Meetings of 1953, which stipulates that all individuals must obtain permission and a permit from the appropriate state official to hold a public meeting. To get a permit for a public meeting, the group must have the signatures of 50 “well-known” individuals. Once they get the permit, individuals at these public meetings are barred from discussing political affairs. But even if a permit is issued, the government still has the right to revoke the permit. The government often nullifies permits by keeping the terms “well-known,” “public meeting” and “political affairs” intentionally vague, giving state officials ample opportunity to deem activities illegal. For example, if the regime wants to shut down an NGO, it could arbitrarily say that some of the signatures for the group’s permits are not “well-known,” nullifying its permit. Or, the regime could assert group members discussed “political affairs” at a “public meeting,” even if some group members informally discussed politics. The requirements along with the vague wording keep civil society off-balance and transparent, reducing the chance of the regime being caught off-guard by social mobilization.

NGOs are forced to operate within this context, being subjected to the 1966 Law of Societies and Social Organizations. Under this law, all NGOs must apply for a permit with the General Union of Voluntaries Societies (GUVS), a governmental body that serves as the link between civil society and the state. This body is essentially an umbrella organization that includes all civil society groups. At the

top of its hierarchical structure is the government, which works in conjunction with other state ministries to monitor civil society groups and ensure that they comply with the web of organization laws. The GUVS has governorate unions for each region in Jordan, and it is at this level that the organization maintains its links with civil society. All registered organizations are required to be members of the GUVS and to report to the governorate unions when called upon. However, becoming a registered organization is a complex and unpredictable process in Jordan.

To qualify to apply for a permit, Law 33 of 1996 stipulates that an NGO must have at least seven individuals draft an internal law that does not allow for “financial or any other personal gains, including political gains.”¹² The GUVS reviews the NGO’s internal laws in consultation with the government ministry that oversees the applicant’s realm of activity. The GUVS does not follow set criteria in approving requests for permits. Rather, the process is arbitrary, depending on the state’s security interests and personal connections. Permits are issued if the NGO is nonthreatening or if the applicant knows enough state officials to use *wasta*, a concept in the Arab world that describes the use of personal connections in bureaucracies to get favorable outcomes. If the GUVS approves a permit to the NGO, the internal law drafted by the NGO’s members serves as a rigid guideline for its future activities. Within these boundaries, NGOs must practice self-censorship, refraining from critiquing government policies and framing its calls for reform as “raising awareness” for a particular issue. Also, NGOs are required to document their finances and the minutiae of their activities, all of which the GUVS has the power to investigate anytime. Once a month, a former government official from the ministry that oversees the NGO’s field of work visits the NGO. These visits are casual and even friendly in nature, but it constitutes a type of soft authoritarian control.

Under Law 33 of 1996, the GUVS can dissolve an NGO that oversteps its boundaries as stipulated by its internal laws, fails to comply with GUVS demands for documents, or openly criticizes the Royal Family. The threat of dissolution forces NGOs to remain transparent for the regime and to take on the extra administrative costs of constantly producing financial reports and other paperwork. In total, the NGO laws in Jordan illustrate how the regime sees NGOs through a “security lens”, and uses them instrumentally to maintain its power.¹³

In addition to the labyrinth of laws that the regime uses to regulate NGO activity, it also seeks to dilute NGOs' financial strength and influence in two ways. First, the regime mandates that NGOs pay membership dues to the GUVS. Second, the regime organizes its NGOs, which are known as Royally-Organized Non-Governmental Organizations (RONGOs). Members of the Royal Family chair these RONGOs, which focus on activities that serve to legitimize the regime's image and to weaken its opposition. For example, many RONGOs focus on empowering women to promote what Lowrance calls "state feminism."¹⁴ This state feminism is designed to draw feminists away from the opposition to legitimise the King as a reformer. RONGOs such as these get the majority of Western funding and the funds from the GUVS membership dues. Thus the RONGOs, like Jordan's NGO laws, demobilize opposition groups and prevent private NGOs from building independent sources of revenue.

WESTERN AID TO JORDAN

To understand why Western-funded NGOs are allowed in Jordan and what accounts for their form, we must first examine how the Jordanian regime links domestic and international strategies to maintain its power. Western aid and, more importantly, aid from Gulf countries helps the government shore up its budget enabling the regime to maintain a strong security apparatus. Given the cordial relations between Western countries and the Hashemite monarchy, Western aid is designed to support the Royal Family rather than undermine it. However, we must see funding for democracy-promoting NGOs as more than just cynical efforts to stabilize the regime and promote Western strategic interests. They are also products of the tensions between Western interests and values.

Western aid allows the regime to reduce government spending on social services and to let foreign donors pay the costs of providing essential services to Jordanian citizens and refugees in Jordan. Many of the Western-funded NGOs maintain a technocratic focus on helping the resource-poor Jordanian government provide services and promote economic development. For example, among the many projects that the World Bank funds are effort to improve urban infrastructure in Amman and Petra, upgrade municipal waste management efficiency in Amman, and construct a new power plant in Almanakher.¹⁵ USAID funds projects to improve irrigation and water supply and to

facilitate the provision of health and education to Jordanians.¹⁶ Also, the United Nations Development Program and other Western donors are the primary contributors to social services in Palestinian refugee camps. This array of Western aid ultimately helps the Jordanian regime inasmuch as it helps placate citizens' demands for social services and allows the government to allocate its revenue to providing subsidies on gas and bread.¹⁷

Western donors also have a stake in ensuring that these NGOs stabilize the Jordanian regime rather than undermine it. By looking at the regional interests of these Western donors, we can see that their goal is to ensure the survival of the Royal Family rather than to see it swept away by revolution. The United States, a major donor to the Jordanian regime and many democracy-promoting NGOs within Jordan, has a long-running strategic relationship with the Royal Family and seeks to preserve the status quo.

The US and Jordanian governments signed a Memorandum of Understanding under which the US will provide Jordan \$300 million USD in military aid and \$360 million USD in economic aid each year until 2013.¹⁸ Since the 1994 peace agreement between Jordan and Israel, the Jordanian regime has played a key role in stabilizing the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict by continuing to host Palestinian refugees and to marginalize Palestinian groups who oppose the treaty. Beyond the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, the US and Jordan cooperate on a broad range of regional issues. Jordan is a crucial American ally in combating terrorist networks, since Jordan's General Intelligence Directorate is effective at infiltrating Jihadist networks.¹⁹ In addition to this, since the breakout of civil war in Syria, Jordan has been a key player in limiting the flow of arms and terrorist groups in and out of Syria. All of the US military aid is crucial to the stability of the Jordanian regime. The military aid strengthens the security apparatus that monitors civil society, maintains social order, and protects the country from external threats.

Complementing the military support Western countries have given the Royal Family and the high level of strategic cooperation between Jordan and the West, economic and development aid from Western donors also helps the Royal Family retain domestic political power. In what Lobell calls the "second face of American security," the US-Jordan Free Trade Agreement that was implemented in

2001 was designed to help King Abdullah II promote his “Jordan First” program.²⁰ Not only did the subsequent economic growth legitimize the newly appointed King, it strengthened his pro-Western supporters such as military personnel, private sector elites, and Palestinian businessmen close to the palace.²¹

However, this support for liberalization illustrates the tension between the democratic values of Western donor countries and their interests in strengthening the Jordanian regime’s authoritarian control. The liberal rhetoric underlying the West’s economic and developmental aid is not necessarily part of cynical “Trojan horse” strategies as Lobell states. Rather, it reflects a genuine tension between Western interests and values in the Middle East – a tension that has only become more apparent since the Arab Spring.

Democracy-promoting NGOs serve the regime’s interests as well, but in more complex ways than the technocratic economic aid. By letting democracy-promoting NGOs operate in the country, the regime seeks to legitimize its reform program and to retain control over the political sphere. Domestically, the co-optation of democracy-promoting NGOs allows the regime to keep democratic activism visible. By encouraging civil society actors to organize with the Western-funded NGOs – which are monitored just like other NGOs – the regime can better gauge the public mood and monitor public discontent. These NGOs also promote democratic participation *within* the regime’s electoral and political framework. They emphasize their role in making the system fair and credible, which helps the regime legitimize its vision for the political system and preempt calls for radical reform. This plays into the regime’s survival strategy, which is to encourage a diluted reform program that includes supporters of the Royal Family and sidelines opposition to the Royal Family’s rule.

Allowing democracy-promoting NGOs in Jordan enables the regime to also present itself as a reformer on the international stage. This helps the regime maintain its aid networks with the West. By presenting itself as a reformer to Western governments, the Jordanian regime makes itself more attractive to Western donors. Funding democracy-promoting NGOs is also in Western countries’ interests. They fund these NGOs to show both their genuine commitment to democracy and to justify

their other democratization-inhibiting policies. The fact that these NGOs, despite their democratic goals, inhibit full democratization in the short term is symbolic of Western foreign policy in the Middle East.

However, like Western economic aid, they can quickly transform from being assets to being liabilities. The regime must play a delicate balancing act to ensure democracy-promoting NGOs do not promote too much or the wrong type of liberalism. Organizations such as the Justice Center for Legal Aid (JCLA) and USAID's democracy-promoting programs force the regime to engage in this balance act. Ultimately, however, these NGOs represent the intersection of strategic interests, liberal values, and authoritarian control.

DEMOCRACY PROMOTION AND ITS LIMITS

The Justice Center for Legal Aid (JCLA) is another legal organization based in Amman, Jordan but it also has offices in Madaba and Zarqa'a.²² Established in 2008 by private Jordanian citizens, it seeks to provide free legal aid to underprivileged residents throughout Jordan. The organization seeks to empower communities by promoting individual legal rights and a "democratic culture."²³ Among its supporters are the World Bank, the British Embassy, and USAID – all organizations representing Western countries that have strategic ties with the Hashemite monarchy. Looking at the JCLA's goals and philosophies, one could infer that it carries potential for being a source of activism for true democratic change. Individual rights and the rule of law provide the foundation to democracy. By promoting public awareness of the connection between individual rights and democracy, it has potential to connect Jordanians to liberal discourses of dissidents and makes common citizens more likely to protest against regime policies that impede legal and political freedoms.

However, if we place the JCLA in the context of the Jordanian regime's system of control, we can see that it is not as subversive as it seems. It obtained a permit from the GUVS and the Ministry of Justice, which means that the JCLA's missions and aims fit into the regime's strategic vision for its civil society. The permit creates rigid boundaries for the JCLA's operations, ensuring that the JCLA does not become overtly political. Unsurprisingly, the JCLA cannot serve defendants in "state security cases" or in cases with "social repercussions."²⁴ This serves as a boundary to guarantee that the JCLA

works within the legal system and does not take any cases where it may override the regime's security or political interests. Furthermore, the JCLA's day-to-day operations are never too far away from the government. One of their Amman offices is located in the Queen Rania Family and Child Center, and every month a former justice minister will come to visit and sit in on executive meetings.

The JCLA fits into the King's overall strategy of legitimating reform within the system, as opposed to dramatic change. By allowing an NGO such as the JCLA to operate, the regime seeks to placate Jordanians' demands for a public defenders' office, or some sort of public-funded pro bono legal services. The JCLA seeks to preempt public calls for social justice and reform to the legal system that is stacked against defendants in favor of the regime. The regime uses organizations such as the JCLA as evidence that it does indeed value legal reform and "democratic culture" – without changing the legal system or precisely defining democratic culture. Additionally, letting Western donors fund the JCLA serves the regime's interests in two ways. First, it saves the government money that could be used on its patronage networks or subsidies. Second, if the JCLA ever did become an agent for democratic activism, the regime would be able to brand it as a foreign-funded entity seeking to destabilize the country.

USAID's Political Processes and Civil Society Strengthening programs are also illustrative of how the Jordanian regime tames Western-funded, democracy-promoting NGOs and incorporates them into its broader survival strategy. USAID donates to the International Republican Institute and National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, who in turn implement the program.²⁵ Their goals are to strengthen Jordanian political parties' ability to articulate public opinion and engage youth. They encourage Jordanians to participate in elections and fund local youth committees to motivate youth activism. They also offer skill-training and capacity-building workshops for political parties to better represent their constituents. And crucially, they train election observers to ensure that parliamentary elections are free and fair.

In a vacuum, these activities seem to promote unfettered democracy, which is not in the regime's best interest. However, taken in conjunction with the context of "administrative co-optation" and the regime's control over political life, USAID's Political Processes Strengthening Program fits into

the Royal Family's survival strategy. It encourages "mainstream" political participation, which can be interpreted as a political system constructed by the regime to safeguard its interests. Building political parties' abilities to better represent their constituents, the regime mollifies demands for more accountability and more public say in policy-making, which is intended to legitimise the current political system. Creating more representative political parties also enables the regime to better gauge public opinion and locate areas of discontent. It essentially gives the regime a barometer to know where to pacify discontent by either increasing patronage or its security presence. Furthermore, the program's emphasis on encouraging voter turnout and ensuring that elections are free and fair plays into the King's goal of legitimating the electoral system that favors the Royal Family's supporters and negates opposition calls to boycott the elections.

Placing the program's goals and activities in the context of the regime's system of surveillance, we can see that they serve to help the regime monitor political activity. Political parties and civil society groups are monitored under the country's civil society laws. The program's encouragement of political parties brings activists out into the open, allowing the security apparatus to monitor their actions and ensure that they are not mobilizing dissent towards the Royal Family. In addition, the program's promotion of youth committees benefits the regime by making youth activity more transparent, reducing the chance of the regime being caught off-guard by organized youth activists.

USAID's Civil Society Program also helps the Jordanian regime monitor social and political activity. USAID provides \$18 million to the Academy for Educational Development with the official goals of "cultivating a strong and vibrant civil society" and to improve civil society organizations' capacity and credibility to advocate for social change.²⁶ The organization provides technological assistance, and offers advice on strengthening internal organization and cultivating popular support. With this support, domestic civil society organizations advocate for specific, apolitical causes such as disability rights and combating violence towards women. This complements the Royal Family's support for humanitarian and liberal causes that shows the humanistic side of the regime.

