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Introduction to political parties in the Middle East: historical trajectories and future prospects

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The evils of political parties are all too evident; therefore, the problem that should be examined is this: do they contain enough good to compensate for their evils and make their preservation desirable? (Simon Weil)

The first decades of the new century, like the previous one, have already witnessed protests, riots, rebellions, armed insurrections and calls for revolution, all of which forcefully underscore the ongoing and tumultuous negotiation of the relationship between state elites and societies in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). From the major urban conurbations of Egypt to the more insular quarters of Morocco, from the Pearl Roundabout of Manama to the city squares of central Tehran, the concerted efforts of disgruntled citizens to transform the *_dominant_* relationship between the government and the governed, have exposed the failures of the mechanisms and channels through which state institutions have traditionally been controlled and the political trajectory of the state effected.

Political parties are complex organizational machines which tend to escape a universal definitional framework. A staple of any modern state system, they have long been regarded as an essential ingredient of representative parliamentary democracy and its cognates. In Western political history, parties first stood as the locus of organized political activity for antagonistic elites, and more recently the middle and working classes, coalescing around the defining political struggles of the day, confessional identities and convergent socio-economic interests. In their myriad struggles, the parties themselves and their members have fought for limitations to absolutism, the defence of private property and free trade, parliamentary representation and the extension of the franchise, workers' rights, and land and wealth redistribution, often transforming the institutions of political rule, social reproduction and societal cleavages in the process.

In the aftermath of World War I, the states comprising the MENA region began to increasingly experience patterns of political mobilization and participation that resembled those which had become commonplace in the metropolitan centres which had overseen the region's uneven incorporation into the world economy and had ensured its subjugation to Europe's competing global empires. Where people and social groups had previously pursued political activity by means of secret societies, or redress through traditional associations such as guilds, village elders, urban notables, and the clergy, with the advent of the modern

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era, the political party came to be viewed as an ever-more appropriate and efficacious means of orienting and channelling political action, dispensing patronage, and giving voice to political demands.

Following World War II and the gradual retreat of direct imperial tutelage in tandem with the onset of the global Cold War, this trend gathered pace and saw radical projects such as Communism, Nasserism, and Ba'athism take power and transform their societies in the process. The chief concerns of this epoch included the quest for Arab unity, national independence and the overturning of the old sources of social power and elite rule. The region was transformed irrevocably in what became an era which carried with itself strong aspirations for decolonization and non-alignment, and significant socio-economic transformation. These objectives often came to fruition through strong and charismatic leaders and the one-party states they led, all the while grounding claims to legitimacy in the mobilization of wide-ranging coalitions of groups enveloping the intelligentsia, members of the new professional classes and state bureaucracies, recent urban migrants, and the peasantry.

In the aftermath of the defeat of the Arab front in June 1967, the Palestinian cause for national liberation assumed a more independent line as evidenced by the early politics of Fatah, while Israel's party system found itself forced to come to terms with a rapidly shifting demography and at times a capricious proportional representation system under the shadow of under the shadow of a military occupation and presence penetrating many facets of public and everyday life. By contrast, Iran following the Revolution of 1979 saw the birth of factional contestation labouring under the *imprimatur* of theocratic rule, and has subsequently struggled to institute a stable party political system. Meanwhile, elsewhere in MENA, Islamist organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood, despite their longevity, sought to persevere in debilitating authoritarian contexts through the cultivation of welfare regimes and solidarity networks to permeate the population at the grassroots level. In both cases, these varied proponents of political Islam eschewed the single-party model, which was abandoned in Iran after 1987, when the Islamic Republic Party fell prey to factional in-fighting and found itself unable to forge a centralized party and accompanying bureaucracy through which to rule. This panoply of party systems, and their relationships to modern state institutions such as the civilian bureaucracy and army, as well as with the old and new social classes, has hitherto eluded comprehensive assessment or an integrative analytical framework.

Needless to say, the wave of upheavals which swept across the MENA region following January 2011 has led to significant challenges concerning the place and the continued relevance of political parties. As social movements, both informal and highly integrated, take centre stage in this highly networked information age, the role and function of the political party as gate-keeper to the levers and trappings of power are widely considered to have been markedly diminished. While the post-2011 Arab uprisings may well have marked the demise of the party-political form as it had once stood, the counter-revolutions which almost invariably followed reaffirmed the importance of highly regimented, hierarchical and, more often than not, militarized organizations to political outcomes in evolving social conflicts. The Green Movement of Iran and the Tahrir Square protests, commonly seen by participants and observers alike as shunning structured political organization and leadership, made them all the more unpredictable. More sceptical voices were, however, quick to point out their inherent limitations and inability to overturn decades-long and deeply entrenched structures of political and economic domination confronting the popular-democratic upsurge. Finally, the apparent sectarianization of several geopolitical conflicts in the

region has been strongly linked to political groupings and mobilizations by identity entrepreneurs along confessional lines, in turn posing the question as to whether the 'sectarian party' is here with us to stay.

