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AL-MUNTAQA

NEW PERSPECTIVES ON ARAB STUDIES

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BOOK REVIEW ESSAYS

EDITOR'S NOTE

This final issue of *Al-Muntaqa*'s 8th volume brings together contributions that vary in their empirical fields and theoretical orientations but share the same concern, that of authority and the production of meaning under conditions of political constraint and social transformation. Tackling questions of digital activism, state theory, religious economy, and pharmaceutical practice, this issue's articles interrogate how power is exercised, contested, and reconfigured.

The first article by Mohammad Othman Mahmoud turns to political theory, engaging Azmi Bishara's democratic project through a sustained examination of the concept of the state in the Arab context. Reading Bishara alongside political-philosophical traditions, particularly Rawlsian thought, the study argues that Bishara advances a conception of the state as a "realistic political utopia", grounded in citizenship, civil society, and justice rather than abstract idealism or ideological reductionism. By tracing how questions of democracy logically begin with the state, the article situates Bishara's work as a systematic effort to rethink democratic possibility in societies marked by crises of sovereignty and political fragmentation.

The second article of Lilian Estafanous examines digital activism within the Coptic community in North America, offering a critical reassessment of the promise long attributed to Information and Communication Technologies in diasporic political mobilization. Moving beyond accounts of transnational digital engagement, the study foregrounds the growing vulnerabilities that accompany online activism, including misinformation, surveillance, censorship, and internal fragmentation. By situating the Coptic case within broader debates on "digital diaspora", the article demonstrates how technological infrastructures that once expanded political agency are increasingly entangled in regimes of control that limit advocacy effectiveness.

The third article shifts the focus to post-2003 Iraq, in which Khalid Mutlaq explores what he terms "economic theology" through the institutional expansion of the Shi'i Al-Kafeel network. The study examines how religious authority, when partially disengaged from the state, constructs a parallel economy grounded in theological legitimacy and communal trust. Rather than treating Al-Kafeel merely as an administrative or charitable apparatus, the article conceptualizes it as a symbolic formation that converts ritual authority into economic power and organizational endurance.

In the fourth article, Farouk Tahri adopts an anthropological lens to trace the "biography" of Aureomycin in Morocco, from its introduction as a modern pharmaceutical to its reinterpretation as a popular remedy embedded in local therapeutic practices. By challenging the rigid divide between "modern" medicine and "folk" healing, the study shows how pharmaceuticals acquire new meanings as they circulate through specific social and cultural contexts. The concept of "pharmaceutical heretics" captures this process of appropriation, revealing how users actively reshape medical technologies rather than merely consuming them as intended.

Complementing these research articles, the issue also includes two book reviews that critically engage recent contributions to Arab and regional scholarship. Brahim Chlaih reviews *The 2019 Legislative and*

Presidential Elections in Tunisia: Politics, Electoral Behaviors, and Elite Mobilization, and Yasmine Lahnin reviews *Chinese Strategy Toward Arab States: Goals and Implications for the Future, an Exploration*, both ACRPS book publications.

Finally, this issue features a graphic from *Jerusalem Story* documenting Israel's systematic restrictions on Muslim access to prayer at al-Aqsa Mosque. Published as the month of Ramadan approaches – a period of heightened religious presence, collective worship, and intensified Israeli control over Jerusalem – the graphic underscores the lived realities of spatial control, religious regulation, and colonial power that continue to structure everyday life in the city.

In tracing these dynamics in diverse contexts, *Al-Muntaqa* continues its commitment to fostering critical, interdisciplinary scholarship attentive to the complexities of the contemporary Arab region as well as its diasporas.

ARTICLES

Mohammad Othman Mahmoud*

The State and the Arab State in Bishara's Democratic Project: Political-Philosophical Approaches**

الدولة والدولة العربية في مشروع بشارة الديمقراطي: مقاربات فلسفية سياسية

Abstract: This study examines the question of the state in Azmi Bishara's exploration of democracy through the lens of political-philosophical approaches to utopia, Rawlsian philosophy, citizenship, civil society, and justice, particularly in the Arab context. Where do Bishara's theses on the state sit within his broader intellectual project? What is the relationship between the citizenship-based state, civil society, and justice? How does his approach compare with John Rawls's political utopia? The study posits that Bishara focuses on developing a theory of the state and elaborating it conceptually, treating the state as a realistic political utopia. Bishara's chief goal is to ascertain the conditions necessary for the establishment of democratic systems in the Arab region. For him, the question begins logically with the state – its origin and evolution – and ends with democracy and issues pertaining to it.

Keywords: State; Azmi Bishara; Democracy; Citizenship; John Rawls; Civil Society; Justice.

ملخص: تتناول الدراسة موضوع الدولة في مشروع عزمي بشارة الفكري الديمقراطي، من خلال مقاربات فلسفية سياسية في اليوتوبيا والرولزية والمواطنة والمجتمع المدني والعدالة، ولا سيما ضمن السياق العربي، وتنطلق من الأسئلة التالية: ما موقع أطروحات الدولة عند بشارة في سياق مشروعه؟ وما علاقة الدولة، بما هي مواطنة في جزء مهم من تعريفها، بالمجتمع المدني والعدالة؟ وما وجه المقارنة بمقاربات جون رولز واليوتوبيا السياسية؟ وتحاجّ الدراسة بأن بشارة يركّز على تطوير نظرية الدولة وبلورة مفهومها (أطروحاته في الدولة بوصفها يوتوبيا سياسية واقعية أيضًا). هدف بشارة الرئيس هو تأكيد شروط الوصول إلى نظم ديمقراطية في السياق العربي، والمسألة عنده تبدأ منطقيًا بالدولة، وما له صلة بنشوئها وتطورها، وتنتهي بالديمقراطية وما له صلة بها.

كلمات مفتاحية: الدولة؛ عزمي بشارة؛ ديمقراطية؛ مواطنة؛ جون رولز؛ مجتمع مدني؛ عدالة.

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Introduction

Azmi Bishara's works address issues of current theoretical and practical importance in the Arab world and may, taken as a whole, be best described as an Arab, democratic project of enlightenment. As part of this venture, his latest book, *al-Dawla al-ʿArabiyya: Baḥth fī al-Mansha ʿ wa-l-Masār* [*The Arab State: An Essay on its Origins and Trajectory*] (2024), serves as the promised follow-up to his seminal *Masʾalat al-Dawla: Uṭrūḥāt fī al-Falsafa wa-l-Naẓariyya wa-l-Siyāqāt* [*The Question of the State: Philosophy, Theory, and Context*] (2023).[1] Bishara's project is, above all, an Arab one insofar as the "Arab question" lies at the core of his intellectual and political interest and constitutes the driving force behind his comparative research – both theoretical and empirical – on historical and contemporary models and experiences. He writes: "To derive theoretical models, we have no choice but to employ reason based on universal values coupled with an inductive theory of Arab reality".[2]

Bishara's project is also one of enlightenment, driven by a sustained effort to dispel misconceptions surrounding key concepts circulating across Arab and non-Arab intellectual, political, cultural, popular, populist, and elitist discourses. This edifying impulse has been evident since the publication of *Civil Society*, in which Bishara underscores the necessity of understanding civil society in relation to politics and the state, arguing that it constitutes a pathway to democracy that is contingent on the existence of the state. Subsequently, and particularly during the Arab Spring and its aftermath, Bishara engaged extensively with themes of populism, Salafism, sectarianism, freedom, justice, and revolution (particularly the Arab Spring revolutions), as well as the relationship between the army, politics, secularism, and the state, especially the Arab state.

In this body of work, Bishara draws an important distinction between nationalism and the nation, contrasting the concept of the "state-nation" – a nation of citizens within a state – with the traditional conception of the "nation-state", which in Arab discourse has become synonymous with the pan-Arab state. Underscoring the centrality of citizenship, he argues that it must be incorporated into the definition and theory of the contemporary modern state. A cursory reading makes clear that the overarching theme of Bishara's project is democracy, specifically in the Arab context, and the constellation of related questions it entails, such as the state, citizenship, civil society, and justice.

Bishara's work is interdisciplinary and cross-methodological. Although one of his earlier works, *Religion and Secularism in Historical Context*, is a treatise on religion and secularism, much of the discussion it has generated has unfolded in political and legal studies, specifically constitutional studies. Among Bishara's works, this is most apparent in his reflections on the state, which, in great part, tell "the story of secularization and the differentiation of politics from other realms such as religion and ethics".[3] As Bishara notes, "Any beneficial theoretical approach to the state, even when arising from political philosophy derived from ethical philosophy, must strike a balance between employing the work of historians on the rise

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[1] English translations of both these works are forthcoming. These two volumes represent the culmination of Bishara's intellectual project that began with the publication of *al-Mujtamaʿ al-Madanī: Dirāsa Naqdiyya [Civil Society: A Critical Study]* (1996), *Fī al-Masʾala al-ʿArabiyya: Muqaddima li-Bayān Dīmuqrāṭī ʿArabī [On The Arab Question: An Introduction to an Arab Democratic Manifesto]* (2007), the three volumes of *al-Dīn wa-l-ʿAlmāniyya fī Siyāq Tārīkhī [Religion and Secularism in Historical Context]* (2013-2015), and *al-Intiqāl al-Dīmuqrāṭī wa-Ishkāliyyātuh: Dirāsāt Naẓariyya wa-Taṭbīqiyya ʿArabiyya [Problems of Democratization: A Comparative Theoretical and Applied Study]* (2020). An English translation of the last title in this series has been published as: Azmi Bishara, *Arduous Paths: On the Theory and Practice of Democratic Transition* (London: Hurst, 2026). Bishara has also published seminal works on Israeli affairs and the Palestinian question, in both Arabic and English, as well as other works released by the ACRPS or in its conferences, seminars, and peer-reviewed journals. Bishara additionally founded several institutions in Palestine and spent years resisting Israeli policies before relocating to Doha, where he later retired from political activism and devoted himself to scholarly pursuits.

[2] Azmi Bishara, *Maqāla fī al-Ḥurriyya* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2016), p. 188.

[3] Azmi Bishara, *Masʾalat al-Dawla: Uṭrūḥāt fī al-Falsafa wa-l-Naẓariyya wa-l-Siyāqāt* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2023), p. 142. See also: Azmi Bishara, *al-ʿAlmāniyya wa-l-ʿAlmana: al-Sayrūra al-Fikriyya*, pt. 2, vol. 1, of *al-Dīn wa-l-ʿAlmāniyya fī Siyāq Tārīkhī* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2015), pp. 303 - 304.

of states and the theories of sociology, political science, and law".[4] *The Question of the State* constitutes a foundational work that logically ties together Bishara's other major writings. *Civil Society*, *Problems of Democratization*, and *The Arab State*, in particular, may be read as complementary volumes when situated within the overarching objective of Bishara's project: the theorization of democracy. *The Question of the State* can also be read as parallel or complementary to other works, especially *Religion and Secularism in Historical Context* and *Sectarianism Without Sects*.[5]

Religion and Secularism in Historical Context has been discussed by both Souhail Hbaieb[6] and Mustapha Ait Kharouach.[7] The former primarily addressed Bishara's conceptualization of secularism in that book[8] and in two other works (*The Question of the State* and *Civil Society*). Hbaieb's analysis overlaps only tangentially with the focus of the present study, particularly in chapters 2 and 6, where he discusses the transition from "negative religion" to "affirmative state" – a point at which Bishara himself pauses – before turning to related themes in *The Question of the State* and *The Arab State*, which logically complement *Religion and Secularism in Historical Context*. The same is true of Kharouach, although, unlike Hbaieb, he does not address the question of the state and the notion of "statist consciousness". Instead, Kharouach is primarily concerned with delineating the contours of Bishara's theory of secularism and religion, as well as his engagement with the fallacies and grand narratives prevalent both globally and in the Arab world.

A broader body of scholarship has appeared that does not directly engage the core focus of the present study and instead advances distinct questions, aims, and analytical frameworks. Nevertheless, it intersects with this essay in its shared interest in Bishara's approaches to the state, democracy, justice, and civil society. The most significant contributions are by Hbaieb,[9] Youssef Ben Adi,[10] and Mohammed Hemchi.[11]

A Theory of the State: Normative Political Ideal and Realistic Political Utopia

A summary of Bishara's conclusions in *The Question of the State*, restated in the introduction to *The Arab State*, is essential for understanding his theorization of the Arab context. In Bishara's account, the contemporary modern state – an iteration of a model that developed in Europe – emerged through the differentiation of the political sphere from other domains, including the religious, and through the subordination of these spheres to the political, with secularization understood as a process of separation and subjugation. The state monopolizes legitimate violence and lawmaking within its territorial borders[12] and is supported by non-coercive institutions, taxation, and bureaucracy. This is the established model, whose historical imposition has repeatedly generated conflict.

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[4] Bishara, *Masʾalat al-Dawla*, p. 87.

[5] Azmi Bishara, *Sectarianism Without Sects* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021 [2018]).

[6] Souhail Hbaieb, *al-ʿAlmāniyya min Sālib al-Dīn ilā Mūwjab al-Dawla: Rāhiniyyat Mashrūʿ Bishāra ʿArabiyyan* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2019).

[7] Mustapha Ait Kharouach, *Naẓariyyat al-ʿAlmāniyya ʿind ʿAzmī Bīshāra: Naqd al-Sardiyyat al-Kubrā li-l-ʿAlmana wa-l-ʿAlmāniyya* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2019).

[8] Azmi Bishara, *al-Dīn wa-l-Tadayyun*, pt. 1 of *al-Dīn wa-l-ʿAlmāniyya fī Siyāq Tārīkhī* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2013); Bishara, *al-ʿAlmāniyya wa-l-ʿAlmana*; Azmi Bishara, *al-ʿAlmāniyya wa-Naẓariyyat al-ʿAlmana*, pt. 2, vol. 2 of *al-Dīn wa-l-ʿAlmāniyya fī Siyāq Tārīkhī* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2015).

[9] Souhail Hbaieb, "Mashrūʿ ʿAzmī Bishāra fī al-Taḥawwul al-Dīmuqrāṭī ʿArabiyyan: Dirāsa Muqārana fī Zaman al-Baḥth ʿan Shurūṭ al-Qābiliyya li-Taṭbīq al-Dīmuqrāṭiyya," *Tabayyun*, vol. 2, no. 3 (Winter 2013).

[10] Youssef Ben Adi, "Naqd al-Mafāhīm fī al-Mashrūʿ al-Fikrī al-ʿArabī: ʿAzmī Bishāra Namūdhajan," Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 20 June 2019, accessed on 12/3/2025, at: https://acr.ps/1L9zRgu

[11] Mohammed Hemchi, "Global South Studies on Civil Society: An Arab Contribution," *Al-Muntaqa*, vol. 5, no. 1 (April/ May 2022), pp. 29-48.

[12] Bishara discusses the Ottoman Tanzimat and their role in the Arab-Islamic context in early secularization and the monopolization of lawmaking (and hence the transition to a state-nation and citizenship) in *al-Dawla al-ʿArabiyya*, observing that the early leaders of Arab states, who were products of the Tanzimat, were more receptive to pluralism than subsequent leaders who came of age under colonialism. See: Azmi Bishara, *al-Dawla al-ʿArabiyya: Baḥth fī al-Mansha' wa-l-Masār* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2024), p. 98.

The state, in Bishara's conceptualization, is distinct from regimes and individual rulers. It rests on what is shared between rulers and the ruled, namely citizenship, which is defined as membership in a state rather than in an ethnonational group or any sub- or supra-national affiliation, although the two may occasionally coincide. Sovereignty does not reside in the ruler but in this shared belonging and the rule of law it entails – that is, in citizenship itself, which signifies belonging to the state-nation or the nation of citizens, rather than to the nation-state, which emerged historically as an expression of belonging to an ethnonational group.

This understanding requires citizenship to be incorporated into the definition of the state, while recognizing the tension between citizenship and sovereignty, as well as the tension between the state in theory and in reality. Citizenship is a composite of rights and duties that regulate the relationship between the individual and the state. Ideology tends to reduce the concept of the state into a single organizing principle, an inclination that philosophy ought to resist. The state does not emerge in isolation, but as part of a system of states that mutually recognize one another's sovereignty and share an interest in preserving the framework within which they operate.[13]

It is important to recognize that the contemporary Arab state conforms to the existing state model.[14] This applies both to the "old" Arab states (those with a precolonial territorial core such as Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco), and to the relatively newer Arab states whose sovereign borders were shaped by colonial division, partition, and annexation, including Syria, Algeria, Libya, Jordan, and Sudan. The difference between the two categories lies in the depth and durability of their historical legitimacy. Bishara argues, however, that legitimacy cannot be reduced to historical legitimacy alone, and that these states no longer qualitatively differ in the sources of legitimacy they draw on or in the form of consensus that sustains them.[15]

Bishara reaches these conclusions using multiple methodological tools that enable him to achieve the wide reflective equilibrium[16] typical of normative political theory and political philosophy.[17] He employs a "historical analysis of the origin and development of [the modern state] and extrapolating from existing states", thus developing a theory of the state "which differs, insofar as it is theoretical, from the reality of existing states".[18]

Evidently, once any theory gains currency, tensions arise between the theoretical model and empirical reality. The state can no longer be defined, theoretically or practically, solely by its monopoly on legitimate violence (in Max Weber's sense) or by sovereignty (as articulated by thinkers from Jean Bodin to Carl

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[13] Ibid., pp. 16-17.

[14] Ibid., p. 177.

[15] Ibid., pp. 101 ff.

[16] The method of wide reflective equilibrium, introduced by Rawls in his theory of justice, is most commonly used in contemporary normative prescriptive political theory. It creates balance and coherence between our principles, ideas, approaches, assumptions, and arguments by considering and reflecting on alternatives, thus ensuring these beliefs and ideas are carefully formulated and justifiable. See: John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 18-19, 42-44, 104, 379, 381, 507-508; John Mikhail, "Rawls' Concept of Reflective Equilibrium and Its Original Function in 'A Theory of Justice'," *Washington University Jurisprudence Review*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2010), pp. 23-28; Norman Daniels, "Wide Reflective Equilibrium and Theory Acceptance in Ethics," *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 76, no. 5 (1979); Carl Knight, "Reflective Equilibrium," *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, 27 November 2023, accessed on 10/4/2025, at: https://acr.ps/1L9zQrB

[17] Bishara's theories on the state align with the distinction drawn by philosophical and normative political theory between political reality and the politically desirable. The methodology in normative political theory (also known as analytical political theory) can be both descriptive and prescriptive: prescriptive in that it indicates "what ought to be" and descriptive in that it points to the practical constraints of specific situations. This allows for a wide range of approaches to norms and their application within these practical limitations. See: Chandran Kukathas & Philip Pettit, *Rawls: A Theory of Justice and Its Critics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), pp. 1-2; Christian List & Laura Valentini, "The Methodology of Political Theory," in: *Herman Cappelen, Tamar Szabó Gendler & John Hawthorne, The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Methodology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 1; Laura Valentini, "Ideal vs. Non-ideal Theory: A Conceptual Map," *Philosophy Compass*, vol. 7, no. 9 (2012), p. 654; Dorota Pietrzyk-Reeves, "Normative Political Theory," *Teoria Polityki*, no. 1 (2017), p. 179. See also Bishara's nuanced distinction between political theory and political philosophy in: Bishara, *Mas'alat al-Dawla*, p. 61 ff.

[18] Bishara, *Mas'alat al-Dawla*, p. 426.