Troublingly, however, the Civil Society Program also helps the regime monitor civil society groups, fitting into Wiktorowicz and Foucault's ideas of control. According to USAID, the Civil Society

Program coordinated an effort with the Ministry of Social Development to survey over 1552 NGOs and to establish the first phase of the “Automation Information System” for NGO data management. By maintaining a centralized digital database of civil society actors, the security apparatus can better partition groups and monitor the activities of potential agents of political mobilization.

LOFTY GOALS, NEGLIGIBLE EFFECTS

The above examples of the Western-funded, democracy-promoting NGOs have negligible effects by themselves. Also, more broadly speaking, Western-funded, democracy-promoting NGOs will not act as democratizing agents or vehicles for oppositional mobilization in Jordan. This can be attributed to the previously described policies taken by the Jordanian regime and the historical trends of political mobilization in Jordan.

The regime’s effective monitoring and “administrative co-optation,” the term used by Wiktowicz to describe the bureaucratic process of co-opting NGOs, ensure that all NGOs remain ineffective in mobilizing dissent. Its system of control, based on the Law of Societies and Social Organizations of 1966, forces NGOs to operate within the rigid boundaries of their government-approved mandates. The internal laws that are reviewed by the GUVS render NGO activity predictable and non-threatening. Logically, the same laws apply to Western-funded, democracy-promoting NGOs. These NGOs practice self-censorship by operating only within the pre-approved guidelines of their mandate and internal laws.

Further inhibiting Western-funded NGOs in their ability to mobilize is that they operate in a civil society that is divided and monitored by design. By allowing many Western-funded, democracy-promoting NGOs to operate at the same time, the regime dilutes each NGO’s potential to act as a node of mobilization. At the same time, these NGOs do not form horizontal links to mobilize democratic opposition. Their limited and technocratic mandates force them to focus on their pre-approved activities, which individually do not threaten the regime’s interests. To the extent that NGOs are interconnected, their relations are mediated through their membership in the GUVS. Therefore,

when leaders of these NGOs do meet, most commonly at GUVS gatherings, it is under the auspices of the Jordanian bureaucracy.

If an NGO were to get out of line by overstepping its boundaries and becoming overtly political or critical of the King, the regime's effective surveillance system would be able to detect and stifle the NGO's activities. The regime's permit system and recent digital management system brings NGO activity out into the open, making it difficult to mobilize clandestinely. And as noted before, Law 33 of 1996 enables the *mukhabarat* to dissolve any NGO that violates its mandate or becomes too political. In the unlikely case in which members of a Western-funded, democracy-promoting NGO mobilized political opposition to the regime, the NGO would be promptly dissolved.

Also, through GUVS collection and control over allocation of NGO membership dues, NGOs that are not headed by a member of the royal family are often financially weak. This prevents domestic NGOs from accessing the financial resources needed to offer the "selective incentives" necessary for mass-mobilization.²⁷ Western-funded, democracy-promoting NGOs are better funded than their domestic counterparts. Yet better funding – from Western governments – could be a liability, as NGOs receiving such funding can be seen as foreign agents causing trouble in the Kingdom. This is an unlikely scenario however, for their Western donors do not have an interest in aiding opposition to the King, since they are heavily invested in the Hashemite Monarchy as an ally in efforts to maintain regional stability and prevent terrorist operations.

Compounding this inability to mobilize opposition, the regime uses Western-funded, democracy-promoting NGOs to draw citizens away from opposition forces and to legitimate the King's reform program. The regime's co-optation of liberal causes is intended to set boundaries of political discourse on the regime's terms. Thus, even if these Western-funded, democracy-promoting NGOs had access to the finances and resources needed to mobilize large segments of the population, their energy would be devoted to legitimizing the political system that the King is trying to maintain.

We can therefore expect oppositional mobilization to come from other forms of regime resistance. Historically, due to the weakness of the political system and civil society, organized political opposition to the Hashemite Monarchy has been primarily mobilized through the Muslim Brotherhood

and professional syndicates. From the onset of independence until the stalled liberalization under King Abdullah II, the Muslim Brotherhood served as a “loyal opposition” to the Hashemite Monarchy.²⁸ The regime permitted the Muslim Brotherhood to operate to burnish its Islamic credentials and to stifle leftist, secular, and pan-Arab opposition movements. Unsurprisingly, the Muslim Brotherhood arose as the leading organized social movement in Jordan.²⁹ Before the Arab Spring, the Muslim Brotherhood (and later its political arm, the Islamic Action Front) led the “anti-normalization” movement against the peace treaty with Israel, and it has continually called for reform of the electoral system.

From 1957 until 1992, when political parties were banned in Jordan, professional syndicates filled the vacuum for political organization. They were both the vehicle and objects of political activism, as various political actors sought to control and direct these associations for their own ends.³⁰ Islamists, trade unionists, and regime loyalists fought for control over these syndicates through internal elections. These syndicates offered networks and modes of communication for middle class professionals to operate under the context of political demobilization. As professional syndicates, they had independent financial bases to fund their activities – unlike most civil society organizations in Jordan. For example, in 1989, professional syndicates provided the infrastructure needed to mobilize 40,000 lawyers, doctors, and other professionals, who called on King Hussein to end martial law and open up the political system.³¹ Outside of these vehicles of opposition, other forms of protest remained localized and limited in scope. Rather than calling for political reform, they were often characterized by socio-economic grievances, as illustrated by East Banker “bread riots” against neoliberal policies during the 1980s and 1990s.³²

Looking at the current protests in Jordan, democracy-promoting NGOs have played negligible roles in mobilizing opposition. Rather, the main actors in organization protests have primarily been the IAF, East Bank kinship networks, and youth activists. The IAF has led protests against the new electoral law, which they see as a continuation of the previous electoral system that favors East Bank constituencies at the expense of Jordanians of Palestinian descent.³³ In its protests, the IAF has seized on public anger over the regime’s reduction of subsidies, and it has promoted its agenda for reducing the King’s powers.³⁴ East Bank protests have been organized along tribal networks, most often

protests against reduced subsidies and uneven distribution of economic growth.³⁵ These forms of protests follow political and economic trends that have been developing well before the introduction of democracy-promoting NGOs.

Loosely bound Amman-based youth networks or “*tansiqiyat*” mobilize through Internet forums and social media.³⁶ They have not played a big role in mobilizing protests in Amman, but they have led Internet initiatives such as “7oryanet” to protest the regime’s latest censorship laws on Internet content.³⁷ These Amman-based youth are empowered by new “opportunity spaces” on the Internet, which enable dissidents and potentially politically active youths to forge solidarities and share ideas.³⁸ They do not mobilize in overt NGOs, as their dissident activities would be monitored and repressed.

As noted by Seam Yom and Wael al-Khatib, East Bank youth activists have also been organizing through kinship networks and social media.³⁹ They have been the major organizers of the more violent protests in traditional East Bank cities such as Irbid, Karak, and Jerash.⁴⁰ Theoretically, one could deduce that the rhetoric of democracy-promoting NGOs has imbued these youth activists with democratic ideals. However, looking closely at their demands and forms of protests, it is apparent that other factors account for their mobilization. Their grievances lie with King Abdullah II and their tribal elders. East Bank youth are protesting longstanding grievances such as regime corruption and lack of youth representation within tribal structures.

Therefore, when considering the legal context in which NGOs operate and the current protests, we can see that Western-funded, democracy-promoting NGOs do not threaten the Jordanian regime. As part of the regime’s survival strategy, these NGOs are designed to tame political mobilization by dividing and co-opting potential opposition. Jordan’s strict NGO laws make most NGO activity relatively inconsequential in terms of effecting political change or mobilizing support. In cases where democracy-promoting NGOs manage to mobilize support, they ultimately play into legitimizing the regime and its reform program. Adding these factors together, it is clear that we must look elsewhere to find the avenues for oppositional mobilization in Jordan.

Notes

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2. See Satloff, R., "Jordan's Great Gamble: Economic Crisis and Political Reform," in Henri Barkey, ed., *The Politics of Economic Reform in the Middle East* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992).
3. C.D. Ryan, "Political Liberalization and Monarchical Succession in Jordan," *Israel Affairs* 9:3, pp. 129-140.
4. N. Pelham, "Jordan's Balancing Act," *Middle East Research and Information Project*. February 22nd, 2011. <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero022211>.
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6. As quoted in S. Berman, "Civil Society and the Collapse of the Weimar Republic," *World Politics*, 49 (April 1997), 407.
7. Berman, "Civil Society," 401-429.
8. Aarts et al., "From Resilience to Revolt: Making Sense of the Arab Spring," p. 39.
9. E. Bellin, "The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective," *Comparative Politics* Vol. 36, No. 2 (January, 2004), pp. 139-157.
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13. M. Bratton, "The Politics of Government-NGO Relations in Africa," *World Development*, 17 (4) pp. 569-587.
14. S. Lowrance, "After Beijing: Political Liberalization and the Women's Movement in Jordan," *Middle Eastern Studies*, 34 (3) pp. 83-102.
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16. USAID Jordan Program Areas: Water. <http://jordan.usaid.gov/en/OurWork/ProgramAreas/Pages/Water.aspx>. Accessed November 2nd, 2012.
17. Fattough and El-Katiri, "Energy Subsidies in the Arab World," *Arab Human Development Report Research Paper Series*.
18. J. Sharp, "Jordan: Background and U.S. Relations," *Congressional Research Service*, October 30th, 2009, p. 10.
19. Ibid., p. 17.
20. S. Lobell, "The Second Face of U.S. Security: The U.S.-Jordan Free Trade Agreement as Security Policy," *Comparative Strategy*, 27:1, pp. 88-100.
21. O. Wils, "Competition or Oligarchy? The Jordanian Business Elite in Historical Perspective," in *Management and International Business Issues in Jordan* (Hamed El-Said and Kip Becker, eds., New York: Haworth Press, 2001).
22. The Justice Center for Legal Aid in Amman does excellent work. In Jordan, it is a pioneer for providing pro bono legal aid and advocating for legal aid reform in the Kingdom. After interning with the organization, I was inspired by the employees' hospitality and dedication to human rights. This section is intended to highlight the low likelihood of the JCLA mobilizing anti-Hashemite democratic reform.
23. <http://www.jcla-org.com/>. See sections "What we do" and "Who we serve."
24. Ibid.

25. <http://jordan.usaid.gov/en/OurWork/ProgramAreas/Pages/DemocracyandGovernance.aspx>. See Political Process Strengthening Program under “projects.”
26. Ibid., see Civil Society Program under “projects.”
27. Q. Wiktorowicz, “Introduction” in Wiktorowicz, Q., ed. *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*. Indian: Indiana University Press, pp. 1-33.
28. C. Ryan, “Islamist Political Activism in Jordan: Moderation, Militancy, and Democracy,” *Research Institute for European American Studies*. June 7th, 2008. <http://www.rieas.gr/research-areas/global-issues/islamic-studies/660.html>.
29. Ibid.
30. P. Moore, and B. Salloukh, “Struggles Under Authoritarianism: Regimes, States, and Professional Associations in the Arab World,” *International Journal for Middle East Studies* 39, pp. 53-76.
31. M. Mufti, “Elite Bargains and the Onset of Political Liberalization in Jordan,” *Comparative Political Studies* 32 (February 1999), pp. 100-129.
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33. K. Kao, “Jordan’s Ongoing Election Law Battle.” <http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/07/05/jordan-s-ongoing-election-law-battle/ck59>.
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40. See 34.

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HIGHER EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT IN QATAR: THE ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

EUNSOOK PARK

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines how international partnerships in higher education in the State of Qatar have evolved in the context of the education reforms that the State has launched as a means to foster economic development and social reform. The effects of economic globalization have created a new economy that is driven by social mobility, skills, and knowledge-creation.¹ As a result of these changes, education has become a priority in nations' capacity building. Many nation-states identify educational investment in human capital development as a critical element in determining the level of economic returns on a nation's growth and capacity building. Against this backdrop, the Qatari government recognizes the building of national human capital through higher education development to be a key to coping with the evolution to a post-oil economy for the country. In doing so, the Qatari government has taken a rather bold and innovative approach in choosing a path of reform that involves developing partnerships with globally recognized higher education institutions. These partnerships have developed mainly in the form of branch campus operations. Other countries of the Gulf region and South Asia have instituted similar arrangements, with varying degrees of success.² Qatar's partnership initiatives are distinguished from others by three underlying principles: leadership of the State, selectiveness of the partner institution, and respect for the academic autonomy of the partner institution. The relative success of Qatar's efforts to internationalize higher education prompts

¹ The author would like to acknowledge the support received from the Gulf Research Centre (GRC) at Cambridge University, UK.

the following questions: What drives the partnership developments in Qatar, and what are the nature, purpose, and implications of these partnerships?

In examining these questions, it is essential to integrate the variables related to Qatar's socio-economic issues, as neither educational development nor the partnerships themselves can be separated from the local socio-economic context. The partnerships are influenced by the intercultural, socio-economic, and political spheres within both the State of Qatar and the home countries of its partner institutions. Therefore it is worthwhile to review to what extent current theory on the internationalization of higher education is reflected in Qatar's partnership developments. Data are drawn from interviews, conducted as part of my field research in Doha in 2010, with top managers of the educational institutions and key government actors concerned in the partnership building.

INTERNATIONALIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Internationalization is a concept that is interpreted in a number of ways, but positions revolve around two major issues: its links with globalizing tendencies on the one hand and the concern for internationally comparable quality standards on the other. The international dimension of higher education has changed significantly in terms of its volume and scope, in response to the social mobility and issues created through globalization.³ In today's world, higher education is not only the very tool to equip individuals to be competitive in the knowledge-based economy, but also a commodity that generates a great deal of profits across borders through internationalization activities. While the motivations behind internationalization can vary depending on the specific intentions and contexts, Altbach and Knight summarize them as economic opportunities, knowledge and language acquisition, and curriculum development within an international context.⁴ 'Economic opportunity' speaks to the reality of the financial difficulties that higher education currently experiences globally: many institutions make vigorous efforts to export their academic programs and institutional facilities, or to attract more overseas students as a revenue enhancement tool. On the other hand, Jane Knight raises the interesting point that when internationalization is driven by the state, the economic opportunities go beyond the short-to-mid-term financial gain to encompass long-term national economic prosperity.⁵

Another important issue relating to internationalization is the assurance of quality in the academic programs imported from other countries in the process of adopting them to local context.⁶ There has been ongoing debate on this issue for many involved in internationalization, particularly in the regions where offshore campus operations are growing, including the Gulf States.⁷ This is because of the nature of international education, as there is neither legislative enforcement nor a regulatory oversight facility that licenses or monitors institutions that operate across borders. In the reality of a massive increase in internationalization activity that is extending by its very nature beyond territorial jurisdiction, it is difficult to monitor the legitimacy and quality of internationalized degree-granting institutions. Against this backdrop, it will be interesting to see how these issues play out in the case of Qatar's internationalization process, which takes a "hands-on" approach in selecting the partner institutions and maintaining the quality of academic programs offered.

QATAR

Until recently, Qatar was a relatively low-visibility country on the international stage although it is economically prosperous even by the standards of the oil-producing Gulf States.⁸ This is largely due to the fact that Qatar's natural gas production is the third highest in the world, constituting more than five percent of the global total.⁹ Anthony Cordesman provides an insightful account of Qatar's political and economic development in light of its similarities and differences with other Southern Gulf States.¹⁰ Critical commonalities include the lagging modernization of education, the concentration of power around the Sheikh and his inner circle, and the phenomenon of expatriates outnumbering the indigenous population and dominating the domestic labour in industries ranging from construction and services to white-collar managerial positions. These commonalities are all essential elements in this study, as they help to account for how and why the international partnership initiatives in Qatar have evolved.

To help understand the rationale for Qatar's higher education development in general and the partnership initiatives in particular, it is critical to mention three major events in Qatar's modern history. The first event is the discovery of oil and gas in the late 1940s, which brought not only the wealth that

the State enjoys, but also the expatriate population growth and the social changes related to this demographic change.¹¹ The second is Qatar's status change to full independent nation state in 1971, after the end of the British protectorate.¹² Upon independence, the State implemented a form of constitutional monarchy, but one granting full legislative and executive powers to the Head of State.¹³ The third is the power change in the State's leadership in 1995, when the current Emir, Sheikh Hamad, deposed his father, who was the Emir at that time.¹⁴ This power change became the watershed moment in the State's modern history, not only for the way in which it occurred, but also for its impact. It facilitated the introduction of liberal public policies by the current Emir, which have had a direct impact on the educational partnership developments. Under Sheik Hamad, higher education reform has become a priority of the State's long-term social reform plan. The Emir has supported the development of Qatar's higher education by establishing the Qatar Foundation, a non-profit, state-funded organization chaired by the Emir's wife, who has taken an active role in pursuit of education reform.

In international relations, the Emir has developed strategic links with the United States, which Cordesman has cited as a counterbalance to Qatar's dependence on regional powers such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Iraq.¹⁵ While Qatar maintains close ties with the neighbouring states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), its relationship with the U.S. has encouraged Qatar to establish the majority of its educational partnerships with U.S. educational institutions.

In terms of the economy, oil and gas production and the ensuing immigration of foreign labour has led to unique labour market conditions that are dominated by expatriates. The heavy reliance on natural resources for national wealth has caused Qatar to remain one of the least diversified economies of the Gulf States. In addition, the tribal politics existing until today often create a bias in employment in favor of certain tribes and families rather than based on considerations of merit.¹⁶

Regarding population and demographic changes, there is a four percent annual population growth rate and the overall population has grown by almost seven times during the past half century, mainly owing to foreign labor migration.¹⁷ More importantly, the youth population is expected to be proportionately higher than that of other regions for decades to come.¹⁸ However, Qataris now

constitute only 25 percent of the total population of 900,000 with non-Qataris constituting more than four-fifths of the population among the group of individuals age 15 and over.¹⁹

In addition to the fact that foreign workers make up a large proportion of the labour force in a variety of sectors, employment trends have indicated that Qataris prefer to work in the broad public sector because it is deemed to be easily accessible to them, with a higher salary paid, and job security guaranteed without high skills levels required.²⁰ As well, educated female abilities have not been fully utilized in the labor market, due to the commonly-held view that a woman's role is primarily that of a wife and mother.

All of these factors contribute to the recent conditions of Qatar's labor force. The State's international education partnerships have the potential to alter these conditions by equipping Qataris with knowledge and skills that can be applied in the current domestic and global labor market.

Development of Education

It is in the above political, economic, and social context that the development of education in Qatar started in the late 1940s. However, this development began very slowly, despite the rapid economic growth in the oil sector. Sheikha Abdulla Al-Misnad, the current president of Qatar University (QU) explained in her first book that Qatari people were neither prepared for nor capable of handling the sudden wealth generated by oil and gas production and its resulting socio-economic changes.²¹ The Qatari attitude toward acquiring education was neither significantly responsive nor appreciative. Al-Misnad states that the Qataris' nomadic background also accounted for the delay in educational development of the country. According to Al-Misnad, this is mainly due to the fact that their nomadic traditions centered on survival rather than a desire for formal education.²² Notably, the real obstacles to progress in education were two-fold: a lack of enthusiasm on the part of the ruling families and a lack of experience on the part of the planners in education.

Ultimately, the development of university education occurred for two reasons: first, to ease the problem of the severe shortage of national teachers to be supplied to secondary education that had been expanded and, second, to accommodate the growing demand for university education both

by students and the public.²³ This demand arose from two sources: the discrepancy in the employment status between the locals without university education and those with an overseas degree on the one hand; and on the other, the government's identification of a demand for increased participation of women in university education due to the increase in the number of female secondary school graduates. The government was hesitant in deciding how to advance female education within a patriarchal culture. They were concerned about the repercussions of promoting female university education because it went against the traditional roles that women were supposed to play, and because of the reaction to the creation of mixed-gender environments it could create. Indeed, even now, mixed-gender education environments are far from commonplace.²⁴

In the end, the government responded to the need for teachers. As a result, the first phase of higher education development commenced with the opening of Qatar University (QU) in 1973 as a teacher training college (it became a university in 1977).²⁵ Because of its origins, QU's College of Education was and has remained an important producer of national teachers and promoter of teacher training and professional development. As the main artery supplying the State with its future degree-equipped work force, it was presumed to be capable of providing students with the skills and competency needed to perform in the posts for which the graduates were hired. The reality was different. As Joy S. Moini states, although QU was considered to be one of the better higher education institutions in the Arab region, the overall quality of the education that QU provided has deteriorated over the last few decades.²⁶ This deterioration resulted from long-existing structural and managerial issues, such as outdated curricula and inefficient and inflexible management.²⁷ In addition, QU had neither enough seats to admit the prospective burgeoning youth population nor the capacity for expanding the subject areas that were in demand.²⁸ The Qatar Foundation (QF), recognized that the issue lay beyond QU's capacity to fix, and took charge of an expansion initiative.²⁹ As a result, after 30 years of having only one national higher education institution, Qatar now has a dozen foreign university branch campuses that opened in Doha within the span of a decade. Most of them are housed in the so-called Education City (EC), a vast physical complex that comprises various educational institutions and business corporations, as well as Qatar Foundation. In June 2010 this

branch campus operation evolved into a new entity called Education City University (ECU), in which these branch campuses are integrated and run by QF under a single umbrella.³⁰ Recently, the ECU was renamed Hamad bin Khalifa University (HbKU), after the current Emir.³¹

DISCUSSION

In the analysis of the development of Qatar's international partnerships in higher education, several key issues emerge for discussion. The purpose of the partnership building is to improve the quality of higher education in order to produce highly skilled national human capital. Three principles underlie the nature of the partnerships: leadership of the State, selectiveness of the partner institution, and respect for the academic autonomy of the partner institution. Three possible implications of the partnerships are identified: women's wider participation in the workforce, linguistic dualism, and Qatar's regional and global development contribution. The State leadership has pursued education reform in the form of educational partnerships in order to produce national human capital which should, in the long run, contribute to the State's prosperity in the context of a knowledge-based global economy.

1. Purpose: National Capacity Building, Quality Enhancement, Global Recognition

An interview with a senior manager at QF succinctly describes the purpose in building these partnerships:

We don't know how long, but it is quite conceivable that, in a relatively short period of time, the world will stop buying the natural gas. So what have we got then? We've got nothing. But at the same time we know that there are many countries of the world that have become quite wealthy, based on the calibre of their people, not on raw material. You have to develop these abilities. You need to invest in people. That has not happened here historically because we haven't got that tradition of education. . . . One thing QF is trying to do is quite simply convert these very abundant petrodollars into durable, sustainable human capacity. So, education.

This comment epitomizes the approach of Qatar's internationalization in higher education, an approach that is different from that of all other similar operations in the region. Very few governments anywhere in the world can afford to follow suit. Those who can, such as other Gulf-rentier states, differ from

Qatar.³² In the case of Qatar, specific goals have been adopted at the national level with the intention of developing the national human capital through education reform. Moreover, these goals are set and closely monitored by the State's leadership, who are fully committed to realizing them and who appear to have seemingly unlimited resources for their realization, however long it takes. Therefore, the partnership building is a continuing process, and each partnership is developed separately and according to specific needs within the national human capital development framework. The partnership institutions open their branch campuses only by the State's invitation. In return, they are guaranteed 100 percent of their institutional autonomy in their academic operations, although they function under the umbrella of HbKU, as individual colleges or faculties offering particular subjects according to their area of expertise.

The leadership's realization of Qatari human capital development should not come as a surprise, in view of the socio-economic factors discussed earlier, such as the size of the population, its demographics, and Qataris' preference for public sector employment. What is interesting is the leadership's foresight in pinpointing higher education as the foremost vital element in post-oil era economic development, and in connecting education to the encouragement of Qataris' active participation in the labour force. This process is articulated as *Qatarisation* – “a set of labour-market policies and programs for increasing the employment of nationals and regulating the use of expatriate workers”³³ for fast-tracking the national capacity-building process. How then are the partnerships developed in the frame of these *Qatarisation* objectives?

There are two key actors in the partnership development process: Qatar University (QU) and Qatar Foundation (QF). The partnerships undertaken by these two organizations differ according to the partner institutions involved, and the approaches and objectives being called for.

Qatar University

The Diwan Emiri, the executive office of the Emir, appointed a female, British-educated PhD-holder to the presidency of QU in 2003 “with the specific mandate to reform the university” (interview with the President Al-Misnad). She was given clear directions to modernize the rigid, outdated, and

inadequate curriculum and to enhance academic quality.³⁴ The President states that, in seeking a way to improve the quality of its education, QU chose the path of concentrating on curriculum development. Hence it took the approach of building partnerships with internationally recognized accreditation agencies. While the QU leadership was closely involved in the process, these partnerships were developed at the individual college/faculty level. QU took this approach due to the fact that each subject area has different criteria for its teaching and learning and therefore has to be linked with a corresponding field's accreditation agency. These agencies evaluate and provide direction to their corresponding academic programs, in order to bring the program up to international standards. This, in turn, adds a greater purpose to the partnership development, whereby QU seeks international recognition for its academic credentials.³⁵ Concisely, QU aims for global visibility in the long run. Dr.

Shaika Jabor Al Thani, the QU Vice President Academics, states that:

QU views that its programs being accredited is worthy of public validation of the high quality of the programs (to be recognized by various actors in Higher Education and employment), and that the accreditation process itself gives QU an opportunity of a self-evaluation on the quality enhancement progress. (QU Vice President Academics)

The most recent achievement in this respect was the accreditation of the QU College of Education's teacher education program through the Center for Quality Assurance in International Education's International Recognition in Teacher Education (IRTE). Moreover, QU's partnerships have quickly expanded to cover cross-university collaborative work with Education City branch campuses, as well as student and faculty exchanges with universities in the U.K., Hungary, and Malaysia.³⁶ The latter is a somewhat positively surprising outcome. Given the difficulties faced by Qatari females when travelling abroad (a social norm is that they ought to be accompanied by a male member of the family), one could question the feasibility of the exchange initiative in such an institution as QU, where female representation is much greater than that of males (Table 1 & 2). Nonetheless, this approach reflects how aggressively the university is pushing forward in the realization of its goals.

Table 1: History of gender based student demographics at Qatar

University Year	Male	Female	% Female	Total Students
1976-77	184	356	65.9	540
1980-81	468	1,180	71.6	1,648
1985-86	1,163	2,548	68.8	3,711
1990-91	1,220	3,783	75.6	5,003
1995-96	2,114	5,533	72.3	7,647
1997-98	1,770	5,316	75.0	7,086
2001-02	1,700	5,416	76.0	7,116

Source: Bahry, L. and Marr, P. (2005) Qatari Women: A New Generation of Leaders? *Middle East Policy*, 12 (2), p. 106

Table 2: Student registration at Qatar University

Registered students 2009 – 2010		
	Number	%
Total	8706	
Male	2090	24
Female	6616	76
Qatari	5376	62
Non-Qatari	3330	38
Full-time	833	96
Part-time	323	4
Working towards:		
Bachelor	5326	61
Master	150	2
Diploma	49	1
Non-degree	93	1
Foundation programme	3088	35

Source: Qatar University Fast Facts 2009-2010

Qatar Foundation

QF's approach to the expansion was innovative: to form partnerships with leading foreign educational institutions that could deliver academic programs for those subjects in demand, in the form of branch campus operations.