These broad reflections on past and present forms of party political organization in the Middle East were the initial impetus for a conference supported by the Centre for the Advanced Study of the Arab World (CASAW) and convened at the University of Manchester on 28–29 January 2016. Several of the articles delivered at the conference have since been further developed and now comprise this special issue of the *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*. They address a host of important issues ranging across comparative studies of party political systems, to one-party states, as well as nuanced case studies of the development of oppositional parties, party political activism through the optics of sectarian identity, and women's activism within ruling parties. Thoughtful reflection on the history and contemporary modus operandi of political parties remains of crucial importance as traditional party-based formations and loyalties increasingly dissipate and are reshaped in response to, *inter alia*, internal and external struggles and conflicts over political and economic capital, religious and national identities, and normative value systems. This special issue not only seeks to present empirical case studies of political parties in the MENA, but also tries to address some of the underlying reasons for the persistence of political parties and demands for legal and constitutional reforms which would permit their institutionalization despite their apparent decline in the present. Another objective is that of addressing the broader question of the meaning of political parties for the region (such as what their roles have been in government, in the opposition, as part of communal structures, and in the daily lives of citizens), and how they continue to be relevant for the future of the MENA.

Raymond A. Hinnebusch opens the issue with a comprehensive survey of the development of party political organization and party systems in the MENA region from the early period of oligarchic pluralism to the era of mass single-party systems, and the later controlled attempts at liberalization and constrained multi-party systems in the 1990s. His attention then turns to the present-day relationship between political party configurations and regime trajectories in the post-Arab Spring context. Importantly, he questions the charges of Middle Eastern 'exceptionalism', rejecting the notion that cultural factors have posed a unique obstacle to modern forms of political association, showing how political parties have in turn shaped the societies out of which they emerged.

Mona Tajali elaborates upon the role of elite women in Islamic political movements and organizations in contemporary Iran and Turkey. By means of extensive ethnographic work, Tajali shows how women activists from these putatively conservative organizations have sought to challenge prevalent discriminatory norms and practices and have thereby contributed to the struggle for gender equality in novel and unexpected ways. As she cogently argues, various forms of 'internal criticism' have been decisive to increasing women's representation and enhancing women's status within their respective organizations. In his contribution, *Christian Thuseitl* sets out to question the assumption that Lebanese parties comprising its confessional political system are little more than the clientelistic instruments of their leaders and 'cults of personality'. Instead, he delineates an 'informal social contract' defining their operation, expounding upon the consequent relationship of reciprocity between leaders and partisans, with particular reference to the dynamics of Lebanon's contemporary Christian political parties.

Marie Vannetzel provides a fascinating window into the complex workings of Islamic party politics through her examination of the long-established Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's first foray into party organization, the Freedom and Justice Party, which emerged in the early stages of the post-Mubarak era. She examines the profound difficulty engendered by decades of 'forbidden yet tolerated' activism by the parent organization, and its accompanying apparatus, and the failure to adapt to new political realities demanding greater transparency regarding policy objectives and decision-making processes.

A pertinent comparative analysis is offered by *Joseph Sassoon*, who delves into the style and patterns of governance in the twentieth century's Arab republics, which included both one-party and multi-party systems. He achieves this through recourse to a vast and rich memoir literature which has become available to scholars in recent years, providing insight into several underappreciated aspects of these diverse regimes. Working at the juncture of human rights and gender, *Zehra F. Kabasakal Arat* undertakes a discourse analysis of Turkish political parties' political programmes and their approach to the question of women's rights between 1923 and 2007. Arat observes how the once neglected question of gender and women's rights has been taken up by political parties, even while the discourses of different parties continue to discernibly vary. Conservative and religious parties articulated what she terms a 'dualist approach', advocating traditionalism, but also conceding ground to the claims of gender equality, while a variety of left-leaning groups have come to increasingly propound positions that are identifiably feminist in orientation. *Khalil Dahbi* explores the formation of the 'political party field' in post-independence Morocco. In order to realize this ambition, he makes dexterous use of the conceptual affordances of Pierre Bourdieu's field theory, calibrating it to the socio-historical specificity of his case study. Its chief contribution lies in its attempt to furnish a novel approach to the study of political parties in Morocco, going beyond accounts which have tended to be elitist in character. Finally, *Francesco Saverio Leopardi* tackles one of the foremost leftist political forces on the Palestinian political scene - delete Palestinian kaleidoscope, namely, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), and its role during the First Intifada of 1987–1990. Through analysis of official PFLP ideology, publications, and interviews with former and current party members, Leopardi attempts to unravel the reasons behind the PFLP's declining ability to impact the terms of the political settlement between the Israeli state and the Palestinian leadership. He examines the policies and practice of the PFLP against the backdrop of Fatah's adoption of a diplomatic agenda and strategy, the fragmentation of the Palestinian left, and the rise of the Islamist movement, amongst others.

Together, it is hoped these articles will provide a modest contribution to the burgeoning literature on the history, contemporary practice, and modus operandi of political parties in the MENA region, and demonstrate the disparate methodological and thematic approaches, as well as empirical case studies available for scholarly enquiry and investigation. Far from providing the final word on the subject, these theoretically rigorous and empirically grounded articles aim to spur further research into what has come to be recognized as an indispensable facet of political life and a key agent of socio-economic change.