Schmitt).[19] Other functions are now expected of it, most importantly those related to legitimacy and citizenship.[20] Bishara's theoretical propositions represent, as he says, what the state "ought to be", or the way it conceptualizes itself.[21]

Bishara here articulates the political ideal: the "political ought" or the "realistically utopian". This entails "probing the limits of practicable political possibility" and contemplating the possible, whose limits, according to John Rawls, are not static.[22] As I have written elsewhere, "What appears in reality is, in many cases, impoverished compared to the latent possibilities within it".[23] This aligns with what Karl Mannheim referred to as "relative utopia": a vision that seeks to break the constraints of existing reality and transcend its limits. This type of utopia differs from ideologies that function as a false consciousness, obscuring and distorting reality,[24] and from ideal utopias, which posit fantastical and ultimately unattainable visions.

Bishara's propositions may indeed represent a relatively realistic utopia inherent in the conception of the state itself and, in principle, realizable in every individual state. For Rawls, such a vision corresponds to an existing condition within a society grounded in liberal democratic traditions and aspiring to achieve social justice across all institutional levels. This vision seems realistically utopian especially since reality itself seems to affirm the durability of the state and its legitimacy within the international system, even in cases of failed states that have lost their monopoly on legitimate violence. Bishara, however, does not seem optimistic about the possibility of establishing a realistic utopia between states or societies at the global level. This contrasts with Rawls, who argues that such a condition could exist among egalitarian, liberal democratic peoples and other societies possessing what he calls "a decent consultation hierarchy".

Contemporary international relations are not moving in this direction. On the contrary, severe and flagrant violations of ostensibly well-established international law, especially the violation of state sovereignty, human rights, and self-determination, are commonplace on the global stage.[25] Consider, for example, the occupation of Iraq and the extra-legal violation of its sovereignty, or the international community's indifference to Israel's ongoing crimes (displacement, ethnic cleansing, and apartheid) against the Palestinians,[26] not to mention Western complicity in and support for these violations.

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[19] Ibid., p. 306. Weber defines the state from a functional, sociological perspective by its qualitatively distinct, though not its only instrument, which is its monopoly on legitimate or legal physical (or bodily) violence within territorial borders or a defined land (the sphere of sovereignty). See: Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," in: *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology,* H. H. Gerth & C. Wright Mills (trans.) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), p. 78.

[20] Bishara, *Masʾalat al-Dawla*, p. 427.

[21] Ibid.

[22] John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (Cambridge, MA/London: Belknap Press, 2001), pp. 4-5, 13.

[23] Mohammed Othman Mahmoud, *al-ʿAdāla al-Ijtimāʿiyya al-Dustūriyya fī al-Fikr al-Librālī al-Siyāsī al-Muʿāṣir* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2014), p. 154.

[24] Karl Mannheim, *al-Aydiyūlūjyā wa-l-Ūtūbyā: Muqaddima fī Susyulūjyā al-Maʿrifa*, Mohammed Raja al-Dirini (trans.) (Kuwait: al-Maktabat al-Kuwaytiya, 1980), pp. 160-163, 257.

[25] For more on Bishara's discussion of Rawls' utopia in international relations, see: Bishara, *Masʾalat al-Dawla*, pp. 303-304; for a discussion of the violation of state sovereignty and international law, Western double standards, and international relations, particularly the tendency of states to rely on their own coercive power rather than legitimacy, laws, or international humanitarian principles – which Bishara describes as "a terrible tragedy" – see: *Masʾalat al-Dawla*, pp. 285 ff, 296; for more on utopian relations between societies and on societies with a "decent consultation hierarchy", see: John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples* (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press, 1999). In developing his "law of peoples", Rawls draws on Immanuel Kant's "Perpetual Peace", which discussed the notion of an alliance of peoples or nations. As a universal, contractualist utopia, the closest we have come is the United Nations, which has failed to secure world peace between and within nations. The world is thus moving away from the aspirations of Kant (and Rawls and others) for a utopian law of peoples. See: Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Essay*, M. Campbell Smith (trans.) (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1917), pp. 129-142. See also: Mahmoud, pp. 105-106.

[26] For more on Palestine, see two important works by Bishara: Azmi Bishara, *Palestine: Matters of Truth and Justice* (London: Hurst, 2022) and Azmi Bishara, *al-Ṭūfān: al-Ḥarb ʿalā Filasṭīn fī Ghazza* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2024).

The State as a Realistic Political Utopia Unmasking Ideological Falsity: Bishara and Rawls

Rawlsianism, which envisions a political utopia centred on the value of justice, grew out of a relatively stable, well-established state and a society grounded in liberal, democratic cultural traditions (that is, a reasonable balance between freedom and equality). It sought to counter the ideological claims of neoliberalism associated with Friedrich August Hayek and Milton Friedman, and the libertarian philosophy that underpins and justifies it (notably Robert Nozick). The latter philosophy, calling for a return to radical liberalism, questions the legitimacy of the state, arguing that it entails a great measure of destruction, following Adam Smith. Accordingly, it advocates limiting the state's role, interventions, and functions to a minimum, reducing it to a "minimal state" in which everything except the army and law enforcement is left to transactions and agreements between citizens.[27] Rawlsianism similarly exposed the shortcomings and dysfunctions in illiberal, radical Marxist and socialist ideologies' conceptualization of the state and its functions.

Bishara's approach, by contrast, revolves around the state, specifically the citizenship-based state, conceived as a pathway to democracy mediated primarily by civil society. After all, there can be no strong, effective civil society without strong, effective citizenship, and no strong state without a strong society. His approach exposes the discursive shortcomings and dysfunctions of the same dominant ideologies. However, Bishara does not focus on the intimate relationship between freedom and equality, nor on the arguments that diminishing one inevitably undermines the other, thereby destabilizing both society and the state. Rather, his focus is on state legitimacy and the consolidation and ever-expanding functions and roles of the state.[28] These sovereign states are the entities the international system is keen to preserve, even when they become partially or wholly failed states.[29]

Bishara also distinguishes between the new liberalism, that accommodates social justice, and neoliberalism, which operates according to the principle of "less state, more society". The latter, a radical ideology that entrenches social disparities and injustice, characterized by an overabundance of freedoms coupled with a paucity of equality, emerged in response to the crisis of the welfare state. I would argue that this welfare state does not fully merit its name, insofar as it has remained only minimally dedicated to social welfare and has functioned as a lifeline for capitalist liberalism in crisis.[30]

In addition, Bishara's approach successfully dispels the confusion produced by the unproductive debate raised by communitarianism, buttressed, in part, by multiculturalist approaches associated with Will

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[27] The same is true of the philosophy that underpins the ideology of the welfare state model, albeit to a lesser extent. Neoliberal ideology is a revival of radical capitalist liberal approaches in its utilitarianism and the limits it places on state intervention to achieve the common good. Liberal liberty is based on the principle of non-intervention by the state, or negative liberty in the sense argued by Isaiah Berlin, borrowing from Friedrich Hegel, particularly in economic activity and the market. It takes Adam Smith's invisible hand as an alternative to the state's hand (it has been mockingly called "the state of the night watchman and the traffic cop"). In this context, Nozick, in *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, distinguishes the state from utopia, which he sees Rawlsianism as representing, especially in its original form, as a hypothetical form in the first instance in social contract theories. The state, in this sense, is a middle ground between the realistic misery of anarchy and the contemplative bliss of utopia. See: Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), pp. 282-292; Robert Nozick, *Invariances: The Structure of the Objective World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), pp. 77, 250, 289, 391, 399; Robert Nozick, *The Nature of Rationality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1993), pp. 68, 192, 194. See also: John Kenneth Galbraith, *Tārīkh al-Fikr al-Iqtiṣādī: al-Māḍī Ṣūrat al-Ḥāḍir*, Ahmed Fouad Balbaa (trans.) (Kuwait: National Council for Culture, Arts, and Humanities, 2000), p. 76; Isaiah Berlin, *Arbaʿ Maqālāt fī al-Ḥurriyya*, Abd al-Karim Mahfud (trans.) (Damascus: Ministry of Culture, 1980), pp. 60-61, 276-277, 285; Mahmoud, pp. 57-64; Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University, 2005), pp. 19, 364, 579-590.

[28] For more details, see Bishara, *Masʾalat al-Dawla*, pp. 33 ff.

[29] Ibid., p. 9; Bishara, *al-Dawla al-ʿArabiyya*, p. 18.

[30] Bishara, *Masʾalat al-Dawla*, pp. 83, 215. On the welfare state in this sense, see: Mahmoud, pp. 67 ff.

Kymlicka, Charles Taylor, and others,[31] in response to claims of liberal neutrality in public affairs,[32] that is, at the level of the state and its institutions. He also clarifies some prevailing misconceptions about the Treaty of Westphalia and its historical role in the emergence of the modern state,[33] as well as misconceptions surrounding social contract theory.

Presented as an exclusively liberal, democratic approach, Bishara argues that social contract theory has become an ideological, culturalist discourse that has gradually narrowed its conceptual horizon regarding the state and its assumed contractual legitimacy. The various contractarian approaches, as advanced by Hugo Grotius, Thomas Hobbes, Samuel von Pufendorf, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant, and even Rawls, are subsequent to the rise of the modern state or immanent in it, and represent attempts to understand and explain the state in intellectual, reflective terms.[34] As Bishara observes, "The state itself does not arise out of a social contract", which is "at best a theory for understanding the state [which justifies] a particular vision of it, its validity, and the conception of justice within it".[35]

Rawlsianism itself adopts a hypothetical contractualist approach intended to provide liberal justification in the public mind through the normative approach of overlapping consensus, in this instance, around principles of constitutional justice within a long-established democratic state. This bears little relevance to the Arab context, which is marked by crises of state legitimacy, challenges of state consolidation, and not least the unresolved question of democratic transition. Rawls also insists on the importance of liberal (democratic) political neutrality with respect to cultural and communitarian identities and affiliations, which he classifies as "reasonable" comprehensive doctrines compatible with political liberalism or democracy. Such neutrality aims to contain such identities within the framework of citizenship, construed as the identity of the state-nation; a position Bishara is actively advancing in the Arab context.

Bishara also refutes the fallacies embedded in the ideological discourse of Arab nationalists and radical Islamists, though such currents have much diminished in influence, and their conception of the state and citizenship carry far less weight among the Arab public. Historically, citizenship emerged as membership in an imagined ethno-cultural nation, which in turn became the pathway to membership in the modern state. Yet in the contemporary modern state, citizenship has transcended this framework to become a bond of rights and duties in its own right, giving rise to a state-nation made up of citizens irrespective of their ethno-cultural identity.

The fallacy lies in treating national bonds as inherently ethnonational, even where the two may at times overlap. Ideological nationalism holds that "the nation equals the ethno-nation, which transcends geopolitical boundaries"; conversely, other approaches insist on "ethnicizing the people of the state". But a distinction between the nation and the ethno-nation, Bishara argues, "does not imply a contradiction

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[31] Sectarianism is one cultural, communal tendency seen in the context of the state, citizenship, and the public sphere – a topic that has been amply covered by Bishara in *Sectarianism Without Sects*. Multiculturalism refers to a state model that considers cultural, communal demands, and the challenges of communal disputes. Kymlicka argues that political justice should be based on cultural-communal membership and related rights "beyond the common rights of citizenship". See: Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 206, n. 1.

[32] This is what is known as difference-blind liberalism, particularly when it comes to cultural differences. In this context, Taylor argues, "Liberalism is not a possible meeting ground for all cultures, but is the political expression of one range of cultures, and quite incompatible with other ranges. … All this is to say that liberalism can't and shouldn't claim complete cultural neutrality. Liberalism is also a fighting creed". Looking at it from the opposite perspective, Taylor continues, "For mainstream Islam, there is no question of separating politics and religion the way we have come to expect in Western liberal society. … Moreover, as many Muslims are well aware, Western liberalism is not so much an expression of the secular, postreligious outlook that happens to be popular among liberal intellectuals as a more organic outgrowth of Christianity – at least as seen from the alternative vantage point of Islam". See: Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in: Charles Taylor et al., *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 62.

[33] Bishara, *Masʾalat al-Dawla*, pp. 52, 54, 99, 244, 271-272, 298.

[34] For more detail, see: Ibid., pp. 163 - 181.

[35] Bishara, *Maqāla fī al-Ḥurriyya*, p. 186.

between the majority's ethno-cultural identity as a cohesive force and the citizenship-based nation that encompasses all citizens".[36] This applies equally to the "pan-Arab nationalist current [which] presumes the existence of an Arab nation that has yet to attain independence in a unified state" and to the radical Islamist discourse[37] that prioritizes political affiliation with the Islamic community and aspires to the restoration of a utopian caliphate that unites this *umma*.[38]

At its core, what distinguishes Bishara's relatively realistic political utopia from both the utopia of an Islamic nation united under a caliphate and the utopia of an entire Arab nation unified within one state[39] is that the utopian caliphate is not grounded in an inductive reading of the reality of the contemporary modern state – with its origin and evolution in Arab, Islamic, and international contexts. Rather, it draws on prophetic religious texts, which may be valid according to the standards of hadith sciences,[40] yet are not anchored in a specific historical time, spatial context, or set of concrete circumstances. The caliphate ideal thus expresses a nostalgic longing for a perceived glorious past that ended with the collapse of the last state to politically unite a substantial segment of the Muslim world, namely the Ottoman Empire, which some do regard as a caliphate.

This utopia clings to a historical legitimacy that the contemporary modern state has transcended and abandoned for other forms of legitimacy and resilience of the kind Bishara discusses in *The Question of the State* and *The Arab State*. The utopias of both the Islamic caliphate and the pan-Arab state (stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the Arabian Gulf) are unrealistic, speculative solutions to profound crises that lack practical solutions, even if such aspirations may persist in the collective consciousness for historical, cultural, linguistic, and ideological reasons.

More troubling than utopian consciousness itself is its evolution into a radical ideological consciousness that constricts the moral, humanistic, and civilizational dimensions inherent in Islam and Arabism. Ideology often narrows the possibilities of cultures, philosophies, and religions, confining them within closed, exclusionary intellectual systems, in contrast to the relatively realistic utopia which seeks attainable improvements in socio-political reality.

Moreover, even Islamists who have abandoned the hope of a utopian caliphate and instead seek to govern existing nation-states in the name of religion and the Sharia deny the state, in whole or in part,[41] particularly its monopoly on lawmaking, a defining element of the modern state. In doing so, they bypass the historical evolution of the state, a revolution that is inseparable from the process of secularization. This position entails regressing to a time in which no clear distinction existed between public and private realms, thereby misapprehending "the strength of the Arab state and the breadth of its social base".[42] What distinguishes the relatively realistic utopia is its grounding in social and political reality and its capacity for concrete realization. It offers a structured model that renders it intelligible – a requirement of human

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[36] Bishara, *al-Dawla al-ʿArabiyya*, p. 19. For more details, see: Azmi Bishara, *al-Intiqāl al-Dīmuqrāṭī wa-Ishkāliyyātuh: Dirāsa Naẓariyya wa-Taṭbīqiyya ʿArabiyya* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2020), pp. 325 ff.

[37] Islamist discourse remains more prevalent and influential than Arab nationalist discourse among non-elites in Arab states.

[38] Bishara, *al-Dawla al-ʿArabiyya*, p. 22.

[39] We should not overlook the difference between the Islamist and Arab nationalist utopias. Ethnocultural identity has been an entry point for the evolution of the state-nation in numerous modern cases and can represent a deep-seated cultural identity within the framework of the state and its nation.

[40] Particularly prophetic hadith. One well-known hadith details the progression of the Muslim *umma* as ruled first by the Prophet, then the caliphate following the path of the Prophet, then a stinging dominion, then a tyrannical dominion, then, again, a caliphate following the path of the Prophet. See: Ahmed Ibn Hanbal, *al-Musnad*, vol. 30 (Beirut: al-Risala Foundation, 1999), p. 355.

[41] A formula consistent with the logic of the modern democratic state would be the acceptance of Islamic jurisprudence (and Islamic law more generally) as a source (perhaps even a primary source) of legislation, which is the exclusive domain of the state, represented by elected and appointed legislators. At a minimum, Islamic law would govern personal status matters, and the same applies to the religious laws of other faith communities. In most cases in the developed world, the lawmaking monopolized by modern states is not divorced from the culture of their societies, including their religions, customs, and heritage.

[42] Bishara, *al-Dawla al-ʿArabiyya*, p. 181.

societies – and stands in sharp contrast to the value-diminishing realm of the fantastical. This is what dominant ideologies attempt to convey, not because the counter-utopia is unrealistic, but because it exposes ideological falsehood and the dearth of political legitimacy they seek to obscure.[43]

In this context, Bishara asserts, "An understanding of highly complex social phenomena like the state based on a single principle, no matter how rational or moral, can evolve into an ideology".[44] This view aligns closely with Rawls's conclusions in political liberalism, centred on the principle of constitutional justice. In short, the state should not become an ideological instrument that imposes its vision and doctrine – including liberalism itself or any other secular doctrine – should these be advanced as ideologies.[45]

One of Bishara's chief objectives in *The Question of the State* is to make "a broad theoretical contribution" of particular relevance to the question of the Arab state by "developing a definition of the state and the significance of that definition encompassing citizenship; the relationship between sovereignty, legitimacy, and citizenship, and between the nation and nationalism; and the distinction between the state and the system of government".[46] Indeed, the Arab region is grappling with profound challenges directly related to the state, citizenship, sovereignty, legitimacy, nationhood, nationalism, and systems of government, compounded by the prevalence of distorted consciousness, which is largely ideological in nature. These problems hobble the progress of Arab states toward democratic transition and the consolidation of durable democratic regimes, which represent a principal goal of Bishara's project.

A state that recognizably conforms to Bishara's theoretical propositions is one that strives for the relative perfection of the political ideal, and such a state is necessarily governed by democratic regimes. In contrast, the Arab state in its current form satisfies only the bare minimum required to persist as a state: "a central bureaucracy, a regular army, fixed territorial borders, and finally, nationality/citizenship".[47] In other words, it still falls short of the ideal state in its most complete, relatively realistic form. Accordingly, it has yet to realize citizenship as the flipside of sovereignty, anchored in rights, duties, and the rule of law, and instead treats citizenship as mere nationality or a marker of subordination to a particular state.[48] Moreover, it still lacks a politically influential civil society.

The state, when conceived as a political ideal in which citizenship, in Bishara's sense, is integral, is likely either to be democratic or to evolve, over time, into a fully constituted and integrated state governed by a democratic regime. In the modern era, the European state had already evolved in ways that aligned with a substantial portion of Bishara's propositions before the advent of contemporary democratic regimes, which later adopted liberal democratic models to varying degrees. Europe reached this point through multiple historical trajectories, all of which involved the dismantling of undemocratic regimes but not of the state itself, which by then had become a concrete and conceptual reality. This raises key questions about Bishara's project: Why begin with the state? Why insist on citizenship as an integral part of its definition? And what is the relationship between the citizenship-based state, on the one hand, and civil society and justice on the other, especially in the Arab context?

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[43] Mannheim, pp. 248, 257. On the question of legitimacy, utopia, and ideology, see: Paul Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, George H. Taylor (ed.) (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 258.

[44] Bishara, *Masʾalat al-Dawla*, p. 426.

[45] Mahmoud, p. 156.

[46] Bishara, *Masʾalat al-Dawla*, p. 11.

[47] Ibid., p. 386.

[48] Bishara, *al-Dawla al-ʿArabiyya*, p. 178.

Citizenship as Integral to the State and a Condition for Democracy

For Bishara, citizenship constitutes the most fundamental element of and the primary prerequisite for democracy. Indeed, he argues that the development of democracy is nothing more than the evolution and universalization of citizenship: "The idea and practice of citizenship, even before it is democratic, is a prerequisite for a democratic regime".[49] Citizenship here refers to the relationship between the individual and the state, not the group, whether national, ethnic, religious, or sectarian. It is the socio-political identity of the state-nation.