QF's partnerships can be said to have begun in 1998, when Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) first came as an independent design school³⁷ that "was brought in with the purpose of training young Qatari women in arts and design" (interview with the VCU Dean). This initiative has evolved to comprise several universities. So far, eight branch campuses including the VCU are situated in Education City for the same purpose of educating Qatari women but covering a wider selection of subject areas. They include Cornell Medical College for medical education; Carnegie Mellon for business administration, computer science, and information systems; Texas A&M for petroleum engineering; Georgetown University for government studies and foreign service; Northwestern University (in close collaboration with Al Jazeera) for journalism; HEC (Ecole des Hautes Etudes Commerciales) from France for an executive MBA program;³⁸ and UCL (University College London) for a post-graduate degree in museum studies, conservation, and archaeology.³⁹ Two additional universities and one vocational education and technical training college have been operating, located outside the EC: the University of Calgary-Qatar (UCQ) from Canada for nursing, Stenden University from the Netherlands for hospitality and tourism, and the College of the North Atlantic from Canada (CNA-Q) for vocational training.

At a glance, this set-up appears to be an assortment of university 'shops' that came of their own volition with their own agenda. Yet in fact the contrary is true: Each institution is specialized in a certain subject, and there is no overlap regarding the subjects offered; also, each program is purposefully selected to serve the purpose of Qatarisation and national capacity building in each sector that the State identifies as a priority. The UCQ's nursing program, for example, is aligned in purpose with Weill Cornell's medical program to produce Qatari doctors and nurses. An increase of chronic health issues in Qatar such as diabetes, obesity, and adverse effects of inbreeding⁴⁰ has led to an increased demand for medical services, especially in light of the "severe shortage of Qatari doctors and

nurses, and (an) ailing healthcare system that needed medical and nursing schools of high caliber.”*

The Dean of UCQ explains that:

What is and what was happening in Qatar is that there was not enough nurses to provide health care for the population. Hamad, the big hospital, was providing the majority of care for patients in hospitals but, in the past few years, there are other hospitals opening up. They are looking at health care in a broad context . . . of doing community healthcare…(but) there are not enough nurses to fill the hospital jobs and certainly not enough for community jobs. So QF went to Canada because we have a good reputation for nursing education…They know to focus on education to educate the population…to advance the country.

The Deans of the partner universities provide respectively further examples of the specific purposes behind the State’s selection of partner institutions that can provide particular programs. Georgetown University’s program focusing on foreign affairs was selected because it accords with the State’s aim to become a regional mediator; in other words, “a Switzerland in the Sands.”^{41**} Northwestern University was selected to provide a journalism program to respond to the increased demand for professionally trained journalists following the State’s dismantling of censorship laws in the mid-1990s. According to a top manager at QF, Standen University was selected because the state wanted to develop its tourism and hospitality sector in order to become an attractive host for international sporting events (such as the 2006 Asian Games and the 2022 World Cup).

This overview indicates how purposefully these partnerships have been developed within the frame of educational quality enhancement for national capacity building. In turn, this purposefulness suggests that the rationale of internationalization of higher education can, as Knight asserts,⁴² go beyond the traditional student/faculty exchanges and academic program transfers, to social/cultural, political, economic, and academic enhancement. The branch campus operation is a shared community of academic development for social capital gain beyond financial and human capital gain. This explains to a certain extent why UCQ is located outside Education City and not with the other branch campuses. The Dean asserts that the State’s leadership sees the nursing program as broad

*Interview with the Dean of UCQ

** Dean of Georgetown University

community work beyond an academic subject, and therefore it has to be close to the local community. Without a doubt, this is purposeful planning; nothing has happened by accident.

2. Nature: Selective, Leadership-Driven, Institutional Autonomy

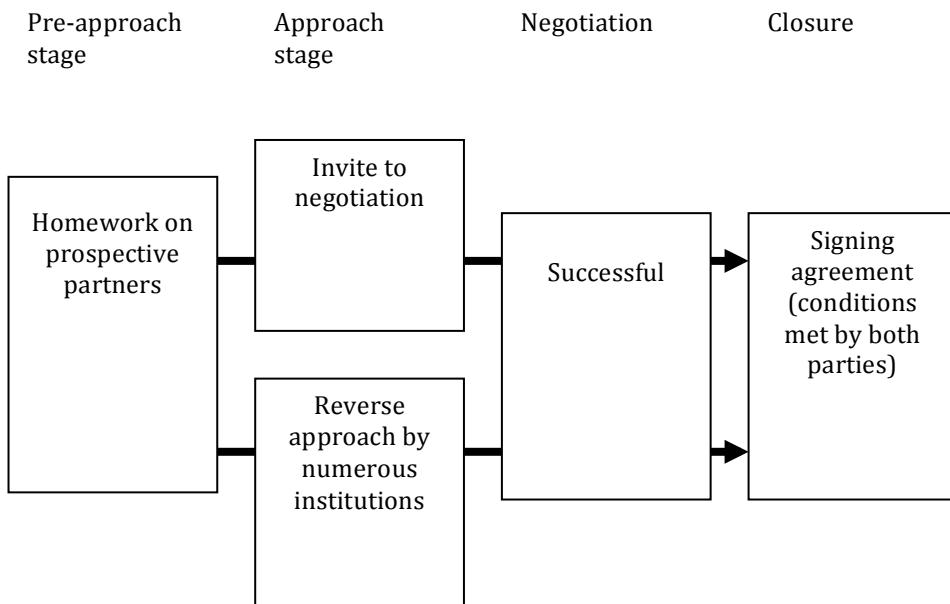
The first distinctive characteristic of the partnerships can be described as *selectiveness*. A top manager at QF involved in the partnership selection process summed up the nature of the partnerships as “highly selective” and “only by the State’s invitation” following a rigorous world-wide search.

(A)t the beginning, Qatar Foundation [was] looking for a university to deliver certain programs that are not in Qatar and the programs should not duplicate what exists in Qatar University or other places. We looked for one institution that can deliver more than one program. We understood that there is no one university that can deliver all the programs at the strength we want. Then the idea evolved, to go to the college level instead of going to the university. That’s why we went to Cornell Medical School of Cornell University for a medical program, and Texas A&M for engineering. But we were looking at the quality of the program and, as much as we can, have exposure internationally. We were doing our homework.

The key phrase “only by invitation” distinguishes Qatar’s branch campus operations from others, which can and do come to the region and begin operations as they wish. In many of these cases, there are financial risks that the branch campuses have to bear in order to survive and succeed, and there have been cases where they have ceased after a few years of operations due to financial difficulties.⁴³

As the diagram below shows, the State’s selection process entails a series of stages that range from the State’s investigation of prospective partner institutions, overture to the institutions, negotiation where mutual interest is confirmed, and signing of a formal agreement with conditions to be fulfilled by both parties.

Selection Process



As this process is explored further, the evidence shows that there is a high priority accorded to the originality and commitment shown by the partner, as well as the extent of mutual understanding in place—on the one hand, regarding the academic quality of the subjects offered, and on the other, the measure of empathy shown towards the local culture and the national goal of *Qatarization*. It seems only natural that with its new-found political system, political will and resources to undertake reform, yet severe lack of expertise, Qatar needs partners who have the quintessential elements that are required in a long-term successful partnership, which are summarized as “Compatibility, capability, and commitment”.⁴⁴ The QF’s top manager continues in the interview that it was never QF’s intention to partner with institutions that were already partnered elsewhere, but only with those that were committed to understanding what Qatar wants to do, and making their contribution towards achieving Qatar’s objectives. This does not mean that the partnership development process has always turned out the way QF wished, as there have been cases where the State’s invitations were turned down. There have also been examples of branch campuses that came with their own set of intentions upon the State’s invitation. The Dean of Texas A & M branch campus states:

Back in 2002, that is when QF invited our institution to consider establishing a branch campus here…We made several visits, then negotiated an agreement with QF…It (the invitation) was on the strength of our engineering programs in general…We were also looking at building an offshore campus for a while, but weren’t quite sure where. Then our partnership with Qatar got developed.

Therefore, it can be concluded that the partnerships require full commitment on an exclusive basis with mutual understanding. This shows that they entail multiple intangible social-capital factors that can be much more valuable than a simple financial gain, such as bridging between different cultures, understanding and respecting local context, and increasing goodwill between countries.

This selectiveness applies to the case of Qatar University as well. QU’s senior administrator explains that QU formed a team of experts in search of appropriate partner institutions who have an international reputation for the quality of the programs they offer. However long it takes, whether it is an accreditation body or a university and whether it is American or European, QU looks for a partner who understands the outcome that QU seeks from their partnership. Evidently, with both QU’s in-house curriculum-development approach and QF’s branch campus operation approach, these partnerships can be characterized as *transplant-then-localize*—a jump-start approach that is strategically designed to meet the set national objectives, based on the importation of highly selective and ready-made global class programs.

Leadership Driven

Both at QU and QF, the interviewees unanimously respond that these partnerships are driven by the leadership of QU and the State. A British academic at QU contends that “a lot of credit (for QU’s success) must be given to the president of the university (QU).” Similarly, a senior manager of QF says, “I suppose you have to put it down to Emir and Sheikha (Mozah)—the leadership. They recognize the need to invest in their people, to raise the level of human development…The leadership. They are absolutely committed to modernizing the society.” Finally, according to a VP of CAN-Q branch campus, “Sheikha Mozah has a vision and a plan. All this is not by accident…A driving force, she’s rather aggressive in moving that vision forward.”

The leadership's direct involvement in multiple processes of building partnerships is what has been the central and integrating force in the birth and the growth of the partnerships. This leadership exemplifies a "mobilizer"⁴⁵ of nation building, which pushes forward the education reform and transforms it into social capital gain and political progress⁴⁶ through inspiring the public to adopt a sense of higher purpose in pursuit of the national objectives.

Autonomy of Academic Operations

Third, the partnerships operate under a strict agreement to respect the autonomy of the branch campuses in academic affairs. Considering the 100 percent financial provision granted by QF to the respective branch campuses, and the costs involved, some could question whether the branch campuses are truly fully autonomous. However, interviews with the deans of the branch campuses indicate that the QF does not interfere with the campuses' academic and internal affairs. One of these deans comments:

Autonomy? Totally! There's autonomy. And there's academic freedom that is codified in our agreement with QF—a legal agreement. It has been consistently honoured in practice. I think QF understands that, if they begin compromising that…there will be great difficulty in attracting more institutions and that some current institutions will depart. *

The academic standards of the branch campuses sit within the framework of the home university's policy and management—in other words, they remain at the institution's discretion. These institutions were invited to Qatar because of their academic standards and institutional reputations and quality. As QU and QF work to enhance Qatar's current economic development, they have benefitted from the many years of experience of their partner institutions, as some institutions were founded centuries ago. Thus it is not surprising that the leadership of QU and QF had allowed the branch campuses such a degree of autonomy. Instead, a Joint Advisory Board consisting of several internal and external stakeholders was established for each partnership and tasked *inter alia* with carrying out an annual review of matters related to the curriculum and overall management. These arrangements serve the

*Dean of Northwestern University

purpose of providing a measure of collaborative oversight and opportunity for Qatar's input, albeit within an agreed-upon framework of operational autonomy for the partner institutions. In this way, both parties are responsible for ensuring that the branch campus' academic standards match those of the home campus, although this may be less simple than it sounds. As the partnerships expand and the programs become diversified, the adaptation of the academic contents to the Qatari socio-economic context will become a core issue; therefore more debate on academic autonomy related to curriculum development within the social context is emerging.

3. Implications of the Partnerships

Female Workforce Development

According to the statistics in secondary education, the dropout rate for boys is three times higher than that for girls, and boys fail exams at twice the rate of girls.⁴⁷ Similarly, females' post-secondary education aspirations are much higher than those of males⁴⁸ and the current enrollment of female students in the branch campuses accurately reflects this aspiration. The QU President echoed this in her remark that "women were deemed as the backbone of the university,"⁴⁹ which reflects women's strong representation and high achievement at QU.

This indicates that women's potential contribution to the workforce is very high and, in this context, the educational opportunities that the partnerships provide can optimize the benefits of women's contribution. In reality, Qatar is far from fully utilizing highly educated women in the workforce, although there have been some notable achievements by women in gaining high office,⁵⁰ not to mention the QU presidency. This reality is a result of two major factors: first, the traditional belief that women's role is in the household rather than in making a broader economic contribution⁵¹ and second, gender-segregated workplaces that limit the full mobilization of women. These two factors help to explain why women's career choices and the demand for a female workforce in different fields do not seem to accurately reflect their level of academic achievement.⁵² The disparity between women's educational achievement and the nature of the positions that they hold is largely due

to the “prevalent gender ideologies that create a natural disposition for specific occupations for women” such as teaching, nursing, and social service.⁵³ Krause’s notion of the negative effect of gender discrimination in promotions, particularly in the public sector,⁵⁴ and Qatari men’s unwillingness to work for a female supervisor,⁵⁵ strengthens the evidence of this disparity.

Higher education tackles gender bias in two ways. First, the mixed-gender environment that the branch campuses provide counters the gender segregation that is a part of Qataris’ upbringing, an upbringing that contributes to making it difficult for members of either gender to work in a mixed-gender environment in a later stage of their life. A Dean of a branch campus states:

For some of our students, it is the first time they’ve been in a co-educational environment. That presents some challenges, but what we point out to them is that if they are going to go out and become successful engineers, part of being a successful engineer is being able to work together (regardless of gender) in teams with other individuals of diversity. So it’s to their advantage to become part of the learning environment here, to learn how to work with mixed-gender teams. That way, when they go out, they’re prepared for that.

More evidence is needed, but as the Dean commented, by providing a sense of equal opportunity and entitlement, the co-educational environment of the partnerships – particularly the branch campus operations – present an opportunity to help break the labour market rigidity. In turn, this process helps to accelerate the maximization of the benefit of Qatari female education in the labor market, thereby ensuring women’s full participation in the national capacity building. Second, QU’s recent expansion of student/faculty exchanges with universities overseas suggests that the QU leadership realizes that QU’s gender-segregation practices are ill-suited to internationalization efforts and therefore a gradual exposure to co-educational environments needs to be facilitated should the university wish to regain its reputation for being a major supplier for the national work force.