The "state-nation" implies a state-society (for instance, Egyptian society) composed of its citizens (Egyptian citizens), in which there is no contradiction between being, for example, an Egyptian citizen and a Coptic citizen. The fundamental unifying socio-political identity here is "Egyptian", while "Coptic" denotes a cultural and communal identity to which the individual belongs. Neither the individual rights and choices upheld by citizenship in the Egyptian state, nor one's cultural, communal affiliations, are compromised within this framework.

Communitarian and multicultural approaches essentially remove citizenship from the public sphere. In so doing, they confuse multicultural pluralism – a reality that must be addressed within the framework of citizenship, with rights and duties, and with group affiliation treated as an individual choice (or what ought to be an individual choice, though it often is not) – with partisan political pluralism. When partisan political pluralism aligns with multicultural pluralism, the state does not move toward a democratic regime but rather toward a consociational, quota-based model.[50] Existing regimes in Lebanon (sectarian), Iraq (sectarian and ethnic, cultural, and linguistic nationalism),[51] and Somalia (tribal) are all examples of quota-based models ostensibly grounded in consensus.

As the shared culture of citizens in a state-nation, democratic culture – that is, respect for the rules of the democratic process and a culture of rights governing the relationship between the individual, the state, and fellow citizens – cannot develop in the absence of democratic practice. Yet the conditions that allow for democratic practice cannot be met before a democratic system of government comes into existence, which is impossible without an entrenched state in which citizenship represents another facet of sovereignty. Citizenship, even before the regular rotation of power via elections, is the sole vehicle through which the rule of law and equality before the law can be realized. It provides the minimum threshold of rights exercised in the face of arbitrary powers and regimes, and it is the basis upon which demands for political rights are articulated. Citizens expect political rights by virtue of their primary identity as citizens, which, in the contemporary modern state, wholly transcends the status of subjects, who do not expect political and human rights and freedoms but merely hope for good treatment and tolerance.

Under democracy, both the state and citizenship are fully realized, and the demand for democracy is not limited to securing the peaceful rotation of power. Democratic practice also leads to the expansion and deepening of citizenship itself, affirming that majority rule, when detached from the premise of citizenship and maintained for purposes other than advancing and regulating citizen rights, becomes a dictatorship

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[49] Azmi Bishara, "Nawʿān min al-Muwāṭana: Kalimat al-Duktūr ʿAzmī Bishāra bi-Munāsabat Manḥihi Jāʾizat Ibn Rushd li-l-Fikr al-Ḥurr," Ibn Rushd Fund, 14 December 2002, accessed on 12/3/2025, at: https://acr.ps/1L9zQHc

[50] Azmi Bishara, *Fī al-Masʾala al-ʿArabiyya: Muqaddima li-Bayān Dīmuqrāṭī ʿArabī* (Beirut: Centre for Arab Unity Studies, 2007), pp. 190-191.

[51] Bishara discusses the case of Iraq in depth, particularly in connection with sectarianism, in *Sectarianism Without Sects*, pp. 575-789.

of the majority. Procedural democracy is therefore not synonymous with majority rule; it is rather rule by representatives of the majority in accordance with values and principles, foremost among them citizenship.[52]

Bishara asserts that a polity composed of a state and subjects, rather than citizens, cannot generate the dialectic necessary for the development of democracy, because it lacks the interactive dynamic between the individual, society, and the state – the dynamic that produces the dialectic of citizens, civil society, and democratic state. A state without citizenship does not embody popular sovereignty, since the people, understood as citizens of the state, are the bearers of that sovereignty. Nor does it constitute a source of political legitimacy, including the legitimacy of the state itself, which entails the right of a people to determine its political destiny, whether by remaining within an existing state or opting for independence, for example through a direct referendum.

Such a state does not bolster rights and their development. In a democratic state, rights are derived from citizenship; even collective identity and rights have evolved as derivatives of the rights held by individuals as citizens. Citizenship, as an identity shared equally by all members of a state, is thus the exclusive regulator of the relationship between the individual and the state. This neutralizes religious, national, and other identities in the individual's relationship with the state, without denying individuals the right to claim these identities so long as this does not conflict with citizenship rights as they have evolved within a liberal democratic framework.[53]

With the development of citizenship, a distinction emerged between the identity of state-nation – the nation of citizens and the flipside of sovereignty – and ethnonational or religious identity. While the latter may preserve national cohesion, it plays no political role in the democratic state, which cannot be a religious, ethnonational, or sectarian entity that politicizes communal ties or any group's claims and demands. In a liberal democratic state, belonging to communal groups must be theorized as a matter of individual choice, so that such an affiliation remains grounded in the idea of citizenship rather than undermining it. Any theory of the state that fails to centre citizenship leads to state models organized around pre-, sub-, and supra-national affiliations (communitarianism and its political variants, internal and external). These models do not move toward a liberal, egalitarian, civic democracy. Among them is what is known as consociational democracy, which Bishara believes cannot be described as democracy.[54]

The Citizenship-Based State as a Condition for Civil Society and Democracy

Although civil society can be distinguished from other public spheres, it cannot be understood, interpreted, and theorized, or its critical democratic role appreciated in isolation from the political sphere and the citizenship-based state. Bishara asserts that civil society "leads to democracy because it is the process of the

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[52] See: Bishara, "Nawʿān min al-Muwāṭana." Bishara exposes the realities of the state, citizenship, and democracy in the Israeli context, saying: "The fundamental challenge facing democratic forces in a non-democratic state is the practice of citizenship, habituating individuals to act like citizens, and habituating various political forces to the concept of equal citizenship and equality before the law. You know that I belong to a people deprived of citizenship because they live under occupation and are denied the right to self-determination and sovereignty. We cannot speak of citizenship under occupation and absent full sovereignty. As I have already said, citizenship is the flipside of sovereignty. I am also a citizen of a state in which religious or national affiliation constitutes the basis of the individual's relationship with the state. I am a citizen of a state that does not belong to its citizens." For further discussion, see: Azmi Bishara, *Min Yahūdiyyat al-Dawla ḥattā Shārūn: Dirāsa fī Tanāqudāt al-Dīmuqrāṭiyya al-Isrāʾīliyya*, 2nd ed. (Cairo: Dar al-Shorouk, 2004). In *Masʾalat al-Dawla*, p. 413, n. 41, Bishara describes Israel as an apartheid, settler colonial state. On democratic culture, see: Azmi Bishara, "al-Thaqāfa al-Siyāsiyya: Mulāḥaẓāt ʿĀmma," *Tabayyun*, vol. 12, no. 45 (Summer 2023), pp. 23-29. See also: Bishara, *al-Intiqāl al-Dīmuqrāṭī*, pp. 407 ff.

[53] Bishara, "Nawʿān min al-Muwāṭana."

[54] Bishara, *Fī al-Masʾala al-ʿArabiyya*, pp. 149-150. The most prominent theorist of consociational democracy is Arend Lijphart, who elaborated on the concept in multiple works. See: Arend Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977). The consociational model as promoted and applied in Iraq and Lebanon has come in for severe criticism by Bishara, who has detailed both its theoretical and practical problems. See: Bishara, *Sectarianism Without Sects*, pp. 221-247.

development of democracy itself"; accordingly, the battle for civil society in countries lacking democratic systems of government is "the battle for democracy [within] the realm of the state".[55]

Bishara characterizes the citizenship-based state-nation as "a nation on the outside and a civil society on the inside",[56] arguing that "civil society is an intellectual and historical process oriented toward citizenship and democracy, unfolding through a set of articulations and differentiations in the relationship between … society and the state".[57] In other words, the relationship between the contemporary modern state, citizenship, civil society, and democracy is complex and dialectical: each element leads necessarily to the others, whether temporally and/or logically. Crucially, however, the sequence must begin with the state and the legitimacy of its existence.

Bishara clarifies the conceptual confusion surrounding civil society that results from the uncritical adoption of ready-made categories ill-suited to states governed by undemocratic or transitional regimes, such as those found in the Arab region. An example is the assumption that civil society is synonymous with non-governmental organizations, or that it is apolitical. Such misapprehensions stem from a failure to appreciate the historical political role civil society played in the development of democracy and the delimitation of the state's powers in the West.

Civil society does not develop under a weak state, Bishara argues. Rather, it is "born out of the power of the state, to act as a counterweight to it". It is "the product of the delimitation of state prerogatives … because it is feared that the state will subordinate society entirely", potentially transforming into a totalitarian, ideological force. Civil society is therefore not the result of "state collapse, retreat, or destabilization", but of a clearly articulated relationship between the state (the sphere of authority and the monopoly of force) and society, which is ostensibly the source of the state's legitimacy.[58]

Bishara concludes that the knot binding civil society, citizenship, and the state-nation cannot be severed. The state-nation, in his conception, transcends both the nation-state and cultural, identitarian, and linguistic nationalism. He distinguishes the latter type of national bond from ethnonationalism and other sub- and supra-national affiliations, delineating its limits and role while discussing its importance as an entry point for the development of the state-nation within the broader evolution of the contemporary modern state.[59] If a polity fails to evolve to the stage of the citizenship-based state-nation, these sub- and supra-national affiliations will continue to dominate political life, a condition that opportunistic regimes can exploit to remain in power. Such regimes do not work toward – or have, at best, failed to achieve – social integration based on citizenship, which Bishara insists is indispensable to the realization of the state-nation. Otherwise, he writes, "There develops no consciousness of a civil society grounded in the relationship between the citizen, with his various affiliations in his own private sphere; the nation, which is broad enough to accommodate multiple affiliations; and the state, which is the polity of that nation".[60]

Bishara restores the political dimension to civil society, fleshing out its relationship with the state, citizenship, and democracy, especially in the Arab context. Civil society, he writes, is bound up with "the [state-]nation, and both stand before the state as a source of its legitimacy in a democracy … If the nation, however, does not find political expression in the state [or at least in the longing for it], then there is no place for the modern nation, the nation of citizens, the political nation, or civil society".[61]

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[55] Azmi Bishara, *al-Mujtamaʿ al-Madanī: Dirāsa Naqdiyya*, 6th ed. (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2012), p. 49.
[56] Ibid., p. 8.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Ibid., p. 75.
[59] Ibid., pp. 243-295.
[60] Ibid., p. 31.
[61] Ibid.

Addressing the Arab context directly, Bishara connects civil society and the nation with ruling regimes' loss of legitimacy, asserting that the search for Arab civil society is "intimately linked to the process by which the polity of the (Arab) nation takes shape, at least in consciousness".[62] While Bishara observes that this does not require the formation of a single Arab state, he stresses that if an Arab nation cannot be conceptualized, it will not be supplanted by, for example, a Syrian or Yemeni nation, but rather by communal and organic sub- or supra-national affiliations (for instance, Sunni, Alawite, Shi'i, southern and northern, Kurdish and Arab).

Thus, in the Arab context, it is necessary not to "make of civil society a false witness". It cannot be absent or excluded from the concerns of politics and the state, for three reasons: "Civil society takes root only in the space of the reciprocal relationship with the state … There is an inextricable link between the formation of the nation and the formation of civil society, which signifies a belonging based on citizenship … The battle for democracy is a political battle".[63]

Citizenship as Justice and Social Democracy

Bishara's understanding of citizenship as "a system of rights and duties"[64] inevitably leads to a consideration of justice. In a liberal democracy, justice begins with the constitution and extends through all laws, statutes, and even the smallest issues concerning citizens. It is a reasonable, balanced formula for reconciling freedoms with forms of equality. This suggests that, among the many models of democracy, Bishara's thought leans to a form of social democracy.

Ultimately, this does not set him apart from Rawls, though for him, the citizenship-based state must first be consolidated. Only then can it be governed by a democratic system, which, for Bishara, seems to be a form of social democracy. Indeed, Rawlsian justice constitutes a model of social constitutionalism designed for a stable society governed by a liberal democratic regime – something that remains beyond the current reach of Arab societies.[65]

The connection between rights and justice implies that justice is inseparable from citizenship[66] in the contemporary modern state. Insofar as citizenship is linked to a democratic outcome (namely to democracy), this implies that democracy is bound to justice. This suggests that if a state is to enjoy durable cohesion and stability, it must be governed by social democratic regimes[67] that balance the values of freedom and equality in their constitutions, laws, and policies. Freedom without a corresponding measure of equality – in the sense of empowerment or capability, as theorized by Amartya Sen,[68] whose approach is fundamentally compatible with the essential theses of Rawls and Bishara – degenerates into a false ideological slogan, liberal in appearance (neoliberalism and the welfare state). In this context, Bishara asserts, "It is no longer possible to imagine a justice that does not regulate the relationship between equality and freedom".[69]

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[62] Ibid.

[63] Ibid., p. 32.

[64] Bishara, *Fī al-Masʾala al-ʿArabiyya*, p. 150.

[65] See: Azmi Bishara, "Mudākhala bi-Shaʾn al-ʿAdāla: Suʾāl fī al-Siyāq al-ʿArabī," *Tabayyun*, vol. 1, nos. 1-2 (Summer 2013).

[66] Bishara, *Maqāla fī al-Ḥurriyya*, p. 150.

[67] So-called property-based democracy, or what I have taken to calling, though without enthusiasm, "a legally limited democracy of property", is an important theoretical model recently developed in the context of Rawlsianism and liberal social democracy in general; it may also have something of a socialist bent. For more details, see: Mahmoud, pp. 259-278; Murad Diyani, *Ḥurriyya, Musāwā, Karāma Insāniyya: Ṭūbāwiyyāt al-ʿAdāla min Manẓūr al-Namūdhaj al-Librālī al-Iskandanāvī* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2016), pp. 257-315.

[68] Amartya Sen's approaches can best be grasped in: Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (New York: Belknap Press, 2009) and Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1999).

[69] Bishara, *Maqāla fī al-Ḥurriyya*, p. 187

Accordingly, equality must be conceptualized in such a way that "encompasses affinity or identity groups without it coming at the expense of freedom and equality, but rather resting on their foundation".[70] Justice, for Bishara, is linked to the citizenship-based state and the mechanisms of social integration, which constitute a solid foundation for the construction of the contemporary modern state-nation.[71] When theorizing justice, distinctions between what is intrinsic and extrinsic to the state can only be made in the abstract, Bishara writes. A form of consociationalism without equal citizenship, he argues, is a recipe for low-grade civil war, liable to ignite at any time: "The relationship between social integration and justice is thus not a superfluous question, but rather a fundamental issue that the modern state, especially a democratic one, cannot ignore".[72]

Justice, then, is political and bound up with the state, insofar as the state provides its main framework and constitutes the most important realm of its sovereignty.[73] On this, Bishara and Rawls agree. Rawls starts from a general moral sense of justice and a Kantian ethics of duty to elaborate his theory of political justice – justice as fairness. This refers to the supra-constitutional, foundational principles necessary in a functioning liberal democratic state to ensure socio-political stability and to uphold liberal values themselves, especially freedom, which becomes hollow in the absence of a reasonable degree of equality and empowerment.

Bishara, by contrast, starts from a theory of the state in its ideal yet attainable form – a realistic political utopia – derived inductively from historical and contemporary realities, with citizenship at its core. Building on this foundation, he brings together his theses on civil society and justice to examine the possibility of a realistic democracy in an Arab region still plagued by profound problems and facing multiple obstacles on the path to democratic transition.

If Bishara's immediate concern is not to establish a purely philosophical-moral foundation for his theory in the manner of Rawls and Kant – though he does discuss moral philosophies when germane – an altruistic social ethics nonetheless lies at the heart of his propositions. If realized, especially in the Arab context, this ethics would uphold human dignity, freedom, rights, and equality – both among citizens, and, more broadly, in relation to humanity and societies that have made greater strides toward political justice in the form of civic freedoms, human rights, and social welfare systems, as seen in many Western societies.[74]

The liberal democracy that Bishara affirms is moreover influenced by its philosophical-moral roots, especially deontological liberalism, with its belief that human autonomy, freedom, and equality are ends in themselves, not mere means. Politically, this translates into a belief that a legitimate state must rest on *a priori* principles: the freedom of all members of society as human beings, their equality with all others as subjects, and their independence in the public sphere as citizens.[75]

The primacy of rights and duties over conceptions of the good or the beneficial is foundational to deontological liberalism.[76] Personal liberal autonomy refers to each person's ability to decide for themselves what is good or beneficial and to their freedom to pursue it.[77] Accordingly, the state must be politically neutral on what citizens, both individuals and groups, deem good or beneficial within the private sphere,

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[70] Ibid.

[71] Ibid., p. 189.

[72] Ibid., p. 190.

[73] Bishara, "Mudākhala bi-Shaʾn al-ʿAdāla," p. 11.

[74] The majority of Western states can be most aptly described as exhibiting "Kantian behavior internally and Machiavellian behavior externally". See: Tarek Mitri et al., "Munāqashat Kitāb ʿAzmī Bishāra *Masʾalat al-Dawla*," Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, Discussion series, January 2024, p. 8. I would say "internally Kantian in form" since they have failed to achieve a reasonable degree of equality, and particularly of empowerment. This description can be broadly generalized to their dealings with other states, societies, and individuals, as manifested blatantly and shamelessly in Gaza since the al-Aqsa Deluge, and for decades before that in Palestine and elsewhere.

[75] Bishara, *Masʾalat al-Dawla*, p. 164.

[76] For more detail, see: Mahmoud, pp. 182 ff.

[77] Taylor, p. 57.

which encompasses religious, sectarian, or ethnic cultural and communal norms, including those reflected in personal status laws in the Arab context.

In the public sphere, however, individuals must be treated equally, both as citizens protected by constitutional citizenship and by the legal system more broadly. This coincides with social integration programmes, which Bishara consistently emphasizes as the foundations of citizenship – an objective that Arab regimes in multicultural, pluralistic societies have failed to pursue, often with catastrophic results.

In understanding Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's philosophy of the state and the triad of state, individual, and society, Bishara highlights the importance of public morals and the standards of conduct in the public sphere beyond the group or organic community. The components of this tacitly agreed-upon morality include duty, responsibility toward others, and trust in society, the state, and their institutions. If this ethical code is distorted or perverted on a broad scale, it impedes the democratic transition and the building of democratic systems.[78] In this context, it is noteworthy that Bishara's philosophical approaches to the state show clear Hegelian influences, particularly his response to social contract theory and his assertion that the state is a "moral/rational" entity.[79] Its moral dimension is public and social rather than transcendental and reflective, the latter being grounded in the abstract, autonomous subject, as with Kant and Rawls.

The Arab State in Bishara's Project

Bishara addresses the critical problems facing the Arab state, among them the distinction between the legitimacy of the state and the legitimacy of the regime that governs it. The Arab Spring and its revolutions, and the subsequent attempts at democratic transition, have only heightened the urgency of this issue. In Egypt, the transition was thwarted; in Tunisia, its derailment is nearly complete. The consequences have been disastrous.

States such as Syria, Yemen, Libya, and post-occupation Iraq have lost a degree of their sovereignty and their monopoly over legitimate violence and lawmaking within their borders. At the same time, the regimes that govern them face crises of legitimacy that manifest as crises of state legitimacy. The relationship between group dynamics – clan, sectarian, religious, ethnic, and sub- and supra-national chauvinisms and belongings – and the state and its legitimacy has become deeply entangled, as opportunistic regimes have invested in and exploited these dynamics to remain in power. What appears to be an erosion of state legitimacy is, in fact, a crisis of the regime and its own legitimacy. The problem lies in regimes' failure to integrate citizens, which has triggered conflict and engendered social cleavages.

The development of citizenship has been hindered by regime policies that deal with groups based on loyalty to the regime, as well as by the tattered state of public services and other non-coercive social integration institutions. Most importantly, it has been undermined by the erosion of citizenship rights and duties, without which "citizenship is but a mere formality, i.e., an ID document".[80] This condition stands in stark contrast to Bishara's utopian yet realistic conceptualization of the contemporary modern state, which means democracy is similarly out of reach at present. Bishara argues that there can be no modern state without citizenship as an integral component; likewise, there can be no civil society and democracy without citizenship, nor can citizenship, democracy, and civil society exist outside the framework of the state or beyond its umbrella.

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[78] Bishara, "al-Thaqāfa al-Siyāsiyya," pp. 16-17. For Hegel, the state "instantiates public ethics in an institution capable of representing and applying them". See: Bishara, *Masʾalat al-Dawla*, pp. 186-187, 195.

[79] Bishara, *al-Mujtamaʿ al-Madanī*, p. 173.

[80] Bishara, *al-Dawla al-ʿArabiyya*, pp. 17-18.

Bishara concludes that the Arab state was consolidated through its own momentum, its struggle for survival, the expansion of its social base, and the interest of the international order in preserving existing states. He continues:

> In this respect, there is no difference between "old" states [i.e., those with a precolonial territorial core] and those that are a product of colonial partition. There is no longer a conflict over the existence of the Arab state, but rather over systems of government. Even so, the conflict over the regime in some countries can destabilize the state itself, although this is not the intended goal. State stability is no longer related to origin, but rather to the degree to which social structures overlap with regime structures … in the form of social loyalty networks standing opposite other social groups that are excluded, as well as the willingness of ruling groups to divide society and use violence to confront any threat to their authority.[81]

This is a precise description of various countries since the Arab Spring revolutions. Bishara points to the distinctive nature of Syria as "a composite country containing multiple religious, sectarian, and ethnic groups", which has hindered "the crystallization of an inclusive national identity that might have made it possible to separate society from the regime and the regime from the state".[82] The now-deposed regime, along with sectarian Alawite loyalty networks, an opportunistic minority from the Sunni majority and other national minorities, and a foreign, sectarian faction were all involved in unlawful violence that stripped the state itself of a measure of sovereignty and its monopoly over legitimate violence and lawmaking within its territory.

Moreover, over its decades in power, the deposed Syrian regime failed to institute programmes for social integration based on citizenship. When its authority was threatened, it deliberately inflamed sectarian tensions (Alawite vs. Shi'i vs. Sunni) and ethnonational divisions (Kurds vs. Arabs), plunging the country into a catastrophic cycle of violence. (Foreign interventions – some invited by the regime and others triggered by its actions – must also be taken into account.) The regime similarly stoked the fears of religious and sectarian minorities (Christians, Druze, Ismailis), presenting itself as their protector against an alleged threat posed by the Sunni majority.

Nevertheless, as Bishara notes, no serious separatist tendencies emerged in Syria. Rather, the state's weaknesses surfaced when the regime itself entered crisis, manifesting as "politicized social fractures". The cleavages were exacerbated by the lack of social integration programmes and the eruption of a "conflict over the nature of the common national bond … Is the bond a civic, an Arab nationalist, or a sectarian one? Nevertheless, all parties remain committed – in theory – to the unity of the state, even though – in practice – its territory is split between several de facto authorities and remains subject to the influences of numerous states. The international order also insists on the continued unity of the Syrian state".[83]

Here, Bishara inserts a prescient, if troubling, observation: "The question is whether that commitment will endure if the de facto partitions continue for much longer?".[84] The scenario he ponders has become more likely since the fall of the totalitarian, sectarian regime and the attempts of regional parties to bolster separatist tendencies along sectarian lines, for example, Israel's claims of protecting the Druze.

The case of the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) is instructive. Representing sub- or pre-national ethnic affiliations (Kurdish, Arab, and Syriac) and even supra-national political extensions of these identities (for example, the Kurdistan Workers Party, at least ideologically, if not organizationally),

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[81] Ibid., p. 18.

[82] Azmi Bishara, *Sūriyya: Darb al-Ālām nahw al-Ḥurriyya* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2013), p. 31; published in English as: Azmi Bishara, *Syria 2011–2013: Revolution and Tyranny before the Mayhem* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2023).

[83] Bishara, *al-Dawla al-ʿArabiyya*, pp. 357-358.

[84] Ibid., pp. 23, 357-358; Bishara, *Masʾalat al-Dawla*, p. 333.

the SDF attempted to hold local elections in the areas under its control several months before the fall of the Assad regime. This was, essentially, an attempt to invest its monopoly on violence in Syrian territory east of the Euphrates with democratic legitimacy.

Yet its control over this territory rests on the logic of force and lacks any legitimacy beyond the de facto. Although the SDF referred to legitimacy derived from "a social contract", Syrians were not consulted in the matter, and citizenship in a modern Syrian state does not appear to constitute a foundational value of that contract. Indeed, the mere presentation of a social contract in this form reveals a profound confusion, and in some cases, ignorance. Detached from its basic premises or from any possibility of application in relation to existing conditions, obstacles, and factors for success, such usage highlights the conceptual distortions surrounding the term "social contract" itself.

Other Syrian communities categorically rejected the SDF's attempt, and the international order has neither encouraged nor supported it. Thus far, it continues to recognize only the Syrian state in its pre-revolutionary form. Nevertheless, the spiral of violence that divided the country into three spheres of influence, the subsequent fall of the regime, and the rise of separatist tendencies emerging from these cleavages – among the Druze in Jabal al-Arab in the south, the Alawites on the western coast, and the Kurds in the east – raise concerns about the future of Syria as a single state, even in the form of a confederation, which seems the most realistic prospect.[85]

Across the Arab region, the reality of the state, its political borders, and the scope of its territorial sovereignty are in flux. Sudan has already split into two internationally recognized states following a referendum, and the implications of the current conflict between the official government and the Rapid Support Forces militia are unclear. Elsewhere, there is partition, competing spheres of influence, and quasi-state political entities, as exemplified by Syria (three zones of influence before the fall of the regime: the regime, the SDF, and the opposition), Yemen (three main spheres of influence: the official government, the Houthis, and the Southern Transitional Council), Libya (where the relationship between east and west has evolved into a near confederation), Somalia (Somaliland is effectively independent though lacks international recognition), and Iraq (the Kurdistan region is poised for secession should a referendum in favour be approved and supported by the international community).

Therefore, as a matter of principle, we cannot depend on the post-independence Arab state as a stable reality, as it has not yet been thoroughly consolidated. Its political borders, Bishara argues, have been maintained by its own self-propelled momentum: "the interests of its authorities and institutions in imposing state sovereignty over territory and population, the expansion of the state apparatus and the extension of its reach, the rise of broad social groups dependent on the state for their livelihood, and the defence of state borders against neighbours. We should also not ignore the fear that questioning existing borders would unleash outright chaos in the region. For the same reason, the so-called international order has preserved these borders as recognized states",[86] despite the reality of persistent division and strife. In other words, a considerable distance still separates the Arab state from the model of the modern state outlined by Bishara, which is a democratic state grounded in a general ethical principle based on citizenship as an essential facet of legitimacy and sovereignty.

Existing Arab states are beset by problems that prevent them from realizing justice for their citizens. Justice is inseparable from the state, from citizenship construed as an integral part of it, and from the

[85] For more on the SDF elections, see: Alaa Rajab Tabab, "Intikhābāt 'Qasd': Tafāwuḍ 'alā Istiḥyāʾ wa-Ilghāʾ bi-Nakhat al-Taʾjīl," Al Jazeera, 8 June 2024, accessed on 12/3/2025, at: https://acr.ps/1L9zRc6%D8%9B; "al-ʿAqd al-Ijtimāʿi li-l-Idāra al-Dhātiyya li-Shamāl wa-Sharq Sūriyya, Ṭabʿat 2023," Rojava Information Centre, accessed on 23/3/2025, at: https://acr.ps/1L9zQLb

[86] Bishara, *al-Dawla al-ʿArabiyya*, pp. 126, 435-436, 439-440.

instruments of social integration, which constitute a foundation on which the contemporary modern state-nation must be built.[87] Arab regimes have failed – or not even tried – to attain this ideal, resulting in a regression to sub- and supra-national communal affiliations and giving rise to grave civil conflicts, including bloody wars in Syria, Yemen, Libya, Iraq, and Lebanon.

On the surface, the crisis appears to be one of state legitimacy rather than a crisis of failed regimes. Justice thus remains out of reach precisely because the Arab state lacks social integration programmes based on citizenship and has been compromised by neoliberalism (in the Arab case, economic liberalization rather than political liberalization or democratization). These conditions have undermined social rights and eroded forms of equality and empowerment. Accordingly, citizenship, as a composite of rights and duties, remains an unresolved issue, amounting to "merely formal membership [in the state], synonymous with nationality, a bond too insubstantial to constitute the cornerstone of the state … A tension thus arose between the reality of the Arab state and the modern conceptualization of the state".[88] In this reality, the groundwork for democratic transition and for progression toward some form of social democracy, understood as a reasonable balance between political and non-political freedoms, equality, and economic empowerment, remains absent. This, I argue, is both the prerequisite and the aspiration of Bishara's project in the Arab region.

The reality of the Arab state points not only to the diminishing plausibility of political unity – whether under Arab nationalist or Islamist banners, both of which have become little more than utopian fantasies – but also to the further fragmentation of an already divided political landscape. The Arab state did not arise "to instantiate a moral principle, for example, to manifest the rights of an ethnocultural or national group", which undermined "the state's role as a moral authority".[89] As a result, the instrumentalist rationality necessary in a modern state was warped, reduced to a rationality aimed solely at the perpetuation of power rather than the pursuit of the common good.

The most important powers were concentrated in the hands of the ruler, and his office, if not the person himself, became a symbol of national sovereignty. This, in turn, "distorted the modern concept of sovereignty, reintroducing a latter-day sultanism into the authoritarian regimes of modern Arab republics and monarchies".[90] The affairs of the state and its institutions were subordinated to the decisions of the ruler and to the often opportunistic, sycophantic clique around him.[91]

Arab unity was of little concern to Arab rulers and their regimes, whose primary interest lay in maintaining power, though the regimes of Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt, Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, Saddam Hussein in Iraq, and Bashar al-Assad and Hafez al-Assad in Syria continued to propagate pan-Arab ideologies and slogans. The Syrian regime, for example, did not preserve the country's unity and sovereignty within the framework of the state, as evidenced by the emergence of competing spheres of influence, repeated violations of sovereignty through foreign intervention, the loss of its monopoly on legitimate violence, and its own involvement in illegitimate violence. At its core and in its practices, the regime was always a sectarian one, rather than Syrian or Arab nationalist. As Bishara writes:

> In all events, pan-Arab unity never materialized, and its historical moment has passed. The existence of established sovereign states is now an irrefutable reality that cannot be circumvented. Even attempts to unify existing states in the name of pan-Arabism failed, largely because authoritarian regimes were loath to relinquish a fraction of their state's sovereign authorities, which they regarded

87 Bishara, *Maqāla fī al-Ḥurriyya*, p. 189.
88 Bishara, *al-Dawla al-ʿArabiyya*, p. 115.
89 Ibid., pp. 451-452.
90 Ibid., p. 452.
91 Ibid.

> as their own. Arab nationalism never realized its aspiration of uniting Arabs under one state, but nor did existing states manage to produce cohesive national identities … due to weak citizenship.[92]

Ultimately, continues Bishara, national identities did emerge: "They were not local, ethnocultural alternatives to Arab nationalism; rather, they were national identities in which the Arab ethnocultural component helped shape the identity of the majority, while alternatives informed by the rejection of Arab nationalism became sub-national identities".[93] In this context, Bishara asserts that the Arab state and the Arab nation neither fully overlap nor contradict each other: "Integration among citizen-based states, in which Arab nationalism informs the identity of the ethnic majority, can be a realistic goal".[94]

The ideological, unionist discourse, whether Arab nationalist or Islamist, that discredited the legitimacy of the existing Arab state has retreated. The trend today is toward greater communal and geographic fragmentation (in Syria, Yemen, Libya, Iraq, and Somalia). Yet this fragmentation is primarily a consequence of the erosion of regime legitimacy, rather than a failure of the legitimacy of the state itself.

The problem stems from the failure to realize civic integration and strengthen society rather than sub-state groups. A weak state, Bishara asserts, implies "a weak society and strong communal groups", while a strong society "can only be found in the framework of a strong state that enjoys public legitimacy". He continues that the main source of weakness in the Arab state "lies in the politicization of communal social structures" and the loyalty given to these communities over the state.[95] Any effort to further weaken the Arab state and undermine its legitimacy would hinder democratization and the rise of civil society, encouraging communal tendencies not grounded in citizenship and its imperatives.[96]

Arab regimes monopolized the political – and entire public – sphere by suppressing all opposition, particularly organized national parties. The alternative was the eruption of the spontaneous, unorganized popular revolutions of the Arab Spring. When those, too, were brutally quelled, this gave rise to violent oppositions growing out of sub-and supra-national communal social structures. This development imperilled state sovereignty itself due to the entanglement between regime and state. The result was direct foreign intervention and the erosion of the state's monopoly on legitimate violence. Bishara warned of this trajectory early on:

The concept of civil society may be useful in the Arab battle for democracy if it is understood historically, i.e., critically, by revealing its historical limits and exposing its latent potential. But it could also damage the cause of democracy and the liberation of Arabs if it becomes a tool to politically neutralize the cause and sideline the question of the system of government.[97] The aspirational Arab state – a modern state with a politically active civil society that can achieve democracy – is thoroughly incompatible with the politicization of "communal social structures that reject the state's monopoly on legitimate violence and legislation".[98] This marks a major distinction from modern national forces struggling for power within the state, even if the latter resort to violence.[99]

The Arab condition is precarious, with "deep social fissures penetrating even the state apparatus, weak citizenship in term of right and duties, a low sense of national affiliation compared to politicized sub-national

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92 Ibid., p. 453.
93 Ibid.
94 Ibid., p. 455.
95 Ibid., p. 454.
96 Ibid., p. 455.
97 Bishara, *al-Mujtamaʿ al-Madanī*, p. 19.
98 Bishara, *al-Dawla al-ʿArabiyya*, p. 449
99 Ibid.

affiliations, and poorly performing non-coercive state institutions".[100] This explains the risks (or rather, the disastrous outcomes) of attempts to overthrow regimes through revolution or foreign intervention, such as Iraq in 2003 and Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Sudan since 2011. The result in each case has been the collapse of the state apparatus and the transformation of conflicts over the state into civil wars between groups.

In such cases, regime change through "gradual reform" is a safer bet, but it is now far too late. As Bishara writes, angry crowds who take to the streets in spontaneous uprisings against injustice are unlikely (nor should they be expected) to heed such cautions or internalize theories of the state or the diagnoses of social and political scientists.[101] Even the elites who led the Arab Spring uprisings profoundly misapprehended slogans and demands concerning the state, the regime, freedom, justice, civil society, citizenship, democracy, and other issues to which Bishara has been drawing our attention for some three decades.

Conclusion

Employing a cross-disciplinary approach, Bishara's theorizing on the state represents important, original contributions to contemporary political thought. While Rawls is concerned with the political ideal of a state governed by an existing liberal democratic regime, with the goal of realizing social egalitarianism, Bishara aspires to attaining a realistic version of this ideal in the Arab context, which continues to be plagued by profound problems in state consolidation and durability, and where attempts at democratic transition have repeatedly faltered.

Notably, Bishara disagrees with social contract approaches to understanding the state and explaining its origins and development. Rawls's work, in contrast, builds on social contract theory, although his focus is less on the state and its evolution than on constructing the ideal form of an already existing state within a society possessing liberal democratic traditions – what he calls a "well-ordered society".

Bishara's theory of the state describes a relatively realistic political utopia. It outlines an aspirational model of the state which is, in principle, both achievable and replicable in the future. Although the contemporary Arab reality falls short of this ideal, the circulation of these propositions within intellectual, political, elite, legislative, revolutionary, reformist, and broader cultural circles could trigger a feedback loop that shapes tendencies and practices. More importantly, it may generate a tension between the arguments and concepts embedded in these propositions and reality, which could catalyse further developments in both theory and practice.

Bishara explicitly incorporates citizenship into the definition of the modern state, distinguishing the state from its functions, origins, and evolution. He makes a compelling argument for the importance of citizenship in enabling the state's transition toward democratic governance. His emphasis on citizenship, as integral to the definition of the state, as a system of rights and duties, and as intimately linked to civil society and justice, appears in the context of his broader efforts to uphold liberal democracy, which, based on his approaches to citizenship and justice, is socially egalitarian in nature.

Arab states remain far from the political ideal described by Bishara. Not only are aspirations for unity unattainable, whether in the name of Arab or Islamic nationalism, but in some cases the national state itself is undergoing further fragmentation. While this may reflect a crisis of state legitimacy, it is, in reality, a crisis of ruling regimes that have failed to achieve social integration grounded in citizenship. As a result, communal affiliations have gained ascendancy, becoming the basis for civil strife and contributing to the

[100] Ibid., p. 455.

[101] Ibid., pp. 455-456.

erosion of state sovereignty and of the state's monopoly on legitimate violence and lawmaking within its territorial borders. In cases like Syria before the collapse of the Assad regime, ruling authorities themselves have engaged in illegitimate violence and have invited in or attracted foreign forces, further infringing upon state sovereignty. Consequently, Arab states still lack a politically active civil society that can confront existing regimes in order to push the state toward democracy.

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Lilian Estafanous*

Digital Activism within the Coptic Community in North America: New Transnational Opportunities or Emerging Threats?**

النشاط الرقمي داخل المجتمع القبطي في أميركا الشمالية: فرص جديدة أم تهديدات ناشئة؟

Abstract: This study critically examines the dual impact of digital technologies on the political agency of the Coptic diaspora, emphasizing both the opportunities and limitations posed by Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). Digital platforms have enhanced diaspora visibility, resource mobilization, and transnational activism, but they also introduce major risks, including misinformation, censorship, and surveillance. These growing challenges have hindered the diaspora's ability to navigate power structures, reducing the effectiveness of advocacy efforts. The study argues that the drawbacks of digital activism now outweigh its initial benefits, creating new constraints on Coptic political influence. In light of these pressures, it calls for a reassessment of how diaspora groups can sustain activism in an increasingly hostile digital landscape.

Keywords: Coptic Diaspora; Transnational Activism; Misinformation; Censorship; Surveillance; Digital Activism.

ملخص: تُحلل الدراسة الأثر المزدوج للتقنيات الرقمية في الفاعلية السياسية للشتات القبطي، مع التركيز على الفرص التي تتيحها تقنيات المعلومات والاتصال والقيود التي تفرضها، حيث ساهمت المنصات الرقمية في تعزيز حضور الجاليات القبطية، وحشد الموارد، والانخراط في مناصرة عابرة للحدود، لكنّها في الوقت نفسه أدخلت مخاطر كبيرة، مثل المعلومات المضللة والرقابة والمراقبة. وقد أعاقت هذه التحديات المتزايدة قدرة الشتات على التعامل مع البنى القائمة، ما قلل من فعالية جهودهم السياسية. في هذا السياق، تجادل الدراسة أنّ سلبيات النشاط الرقمي باتت تفوق فوائده الأولى، ما فرض قيودًا جديدة على التأثير السياسي للشتات القبطي الرقمي. وبالنظر إلى هذه الضغوط، تدعو الدراسة إلى إعادة تقييم كيفية مواصلة جماعات الشتات جهودها في بيئة رقمية متغيرة وعدائية.

كلمات مفتاحية: الشتات القبطي؛ التعبئة العابرة للحدود: المعلومات المضللة؛ الرقابة؛ المراقبة؛ المناصرة الرقمية.