Linguistic Dualism in the Context of Cultural Shift in Education

In seeking to situate its higher education strategies in the global context, Qatar recognized the status of English as the global language of business and research, and therefore promotes the learning and use of English throughout its educational system.⁵⁶ At the same time, Arabic is the language of

instruction for some subjects, particularly in the category of social science. In this regard, the relationship between English and Arabic—a linguistic dualism—reflects the subtle tension in higher education, particularly between global interaction and the promotion or maintenance of the local culture. How can the tension between Arabic and English, as they function in higher education, be mitigated?

Sally Findlow sums up this tension, arguing that the use of English has potential social repercussions and is a possible contributing factor to cultural loss.⁵⁷ In the case of QU, Arabic is retained as the language of instruction for certain subjects that are grounded in more local knowledge and historical tradition, such as education, the arts and law, while subjects that are heavily dependent on foreign expertise, such as engineering, business, and pharmacy, are taught in English. This linguistic dualism has at least two important consequences. First, those who learn certain subjects through the medium of English may find it difficult to transmit their knowledge later, with the problem of expressing—or indeed re-conceptualizing—their knowledge in Arabic. Second, it is worth considering what values are transmitted through the knowledge communicated in English—a foreign language—and how these values are received in the local cultural environment.⁵⁸ Subbiondo explains that “culture and language are linked as a result of the impact that language has on shaping our conceptualization of the world.”⁵⁹ Moreover, language is not only a means of communication—its instrumental function—but also a symbol of cultural identity.⁶⁰ Linguistic dualism moves the debate about partnerships beyond maintenance and quantitative growth towards the conflicts that may be brewing under the surface, such as the possibility of cultural shift. A senior staff member at QF echoed this concern, saying

(I)n keeping Islamic culture in education, we don't state it explicitly, but QF also has a role in helping identify, preserve, and develop Qatari culture. It is something QF leadership feels very keenly about. Of course it is a small population outnumbered several times by the immigrant population and the country is changing very, very fast, so the cultural identity issue is a very real one.

If the use of English as the medium of learning is perceived as a promotion of Western culture, then the tension or conflict created by the linguistic dualism may be related to a difference between the socio-linguistic views of the older and younger generations, or, as Findlow asserts: “Arabic localism-

authenticity' vs. 'English globalism-pragmatism."⁶¹ If this matters, Qatari society is likely to face a great challenge regarding the loss of tradition; for instance, in the reshaped gender roles as discussed earlier, or in the move towards a more secular, merit-based society, rather than an entitlement-based one. However, such changes will likely be met with resistance from many conservatives—perhaps with great consequences for the overall viability and momentum of Qatar's education reform. The senior staff member at QF continues:

(C)onservative public there are bound to be . . . there is this kind of huge respect for the Emir. At the same time there are some people who wonder why there are American universities and at the K-12 level why we are asking our children to take certain classes in English. "What's wrong with our Arabic language?" (they ask) ... Other people are saying, "When I was in school, we went a few hours in the morning, studied the Koran, came home—and I've done alright! I've got my Land Cruiser. We are richer. Why can't we do the same?"

Linguistic dualism is perhaps unavoidable, as it is a product of social change that is driven by political and educational agendas. Indeed, it is the reality of globalization itself rather than linguistic dualism in education that creates this latent tension. And yet the partnership initiatives, and the highly visible foreign role they bring to the higher education sector, might galvanize conservative or nationalist sentiments should they be seen as accelerating Qatar's further Westernization. However, the educational development and worldwide connections brought about by the partnerships may aid Qatar in solidifying its presence in the international community, which in turn will help the country to connect its future development to the global economy.

Social and Regional Contribution

Third, we should ask what the partnerships will do for Qatari society, the region, and the globe. There are two main possibilities in regards to their social and regional contribution. One is that the partnerships may act as a moderate enabling strategy in fostering an academic cultural shift from traditional gender segregation and rote learning to a more modern, participatory and socially mobile engagement in a mixed-gender environment. The other is that the partnerships may act as an innovative mechanism for transforming Qatar into a regional leader of education development,

elevating the quality of education and thus attracting students from across the region. The diversity of student demographics found both at QU and EC supports the view that the partnerships play a significant role in the region's human capital development. One senior staff member of the Admission Department at Georgetown University's Qatar branch indicated that student demographics there covered 37 nationalities as of June 2010. According to her, at Georgetown's home campus, 99 percent of the students are from the U.S., mainly the east coast, and are native English speakers, a remarkable contrast to Georgetown Qatar's 90 percent non-native student body. A similar phenomenon is observed at QU, where over 35 percent of the students registered in 2008–09 were non-Qatari.⁶² These institutions play a pivotal role in bringing the young people of the region into an environment where diversity and a strong work ethic are advocated. The QF senior manager says:

We are telling people that you can be forward-thinking, innovative, creative, modern and progressive and you can be Arab, Middle Eastern, and Islamic… And it is part of the broader education process of gaining acceptance in the population and creating a culture of aspiration and innovation and creativity.

Qatar's ambition to become the regional leader can be sensed in the belief of QF's top manager, who states that "(our) leading role in this respect (education development) will establish Qatar as the regional hub of education of excellence." Likewise, the transformation of the branch campuses' operations into the new Hamad bin Khalifa University (HbKU) took place in a subtle way. It is likely that this change will remain as a simple brand creation for now, although it certainly sends an intriguing message about QF's ambition to become the "regional hub of education of excellence." Provided that the current level of commitment and concerted efforts are continued, it is conceivable that by the year 2030 when *Vision 2030*⁶³ is realized, HbKU will have grown to stand alone as a local university, securing Qatar as the regional hub of education.

Moreover, Qatar's rapid emergence on the global scene as a key actor can be seen across many different sectors. Qatar wants to be seen as the region's peacemaker and mediator. Qatar's enviable track record of taking on such roles, and its ambition to continue doing so, has been witnessed in recent reports on a plan for the Taliban to open political headquarters in Qatar for formal peace talks with the West.⁶⁴ Qatar being the first Arab nation to take part in the UN coalition force

deployed in Libya in 2011 epitomizes Qatar's ambition to play a visible role in global politics, and Al Jazeera's prominent role in the global media is an outcome of the State's long-term goal of using education reform to secure Qatar's global visibility through Qatari human development.

THE WAY FORWARD

Qatar has embarked on the Gulf region's most comprehensive and innovative education reform. Its goal is to create a large pool of home-grown Qatari human resources that are competent in a global, knowledge-based society. To this end it has developed international partnerships with globally renowned higher education institutions. Some might assert that Education City's branch campus partnerships are about transplanting education from one location to another mainly for financial motives. Given that financial constraints are a reality faced by higher education globally, there are institutions that regard branch campus operations as a way of overcoming these constraints. What distinguishes the case of Qatar from the rest is that the partnerships are purpose-driven, selective, and exclusive. It is much more complex in meaning and orientation than a simple financial transaction. These partnerships are a long-term commitment to collaboration, consensually made by both parties, to achieve a common goal for the educational development of Qataris, and for the partnerships' regional and global leadership. Partnerships in higher education can indeed function as a springboard for the greater purpose of social development and national capacity building.

In summary, Qatar's partnership developments in higher education are unique, bold, and ambitious—albeit not without duly acknowledged peculiarities. The way in which the partnerships are delivered is unique due to the scale of the finances involved —few governments anywhere have the resources to equal those of Qatar. The country is small enough to undertake a sweeping and comprehensive reform at the national level through an effort of political will. And few locales are willing to put such a high degree of emphasis on keeping a necessary balance between retaining national oversight of education policy, and the realities of branch campuses seeking maximum academic and operational integrity.

As the partnerships progress, it will become increasingly critical that growth is focused on the depth of learning and teaching—and influence. In the long term, the success of Qatar's partnerships, and even its education reform, depend not only on the achievement of national capacity building but also on the global sustainability of Qatar's society and economy. In order to do this, policies, programs, and specific initiatives pertaining to empowering the national population and promoting gender equality without affronting any part of the public are vital. These efforts need to be supported by a viable national consensus of both the leadership and the people that is capable of overcoming the challenges both from within and outside of Qatar.

It is difficult to definitively say whether the partnership developments and overall education reform would have been possible without the leadership's determination. However, this top-down approach could in fact place the reform in some jeopardy should priorities change, or should a new leader either lose sight of or lose commitment to the purpose and direction of the whole process. In this respect, it is important for the State to promote public debate in policy-making processes in order for the partnerships and the reform to be sustainable. Creating and promoting a culture of public debate helps to enhance the State's new global role as a peace maker and mediator capable of engaging in dialogue and negotiations for the interests of the global citizenry. At the same time, if newly partnered universities continue to be integrated into the single entity of HbKU, the HbKU will likely grow to be a well-established and well-respected university in its own right; this transformation may be the optimal outcome of the partnerships. From there, the campuses, now organically linked, would become part of the progressive forces that are driving forward Qatar's unique notion of global sustainability.

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ORIENT STREET

ARIANE SEVERIN

Inspired by the experience of travel, both geographical and cultural, “Orient Street” is a reflection on the photograph as souvenir and object of longing and collecting. The project re-maps the city, where encounters with streets named after Middle Eastern locations in London become a journey of exploration capturing the flux of history in the juxtaposition of sign and place. Further, “Orient Street” is concerned with forming new alphabets and psycho-geographies in an era of globalization where the metropolis is a dynamic locus of constant mobility and migration, arrival and departure.





















ORIENT UNDERCOVER

ARIANE SEVERIN

“Orient Undercover” explores notions of the photographic travel souvenir through a series of images of cars wrapped in dust covers. Taken in various Middle Eastern locations, the nameless streets and cars not only play on clichés of an orient veiled in mystery, but also touch on concepts of a world in constant movement and migration, with the car taking a central role in these trans-global geographies.



















CONTESTED SPACES: RESISTANCE AND THE (FEMALE) BODY IN THE ARAB SPRING

EMANUELLE DEGLI ESPOSTI

The Arab uprisings may have been sparked by an Arab man… but they will be finished by Arab women.¹

Throughout the tumultuous events of the last two years, the trope of the protesting body has served as the ultimate symbol of individual defiance and liberal claims to self-determination across the Arab world. Scholars, journalists and analysts alike have held up iconic images of physical protest in countries as diverse as Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Bahrain as a testament to the unified and unifying goal of resistance to despotic Arab state power. The sheer human scale and drama of protest movements such as those of Egypt's Tahrir Square and Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution are seemingly self-evident proof of Arabs' desire to overthrow their corrupt and stagnant political systems and engage in true democratic representation.

As with all such grand narratives, the seeds of truth are more often than not obscured by overarching generalizations and poorly conceived arguments. While the uprisings collectively dubbed the “Arab Spring” have doubtlessly marked a significant shift in the local and regional politics of the Arab world, the underlying power relations and hegemonic struggles taking place across the region remain unclear and can only be analyzed by deconstructing existing narratives that seek to romanticize the process of resistance.² As noted above, much of this romanticism has been invested in the image of the protesting (Arab) body, and yet the political significance of this body has yet to be fully theorized.³ Furthermore, while there has been some focus on the gendered aspects of the Arab Spring movements, very few scholars have focused on the power relations inherent in the use of the female body as a site of resistance. This article will attempt to go some way in remedying this conceptual gap by analyzing the politics of the protesting female body within the context of the Arab Spring, and offering a way to understand this body as a site of both local and global hegemonic resistance. In

order to deconstruct contemporary representations of the protesting woman, this analysis will be informed by Foucault's theories on power, discourse and the subject, as well as incorporating aspects of postmodern feminist discourse on the performativity of gender.

By probing the ways in which Arab women are re-appropriating and manipulating their bodies as sites of political contestation, this article intends to show that the politics of resistance inherent in such acts is more complex, nuanced and multi-faceted than often portrayed. While not denying the agency of such women, it is also necessary to bear in mind the complex web of norms, power and discourse that both limit and subtly shift the parameters of their actions. In this way, the bodily resistance of Arab women can be used as a diagnostic of the power relations embedded in their actions. Moreover, such power relations point to the emergence of the female body as a key site of contestation in the battle for political and social supremacy, and one whose symbolic potency is appropriated by various actors in order to further their own hegemonic (or counterhegemonic) needs.

This article will begin by charting the ways in which the body, and more specifically, the female body, has come to be understood as politically significant. This discussion will then be used to inform an analysis of how women's bodies have been used and manipulated within the Arab Spring movements. Ultimately, such an analysis aims to show that the dominant narrative used to categorize these women – that which equates the protesting (Arab/Muslim) woman with the emancipated (secular/liberal) woman – is implicated in a wider gendered discourse that pits the effeminate and passive East against the masculine and assertive West.⁴ Arab women, in their creative and multifarious forms of bodily protest, are challenging this Orientalized discourse and pushing us towards rethinking such tired narratives in favor of a more nuanced view. Rather than being a new phenomenon, such renegotiations have been part of the political scene of the region throughout history.⁵

THE BODY POLITIC(S)

The physical space of the human body is one of the primary realms for the production and performance of discourse. The body is the space in which the material and the imagined come together and combine to form new interpretations and realities: "As the most personal and intimate

realm of the self, bodies are the most striking sites for the inscription of power”⁶ Foucault has persuasively argued that the body is a product of discourse, an “object of knowledge”⁷ and a creation of power relations:

In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that can be gained of him belong to this production.⁸

However, this does not suggest that the body can be perceived as a passive receiver, a blank canvas on which power relations are materialized. Rather, the body is itself an active agent in the production of discourse and is immediately involved in confrontations and negotiations of meaning. Bodies are “directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate effect on (them);”⁹ they are imbued with discourse and are actively involved in the shaping of discourse: “bodies in fact carry discourse as part of their own lifeblood.”¹⁰ The mass demonstrations in Egypt’s Tahrir Square and in other public spaces across the Arab world are thus both effects and producers of discourse. Individuals are using the physical existence of their bodies to contest and to reimagine the existing political order.