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Introduction

Global awareness of the Coptic plight surged on 15 February 2015, when ISIS released a disturbing video showing the execution of 20 Copts and one Ghanaian along the Libyan coast. The captives were martyred for refusing to abandon their Christian faith.[1] The release of this video prompted a strong reaction, particularly from the Coptic diaspora, which quickly mobilized online. The event is a notable example of how the Coptic diaspora has evolved into what can be termed a "digital diaspora", utilizing online spaces to foster community and activism.

The Egyptian Coptic Orthodox community, a religious minority in Egypt, has established a significant presence in North America as part of a broader global dispersion. This migration began in the mid-20th century, with waves of Coptic immigrants arriving in the US and Canada in search of better economic opportunities and, in some cases, to escape religious persecution in Egypt.[2] Nadia Marzouki notes that Coptic migration to the US gained momentum in the 1950s, later than other Middle Eastern Christian groups.[3] Over the years, this diaspora has grown significantly, with Coptic communities established in major North American metropolitan areas such as Los Angeles, Montreal, and Toronto. This expansion not only reflects broader patterns of migration but also makes the Coptic diaspora in North America a compelling case study in the modern era of globalization, digital connectivity, and the preservation of cultural identity, particularly due to its efforts to maintain religious and linguistic traditions, its transnational political engagement, and its active use of digital platforms for advocacy.

Digital technologies have reshaped the landscape of transnational activism, enabling diaspora communities to mobilize, advocate, and sustain connections across borders. A key dimension of this inquiry is the role of social media in facilitating digital mobilization and transnational advocacy. These platforms have provided Coptic individuals in the diaspora with tools to connect, voice their concerns, and advocate for the rights and safety of Coptic communities in Egypt. By leveraging digital tools, the Coptic diaspora has raised global awareness, articulated political grievances, and shaped a discourse centred on human rights. The rapid dissemination of news and updates across these networks has fostered solidarity and collective action, reinforcing a sense of community across geographic boundaries.

By engaging with Arjun Appadurai's concept of deterritorialization, the study further situates the Coptic diaspora within broader discussions on globalization and digital activism.[4] Appadurai argues that globalization has dislocated cultural identities from specific geographic territories, allowing migrant communities to maintain and even reshape their traditions in transnational contexts. The Coptic diaspora exemplifies this process, as its members navigate between preserving religious and linguistic traditions, engaging in transnational political activism, and leveraging digital platforms for advocacy with varying degrees of success.

This study examines the Coptic diaspora in North America as a compelling case of identity formation within the broader context of globalization, digital connectivity, and transnational activism. It explores the concept of the digital diaspora, emphasizing the importance of understanding this term within its specific political, geographical, and historical contexts.

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[1] Athens Bureau, "Coptic Orthodox Martyrs Are Beheaded by ISIS in Libya," *Greek City Times*, 16/2/2022, accessed on 23/6/2025, at: https://tinyurl.com/np3e56nf; Bill Hutchinson, "ISIS Releases Video Purporting to Show Beheading of 21 Egyptians in Libya," *New York Daily News*, 16/2/2015, accessed on 23/6/2025, at: https://tinyurl.com/yhesad63

[2] Youssef Zaki, "*A Theban Legion on the Banks of the Potomac: Coptic Political Activism in the Diaspora, the U.S., and the Egyptian Polity,"* George Washington University, *IMES Capstone Paper Series* (2010).

[3] Nadia Marzouki, "The U.S. Coptic Diaspora and the Limit of Polarization," *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, vol. 14, no. 3 (2016), pp. 261-276.

[4] Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

Research Questions and Argument

This study explores how the Coptic e-diaspora in North America has transcended physical borders and mobilized political agency through digital platforms. Specifically, it asks: To what extent do social media and Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) facilitate or hinder the ability of Coptic diaspora advocacy organizations to promote Coptic identity, mobilize resources, and capitalize on political opportunities? What contextual factors impact their capacity to use social media to support the Coptic community in Egypt? What are the primary challenges encountered by the Coptic e-diaspora?

While ICTs have significantly influenced the political landscape, particularly for diaspora communities, their impact remains complex and multidimensional. Fiona McCallum notes that diaspora groups often harness these technologies to advocate for their causes and maintain connections with both their homeland and fellow members around the world.[5] However, this study argues that although digital platforms have enabled the Coptic diaspora to enhance visibility, mobilize resources, and engage in transnational activism, they have also introduced significant vulnerabilities, including misinformation, censorship, and state surveillance. The increasing complexities of digital engagement have further hindered the diaspora's ability to navigate existing power structures, limiting the effectiveness of their advocacy efforts. As these challenges continue to intensify, the disadvantages of digital activism now outweigh its initial benefits, imposing new constraints on the political influence of the Coptic e-diaspora. The increasing barriers to digital activism, including cyber surveillance, misinformation, internal fragmentation, and challenges in framing Coptic narratives, necessitate a critical reassessment of how diaspora advocacy groups can sustain their efforts in an evolving and often hostile digital landscape.

The paper first outlines the methodological approach and conceptual framework, situating digital diaspora activism within broader debates in diaspora studies and social movement theory. It then identifies key opportunities available to North American Copts, such as social media, international lobbying, and transnational networks, for digital mobilization. The analysis subsequently turns to major challenges, including digital literacy disparities, surveillance, self-censorship, internal disagreements, and difficulties framing Coptic narratives for wider audiences. The conclusion reflects on the broader implications of these dynamics and proposes directions for future research.

By addressing these tensions, this study contributes to current debates on digital activism, diaspora politics, and the evolving role of technology in transnational advocacy. It positions the Coptic diaspora as a timely and important case through which to examine how marginalized communities navigate the promises and perils of digital mobilization under increasingly constrained conditions.

Theorizing E-Diaspora

The contemporary migration landscape reveals a dynamic interplay between human mobility and digital communication, which has garnered significant scholarly attention. Researchers are particularly focused on the role of digital platforms in diaspora politics.[6] These platforms facilitate distant expressions and performances, proving crucial for non-state actors and reshaping diaspora identities by fostering homeland imagination and enabling political dissent.[7] Building on this foundation, the advancement of cyber technology has introduced the concept of "digital diaspora", emphasizing how diasporas create borderless

[5] Fiona McCallum, "Religious Diaspora and Information Communications Technology: The Impact of Globalization on Communal Relations in Egypt," in: Marc Lynch (ed.), *The New Arab Media: Technology, Image and Perception* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 2011), pp. 81-101.

[6] Koen Leurs & Kevin Smets, "Five Questions for Digital Migration Studies: Learning from Digital Connectivity and Forced Migration in (to) Europe," *Social Media + Society, vol.* 4, no. 1 (2018), pp. 1-16.

[7] Priya Kumar, "Rerouting the Narrative: Mapping the Online Identity Politics of the Tamil and Palestinian Diaspora," *Social Media + Society, vol.* 4, no. 1 (2018), pp. 1-18.

organizations and leverage communication technologies to enhance their social capital: the networks, relationships, and resources that facilitate collective action and community support.[8] This term encompasses various expressions, including "e-diasporas", "net-diasporas", and "web-diasporas", each reflecting different perspectives on diasporic communities' interactions within digital spaces.[9] These concepts highlight the integration of online and offline experiences and emphasize the interdisciplinary nature of the study, bridging media studies, migration studies, and sociology. For this paper, "digital diaspora" and "e-diaspora" are selected for its versatility in addressing the political, geographical, and historical contexts of diasporic engagement.

To further understand these dynamics, some scholars have redefined the concept of diaspora by drawing on Anderson's notion of imagined communities.[10] Sökefeld notes that dispersed members are united by a shared imagination of a common origin and identity, transcending geographical distance and fostering a collective sense of identity.[11] Similarly, Adamson and Demetriou describe diaspora as a social collective that maintains a cohesive national, cultural, or religious identity over time through enduring ties to a real or imagined homeland.[12] Consequently, connecting members of diasporic communities via the Internet has become integral to modern global culture, linking individuals by birthplace, previous residence, or emotional ties to their homeland.

This interconnectedness is further underlined by the reliance of online communities on social capital, which encompasses individual belonging and a sense of community.[13] Social capital fosters trust, facilitates information exchange, and creates shared expectations, typically categorized as bridging (connections across diverse groups) and bonding (close ties among family and friends).[14] Scholars such as Agnieszka Kanas et al.,[15] Larissa Larsen et al.,[16] and Michelle Martin[17] discuss the "bonding and bridging" processes that enable resource development and transfer from the homeland to the host country.

In addition, Harry Hiller and Tara Franz explore the impact of computer-mediated communication (CMC) on diaspora activities.[18] They argue that CMC, enhanced by online engagement, facilitates interactions beyond physical boundaries, fostering cultural ties and a sense of community centred around group identity. This enables e-diasporas to influence the socio-political landscape of their ancestral homelands while

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[8] Bahar Baser & Amira Halperin, "Diasporas from the Middle East: Displacement, Transnational Identities and Homeland Politics," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies,* vol. 46, no. 2 (2019), pp. 215-221; Jennifer Brinkerhoff, "Digital Diasporas and Governance in Semi-Authoritarian States: The Case of the Egyptian Copts," *Public Administration and Development,* vol. 25, no. 3 (2005), pp. 193-204; Donald A. Westbrook & Michael Saad, "Religious Identity and Borderless Territoriality in the Coptic E-Diaspora," *Journal of International Migration and Integration,* vol. 18, no. 1 (2017), pp. 341-351.

[9] Victoria Bernal, *Nation as Network: Diaspora, Cyberspace, and Citizenship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014); Dana Diminescu & Benjamin Loveluck, "Traces of Dispersion: Online Media and Diasporic Identities," *Crossings: Journal of Migration and Culture*, vol. 5, no. 1 (2014), pp. 23-39.

[10] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1997).

[11] Martin Sökefeld, "Mobilizing in Transnational Space: A Social Movement Approach to the Formation of Diaspora," *Global Networks,* vol. 6, no. 3 (2006), pp. 265-284.

[12] Fiona Adamson & Michael Demetriou, "Remapping the Boundaries of 'State' and 'National Identity': Incorporating Diasporas into IR Theorizing," *European Journal of International Relations,* vol. 13, no. 4 (2007), pp. 489-526.

[13] Vicente Navarro, "A Critique of Social Capital," *International Journal of Social Determinants of Health and Health Services, vol.* 32, no. 3 (2002), pp. 423-432.

[14] Saijun Zhang, Steven G. Anderson & Min Zhan, "The Differentiated Impact of Bridging and Bonding Social Capital on Economic Well-Being: An Individual Level Perspective," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare,* vol. 38, no. 1 (2011), pp. 119 - 142.

[15] Agnieszka Kanas, Frank van Tubergen & Tanja van der Lippe, "Immigrant Self-Employment: Testing Hypotheses about the Role of Origin- and Host-Country Human Capital and Bonding and Bridging Social Capital," *Work and Occupations*, vol. 36, no. 3 (2009), pp. 181-208.

[16] Larissa Larsen et al., "Bonding and Bridging: Understanding the Relationship between Social Capital and Civic Action," *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, vol. 24, no. 1 (2004), pp. 64-77.

[17] Michelle E. Martin, "The Political Power of Diaspora as External Actors in Armed Civil Conflict: Ethnonationalist Conflict–Generated Diaspora Use of Social Media in Transnational Political Engagement in Homeland Conflict: The Case of Rwanda," PhD. Dissertation, Department of Peace Studies, University of Bradford, 2013.

[18] Harry H. Hiller & Tara M. Franz, "New Ties, Old Ties and Lost Ties: The Use of the Internet in Diaspora," *New Media & Society*, vol. 6, no. 6 (2004), pp. 731-752.

asserting their ethnic identities in host countries. Supporting this viewpoint, Bennett highlights how digital platforms, especially social media, have cultivated more personalized political experiences. When shared in online spaces, these individual experiences often contribute to larger collective political movements.[19]

Despite these insights, the debate over whether online communities foster social isolation or enhance social capital remains active. Initial critiques suggested that internet use could lead to isolation by displacing social activities; however, more recent research indicates that the impact largely depends on the type of online interaction.[20] Online communities, often based on shared interests rather than geographical proximity, can promote heterogeneous community building and social bonds. Nonetheless, challenges such as closed structures that create in-group and out-group divisions persist, underscoring the importance of trust and shared norms for both online and offline communities.[21]

Building on these theoretical perspectives, this study applies social movement theories to conceptualize the Coptic diaspora as a digital diaspora actively engaging in transnational advocacy and collective action. While research on social media and digital activism is growing, few studies have incorporated social movement theory or examined the collective action strategies of digital diasporas. This study addresses that gap by investigating how Coptic activists employ digital tools to amplify their advocacy efforts and sustain transnational ties. By integrating social movement theories with the study of ICTs, this research contributes to a broader understanding of digital transnational collective action while also shedding light on this understudied group. In doing so, it bridges an important gap in the existing literature on diaspora activism and digital mobilization. Moreover, while the structural dimension of social movement theory explains the institutional mechanisms that shape Coptic mobilization in Canada and the US, its constructivist dimension highlights the ideational foundations of Coptic activism, illustrating how narratives, identity, and collective memory influence digital engagement.

Methodology: Interviews and Content Analysis

This study employs a mixed-method approach, integrating semi-structured interviews and content analysis to examine the role f ICTs in Coptic digital activism. The primary data consists of 23 in-depth interviews conducted with members of the Coptic diaspora in Los Angeles, Toronto, and Montreal, three major hubs of Coptic residence in North America. Of these, 15 interviews were conducted in Canada and eight in the US, spanning from February to September 2022, with additional interviews held between July and September 2023.

1. Sampling and Data Collection

Participants included leaders and members of Coptic human rights advocacy organizations, volunteers from philanthropic groups, independent Coptic politicians, media activists, Coptic scholars, and clergy members. The study also incorporated perspectives from second-generation Copts, offering insights into generational differences in digital activism. Interviewees were recruited through snowball sampling, starting with key figures in Coptic communities in Canada and the US, as well as individuals identified through public online sources, activist websites, social media, and media reports. Communication with participants was primarily conducted via email.

Interviews ranged from 45 minutes to two hours, with an average length of 90 minutes. While Zoom was the primary medium, many initial conversations occurred in-person in churches, homes, and conferences in

[19] W. Lance Bennett, "The Personalization of Politics: Political Identity, Social Media, and Changing Patterns of Participation," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 644, no. 1 (2012), pp. 20-39.

[20] Norman H. Nie & Lutz Erbring, "Internet and Society: A Preliminary Report," *IT & Society*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2002), pp. 275-283.

[21] Ibid.; Hiller & Franz; Navarro.

Toronto, Montreal, Kingston, and Los Angeles. The interviews were transcribed, coded, and analysed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns in digital advocacy strategies, concerns about surveillance, and the broader impact of ICTs on community mobilization. To ensure participant confidentiality, pseudonyms (for example, "A6") were assigned, except in cases where interviewees explicitly requested to be named.

The interview guide included both open-ended and closed questions, covering key themes such as engagement strategies, the impact of digital media on community identity, and concerns regarding surveillance, control, and privacy. These insights provided a qualitative foundation for understanding the complexities of online activism within the Coptic diaspora.[22]

Ethical approval for this study was obtained following Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines. Before each interview, participants were informed of the voluntary nature of participation and their right to decline answering any question or terminate the interview at any time. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and interviews were recorded only with explicit permission. As a Coptic migrant in Canada fluent in both Arabic and English, the researcher was able to conduct interviews in the language preferred by participants, ensuring their comfort and facilitating more candid discussions. This shared identity helped build trust and ease potential hesitations, particularly around politically sensitive topics such as surveillance and repression. The researcher's insider-outsider positionality – being both part of the diaspora community and trained in academic research – proved crucial in gaining access to key informants and navigating discussions that required a balance of empathy, cultural familiarity, and analytical distance.

2. Content Analysis of Digital Advocacy

In addition to interviews, this study conducts content analysis of digital materials related to Coptic advocacy. This includes publications from major Coptic organizations, social media discourse, electronic media articles, websites affiliated with the Coptic Church, and online forums. Advocacy-related posts from Coptic lobby organizations were monitored, along with correspondence with diaspora associations and conference materials. Social media activity was systematically reviewed on a weekly basis to track shifts in advocacy narratives, mobilization efforts, and response patterns to political events affecting Coptic communities.

The content was categorized based on advocacy focus areas, distinguishing between human rights advocacy, philanthropic and charitable organizations, and cultural preservation initiatives. Within each category, organizations with a strong digital presence on social media platforms such as Facebook, X (Twitter), YouTube, and Instagram were prioritized. The human rights advocacy sector includes organizations that leverage digital platforms to raise awareness, mobilize international support, and document human rights violations against Copts. Among the most active on social media are Coptic Solidarity, the American Coptic Association (ACA), the US Copts Association, the Coptic Assembly of America (CAA), and the International Coptic Federation. These groups frequently publish reports, share news updates, organize online petitions, and livestream conferences and protests. Coptic Solidarity, in particular, has a robust presence on X (Twitter) and Facebook, where it engages with policymakers and international human rights organizations.

The philanthropic and charitable sector features organizations that utilize social media to fundraise, share testimonials, and promote humanitarian initiatives. Notable organizations with strong digital engagement include Coptic Orphans, Santa Verena Charity, Care 4 Needy Copts (C4NC), Light for Orphans USA, and Rising Out Of The Ashes (ROOTA). These groups frequently post success stories, crowdfunding campaigns, and behind-the-scenes footage of their aid efforts on Instagram and Facebook. Coptic Orphans, for example,

[22] See: Appendix.

has a well-established digital outreach strategy that includes YouTube videos, X advocacy, and interactive Instagram posts to showcase its impact and mobilize diaspora contributions.

The cultural preservation sector consists of organizations that digitally archive historical materials, promote Coptic heritage, and engage with diaspora communities through educational initiatives. The most digitally active include St. Shenouda the Archimandrite Coptic Society, The Coptic Museum of Canada, The Society of Coptic Church Studies, and The Coptic Canadian History Project (CCHP). These institutions frequently host virtual lectures, publish digital archives, and engage with audiences through podcasts, online exhibits, and webinars. The Coptic Museum of Canada maintains a strong presence on Facebook and Instagram, regularly posting historical artifacts and cultural insights, while CCHP actively shares research publications and oral history projects on X and YouTube.

By prioritizing organizations with significant social media activity, this study ensures a more dynamic analysis of digital advocacy, philanthropy, and cultural preservation within the Coptic diaspora. Future monitoring efforts will focus on tracking these organizations' content trends, engagement strategies, and evolving digital mobilization tactics across various platforms.

Unlocking Opportunities: Information Technology in Coptic Advocacy

In the process of remembrance, the portrayal of Coptic victimhood plays a crucial role in identity reconstruction and political resistance. This victimhood is rooted in historical and contemporary experiences of marginalization, shaping a collective memory that reinforces a shared sense of struggle and resilience. By mobilizing these narratives, Copts in the diaspora not only affirm their distinct identity but also strengthen transnational ties, using digital platforms and advocacy networks to connect dispersed communities. This process transforms collective memory into a tool for political mobilization, allowing Copts to frame their struggles within global human rights discourse and seek international recognition and support.

Digital technologies, particularly social media, have further reinforced this process, offering Coptic advocacy organizations in North America new avenues to amplify their voices, organize campaigns, and sustain transnational engagement. These online platforms function as extensions of diasporic networks, enabling more immediate and far-reaching forms of activism that bridge local concerns with global advocacy efforts. This digital connectivity aligns with the broader concept of the "e-diaspora", where virtual spaces become vital arenas for identity formation, collective action, and the preservation of Coptic heritage. Through these platforms, Copts can challenge marginalization, shape public discourse, and cultivate a sense of solidarity that transcends geographic boundaries. The following sections explore how digital platforms amplify the collective voice of Copts across borders, creating opportunities for the Coptic diaspora. Key areas of focus include how ICTs have improved communication and visibility, fostered political and financial autonomy, and helped preserve religious and cultural identity among first- and second-generation Copts.

1. Improved Communication and Visibility

ICTs have revolutionized the communication methods of Coptic advocacy organizations. These digital tools facilitate smoother interactions both within Coptic networks and with external entities, such as government bodies, thereby enhancing collaboration and streamlining advocacy efforts. Additionally, ICTs grant advocates direct access to crucial data, legislative updates, and news, empowering them to stay informed and actively engage with policymakers.

Beyond enhancing communication, ICTs present Coptic organizations with opportunities to amplify their visibility and promote their political agendas. Social media platforms such as Facebook, X (Twitter), Instagram, and YouTube allow these organizations to bypass traditional media, which often misrepresents

or underrepresents their stories, thereby enabling direct connections with a broader audience. Based on the author's content analysis of social media outputs and organizational websites, Facebook, X (@Coptic_Solidarity), and Instagram (@copticsolidarity) are actively used by Coptic Solidarity to engage followers worldwide. YouTube channels such as Coptic Advocacy, Coptic Solidarity, and Coptic Orphans regularly share personal narratives and visual content that raise awareness of human rights concerns and enhance the diaspora's visibility.

In an environment marked by state control and news censorship, social media has become a crucial communication tool for Coptic Orthodox Christians in Egypt. This significance is emphasized by the violence they face from both government and sectarian groups. Research reveals a stark contrast in the coverage of incidents such as the Maspero Massacre between state-owned and independent media, with social media emerging as an essential alternative. For instance, X has played a key role in fostering solidarity for Copts through personal testimonies and collaborative Muslim-Christian prayers.[23] It not only facilitates the sharing of images and videos but also provides a platform for independent voices to express firsthand experiences, helping to fill gaps left by state-dominated media narratives.

Another important type of online social community for the Coptic diaspora involves the use of more conventional media, such as livestreams and television broadcasts. These observations are based on the author's review of digital archives and media histories documented by Michael Saad, along with analysis of diaspora broadcasting content available through satellite and YouTube platforms.[24] Coptic television and press in North America have played a crucial role in preserving cultural heritage and providing platforms for communities to express their views on social and political issues. For instance, in 1997, an effort was made to establish Egyptian Coptic Television in New Jersey under the leadership of Sami Boulos, a prominent figure within the Coptic community. Boulos, with his extensive background in education and religious writing, led a program that aired for two hours every Friday evening over a span of 12 weeks.[25] This initiative aimed to deliver religious and social programming tailored to the needs of the Coptic diaspora. However, despite its initial success, the program's short run can be attributed to a lack of sufficient financial resources.

Building on the foundation laid by such initiatives, another notable attempt to create a Coptic television presence was the establishment of Orthodox Christian TV (OCTV) in Los Angeles, led by Coptic immigrant Wahid Boctor. From 2003 to 2007, OCTV broadcasted for 30 minutes every Saturday morning via a cable network. Although it received support from other Orthodox Churches, financial constraints ultimately hindered its long-term sustainability.[26] In contrast, the landscape shifted in 2007 with the launch of two Coptic Church channels from Egypt that aimed to reach a broader audience through 24 / 7 satellite broadcasting. Aghapy TV, run by Bishop Botros and accessible via Dish Network, was able to sustain itself through donations and subscriptions, while the other channel, Coptic TV, was financed by Sarwat Bassily, who maintained residences in both Cairo and Chicago. Both channels quickly garnered substantial viewership within the US, further solidifying the role of television in connecting the Coptic diaspora and enhancing their sense of community.[27]

Continuing this momentum, in 2010, the Coptic Diocese of Los Angeles initiated the Logos TV satellite channel, which had four primary goals: evangelism, education, healing, and defending the oppressed and

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[23] Amal Bakry & Mohammed F. Alkazemi, "Social Media Coverage of 'Maspero': Solidarity between Muslims and Christians Post the Egyptian Uprising," *Romanian Journal of Communication and Public Relations*, vol. 16, no. 3 (2014), pp. 61-74.

[24] Michael Saad, "The Contemporary Life of the Coptic Orthodox Church in the United States," *Studies in World Christianity*, vol. 16, no. 3 (2010), pp. 207-225.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid.

persecuted. Co-sponsored by other Coptic dioceses in America, Logos TV broadcasted in English and Arabic. This initiative represented a significant development in the Coptic diaspora's media landscape, providing a powerful platform to showcase and preserve Coptic heritage, advance its rich civilization, and foster the expansion of a dynamic and interconnected global community. Since 2013, Michael Saad has been hosting the Logos TV program "Coptic Civilization" in both Arabic and English.

2. Fostering Political and Financial Autonomy

Digital technology also provides Coptic advocacy organizations with the potential for greater political autonomy. A key challenge these organizations face in traditional settings is the overwhelming influence of the church in political matters, as the church often seeks to maintain exclusive control over representing the Coptic community. The church's stance toward any form of oppositional political activity within the Coptic community remained consistently negative and restrictive for years. Mariz Tadros describes the state's treatment of Copts as a patron-client relationship, where limited services, such as church permits, are provided to secure the political loyalty of the Coptic community.[28] Similarly, Rowe refers to this church policy as a mutually reinforcing neo-millet partnership, wherein the church supports the state, and the state grants legitimacy to the church.[29] However, despite these arrangements, none of these services address the unjust legal and institutional policies targeting Copts in the country. Guindy points out that having the church as the "main interlocutor" between the state and the Copts appears to be a strategy to exert pressure indirectly on the Copts by pressuring them into silence in order to avoid disturbing the already-unstable relationship between the church and the Egyptian government, thus worsening the Copts' situation in Egypt.[30]

Many interviewees noted that the church's reluctance to support independent organizations significantly limits the scope of Coptic political advocacy. This hesitation arises from the church's desire to avoid endorsing initiatives that might jeopardize its relationship with the Egyptian government. This desire to monopolize representation complicates the efforts of independent advocacy groups, who may struggle to gain legitimacy without the church's endorsement. By utilizing digital tools, Coptic advocacy groups can assert their independence, promote their causes more freely, and operate outside the constraints of traditional ecclesiastical power structures.

Moreover, digital platforms allow organizations to promote their projects and cultural initiatives, creating new opportunities for funding and reducing dependence on governmental or church financial support. This financial independence gives them the flexibility to advocate freely without fear of reprisal. As 8I explained, organizations like Association Copt de Montreal (ACOM), established to engage with politicians at various levels, struggled with workload and management, ultimately leading to their discontinuation.[31] Volunteers often face burnout due to the overwhelming demands of advocacy work, a challenge amplified by the volunteer-based nature of many Coptic advocacy organizations. 5D, a lawyer and politician, reflected: "It is not just a Coptic issue. Advocacy itself is exhausting. People start with passion but burn out fast". He added, "How many of us can afford to work full-time for free?".[32] Similarly, 7G, a Coptic lawyer and activist, emphasized the scarcity of well-funded Coptic organizations with proper governance structures,

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[28] Mariz Tadros, "Vicissitudes in the Entente between the Coptic Orthodox Church and the State in Egypt (1952–2007)," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 41, no. 2 (2009), pp. 269-287.

[29] Paul S. Rowe, "Neo-Millet Systems and Transnational Religious Movements: The Humayun Decrees and Church Construction in Egypt," *Journal of Church and State*, vol. 49, no. 2 (2007), pp. 329-350; Paul S. Rowe, "Building Coptic Civil Society: Christian Groups and the State in Mubarak's Egypt," *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 45, no. 1 (2009), pp. 111-126.

[30] Adel Guindy, *Sword over the Nile: A Brief History of the Copts under Islamic Rule* (London: Austin Macauley, 2020), p. 325.

[31] 8I, politician, Conservative Party of Canada candidate in 2019 and board member of Les Partenaires de l'Association de la Haute-Égypte, Zoom interview, Montreal, April 2022.

[32] 5D, lawyer, politician, former member of the Conservative Party and current member of the Liberal Party, Zoom interview, Kingston, Canada, May 2022.

noting that few have succession plans or the capacity to sustain long-term advocacy.[33] 8I, a politician and board member of Les Partenaires de L'Association de la Haute-Égypte, also pointed out that Copts in North America face significant funding challenges, as "most donations go directly to charity work in Egypt, not to advocacy organizations here". She stressed that "many Copts are not used to the idea of donating to political causes – they have not been taught why it matters".[34]

3. Preserving Religious and Cultural Identity

In the effort to preserve Coptic cultural identity, ICT plays a key role. It provides individuals with access to a wealth of resources related to Coptic history, language, and traditions through online platforms. These resources range from virtual libraries of Coptic texts to instructional materials for learning the Coptic language. As a result, younger generations of Coptic Americans and Canadians now have unprecedented opportunities to engage with their cultural heritage in ways that may not have been possible without the internet.

The case of second-generation Copts illustrates the advantages of being raised in the diaspora. These individuals, as products of their environment, possess the knowledge and skills to effectively engage with governments and amplify Coptic voices. They are particularly adept at utilizing various media platforms and are more active and open in their advocacy efforts. As part of the e-diaspora, they have the potential to advocate for Copts' rights in Egypt, provided they receive the necessary education, training, and experience.

Additionally, Donald Westbrook and Saad highlight another motivation for first- and second-generation Copts through three case studies on electronic identity mediation and preservation in the Coptic diaspora. These cases demonstrate how diaspora initiatives partly fulfil Copts' longing for territorial ownership and control.[35] The examples include: 1) the online ecclesiastical and educational presence of Bishop Suriel of Melbourne; 2) the spiritual, social, and cultural mission of the Los Angeles-based Coptic television channel Logos TV; and 3) the global collaborative academic project of the digital Claremont Coptic Encyclopedia. Together, these initiatives represent an emerging electronic Coptic diaspora (e-diaspora) – a form of borderless territoriality that compensates for the loss of socio-religious, cultural, and political control in Egypt, providing first- and second-generation Copts with virtual territorial gains and a borderless space for community engagement and consciousness-raising.[36]

Navigating Digital Challenges in Coptic Advocacy

This section focuses on the challenges posed by information technology in Coptic advocacy in North America. It draws on insights from Coptic advocacy organizers and second-generation members to highlight key issues and strategies for navigating the complex digital landscape. The discussion addresses a range of obstacles, including cyber surveillance, self-censorship, and corporate control, alongside training gaps and power imbalances. It also examines the complexities of framing Coptic narratives and the internal divisions among Coptic diaspora activists.

1. Training Gaps and Power Dynamics

While digital transnational activism offers significant advantages, inadequate training and digital skills pose a major barrier to digital equity and effective engagement among the Coptic community. Many participants

[33] 7G, lawyer and activist, second-generation Copt, Zoom interview, Montreal, April 2022.
[34] 8I.
[35] Westbrook & Saad.
[36] Ibid., p. 345.

reported that this lack of training limits their ability to fully leverage digital tools, despite their potential to reach both Coptic and non-Coptic audiences. As one participant put it, "We have the platforms, but most people do not know how to use them strategically. There is no training, no guidance".[37] Over three-quarters of interviewees noted that these limitations have adversely affected their efforts to promote a shared Coptic identity. Reflecting on earlier periods of activism, 9L, an academic and advocate, remarked, "It was easier before. People were more focused. Now the noise online makes it hard to come together".[38] Additionally, unequal access to digital tools further exacerbates this challenge, particularly in grassroots communities where many first-generation Copts continue to rely on traditional communication methods, such as church bulletins or in-person meetings, rather than digital outreach.

Transitioning from these challenges, even when organizations possess some necessary skills, they often struggle to compete with more powerful actors, such as government agencies and corporate entities, that have far greater resources to develop sophisticated public relations campaigns that can overshadow grassroots efforts. Therefore, without genuine recognition and support for Coptic concerns, technology alone cannot address deeper systemic inequalities or political marginalization.

Moving forward, it is essential to recognize that the broader social and political context significantly influences the success of digital communication. While social media enables Coptic organizations to bypass traditional media and communicate directly with the public, it does not inherently change public perception or power dynamics. Moreover, although digital tools can help disseminate information and mobilize supporters, they cannot, on their own, overcome deeply entrenched political and social inequalities. The experiences of various Coptic advocacy leaders demonstrate that using IT for political purposes is constrained by the broader context of state control, public opinion, and available resources.

2. Cyber Surveillance and Privacy Concerns

Emerging digital securitization strategies increasingly rely on surveillance mechanisms targeting marginalized groups such as migrants, refugees, and diasporas that are viewed as potential threats. These strategies often involve monitoring through databases like Frontex, Eurosur, and Eurodac, as well as biometric technologies, intertwining national security concerns with global migration.[39] As a result, rather than alleviating power imbalances, the digital revolution deepens them, disproportionately burdening already vulnerable groups.

For Coptic advocacy, the threat of cyber surveillance and the spread of misinformation present serious obstacles. Advocacy leaders fear that state and powerful actors may use digital tools to monitor their activities. The risk of being perceived as a national security threat or facing political persecution can deter organizations from fully utilizing digital platforms. These concerns are heightened by the increased capacity of both homeland and host country governments to engage in surveillance, as seen in cases where Coptic activists have experienced monitoring and harassment.

Retaliation is a particularly significant challenge for Coptic diaspora activists, especially in their dealings with the Egyptian government, which has long viewed diaspora activism with suspicion as a hazard to Egypt's sovereignty. Egyptian regimes often frame such activism as unnecessary political pressure, external interference, or even conspiracies orchestrated by perceived enemies like Israel or Zionist

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[37] 6F, activist and university professor, Zoom interview, Kingston, Canada, August 2022.

[38] 9L, activist, university professor, and executive member of the Canadian Psychological Association, Zoom interview, Kingston, Canada, February 2022`.

[39] Mark Latonero & Paula Kift, "On Digital Passages and Borders: Refugees and the New Infrastructure for Movement and Control," *Social Media + Society*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2018), pp. 1-11; Shoshana A. Magnet, *When Biometrics Fail: Gender, Race, and the Technology of Identity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

Christianity.[40] Consequently, posting on social media frequently exposes activists to increased threats. To suppress opposition, the Egyptian government employs transnational repression tactics, including revoking citizenship, restricting travel to Egypt, harassing family members, confiscating property, and persecuting relatives still residing in Egypt.[41]

Interviews with activists reveal the disturbing effect of these tactics on diaspora mobilization. For instance, 7G, a lawyer and activist, highlighted the government's resistance to external groups influencing how internal issues are addressed, especially when these groups reside abroad.[42] Similarly, 13R, an executive member of Coptic Solidarity, noted that Coptic mobilization has been significantly stifled by government pressure aimed at silencing diaspora activists. The fear of retaliation extends beyond activists themselves. 5D, a lawyer and politician, expressed concerns about the safety of activists and their relatives, citing the 2012 release of a list of Coptic activists by ISIS, which included many names from Canada.[43] Likewise, 6F, a university professor and activist, stressed the need for cautious representation of the Coptic cause, fearing that activism could negatively affect their families and fellow Copts in Egypt.[44]

The experiences of activists like 11M further illustrate the complex dynamics of diaspora activism. For example, 11M, a politician and activist, wrote poems about sectarian discrimination and the Maspero events but hesitated to share them widely, fearing it would jeopardize his chances of returning to Egypt.[45] The pervasive threat of transnational repression demonstrates how the Egyptian government seeks to close down opportunities for advocacy, creating an environment of fear and self-censorship.

These tactics, employed not only against Coptic activists but also against a wide range of human rights defenders and civil society activists, regardless of religious affiliation, severely limit activists' ability to openly discuss political issues, both online and in person, with fellow expatriates. By fostering fear and mistrust, the government effectively undermines the diaspora's digital mobilization efforts, weakening the impact of Coptic advocacy organizations abroad and curtailing their capacity to influence homeland politics.

That being said, interviewees noted that political sensitivities in Egypt, as well as in host countries like the US and Canada, significantly influence their digital advocacy strategies. These political dynamics require careful adaptation of strategies to avoid conflict and maximize impact. They emphasized that in the US, the political climate surrounding religious freedom and cultural sensitivity plays a crucial role in shaping how messages are framed and received. During politically charged periods, they adjust their messaging to focus more on general human rights rather than specific Coptic issues to avoid potential backlash. In Canada, where there is a strong emphasis on multiculturalism, advocacy content is tailored to align with the country's values on diversity and inclusion.

3. Censorship and Corporate Control

The challenges posed by government surveillance extend to corporate censorship, where digital platforms play a significant role in controlling content visibility. As digital activism increasingly depends on social media, Coptic advocacy groups have encountered numerous incidents of their content being monitored,

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[40] Sameh Elnaggar, "Egyptian Diaspora Explains the Meaning of Its Political Engagement in Washington, DC," ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2019; Hani Labib, *Azmat al-Ḥimāya al-Dīniyya: al-Dīn wa-l-Dawla fī Miṣr* (Cairo: Dar al-Shouruq, 2000); Bosmat Yefet, "The Coptic Diaspora and the Status of the Coptic Minority in Egypt," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. 43, no. 7 (2017), pp. 1205-1221.

[41] Mena Botros, "The Coptic Identity: Recognizing the Coptic 'Indigenous Peoples' Status for Protection from State-Sponsored Discrimination," *Coptic Solidarity Report*, 2/5/2023, accessed on 23/6/2025, at: https://tinyurl.com/4c2b66ek; Egyptian Human Rights Forum, *Years of Persecution, Reprisals, and Deprivation of Basic Citizenship Rights: Targeting of Egyptian Human Rights Defenders in the Diaspora* (2024), accessed on 23/6/2025, at: https://tinyurl.com/3xumrybw

[42] 7G.

[43] 5D.

[44] 6F.

[45] 11M, Conservative Party of Canada candidate for Mississauga–Streetsville 2019 and activist, Zoom interview, Toronto, March 2022.

flagged, or removed, prompting a need for careful messaging strategies. Activists worry that their posts, aimed at highlighting human rights violations and Coptic persecution, could be suppressed by platform algorithms, hindering engagement and amplifying fears of corporate surveillance.

Facebook's algorithm adjustments, for instance, have been especially impactful. These algorithmic changes have at times restricted the reach of posts related to Coptic issues, such as the ongoing discrimination against Copts in Egypt. This shadow-banning effect, where posts are limited without explicit removal, frustrates advocacy efforts, as it reduces the visibility of critical campaigns like the #SaveCopts movement.[46] In one instance, several posts related to the campaign were flagged or removed across Facebook and Instagram, limiting their impact and raising concerns about biases in content moderation policies. As a result, activists are forced to adjust their approach, navigating around these corporate gatekeepers while seeking to protect the privacy and integrity of their members.[47]

The rise of misinformation and the proliferation of fake accounts further complicates digital advocacy. A key example occurred when false information circulated about a major campaign, leading to significant efforts to counteract the damage done to the advocacy message. This wave of disinformation not only diluted the original message but also added complexity to online mobilization efforts, as it required advocacy organizations to defend against false narratives while advancing their cause.

In response to corporate censorship, Coptic advocacy organizations have also embraced alternative communication channels. Many groups now place increased emphasis on email newsletters and independent websites to ensure that their key messages, especially those around human rights violations, are shared without the risk of suppression.

4. Challenges in Framing Copts' Traumatic Memory, Cultural Identity, and Persecution Narratives Across Generations

Digital media has profoundly influenced the Coptic community's sense of identity, strengthening collective ties by providing a platform for shared experiences and values. However, there are concerns that it could also dilute traditional practices if not managed carefully. The impact of digital media is multifaceted; while it reinforces community bonds, it simultaneously challenges the preservation of cultural identity. This duality presents significant hurdles for Coptic digital advocacy, particularly in light of the declining interest among second-generation Copts in maintaining a strong cultural identity, complicating efforts to mobilize around shared goals. Many participants expressed concern that the influx of foreign ideas, often introduced through the internet, entices younger Copts to adopt different lifestyles, distancing them from their cultural roots. This dilution of identity, magnified by online exposure to global influences, weakens the ability of advocacy organizations to unite the community and act effectively.