While the uprisings of the Arab Spring have brought unprecedented attention to the human body as “the vehicle of all social protest,” there has been a tendency to overlook the symbolic value of the protesting body as a site of political contestation in and of itself.¹¹ It has been assumed in much of the literature that the protesting body and the message of political dissent it carries represent separate and irreconcilable spheres; the body has overwhelmingly been seen as little more than the site or space for the missive of resistance, and thus as somehow free from the effects of power relations. But if we accept the notion that the body is itself both a product of and an active participant in discourse, we must also accept that “there is no reference to a pure body which is not at the same time a further formation of that body.”¹² It follows, then, that the images and videos of mass demonstrations across the Arab world are themselves involved in the construction of the trope of the protesting body. The politics of the Arab Spring thus transcends the slogans, chants and messages of the revolutionary crowd and embeds itself in the physical being of their collective and individual forms.

Only by picking apart the various power relations inherent in the formation of these bodies will we thus come to understand the wider political significance of these uprisings.

The protesting female body, symbolizing as it does a contestation of both gender norms and notions of self-determination, emerges as a key site of this political significance. It is no coincidence that many of the media images of the Arab Spring have centered on that of the female protester, whether she be a slogan-shouting *hijabi* in Cairo's Tahrir Square, a female rebel fighter in Syria, or a nude anti-Islam activist.¹³ These images speak of a compelling narrative of women's resistance and liberation through political activism: a narrative that has succeeded in capturing the attention of much of the world. It is partly a result of the unique symbolism inherent in the protesting (Arab/Muslim) female body that women have become so central to the imagery of the Arab Spring. It is this symbolism that raises interesting and pertinent questions about the relationship of resistance to power. As Nadje Al-Ali has emphasized, "women and gender are key to both revolutionary and counter-revolutionary processes and developments (in the Arab world) and not marginal to them."¹⁴

POWER AND RESISTANCE

Understanding the power dynamics inherent in the protesting (Arab) female body is not possible without a theoretical grasp of the politics of resistance and its relationship to power within the context of the Arab Spring. The sheer scale and drama of the events that have unfolded since the self-immolation of Tunisian fruit seller Mohammed Bouazizi in late 2010 have led many to throw caution to the wind and lose sight of all historical and regional contexts in their tendency to romanticize the Arab Spring. Even the name "Arab Spring" – invoking notions of blossoming and regeneration – involves an implicit value-judgment and has been alternately interpreted as referring back to the 1848 revolutions in Europe and the uprisings that swept North Africa in the early 20th century.¹⁵ How are the multiple, varied and often contradictory movements of the Arab Spring thus to be analyzed under the rubric of resistance?

The study of resistance has long been dogged with the conceptual difficulty of identifying what actually constitutes resistance: "the term resistance remains loosely defined, allowing some scholars to

see it almost everywhere and others almost nowhere.”¹⁶ This has led some scholars to conclude that the concept of resistance is itself “socially constructed,” and that all that remains for analysts is to define what they take this construction to be.¹⁷ The uprisings and protests collectively known as the Arab Spring circumvent this issue to some extent, as they involve acts of intentional political and social subversion, and have resulted, at least in some cases, to a rupture in the pre-existing political order.

If it is relatively easy to categorize the Arab Spring uprisings as resistance, then vigilance must instead be applied in ensuring that these forms of resistance are not idolized or romanticized in our analysis. By adopting a too-literal interpretation of the Foucauldian maxim that “where there is power, there is resistance,”¹⁸ we run the danger of reading “all forms of resistance as signs of the ineffectiveness of systems of power and of the resilience and creativity of the human spirit in its refusal to be dominated”¹⁹ Instead, it would be more productive to understand the relationship between power and resistance as interdependent and restrictive: rather than proof of the ineffectuality of power, resistance is both created and limited by the effect of power. Working backwards, acts of resistance can thus be used as a diagnostic of the power relations that helped bring them into being.²⁰ Under this interpretation, the protesting female body is less a signifier of women’s emancipation and political activism than a symbol of the gendered and politicized discourses that limit and codify her expression. Understanding the politics of resistance as materialized in the protesting female body thus involves deconstructing the power relations invoked and challenged by her actions.

In the context of the Arab Spring, a female protester is never just a protester but also a symbol of sexual and social politics; from the point of view of the Western gaze, an Arab female protester is never just a political agent but a vehicle for the production of Orientalist discourse. In this way, different strands of social, regional, global and historical narratives are woven together to form the image of the Arab female protester; an image that only exists within the context of the discourse in which it is invoked. What it means to be a female protester in the Arab world is different to what it means to be a female protester in the West, but the basis and constitution of this difference depends on the parameters of the discourse being applied. The notion that women’s bodies are being used as

sites of resistance to Arab state power itself involves a host of assumptions about those women that must be examined and justified in turn.

THE FEMALE BODY AS A SITE OF CONTESTATION

The centrality of gender to the current political and ideological struggles being waged across the Arab world is evident in the way women and their bodies are being used and appropriated by both state and citizen actors to further their own hegemonic causes. While women have been active participants in the mass demonstrations in the region, and have even been involved in women's marches and staged protests in countries as diverse as Yemen, Egypt and Iran,²¹ they have also been used and abused by those who wish to control and stifle their political expression. The female body, as a symbol of the purity and honour of the nation, cannot be defiled by the act of public protest and must thus be regulated by the protective power of the state.²² This gendered discourse of nationhood has led to such disturbing examples as the imposition of forced "virginity tests" on Egyptian female protesters,²³ the public stripping and abuse of a protester by security forces in Cairo (the resulting image of a half-naked woman in a blue bra was widely circulated in the media),²⁴ and the use of rape as a weapon against women activists in Libya and Syria.

Such violence reflected a determination to curtail women's civil and political rights.

Stripping off their clothes was an act specifically aimed at humiliating them as well as suppressing their freedom to assemble, to protest, to move through public space at all.²⁵

By enforcing the state's control over the nation through the symbol of the female body, this body is transformed from a passive citizen into a site of active political contestation; what it means to be a woman in the image of the nation is redefined according to the immediate needs of the current systems of power. But this meaning can in turn be challenged by the women themselves, who reappropriate their own bodies as political symbols and use them in ways that contest the previously-held norms of femininity:

(B)y putting the issue of their bodies at the heart of public debate [Arab women] want to show a patriarchal society that a revolution really is going down - and that it won't be happening without them.²⁶

Women have responded to such attempts to control the representation of the female body by publicly asserting their right to self-expression and freedom from coercion. Activists such as Samira Ibrahim, who successfully took the Egyptian military to court following her enforced “virginity test”²⁷ have challenged the dominant patriarchal order in demanding their voices be heard. Ibrahim and others like her have contributed to an anti-harassment movement that has culminated in the creation of an online “harassmap”²⁸ of downtown Cairo. The blue bra, originally associated with an image of humiliation and violence, has also been turned into a symbol of female emancipation and struggle, spawning various protests and movements across the world that use it as their emblem.²⁹

Thus it is the different ways in which the female body is employed and performed that constitute what it means to be a woman in the context of the Arab Spring. This ties in to postmodern feminist discourse about the performativity of gender, meaning “the power of discourse to produce effects through reiteration.”³⁰ If Arab women are able to repeatedly and publicly challenge the gender norms that limit their political expression, then it follows that they can be actively involved in a reimagining of what it means to be an Arab woman. Focusing on the public representation of the female body throws into sharp relief the social parameters involved in the control and subjugation of this body. By sheer virtue of being present in the public arena as a protesting female body, Arab women are openly challenging conservative social norms. If resistance is a diagnostic of power, then the re-imagination of the female body is indicative of the strong patriarchal chains that limit and control female expression. As Assaaoui puts it, “their approach turns the body into an (aesthetic) messenger of individual and collective independence, of political and ethical resistance.”³¹ When protest is expressed through the body, especially the female body, it is more difficult to tolerate because it challenges the existing order.³² But if the female body is a site of hegemonic contestation when it comes to gender norms and patriarchal limitations, it is also a site of the reproduction of dominant power structures. The very fact that Arab women are choosing to put their bodies at the heart of their resistance efforts suggests they themselves are implicit in the gendering of that body. Although these women are resisting and challenging certain interpretations of femininity, they are simultaneously

reinforcing the notion that it is the female body that is key to the control and pacification of the nation. The gendered discourse of the “female” nation in need of saving from the “male” state is thus reproduced by the very practices that seek to overcome it. As Çınar has pointed out, “interventions related to bodies… always operate through categories of gender, which turn the body into a political field in which… hierarchies of power are institutionalized.”³³ In this way, the individual bodily acts of female resistance are themselves a diagnostic of the enduring gendered discourse of existing power relations. This is not to deny agency to these women, but merely to emphasize the extent to which their agency operates within structured “dynamics of power” from which it “cannot be isolated.”³⁴ Thus just as women reproduce hegemony in their attempts to resist it, “they also confront and discursively penetrate the practices of which they are a part.”³⁵

DECONSTRUCTING THE ORIENTAL FEMALE BODY

As well as being understood as a site for the reproduction of local patriarchal hegemony, the protesting Arab female body must also be placed within the context of wider global power structures. When presented with images of women in the Arab world engaging in political activism, it is possible that the meaning and interpretation of those images and bodies may vary according to the gaze of the onlooker. It is verging on self-evident to assert that an image of a protesting Arab woman will have different meanings in the Arab world than in the West; but in today’s era of globalized media and hyper-connectivity, it is possible for that woman to be present simultaneously in either context. The women who took to the streets of Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and Syria, to name but a few, were doing so in full awareness of the fact that their acts would be seen and interpreted on both a local and global scale. It is within this context that it is important to deconstruct the Western discourse on female resistance in the Arab Spring in order to understand the wider power dynamics that are at play.

Although there has been much criticism of Edward Said’s seminal *Orientalism*, much in the overall polemic of the work still applies to contemporary East-West relations. Said defines Orientalism as a Western form of domination and authority aimed at controlling the Orient: “the nexus of knowledge and power creating “the Oriental” and in a sense obliterating him as a human being.”³⁶ It is

in this sense that Orientalist discourse can be compared to the gendered notion of the female body as representative of the nation: by inscribing the (Oriental) female body with a discourse that negates the individual agency of the women themselves, Orientalism strips these women of their humanity and renders them as pawns in the global struggle between the “progressive” West and “backward” East. In this way, the trope of the female body no longer marks the boundaries of nationalism but is extended to act as a signifier of the Orient itself: passive, submissive, weak and in need of “saving” by the strong and masculine West.³⁷ Much of this Orientalist discourse focuses on the image of the veiled (Muslim) woman as a symbol of female oppression and the legitimate grounds for Western intervention:

The veil has been a veritable obsession of Western writers… serving as the symbol par excellence of woman as oppressed in the Middle East, an image that ignores indigenous cultural constructions of the veil’s meaning and reduces a complex and ever-changing symbolism into an ahistorical reification.³⁸

By adopting a narrow focus on the veil, Western commentators have tended to gloss over the complex politics inherent in the wearing and discarding of this potent cultural symbol. Thus, images of Arab women “de-veiling” as part of the Arab Spring uprisings have been upheld as examples of the progressive, liberal, and secular values of Arab populations without taking into consideration the deeper cultural and political significance of such acts. In reality, women’s creative use of symbols such as the Islamic veil defy any attempts to codify them in a single, essentializing narrative. For example, women in both Egypt and Algeria have historically used the veil as “an ambiguous symbolic solution” to “a web of cross-cutting power relations”, both in the practices of “re-” and “de-” veiling.³⁹ Moreover, the supposedly restrictive garments of the *burqa* and *niqab* have proved useful tools for female protesters seeking to conceal their identity from security forces, and have thus become ubiquitous symbols of female resistance in the Arab Spring.⁴⁰

In November 2012, 21-year-old Syrian activist Dana Bakdounis caused controversy when she posted images of herself on Facebook without the veil and holding a card which read: “I’m with the uprising of women in the Arab world because for 20 years I wasn’t allowed to feel the wind on my hair and (on) my body.”⁴¹ Following a misjudgment on the part of the social networking site, the image

was temporarily removed, resulting in a huge online movement claiming solidarity with Dana's cause, dubbed "#WindtoDana". Dana was held up by many commentators as the "brave girl" who dared to speak truth to power and who broke free of the prison of the veil to experience the "wind" of freedom.

By framing her choice to unveil within the political context of the Arab Spring, Dana was attempting to express ownership of her body in a way that challenged what she perceived to be dominant cultural norms. However, simply equating Dana's unveiling with freedom from oppression misses much of the context in which this act was performed. Firstly, although born in Damascus, Dana was brought up in Saudi Arabia, where veiling is both compulsory and enforced. Second, the fact that Dana posted images of her unveiled self on the Internet, rather than simply going out into the street, suggests that her intended audience was not the local Syrian activists but a wider spectrum of viewers that included those in the West (as suggested by the fact she wrote her sign in both Arabic and English). Moreover, Dana's actions were part of a worldwide social media movement expressing solidarity with Arab women, which used as its tagline the message: "I'm with the uprising of women in the Arab world because..."⁴²

Thus to interpret Dana's actions as those of an emancipated Arab woman throwing off the shackles of Islamic patriarchy is to engage in a form of Orientalist essentialism. Rather, Dana's choice of medium and performance suggest that she sees herself as part of a wider Arab resistance against oppression and domination of all forms. As a diagnostic of power, Dana's resistance can be interpreted as a challenge both to patriarchal gender norms and the Orientalized discourse that takes the passive and oppressed female body as a signifier of Eastern inferiority. Whether she is aware of it or not is beside the point, since "the body, defined politically, is precisely organized by a perspective that is not one's own."⁴³

Similarly, Aliaa el-Mahdy, the young Egyptian activist who shot to worldwide notoriety in late 2011 after posting nude images of herself on her blog, also calls into question local and global gendered discourses in her attempts to de-eroticize the female body as a site of artistic, rather than sexual, expression.⁴⁴ If we accept that "women's bodies are a fixed symbol of possession in patriarchal societies, where everything else is negotiable,"⁴⁵ then Aliaa's expression of ownership over her own

body can be seen as a direct challenge to the dominant patriarchal social order. And yet this interpretation ignores the other power dynamics at play. In the circulation of the image of the naked (Arab) female body, the context in which it is created is as important as the image itself. The contrast between Aliaa's original image of late 2011 and a recent stunt organized in coordination with radical feminist group FEMEN⁴⁶ highlights the importance of this context of the intended gaze. While in the first instance Aliaa represented an Egyptian woman expressing herself in the context of a national uprising, in the second she symbolized an Arab (Muslim) woman conveying an anti-Islamic message in Islamophobic Europe.

While Alia's naked body… does not exist in absolute terms, its nudity must constantly be read against its socially-conservative and repressive Arab context just as it is read against its neocolonial, Islamophobic context… The power of this mediated body, circulating as it is online and through multiple media discourses, is its interpellation of differently positioned audiences. In this hyper-mediated environment, the Western gaze is not the only gaze.⁴⁷

To reduce female resistance in the Arab Spring to tired Orientalist narratives of Arab exceptionalism and Islamic fundamentalism is thus to strip these women of the very political agency they are attempting to exercise. By taking ownership of their bodies in new and creative ways, Arab women are challenging the longstanding power dynamics that have characterized both them and their societies as weak and passive.

CONCLUSION

Women across the Arab world have played a crucial role in the ongoing uprisings. The female body, as a site of political contestation, can be seen as a symbol of both women's and Arabs' resistance to oppression and dominance in any form. While much of Western media and analysis have focused on the image of the unveiled and "emancipated" Muslim woman, the sheer diversity of Arab women's protests suggest that such essentialist and Orientalist narratives cannot be successfully applied. Neither is the phenomenon of female protest new or unique to the Arab Spring; women in the Arab world, just as men in the Arab world, have been using their bodies as vehicles and messages of

protest throughout history. The only difference is the widespread circulation of these images in today's hyper-mediated environment.

While Arab women continue to use their bodies as sites of political and hegemonic negotiation and contestation, the ways in which they do so are in turn restricted by the power dynamics of which they are a part and which they reproduce through the very act of resistance. Thus the bodily resistance of female protesters in the Arab Spring uprisings can be seen as a diagnostic of both the local and global power relations that subtly penetrate the social body. The fact that these power relations are so integral to the social fabric in which they are implicated suggests that the performativity of resistance cannot be reduced to a single act, but rather must be constantly reimagined and re-performed. It is in the discursive negotiation and re-negotiation of the symbol of the female body that Arab women are engaging in counterhegemonic struggle against the dominant power structures. Rather than be curtailed by such structures, their agency moves within them to redefine the very parameters on which they reside. The (Arab) female body thus emerges as a site of hegemonic struggle, a contested space whose boundaries are constantly shifting and blurring to accommodate new and imaginative discursive practices.

Notes

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PRIVATE LIVES, PUBLIC VOICES: WEBLOGS, POLITICS AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE IN IRAN

EMANUELLE DEGLI ESPOSTI

‘The public sphere’: the phrase has ballooned into the God-term of democratic discourse theory. It represents the ideal… the sacred sphere against which standard violations and deviations are to be measured.¹

The liberal democratic ideal of the public sphere is a notion that lingers on in theoretical debates, its legacy echoing across disciplines, places and years. Despite having many critics, Jürgen Habermas remains the much-revered “god” of this ideal, whose seminal 1962 work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (translated into English in 1989) continues to provide the blueprint for theoreticians seeking to construct a model of democratic social discourse. The question to be asked, then, is why Habermas’ conception of the public sphere remains pervasive today, and whether there are certain analytical truths brought to light by his theory that may prove useful to a modern (or rather, in the case of this article, postmodern) analysis of public discourse. A further question that arises when interrogating the Habermasian public sphere – a theory devised from a historical genealogy of Western Europe, and therefore necessarily Eurocentric² – is to what extent it obscures, rather than clarifies, the state-society relations at play in non-Western settings.

This article will attempt to answer such questions by applying Habermas’ theory of the public sphere to the case of Iran, specifically the growing phenomenon of weblogging in the Islamic Republic. Cyberactivism and weblogs in Iran – or “Blogistan” as it has been dubbed – provide an interesting opportunity to critically analyze the concept of the public sphere in a non-Western setting. Despite the fact that Habermas himself was critical of mass media and dismissed it as “a public sphere in appearance only,”³ the rise of the Internet and the creation of a new, virtual space for public discussion has led many scholars to laud the democratic possibilities of such technology. Some have even suggested that the interactivity and interconnectedness of weblogs presents a new and hitherto

unexploited opportunity for the creation of a virtual public sphere.⁴ The case of Iran, in which a dissident public is using the blogosphere to openly criticize the authoritarian Islamic regime under which they live, can thus be held up as a shining beacon of how the Internet can provide oppressed peoples with a safe space for protest.⁵

By presenting an analysis of the way Iranians use blogs as social, political and cultural tools, this article aims to deconstruct this utopian narrative about the Islamic Republic in order to ascertain to what extent, if at all, the Iranian blogosphere can be regarded as a public sphere. Through a quantitative and qualitative survey of the Iranian blogosphere, it will be posited that the voices in Iranian blogs are far too diverse, fragmented and polarized to constitute a single, unitary public sphere. Rather, blogging in Iran provides a reflection of the heterogeneity of Iranian society and as such can be seen to better correspond with a theory of multiple and overlapping public spheres – what Gitlin calls “public sphericules.”⁶ Moreover, the way in which blogging and the Internet are interrogating the boundaries between “public” and “private” in Iranian society can be viewed as indicative of what Nancy Fraser has dubbed the “postmodern public sphere.”⁷

In undertaking such an analysis, this article will begin with a critical deconstruction of the Habermasian notion of the public sphere, and then turn to the case of the Iranian blogosphere in order to construct a new and more suitable theory of the public sphere. Problematizing the shifting boundaries between public and private will be a core part of this reconstruction. Although envisaged with the Iranian case foremost in mind, it is also worth considering the wider repercussions of such a theory of the postmodern, fragmented public sphere as a model for public discourse in the Middle East as a whole.

INTERROGATING THE PUBLIC SPHERE: BEYOND HABERMAS

The Habermasian theory of the public sphere refers primarily to an arena in which “private people come together as a public” in the pursuit of rational and critical discussion to determine the common good.⁸ This public arena is conceptually different from the state, since the sovereign public acting within such a space is able to produce discourses that are potentially critical of state power.

Such a clear distinction between the state and the public (which here is comparable to the notion of “civil society”) is central to liberal democratic theory: in order for the state to be answerable to society, the two must be conceived as separate and discrete entities in their own right.

Habermas has been criticized by many scholars for presenting a model of the public sphere that is both partial and elitist⁹ – the notion of a single, unified public sphere that reflects the “common” interests of a predominantly male, middle-class elite has certainly fallen out of favor in contemporary debates. As Keane puts it: “The conventional ideal of a unified public sphere… [is] obsolete.”¹⁰

While admitting the importance of such debates, the interrogation of Habermas’ theory of the public sphere presented here stems neither from its partiality nor its elitism, but rather from the way it clearly delineates between state and society, between private and public. These two dichotomies are intertwined in the sense that the state can be seen to embody everything that is “public” and society all that is “private”. When Habermas talks of private individuals coming together as a public distinct from the state, he ignores the fact that the state is itself responsible for the fashioning of those private individuals. If we accept Foucault’s assertion that state power is both individualizing and totalizing, i.e. that it creates its subjects both as citizens and individuals,¹¹ then we can see that such a clear division between state and society, between the public and private manifestations of state power, is problematic. Moreover, when we begin to analyze the various sites for the production of state hegemony, it becomes clear that the posited boundaries between state and society are less distinct than might previously have been thought and that these “blurred boundaries”¹² serve to falsify the dichotomy of state/society.¹³

The Internet is indicative of this blurring of conceptual terms in the way it is shifting the boundaries between public and private. As Graham and Khosravi note: “(i)t is the capacity of cyberspace to bypass some of the spatial divisions that underpin social divisions… that endows it with political significance.”¹⁴ Bloggers in Iran and elsewhere are conducting public conversations in the privacy of their own homes, often about topics that are intensely personal. The fact that Iranians are increasingly revealing personal and private information through the public medium of the Internet marks

a profound cultural shift in Iranian society, and raises all sorts of questions about the shifting boundaries between public and private:

These spatial terms of public and private are not innocent designations. They provide a classificatory grid, which underlies the sometimes enforced placement of people, things and ideas and helps create relationships of power, inequality and social exclusion.¹⁵

If we accept such politicization of the division between public and private, then any model of the public sphere we wish to employ must begin by problematizing this division and interrogating the alleged categories of “public” and “private”. Nancy Fraser’s “postmodern” conception of the public sphere, which “takes as its starting point the multivalent, contested character of the categories of privacy and publicity,”¹⁶ is thus useful here. By analyzing the ways in which the Iranian blogosphere has contributed to the blurring of public and private lives in Iran, this article hopes to lay the groundwork for a postmodern theory of the public sphere that goes beyond Habermas to explore the multiple and politicized meanings of “public”.

CONTEXTUALIZING BLOGGING IN THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC

With a relatively high level of Internet penetration in comparison to most other Middle Eastern countries (43.2 percent of the population, compared to 21.1 percent in Egypt and 1.1 percent in Iraq),¹⁷ Iran is arguably the ideal case study in the region for analyzing the public sphere potential of cyberspace. It also has the largest blogging community by a significant margin. Since the creation of the first Persian weblog in September 2001 by Salman Jariri,¹⁸ blogging has become an increasingly popular phenomenon in Iran. By 2009, the generally accepted figure for “live” Iranian blogs (meaning blogs that are updated regularly) was over 70,000 (compare this figure to an estimated 50 live blogs in neighboring Iraq),¹⁹ while Persian has been estimated to be the fourth most popular language in the global blogosphere.²⁰

Quantitatively then, Iran lends itself to an analysis of blogging and the public sphere more than any other Middle Eastern country. But there is also a qualitative argument to be made here. Many commentators have held up Iran’s blogosphere as a shining example of a burgeoning public sphere flourishing under authoritarian rule.²¹ The case of Iran, so the argument goes, gives the lie to the

Orientalist orthodoxy of Middle Eastern exceptionalism and proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that civic activism and dissent is an integral part of the region's political landscape. The seeming paradox between the restricted formal politics of the Islamic Republic and the increasingly political voices of Iranian youth and liberals, as expressed in cyberspace, is only seen to reinforce the view that the Internet is an inherently democratizing public sphere. While not denying the significance of underground politics in Iran, such narratives ignore the vast majority of Iranian bloggers who predominantly write about personal, banal or (seemingly) apolitical subjects. By focusing only on the overtly political voices in Iran's blogosphere (many of whom come from the expatriate community), there is a tendency to overlook the true political significance of the act of blogging in Iran, regardless of subject matter. For these reasons, this article adopts a much broader definition of politics that encompasses the entirety of social practices that reproduce certain dominant hegemonic narratives: “politics’… is the ensemble of discourses and practices, institutional or even artistic practices, that contribute to and reproduce a certain order.”²²

The very act of blogging, of exposing your personal thoughts and beliefs in the public arena of the Internet, is itself a political act when the social norms under which it is conducted prohibit such disclosures. Thus as Sreberny and Khiabany stress, it is important to contextualize blogging in Iran “within the broader sociopolitical and cultural context of the Islamic Republic.”²³ While a fashion blogger in the UK or the US might just be a fashion blogger, a fashion blogger in Iran necessarily comes up against social, cultural, religious and political notions of appropriate dress codes and enforced female veiling. For these reasons, the Iranian blogosphere provides a fascinating example of how politics and discourse are negotiated and imagined in a totalitarian context. When the state reaches into the home and tells citizens how they can and cannot behave, any act of transgression is potentially politically loaded.

The conventional portrayal of the Iranian blogosphere as young, liberal, secular and critical of the regime thus ignores much of the diversity and vibrancy of blogging in Iran, as well as vastly underestimating the influence of the state in this supposed “public sphere”:

If the Iranian blogosphere is a place where women speak out for their rights, young people criticize the moral police, journalists fight against censorship, reformists press for

change, and dissidents press for revolution, it is also a place where the Supreme Leader is praised, the Holocaust denied, the Islamic Revolution defended, Hezbollah celebrated, Islamist student groups mobilized, and pro-establishment leaders, including President Ahmadinejad, reach out to their very real constituencies within the Iranian public.²⁴

Indeed, the most recent comprehensive statistical survey of Iranian blogs²⁵ found that they could be classified into four main “poles”: secular/reformist; conservative/religious; poetry and literature; and mixed networks (including popular culture and celebrity gossip). The blogs within each “pole” only link and engage with other similar blogs, leading to the fragmentation of the blogosphere and the creation of what Thompson calls “bubbles”²⁶ – enclosed and mutually-enforcing blog communities. Conversely, state censorship and filtering, while certainly prevalent, is less restrictive than often portrayed; the same study found that between 79-89 percent of secular and reformist blogs are visible within Iran. That is not to deny the occasional and very real danger posed to dissident bloggers, many of whom have been arrested, imprisoned, even killed as a result of what they have written. In April 2009, Omid Reza Misayafi became the first known Iranian blogger to die in jail, and his name has become synonymous with the fight for freedom of speech in the Iranian blogosphere. Sattar Beheshti, the most recent dissident blogger killed by the Iranian regime, died in prison in November 2012 under uncertain circumstances.²⁷

Thus while the political dimension of Iran’s blogosphere can partially be attributed to the overtly political content of many (though by no means all) of its blogs, a thorough analysis of politics and weblogs in Iran must look beyond such reductionist narratives and consider the ways in which cultural and social norms are being reflected – or flouted – by the practice of blogging in the Islamic Republic.