For second-generation Copts in North America, digital media practices play a key role in shaping identity. These practices are embedded in their daily social, cultural, and political activities, influencing their sense of belonging within the diaspora and their engagement with Coptic causes. However, their connection to traumatic memory varies considerably from that of the first generation. While older Copts carry the trauma of the 1970s through the 1990s – when many left Egypt – the younger generation, born or raised in North America, tends to view the Coptic plight more liberally. With limited firsthand experience of sectarian violence, they often rely on the transgenerational transmission of memories and digital representations from their parents or the church to form their understanding.

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[46] Coptic Solidarity, *The Impact of Social Media Restrictions on Coptic Advocacy*, 2023, accessed on 23/6/2025, at: https://tinyurl.com/mu5rk3ht

[47] Ibid.

The second-generation's relationship with Coptic identity is marked by a tension between "moving on" from past traumas and "sticking" to these narratives, as they remain central to their sense of self. This trauma is rooted in both historical and contemporary experiences of marginalization and violence. Empirical evidence and human rights reports have documented various incidents highlighting the challenges faced by the Coptic community. For instance, between 2016 and 2019, the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights documented at least 36 cases of violence against Coptic Christian communities, particularly in Upper Egypt's el-Minya governorate. These incidents often stemmed from disputes over the construction or renovation of churches.[48] Additionally, the 2023 Report on International Religious Freedom by the U.S. Department of State noted reports of abductions and forced conversions of Coptic women and girls. Civil society groups and Coptic organizations reported at least eight such cases during the year.[49] However, it is essential to recognize that the broader Egyptian populace, irrespective of religious affiliation, has also faced significant political and religious persecution. The 2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for Egypt highlighted credible reports of arbitrary or unlawful killings, enforced disappearances, and torture affecting various segments of society.[50]

Online spaces, particularly social media, provide platforms for second-generation North American Copts to engage with these narratives selectively. Many focus on instances of violence and discrimination primarily when these events reinforce their identity, often sharing such stories digitally to raise awareness. The church also plays a crucial role in maintaining their religious identity as Orthodox Christians, though their political engagement with the plight of Copts in Egypt may be less pronounced online.

Language and historical distance further complicate identity formation, particularly in the digital realm. Many second-generation Copts are less familiar with Arabic have a more mediated relationship to Egypt's history of sectarian violence, which they did not experience directly and did not grow up navigating in everyday life, unlike their parents. As the first generation, with vivid memories of these traumas, diminishes in number, the younger generation struggles to fully grasp the suffering endured by earlier generations. This creates a gap in digital advocacy efforts, where historical events are less frequently discussed or shared.

Despite this historical gap, the second generation has shown a strong reaction to recent acts of sectarian violence, particularly following ISIS attacks on Copts in Libya in 2016. Many Coptic youth took visible online actions, such as changing their Facebook profile pictures to the Arabic letter "nūn" (ن), a symbol used by ISIS to mark Christian homes. Others wore "Nation of the Cross" clothing in solidarity, amplifying their collective voice digitally. As one second-generation scholar, 22I, noted, "We have endured over 2,000 years of martyrdom and persecution. If anything, these events help reinforce and strengthen my identity and faith". This stresses the power of digital platforms in mobilizing support during critical moments.[51]

However, second-generation Copts generally exhibit a lower level of wariness toward other religions compared to the first generation. According to 5D, a second-generation activist, the more conservative nature of many Coptic organizations in North America does not appeal as strongly to younger, more liberal Copts. As a result, many tend to engage more with digital content addressing issues such as homelessness, shelters, and drug abuse, causes that resonate with their local communities rather than distant political struggles.[52]

This generational divide presents a challenge for digital advocacy, as maintaining a collective identity across generations becomes increasingly difficult in the face of differing perspectives, priorities, and levels

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[48] "*Egypt: Release Nine Coptic Christians Detained for Attempting to Rebuild Church*," Amnesty International (March 2022), accessed on 23/6/2025, at: https://tinyurl.com/mrnr42yt

[49] *2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Egypt*, U.S. Department of State, accessed on 23/6/2025, at: https://tinyurl.com/27t3jvxa

[50] Ibid.

[51] 22I, Coptic scholar at Queen's University, Zoom interview, Toronto, September 2023.

[52] 5D.

of engagement with the Coptic plight. Online platforms, while crucial for raising awareness, must bridge these gaps to sustain a unified Coptic advocacy movement across generations.

5. Digital Activism and Disagreements Among Coptic Advocates

A significant factor influencing the pattern of digital activism within the Coptic diaspora is the internal disagreements regarding how to reframe and present their claims. Activists strategically assign frames to relevant events to induce a shared consciousness for collective action.[53] While the majority of Copts agree on the importance of advocating for religious freedom in Egypt, they hold differing views on several critical issues: 1) how Coptic activists should frame their claims, particularly the dilemma of advocating for equal citizenship versus emphasizing minority rights; 2) the extent to which foreign governments should intervene in Egyptian politics; and 3) the overall strategy and vision for engaging with the Egyptian government. These differing perspectives represent a substantial source of disagreement among Coptic activists and intellectuals in the diaspora, often playing out in online discussions and campaigns.

Occasionally, diaspora involvement can reignite conflicts, with well-meaning international engagement sometimes leading to misdirected approaches that exacerbate tensions. For example, several organizations that promoted aggressive and anti-Islamic stances failed to gain significant support from the Coptic diaspora or the broader Coptic community in Egypt.[54] Ironically, their activities attracted considerable online media attention, which ultimately discredited other Coptic organizations. Notably, the National American Coptic Assembly, established in 2009, was criticized for its unrealistic perspectives and vague mission. This organization inadvertently provided a platform for extremist elements within the diaspora to propagate Islamophobic rhetoric. As a result, the National American Coptic Assembly and similar groups were generally unwelcome among the broader Coptic population, as they fragmented the support base rather than fostering unity in defence of a common cause.

While digital activism has provided the Coptic diaspora with opportunities for mobilization and advocacy, it has also contributed to tensions within and beyond diaspora communities. Digital spaces are not only sites of solidarity but also arenas of ideological conflict, where different factions within diasporic groups promote diverging narratives. In some cases, individual actors have used digital platforms to engage in more contentious forms of activism that exacerbate interreligious and interethnic tensions. One notable example is Nakoula Basseley, an Egyptian-American Copt who produced Innocence of Muslims, a controversial and inflammatory film that sparked protests across the Muslim world. His subsequent association with far-right Christian figures further fuelled these divisions, illustrating how digital activism can be co-opted by extremist actors to serve exclusionary and confrontational agendas.[55] Ahmed Al-Rawi documents similar digital tensions, demonstrating how online platforms often become battlegrounds for competing political and religious ideologies.[56] These instances show the need for a more critical examination of how digital advocacy, while often framed as a tool for empowerment, can also generate backlash, deepen societal cleavages, and complicate diaspora activism by reinforcing polarized discourses.

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[53] Doowan Lee, "Resistance Dynamics and Social Movement Theory: Conditions, Mechanisms, and Effects," *Journal of Strategic Security*, vol. 10, no. 4 (2017), pp. 42-63; Amanda Pullum, "Social Movement Theory and the Modern Day Tea Party," *Sociology Compass*, vol. 8, no. 12 (2014), pp. 1377-1387; Marie-Claude Tremblay, "Can We Build on Social Movement Theories to Develop and Improve Community-Based Participatory Research? A Framework Synthesis Review," *American Journal of Community Psychology*, vol. 59, nos. 3-4 (2017), pp. 333-362.

[54] Yvonne Haddad, "Good Copt, Bad Copt: Competing Narratives on Coptic Identity in Egypt and the United States," *Studies in World Christianity*, vol. 19, no. 3 (2013), pp. 208-232.

[55] "Details Emerge on 'Innocence of Muslims' Filmmaker," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 14/9/2012, accessed on 23/6/2025, at: https://tinyurl.com/mryfshna

[56] Ahmed Al-Rawi, *Islam on YouTube: Online Debates, Protests, and Extremism* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

In contrast, some Coptic organizations that emerged in the 2000s, such as the Coptic Assembly of America, Coptic Solidarity, the International Coptic Union, and the Canadian Coptic Foundation, have been effective in advocating for the Coptic community. Coptic Solidarity stands out as one of the most prominent human rights organizations for Copts in North America. To advocate for the rights of Copts, Coptic Solidarity has organized over 20 demonstrations in front of the White House, serving as a staunch defender of their cause. Additionally, Coptic Solidarity has spearheaded numerous international online petition campaigns focusing on critical issues such as proportional representation for the Coptic community, amending Article Two of the Egyptian constitution, combating Islamist extremists and terrorist organizations, and ending the abduction of Coptic girls.

Over the past decade, Coptic Solidarity has focused extensively on advocating for Coptic women and underage girls trafficked or kidnapped, disseminating critical information through social media outlets. Their digital presence has amplified their activism, enabling them to reach a broader audience. For instance, on 22 July 2011, Hany Guirguis, now the president of Coptic Solidarity, testified during a Congressional hearing titled "Minority at Risk: Coptic Christians in Egypt". This hearing, broadcast on C-SPAN, highlighted that these crimes meet the United Nations' definitions of trafficking and align with both Egyptian and US protocols, underscoring the importance of digital advocacy in shaping international awareness and policy.[57]

Conclusion

This study has examined how the Coptic e-diaspora in North America utilizes digital platforms to mobilize political agency, advocate for human rights, and maintain cultural and religious identity. Through social media, Coptic advocacy organizations have created transnational networks that amplify their voices, enhance visibility, and engage with global political structures. However, the findings illustrate that while digital technologies provide opportunities for mobilization, they also introduce significant challenges, including misinformation, censorship, cyber surveillance, and the risk of transnational repression.

As demonstrated in the experiences shared by respondents, these challenges have tangible consequences for Coptic aivists. For instance, 7G, a lawyer and activist, emphasized that "the Egyptian government is resistant to any external influence on how Copts' issues are addressed, especially when those advocating for them live abroad".[58] Similarly, 13R, an executive member of Coptic Solidarity, noted that government pressure has significantly stifled diaspora mobilization efforts, creating an environment of fear and self-censorship.[59] The pervasive risk of retaliation is further evidenced by the experience of 11M, a politician and activist, who hesitated to share his poetry about sectarian violence, fearing repercussions that could jeopardize his ability to return to Egypt.[60] These accounts underscore how digital activism, while offering new tools for advocacy, also exposes activists to significant threats.

Furthermore, this study highlights the generational divide in digital advocacy, with second-generation Copts often engaging selectively with narratives of trauma and persecution. While first-generation Copts have firsthand experiences of marginalization in Egypt, younger Copts rely primarily on transgenerational transmission of memory and digital representations. This difference influences their approach to activism, as reflected in the testimony of 22I, a second-generation scholar, who stated, "We have endured over 2,000 years of martyrdom and persecution. If anything, these events help reinforce and strengthen my identity and faith".[61] However, this perspective contrasts with those of younger activists like 5D, who noted that

[57] "*Jihad of the Womb: Trafficking of Coptic Women & Girls in Egypt*," *Coptic Solidarity*, 10/9/2020, accessed on 23/6/2025, at: https://tinyurl.com/5ctmbw2z
[58] 7G.
[59] 13R.
[60] 11M.
[61] 22I.

"many second-generation Copts do not connect as strongly with traditional advocacy organizations, as this generation's priorities often focus on broader social issues rather than specific Coptic grievances".[62] This generational shift complicates efforts to maintain a unified advocacy movement across different age groups.

Despite these obstacles, the study finds that Coptic advocacy organizations continue to adapt to the evolving digital landscape. Groups such as Coptic Solidarity have demonstrated resilience by leveraging international platforms to bring Coptic issues to global attention. Their advocacy, including congressional testimonies and international petition campaigns, has been instrumental in pressuring policymakers to address the systemic discrimination faced by Copts in Egypt. However, their effectiveness is increasingly challenged by digital censorship, misinformation, and shifting priorities within the diaspora.

To navigate these challenges, Coptic advocacy groups have adopted strategic measures such as diversifying their online presence, utilizing secure communication tools, and tailoring their messaging for different political and cultural contexts. These adaptations allow them to bypass corporate censorship, mitigate state surveillance risks, and ensure their narratives reach wider audiences. Additionally, the rise of independent digital fundraising has enabled Coptic organizations to operate with greater financial autonomy, reducing dependence on traditional institutions that may seek to control their messaging.

More broadly, the experiences of the Coptic e-diaspora illustrate how marginalized communities leverage digital technologies for both resistance and survival. As digital activism continues to evolve, the Coptic case offers insights into the resilience of diasporic advocacy movements in the face of state repression and algorithmic restrictions. Ultimately, while digital platforms provide new avenues for engagement, their potential is constrained by broader political realities, requiring constant adaptation and innovation. Moving forward, the sustainability of Coptic digital advocacy will depend on its ability to balance visibility with security, maintain generational engagement, and develop strategies that counteract both state repression and corporate control.

Study Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study primarily focuses on the challenges of online activism within the Coptic community, specifically examining issues such as surveillance, self-censorship, and other obstacles to digital engagement. Consequently, it does not provide a comprehensive review of the history of Copts in Egypt or their inter-communal relations with Muslims. While aspects like origins, culture, religion, language, heritage, and historical challenges faced by the Coptic community are essential, they are not the central focus of this research. Moreover, the study does not extensively cover the migration history of Copts or the formation of the Coptic diaspora as a transnational group. Instead, it offers insights into the social, cultural, and political motivations behind Coptic immigration to North America, highlighting early activism and mobilization efforts that have shaped contemporary digital advocacy.

In addition to these limitations, the concept of "digital diaspora" faces several challenges and paradoxes. First, the term lacks a clear definition, despite various interpretations and emerging terms like "e-diaspora" and "net-diaspora". This ambiguity can oversimplify or merge diverse practices and groups, thereby diminishing its effectiveness in addressing injustices and amplifying marginalized voices. Furthermore, there is no established methodology for identifying and analysing digital diasporas, and current research often overlooks the different motivations and experiences of diaspora communities across the Global South and North, as well as their internal diversity. To address these issues, this research suggests that digital diasporas should be viewed as dynamic constellations rather than fixed entities, acknowledging

[62] 5D.

their evolving nature and the complex interplay of identity, communication, and belonging. This approach integrates the emotional and affective dimensions of digital interactions, recognizing that the digital and physical worlds are interconnected and that emotions play a crucial role in shaping diasporic experiences. By considering these factors, researchers can better understand how digital technologies transform migration experiences, community formation, and identity.

On the other hand, the study of the Coptic e-diaspora and its role in mobilization has significant implications for future research that can extend to the broader field of diaspora studies and transnationalism. First, the dynamics of transnational activism observed within the Coptic e-diaspora can be applied to other diaspora communities. Researchers can investigate how various diaspora groups use social media to advocate for political, social, or cultural causes in their home countries and explore the effectiveness of these efforts. Additionally, comparing digital identities across different diaspora groups can reveal both commonalities and differences, prompting exploration of how digital identities influence the integration and preservation of cultural heritage within various diaspora communities.

Second, the study's identification of challenges and drawbacks of excessive digital engagement can inform research on how various diaspora communities mitigate or address issues like online harassment, misinformation, and echo chambers. This knowledge can lead to better strategies for promoting positive online interactions. Third, long-term research tracking the evolution of diaspora engagement through social media can provide insights into changing transnational dynamics over time, helping researchers identify trends and adapt their methodologies accordingly. Fourth, the study's policy implications regarding social media use can be extended to transnational contexts in general. Policymakers and organizations can consider how to leverage or regulate digital platforms for transnational cooperation, advocacy, and humanitarian efforts. Lastly, ethical considerations surrounding social media use in diaspora studies can be expanded to the broader field of transnationalism. Researchers and practitioners must grapple with issues related to privacy, data security, information dissemination, and responsible digital engagement in transnational initiatives.

Looking ahead, the integration of emerging technologies such as AI and virtual reality into digital engagement strategies offers both opportunities and challenges. These technologies could enhance advocacy efforts through innovative means of connection and storytelling but will also introduce new privacy and security concerns. Staying informed and adaptable will be crucial for Coptic advocacy organizations as they continue to navigate the evolving digital landscape.

Appendix: Selected Interview Questions

- How does your organization utilize social media and digital platforms to engage with the Coptic community and broader audiences? What are your primary goals (for example, advocacy, awareness, fundraising, community building)?
- What are the most significant challenges your organization faces when using digital platforms for advocacy and mobilization? Have these challenges evolved over time?
- How do concerns about government or corporate surveillance affect your organization's digital strategy? Have you experienced instances of monitoring, censorship, or other forms of control over your content?
- How do you tailor your messaging to engage different audiences (Coptic and non-Coptic)? Can you provide examples of successful campaigns or initiatives that were enabled by digital tools?
- How do political and social contexts, both in Egypt and the diaspora host countries, influence your organization's digital advocacy strategies? Have these contexts led to changes in your online activities?

- In what ways do you believe the use of digital media has influenced the Coptic community's sense of identity, both at an individual and collective level? Do you see this impact as strengthening or diluting community ties?
- How frequently do you engage with Coptic advocacy organizations online? Which platforms do you find most effective, and why?
- What barriers prevent you from engaging more actively with Coptic advocacy groups online? How could these barriers be addressed by the organizations themselves?
- Can you provide specific examples where privacy or surveillance concerns impacted your or your organization's digital activities?
- How do you see the future of digital engagement for the Coptic community evolving in response to these challenges?

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Khalid Mutlaq*

Economic Theology in Iraq: The Parallel Economy of Al-Kafeel

الثيولوجيا الاقتصادية في العراق: الاقتصاد الموازي لشبكة الكفيل

Abstract: This study explores the rise of "economic theology" in Iraq through an examination of the Shi'i Al-Kafeel network and its expanding institutional presence. It addresses the central question of how religious authority, when disengaged from state structures, constructs a parallel economy grounded in theological legitimacy and moral purpose. The analysis, adopting a theoretical framework shaped by Max Weber, Werner Sombart, and contemporary reflections on religious economies, approaches Al-Kafeel not merely as an administrative apparatus but as a symbolic formation that converts ritual authority into organizational capacity and economic power. The study argues that Al-Kafeel exemplifies a distinctive mode of socio-economic action in post-2003 Iraq, one in which religious legitimacy, managerial rationality, and communal trust converge to produce an alternative model of institutional endurance and social influence.

Keywords: Economic Theology; Iraq; Al-Kafeel Network; Religious Authority; Shi'i Institutional Endurance.

ملخص: تبحث الدراسة صعود «الثيولوجيا الاقتصادية» في العراق من خلال دراسة شبكة الكفيل الشيعية وتوسع حضورها المؤسسي. يتناول السؤال المحوري كيفية قيام السلطة الدينية، بمعزل عن هياكل الدولة، بناء اقتصاد موازٍ قائم على الشرعية اللاهوتية والغاية الأخلاقية. يتبنى التحليل إطارًا نظريًا مستوحى من ماكس فيبر وفيرنر سومبارت ودراسات معاصرة حول الاقتصادات الدينية، حيث لا ينظر إلى الكفيل بوصفه جهازًا إداريًا فحسب، بل كتشكيل رمزي يحوّل السلطة الشعائرية إلى قدرة تنظيمية وقوة اقتصادية. وتجادل الدراسة بأن الكفيل يجسد نمطًا مميزًا من العمل الاجتماعي والاقتصادي في العراق ما بعد العام 2003، حيث تتلاقى الشرعية الدينية، والعقلانية الإدارية، والثقة المجتمعية لإنتاج نموذج بديل للاستدامة المؤسسية والتأثير الاجتماعي.