PRIVATE LIVES, PUBLIC VOICES: TOWARDS A POSTMODERN PUBLIC SPHERE

Even as a child (in Iran) you are taught by your parents how to lie, how to put on your mask and go into the street with your real face hidden… You always learn to make two identities: your home identity and your outside identity.²⁸

As part of this article’s goal to contextualize the phenomenon of blogging in the Islamic Republic, it is necessary to have a nuanced understanding of the various social, cultural and political

currents that permeate the lives of Iranians. Blogging, by virtue of the manner in which it publicizes the private thoughts, actions and beliefs of individuals, is deconstructing a very well-established cultural norm in Iranian society and contributing to the blurring of the boundaries between “private” and “public”. Throughout the Islamic history of Iran this boundary has been clearly marked by the division between an inner “female” life – that of the family and the home – and an outer “male” life – that of public practice and performance.²⁹ The categorization of women as belonging to the “private” sphere and men to the “public” was traditionally enforced through the practices of gender segregation and veiling. Women, by being physically and symbolically invisible in public space, were thus relegated to the domestic domain of the private sphere:

For centuries, veiling not only curtailed women’s bodily expression but also inhibited their verbal self-expression. Their public silence was long legitimized, spiritualized, fetishized, and idealized.... (T)he traditional Iranian beauty appears to be made more alluring by not saying anything. Silence was one of her hallmarks.³⁰

With the wave of modernization that swept across much of the Middle East during the early 20th century, such practices became less and less common, especially among the educated and wealthier classes, and women began to be visible in public life. That is, until the Islamic Revolution in 1979 and the subsequent enforced veiling of all women. Paradoxically, the imposition of veiling on all women as a precondition to their presence in public space allowed more conservative Iranians, who hitherto had remained hidden in private, to claim their place in the public arena.³¹

A further result of the Islamic Revolution in Iran has been the crystallization of a cultural legacy of dissemination and performance in public space: “Iranian culture is based on a dialectical relation between the inner self (private) and outer self (public). It involves hiding the core meaning of one’s thoughts from the public.”³² This dichotomy between a private inner life (*baten*) and a public persona (*zaher*) is one of the fundamental cultural norms of Iranian society, and “has led to a strategy of dissimulation and invisibility that has become part of the process of social inclusion and negotiation in post-Revolutionary Iran.”³³ It is so deeply embedded as to even be reflected in traditional Persian architecture, where the “private” rooms of the house (bedrooms, kitchen etc.) are spatially separated from the “public” areas in which people entertain.

Blogging, and other forms of microblogging such as Twitter and Facebook, represent a fundamental challenge to the duality of *zaher* and *baten*, and are creating a new public sphere in the sense that they are charting a middle ground between the perceived mutually exclusive realms of public and private life:

I keep a weblog so that I can breathe in this suffocating air… In a society where one is taken to history’s abattoir for the mere crime of thinking, I write so as not to be lost in despair… I write a weblog so that I can shout, cry and laugh.³⁴

My blog is an opportunity for me to be heard… a blank page… Sometime I stretch out on this page in the nude… now and again I hide behind it. Occasionally I dance on it… I think, I live, I blog, therefore I exist.³⁵

In this context, the act of blogging represents perhaps the only arena in which the “true” identity of the blogger (their *baten*) can be revealed to a wider public: “In Iran… the internet can be a space more ‘real’ than everyday life.”³⁶ The fact that an increasing number of Iranians are choosing to write their private thoughts in the public arena of the Internet – some have even started posting family pictures, traditionally considered a huge cultural taboo (Graham and Khasravi 2002) – suggests that the hitherto clear boundaries between public and private in the Islamic Republic are beginning to shift and blur. To the extent, then, that blogging in Iran takes as its starting point the problematic division between “public” and “private”, it can be seen to constitute a new and unexpected form of postmodern public sphere; one that embraces the heterogeneous and fragmented nature of public discourse.

VIRTUAL UNVEILING: WOMEN BLOGGERS IN IRAN

Nowhere is this blurring of the boundaries between private and public more visible than in the growing phenomenon of women – especially religious and conservative women – bloggers in Iran. In revealing her innermost thoughts, beliefs and desires, the veiled woman becomes symbolically unveiled in the obscurity of cyberspace, thus representing a direct challenge to the patriarchal social order which requires her to remain publicly silent and invisible:

If “improperly veiled” women in urban public spaces are considered a challenge to sharia and the rules of public conduct in the Islamic Republic, the acts of self-narration

and self-disclosure in Weblogistan are considered a transgression of … the rules of patriarchy.³⁷

These “transgressions in narration” are all the more powerful because the voices of women have remained absent from the religiously sanctified political public sphere for so long:

One of the most astonishing influences of Weblogistan has been to open a space about the inner states of mind of women. The speech of women has never been heard publicly in this country; nobody knew about the difference of their opinion, their needs, and their desires.³⁸

Although much of what is written by women bloggers is not overtly political, many write about social, cultural and religious issues that take on a highly political dimension within the context of the Islamic Republic. The blogs *The Arms of a Woman*³⁹ and *Gir*⁴⁰, for example, present personal accounts of sexual encounters in a society in which women’s sexuality is something to be publicly hidden and denied. Similarly, the blogger Neda (a pseudonym) openly admonishes Iranian society for its conception of female “honour”:

Our inheritance from our ancestors is this thing we call ‘honour’: a reverence for the chastity of women… Yet this is the thing that separates us from the First World nations…

Men, Gentlemen, leave women’s honour to them… Instead of guarding our c***’s get on with your work, as this is holding our society back.⁴¹

Many women bloggers exhibit humor and irony when discussing the issues of veiling and female sexuality:

From My Personal Street Research

If you wear a short jacket, lots of make-up and a shawl hanging loosely over your head, all men in Tehran will come on to you.

If you wear tight short jean manteau, lots of make-up, have strands of hair strategically showing, 80 per cent of men in Tehran will come on to you…

If you wear a baggy cream long robe, lots of make-up, and have a few strands of hair showing, 60 per cent of men in Tehran will come on to you…

If you wear long black robes, no make-up and no hair showing, 30 per cent of men in Tehran will come on to you…

A chador and no make-up… will not get you a man.⁴²

Such examples, although only partial, give an overview of some of the types of content being posted by women bloggers in Iran. The trend towards increasing personalization and revelation suggests a fundamental reimagining of the hitherto socially constricted boundaries between public and private lives, where even the most “private” voices – those of the veiled woman at the center of the domestic private sphere – are being made public in the virtual space of the Internet. These small everyday acts of “transgression in narration” are contributing to a new social and cultural paradigm in Iranian society, where individuals’ “hidden transcripts”⁴³ are rendered visible for the first time. This encourages parallels to what Bayat calls “the quiet encroachment of the ordinary:” “a silent, patient, protracted, and pervasive advancement of ordinary people on the… powerful in order to survive hardships and better their lives.”⁴⁴ The accumulation of such ordinary practices can eventually lead to a change in the dominant political and social order. By contributing to the blurring of the boundaries between private and public in Iran, blogging can be said to encapsulate a form of such quiet encroachment, where “the experience of making small daily transgressions in narration… empowers and encourages women and youth to face life in another way.”⁴⁵

An important question here is whether blogging and the Internet are a cause, or merely a symptom of such social change. Although women’s voices have been mostly silenced in the official public discourse of the Islamic Republic, one of the paradoxes of Iranian society, as previously mentioned, is that the enforcement of veiling actually increased the visibility of women in the public arena as those conservative women who were previously excluded from the “male” space of the public have been allowed entry into this space on the precondition of doing so while veiled. Another paradox that emerges from Iranian history is that prior to the 1979 revolution, women (of a certain class) were highly visible in the public arena; indeed, the first memoir to be written by a woman, that of the Qajar Princess Taj al-Saltaneh at the turn of the 19th century, was profoundly taboo-breaking in that she exposed some of her most intimate personal moments, including an account of her divorce.⁴⁶ It is this fascination with the private self that arguably forms one of the cornerstones of modernity, as Thomas Johansson notes (quoted in Amir-Ebrahimi):

Today there is a fascination with people's private lives—a longing to tear down boundaries and to see what is happening behind the scenes… Presentation of the self is a focal point of contemporary culture.⁴⁷

Being modern citizens in Iran has thus meant negotiating the shifting boundaries between public and private, reinventing societal norms and differences and charting new territories between existing practices.⁴⁸ In this sense, blogging forms part of this negotiation, albeit in a new and hyper-connected form. As a model for the postmodern public sphere, the Iranian blogosphere serves as a reflection and crystallization of social and political discourses that are already taking place elsewhere in Iranian society; discourses that are both implicitly and explicitly involved in the reinvention of the (post)modern political subject. The postmodern public sphere, by critically analyzing the problematic division between private and public, is thus embedded in social discourses and practices that are constantly renegotiating and reinventing the notion of "public": it is a public sphere that simultaneously questions, deconstructs and (re)invents itself.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

By conducting both a quantitative and qualitative survey of the multiple, fragmented and diverse voices present in the Iranian blogosphere, and the way in which the act of blogging itself calls into question certain social norms and practices surrounding the notions of private and public, this article has shown that the Persian blogosphere can be used as a template in constructing a postmodern theory of the public sphere. The fact that many Iranian bloggers choose to blog in languages other than Persian (English, Azeri and Dari to name a few), and that the Iranian blogosphere extends far beyond the territorial limits of the state of Iran itself, may well also have implications with bearing on how we should come to perceive of such cyberspaces as a public sphere – such questions, however, fall outside of the scope of this inquiry and are not analyzed here. Although it has been suggested that blogging in Iran presents a new public space in which people are flouting the cultural norms of *zaher* and *baten*, it bears mentioning that although many bloggers are revealing extremely personal and intimate details of their private lives online, most do so under the condition of

anonymity. “I have many friends who blog,” says Bozorgmehr Sharafedin, “but they rarely tell me what the web address is. It’s private.”⁴⁹

This is not a blog, but it’s all mine.

My hit counter shows that nobody read my last post. That’s comforting to know. It helps me relax and think about what I would like to say, without being distracted by thinking about who will see it.⁵⁰

By revealing their private selves anonymously in the public space of the Internet, Iranian bloggers are charting a new middle ground between “privacy” and “publicity”. Even on Facebook, arguably the ultimate cyber-marker of publicity, many people choose to use pseudonyms and often delete photos they deem inappropriate. This is as much to “save face” within a society that values privacy as to protect themselves from potential action by the moral police. The act of blogging is thus simultaneously public and intensely private; Iranians are using their blogs more as online diaries than blogs in the conventional sense of the term. Does this mean that their blogs are less indicative of the public sphere? That depends in part on what we intend by the term. If we accept Habermas’ definition of the public sphere as a realm of rational critical debate about the public good, then these publicly private confessions cannot be seen as constitutive of such a sphere. If, however, we adopt a postmodern conception of the public sphere that takes as its starting point the problematic division between private and public, then we can see that the Iranian blogosphere does indeed constitute a public sphere, or rather, multiple public spheres.

The Iranian case is evidently culturally, politically and historically peculiar, and it remains to be seen if such a model of the postmodern public sphere could be successfully applied in other contexts. It is possible that the shared Islamic histories of the countries of the Middle East, in which the public and private spheres are presented as distinct, gendered spaces, suggests that such a model should indeed be transferable, albeit with some changes. As for Western societies, although conventional wisdom tells us that such a clear delineation between public and private is less evident in the “developed world”, perhaps this is merely indicative of different narratives of power and thus we must search for the public/private boundaries in different places. As an Iranian friend once said:

We Iranians may have a clear division between inner and outer lives, but the West has the strongest sense of privacy that I have ever come across. In Iran it would be perfectly normal to invite your taxi driver back for dinner at your home. I have been in England for many years and I still haven't been to the homes of many of my friends and colleagues. That's privacy.⁵¹

In constructing a postmodern theory of the public sphere, then, we must first engage critically with social, cultural, and political norms of public and private. Where those norms lie, and how they are to be negotiated and reimagined, depends very much on the context in which they are being employed.

Notes

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List of Blogs

*Persian language Iranian blogs*¹

<http://www.sharafedin.com/blog/farsi> - Blog of Borzogmehr Sarafedin, in Farsi and English

<http://www.globalpersian.com/salman/weblog.html>

<http://hamkhabegi.blogspot.co.uk>

<http://beingdoxtar.blogspot.co.uk>

<http://neda.blogspot.com>

<http://khanoomgol.blogspot.com>

<http://weblog.sologen.net>

<http://deltangestan.com>

<http://persianblog.ir>

<http://narenji.ir>

<http://nesvan.wordpress.com>

<http://khers69.wordpress.com>

¹ N.B: Due to language limitations, most Farsi blogs were consulted with the aid of Iranian friends, as well as relying on translations of blogs provided by scholars in their works.

<http://www.ahighway.net>
<http://marde-mokhtasar.blogfa.com>
<http://daaneshmand.wordpress.com>
<http://blognevesht.com>
<http://www.kheyzaronline.ir>
<http://www.ketablog.ir>
<http://aghaejaze.wordpress.com>
<http://www.president.ir/fa> - Website of President Ahmadinejad, also in English
<http://www.tehranavenue.com> - Partly in English
<http://zaneirani.blogspot.co.uk> - Partly in English

English language Iranian blogs and resources

<http://iranian.com> - Online Magazine/Blog for Iranian Diaspora
<http://wwwiraniansblogs.com> - a Directory of English-language Persian Blogs
<http://globalvoicesonline.org/-/world/middle-east-north-africa/iran-> Blog Aggregator
<http://icemachine.blogspot.co.uk>
http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/publications/2008/Mapping_Irands_Online_Public/interactive_blogospher
e_map - Interactive Map of Iranian Blogosphere
<http://lady-sun.blogspot.co.uk>
<http://ladysun.wordpress.com>
<http://tehran24.com>
<http://theupperechelonofhappiness.blogspot.co.uk>
<http://iraniangirl.blogspot.co.uk>
<http://alinonblogger.blogspot.co.uk>
<http://hoomanm.blogspot.co.uk>
<http://khodadad2.blogspot.co>.

In my Middle Eastern travels I have come across many of these torn electoral posters, and have been intrigued (as to) why they have been defaced and/or ripped apart. Evoking the explosive nature of what is happening in the Middle East, they also seem to reflect the search for a new identity in the ever-shifting momentum of the Arab Spring, a collapse of faith in leaders and the electoral systems.

-Ariane Severin
Cover Image Photographer