كلمات مفتاحية: الثيولوجيا الاقتصادية؛ العراق؛ شبكة الكفيل؛ السلطة الدينية؛ الصمود

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Introduction

The term "Al-Kafeel Economy" describes the expanding economic activities of Iraq's religious shrines, particularly those associated with the Al-Abbas Holy Shrine since 2003. The designation draws on the shrine's formal title, Al-Kafeel, a name imbued with profound theological resonance as it refers to one of the epithets of Abbas ibn Ali (d. 680). By extending a sacred title to a network of commercial enterprises, the institution constructs a symbolic veil that obscures the profit-oriented nature of its activities, allowing religious legitimacy and economic practice to merge within a single representational frame. This semiotic manoeuvre signals the emergence of a complex organizational structure whose economic role has grown far beyond its ritual and custodial origins. Today, Al-Kafeel network operates across media production, agriculture, industry, services, and investment, positioning itself as a parallel economy with substantial financial and administrative autonomy. Examining this transformation offers insight into how religious institutions in post-2003 Iraq have translated devotional authority into managerial power, and how economic theology – where belief, legitimacy, and material practice intersect – has become a defining feature of their institutional expansion. Through this lens, Al-Kafeel appears not simply as a religious establishment but as a consequential socio-economic actor.

The intricate relationship between religion and economics in Iraq is profound, particularly when viewed through the lens of Al-Kafeel network. This study explores the transformation of religious institutions in Iraq, with a specific focus on the Shi'i community, tracing their evolution from purely spiritual authorities to prominent economic entities. Historically, religious institutions in Iraq have wielded considerable influence over social and cultural life. However, in recent decades, their role has expanded to encompass significant economic activity, thereby positioning them as key players in the national economy.

The paper draws upon the theoretical insights of Max Weber, Werner Sombart, and Pierre Bourdieu to explore the intersection of religion and economics in Iraq. Through his work on Protestant ethics, Weber provides a foundation for understanding how religious beliefs and practices can influence economic behaviour. Similarly, Sombart's analysis of the Jewish community's economic role in Europe and Bourdieu's concepts of symbolic power and capital help contextualize the economic strategies of religious institutions in Iraq.

In the Iraqi context, Al-Kafeel network exemplifies how religious institutions have capitalized on their spiritual authority to engage in economic ventures. These institutions have not only amassed wealth but have also become integral to the economic landscape, influencing everything from real estate and agriculture to education and healthcare. The study highlights how religious beliefs and practices are intertwined with economic decision-making processes within these institutions, thereby shaping broader economic trends in Iraq.

Moreover, the study examines the collaboration between religious authorities and the emerging political elite, referred to here as the *Parvenus*.[1] This alliance between religious institutions and the new political class has had profound implications for governance and economic development in Iraq. The research argues that this partnership has contributed to the perpetuation of corruption and the entrenchment of the

[1] The term *parvenus* originates in French literature, denoting individuals who have recently acquired wealth or social status but lack the traditional prestige associated with long-established elites. In the context of post-2003 Iraq, this term takes on a broader and more specific meaning. The Parvenus in Iraq are not merely *nouveau riche*; they represent a new ruling class that emerged in the aftermath of the invasion, obtaining wealth, prestige, and political power simultaneously. Under the guise of sectarian religious authority, this class consolidated control, engaging in widespread looting of public funds on an unprecedented scale. Former finance ministers have stated that thirty billionaires have emerged since 2003, all from this new political elite. This figure, confirmed by another former finance minister, indicates the existence of many more who, while not billionaires, have amassed significant fortunes. As such, these individuals transcend the typical definition of *nouveau riche*; their rise to power and wealth, alongside their looting of state resources, necessitates a reconfiguration of the concept. Thus, the term Parvenus is employed here with new connotations to describe this class of Iraqi elites, whose wealth and influence have developed in parallel with their political dominance and religious affiliations.

socio-political status quo, thereby stifling reform and innovation. By shedding light on the economic role of religious institutions in Iraq, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics between religion, economics, and governance in the country. The analysis not only offers insights into the specific context of Iraq but also provides a framework for understanding similar phenomena in other regions where religion and economics are closely intertwined.

Theoretical Framework

Weber provides a foundational lens for understanding the relationship between religion and economics. His seminal work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* explores how religious beliefs significantly shaped the development of capitalism. He theorized that Protestant religious values and beliefs, particularly those stemming from Calvinist traditions, provided a moral framework that encouraged economic behaviour leading to capitalism. This provides insight into the relationship between belief and economic behaviour, which in turn shapes the economic culture of the religious institution in Iraq and its sponsorship of the economies of what I refer to as "the parvenus", in reference to the group that took power after 2003.

Weber argues that Protestant ethics encouraged an ascetic lifestyle, where hard work and frugality were highly valued.[2] Protestants, especially Calvinists, believed in the concept of *Beruf*[3] and that work was a means of glorifying God. This led to a disciplined, rational, and diligent workforce – ideal traits for capitalist production. Calvinism also embraced predestination,[4] a doctrine that caused significant anxiety about salvation among Calvinist believers. Weber saw this anxiety as somewhat alleviated by success in one's worldly calling, which could be interpreted as a sign of divine election. Thus, the accumulation of wealth, though not an end in itself, became a means of demonstrating God's grace.[5] Protestant ethics also emphasized rationalization, organization, and efficiency in all areas of life. This rational approach to life and work aligned well with the needs of a flourishing capitalist economy, which required precise resource management and continuous improvement of production processes.

Weber also assumed that the austerity promoted by Calvinism led to capital accumulation. Since ostentatious displays of wealth were frowned upon, and money was not spent on lavish lifestyles, it was reinvested in a believer's enterprises. Thus, as Weber emphasizes, the decisive feature of the capitalist "spirit" lies in the systematic reinvestment of profits as capital rather than their consumption, a rational conduct that he identifies as fundamental to the development of modern capitalist enterprise.[6]

Weber was not alone in studying the complex relationship between a society's religion and its economic model. Many preceded and followed him in this field. Sombart, a contemporary of Weber and a German sociologist and economist, found that "members of Jewish communities contributed to the overall development of capitalism, although several elements made their connection to commercial capitalism

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[2] Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Talcott Parsons (trans.) (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005 [1930]), pp. 51-52.

[3] *Beruf* is a German term used by Max Weber in his work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism.* It translates to "vocation" or "calling" in English and refers to the concept of a divinely ordained duty or profession. In Weber's analysis, Beruf is central to Protestant ethics, particularly in Calvinism, where work is seen not merely as a means of earning a livelihood but as a spiritual calling through which individuals can serve God. This notion of Beruf encouraged a disciplined and methodical approach to work, aligning with the principles of capitalism by promoting hard work, frugality, and the reinvestment of profits, all seen as signs of God's favour and evidence of one's predestined salvation.

[4] In Calvinist theology, predestination is the doctrine that God has preordained the salvation or damnation of individuals before they are born. This belief generated anxiety among believers about their spiritual fate, which Weber suggested could be alleviated by success in one's worldly calling, seen as a potential sign of divine favour.

[5] Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Routledge), p. 79.

[6] See Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Talcott Parsons (trans.) (New York: Scribner, 1958), esp. pp. 17-19, 47-51, where Weber explains that the moral rejection of consumption and the ethical imperative to increase one's capital through continuous reinvestment constitute the core of the capitalist "spirit", and that this disciplined economic asceticism played a decisive role in the emergence of modern capitalist institutions.

stronger than to investment capitalism".[7] Sombart cites several reasons for this, some of which are rooted in the Jewish religious system, and others in their unique status in Western societies.[8]

Among the studies extending Weber's line of inquiry is Kuan Li's doctoral thesis, "Confucianism and Capitalist Development in the East Asian Newly Industrialised Societies", which contends that contemporary Confucian values, particularly frugality, discipline, hard work, and familial organization, have provided a cultural orientation conducive to capitalist development in East Asia, especially in countries like Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore.[9] The researcher examines the role of Confucian ethics, which emphasize goodness, harmony, and propriety, in creating a conducive environment for business operations and economic growth.[10]

Li considers how Confucianism, traditionally seen as an obstacle to capitalism, as Weber suggested, has evolved. In this regard, he disagrees deeply with Weber, arguing that contemporary Confucian values facilitated the development of the capitalist system by encouraging hard work, austerity, and a focus on education, which are crucial for economic productivity, creating a unique form of capitalism in East Asia, distinct from Western models. Li introduces the concept of "popular Confucianism" as a conceptual tool to explain how traditional values are interpreted and disseminated among the general public, influencing daily business practices and economic behaviours.[11]

Reflecting on Weber's theories, Li's thesis discusses the dual role of culture as both a product of social and economic conditions and as an independent variable that can influence economic outcomes. He thus presents Confucianism not as a static cultural heritage but as a dynamic force influencing modern economic strategies and policies in East Asia.[12]

To refine our understanding of how religious beliefs shape economic patterns, Buddhism must also be considered in both its Indian origins and its later development in China. Two key works illuminate this evolution: Jacques Gernet's *Buddhism in Chinese Society*, which investigates the economic roles of Buddhist monastic institutions in medieval China,[13] and Gregory K. Ornatowski's "Continuity and Change in the Economic Ethics of Buddhism", which analyses shifts in Buddhist ethical attitudes toward economic activity".[14] Gernet traces the development of Buddhism in China and its direct and indirect involvement in the Chinese economy from the fifth to the tenth centuries AD, a history where the sacred, the ethical, wealth accumulation, and distribution intertwine.[15] He offers a fascinating analysis of the trade of sacred objects and of the Buddhist temple as a bank (which denies itself this label) that accumulates sacred resources, donations, and voluntary and non-religious profits, such as those engaging in usurious practices or mercenary activities (e.g. loans of cereals, collateral loans, taxes on mills, agricultural levies). These resources, not used for maintenance, worship, celebrations, or serving the dead, accumulate in an inexhaustible treasure.[16]

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[7] Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Talcott Parsons (trans.) (London: Allen & Unwin, 1930), pp. 115-116, 157-158.

[8] Werner Sombart, *The Jews, and Modern Capitalism*, M. Epstein (trans.) (Ontario: Batoche Books, 2001), pp. 27-42.

[9] Kuan Li, "*Confucianism and Capitalist Development in the East Asian Newly Industrialised Societies*," PhD. diss., Loughborough University, 1997, pp. 153-155.

[10] Ibid., pp. 102-104.

[11] Ibid., p. 55.

[12] Ibid., pp. 47-48.

[13] Jacques Gernet, *Buddhism in Chinese Society: An Economic History from the Fifth to the Tenth Centuries*, Franciscus Verellen (trans.) (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

[14] Gregory K. Ornatowski, "Continuity and Change in the Economic Ethics of Buddhism: Evidence from the History of Buddhism in India, China, and Japan," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, vol. 3 (1996), pp. 187-229. For an analysis of shifts in Buddhist ethical attitudes toward economic activity, see pp.187-228.

[15] Gernet, pp. 3-5.

[16] Ibid., 22.

Ornatowski's reading of the economic ethics of Buddhism notes that in Chinese and Japanese Mahayana Buddhism, monasteries and monks widely participated in commercial activities, including usury and brokerage in mortgages. He suggests that Buddhism was not hostile to economic development or the rise of capitalism, although these did not necessarily align with traditional spiritual teachings on the principle of detachment from the material world.[17]

It is worth noting that all of the above works highlighting the relationship between religious beliefs and economic patterns discuss sub-sects rather than religion in general. While Weber addressed Protestantism in its Calvinist strand of Christianity, Sombart focused on the Maranos sect within Judaism, and Li confined himself to Confucianism in countries and cultures outside China.

Economic Theology in Iraq: Religious Authority and Patterns of Economic Behaviour

In the Iraqi context, a specific economic theology has developed around the Shi'i belief that state property is "ownerless", providing an economic theological justification for the elite's control over public assets. This has been framed not as theft but as an agency for the absent religious authority, creating a hybrid model of a rentier economy and a parallel sacred economy based on investing state resources by possessing and managing them.

The Principle of *Majhūl al-Mālik*: Origins and Doctrinal Development

The concept of *majhūl al-mālik* (lit. "[belonging to an] unknown owner") is rooted in Twelver Shi'i theology. It refers to properties whose ownership cannot be clearly identified, often considered to be under the ownership of the Imam al-Mahdi, the twelfth Imam in occultation. The religious authorities, acting as the representatives of the Imam, are entrusted with the management of these properties. The principle allows for the use or redistribution of these assets under strict religious guidelines, typically for the benefit of the public or for charitable purposes. This doctrine underscores the religious obligation to manage such properties with integrity, as they are ultimately viewed as part of the Imam's trust, and by extension, the trust of the community.

In early Shi'i jurisprudence, this idea developed as a solution to the question of who owns public and communal assets in the absence of the rightful Imam. Leading Shi'i scholars, such as Shaykh al-Mufid (d. 1022) and al-Tusi (d. 1067), framed this concept as a form of divine trusteeship, where the jurists (*mujtahid*s) act as the Imam's deputies during his occultation, managing these resources for the community's benefit.

This idea is extensively discussed in Shaykh al-Mufid's *Kitāb al-Irshād*, a seminal text in Shi'i jurisprudence. Al-Mufid's interpretations of the role of jurists in the absence of the Imam provide a foundational understanding of how public property is managed under the principle of *majhūl al-mālik*.[18] Similarly, al-Tusi expanded on this by establishing a framework in which jurists assume control over public goods, outlining this role in his jurisprudential volume, *al-Nihāya*.[19]

Modern Applications and Legal Debates

The principle of *majhūl al-mālik* plays a pivotal role in the Islamic Republic of Iran, particularly under the doctrine of *Wilāyat al-Faqīh* (Guardianship of the Jurist), championed by Ayatollah Khomeini. In his work,

[17] Ornatowski, pp. 199-203, 206-207.
[18] al-Mufid, *al-Irshād fī Maʿrifat Ḥujaj Allāh ʿalā al-ʿIbād*, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dar al-Taʿaruf, 1981), pp. 85-87.
[19] al-Tusi, *al-Nihāya fī Mujarrad al-Fiqh wa-l-Fatāwā* (Beirut: Dar al-Adwa, 1988), pp. 105-107.

Islamic Government: Governance of the Jurist, Khomeini articulates the legal and theological justification for the state's control over public resources, treating them as under divine trusteeship during the Imam's occultation.[20] The modern application of *Wilāyat al-Faqīh* incorporates *majhūl al-mālik* to justify the state's management of national assets, such as oil, under the supervision of religious leaders.

Ayatollah Murtaza Mutahhari elaborates on this concept in his treatise *Dastūr-i Islāmī barā-yi Ḥukūmat*, where he explores the moral and economic duties of religious leaders in managing resources on behalf of the community.[21] Mutahhari's argument situates the religious leadership as trustees of public wealth, responsible for its equitable distribution and ethical use.

In Iraq, the post-2003 political landscape provided fertile ground for the application of *majhūl al-mālik*, particularly by the religious institutions in Najaf and Karbala. Al-Kafeel network, managed by religious authorities in Karbala, exemplifies the modern utilization of this principle, controlling large sectors of Iraq's economy under the guise of religious trusteeship. Additionally, Islamic organizations and armed factions, either collectively or as individuals, exerted control over state properties, those belonging to officials of the former regime and the assets of displaced Christians and others. This principle has been explored in the writings of Sayyid Mahmoud Hashemi, particularly in *Mawsūʿat al-Fiqh al-Islāmī al-Muqārin* (Encyclopaedia of Comparative Islamic Jurisprudence), where he analyses how religious institutions justify the appropriation of public assets in the absence of state control.[22]

In the Jewish context, through the collaboration between a government owning the means of production (originally poor and dependent on oil revenues) and the religious institution that supports and legitimizes that government in some way, a charismatic status is granted to the rabbis. Within this system, rabbinical leaders acquire an elevated spiritual and organizational status that places them at the centre of communal life and moral guidance. This privileged position resembles, in structural terms, the authority exercised by Shi'i *marjiʿ*s (references or authorities), who are regarded as successors to the Hidden Imam and as the exclusive custodians of correct theological interpretation. In both contexts, the religious elite become the final arbiters of doctrinal authenticity, and their legal opinions can evolve into deeply embedded cultural norms among political activists and party followers, shaping behaviour within a recognized legal-religious framework.

Thus, rabbinical authority shares with its Shi'i counterpart the view of the status of the *marjiʿ*s, who are considered successors to the Hidden Imam and monopolists of the correct theological interpretation. The fatwas of some of them have turned from legal opinions into a kind of ingrained culture among the members of Islamic parties and their audience, who cannot operate outside a recognized legal framework.

Based on Li's analysis of Confucian ethics, one can find differences in the importance of overseeing public benefits. From a Confucian perspective, it is expected that the ruler or government official acts as a guardian of the people's resources, enhancing harmony and well-being. In contrast, the culture of corruption in Iraq has a jurisprudential dimension, accompanied by tribalism that habitually tends toward plundering and looting, exploiting the communal nature of public money in twisted ways and with ambiguous justifications to ease one's conscience.

Using Weber's types of authority, Sombart's economic justifications, and Li's ethical supervision, we can gain deeper insights into the mechanisms through which corruption is perpetuated and justified,

[20] Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, *Ḥukūmat-i Islāmī* (Iran: Maktabat al-Sadr, 1970), pp. 125-130.
[21] Murtaza Mutahhari, *Islamic Principles for Government* (Tehran: Tehran University Press, 1976), pp. 45-50.
[22] Mahmoud al-Hashemi, *Mawsūʿat al-Fiqh al-Islāmī al-Muqārin*, vol. 3 (Beirut: Dar al-Mahajja al-Baydaa, 2003), pp. 210-215.

especially in a country like Iraq, where institutionalized religion plays a central role in political and social life.[23]

Unclaimed resources lacking ultimate ownership significantly influence individual behaviours. This hidden culture facilitates a specific interpretation of property rights that deeply affects public asset management and the innovation of "legitimate" ways to seize them. This belief in the anonymity of ownership has facilitated a culture of impunity among the parvenus, particularly among ideologically driven politicians from Islamic parties and members of new armed movements who do not hesitate to seize public funds and assets, such as occupying government headquarters, clearing agricultural lands for commercial exploitation for partisan interests, and engaging in dubious deals and fictitious projects. Their justification often rests on the belief that these resources, like minerals or former government properties, are provided divinely and are therefore free to seize, provided that the due fees are paid, or, more often, ignored.[24]

These interpretations reveal the causal relationship between what a group of people believes and the nature of its economy, far from the class struggle that Marx prioritized over superstructures. Since the economic model of a society influences its lifestyle and ways of living, it in turn reflects the general temperament of that society. The type of economic reality witnessed in Iraq has created a vast chasm between the "Leisure Class"[25] and a large percentage of people living below the poverty line, who are pacified by religious discourse and its emotional tools such as victory slogans for the sect, ruling in the name of the Imam, and the opportunity to practice rituals, which intensify as the poverty margin expands in the country.

Economics of Religion: Power and Knowledge

> Power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society.[26]

In this section, we focus on the economies adopted by the religious institution and the investment operations it undertakes, then reflect on the relationship between this institution and the parvenus, as well as the ideological-economic collaboration between them. To establish a financial empire that is opaque and not subject to financial oversight standards, it must, as much as possible, intervene in shaping the power that is required to overlook any of its practices. This power, in turn, in order to avoid moral reproach, must resort to protection from religious (sacred) capital.

The religious system sponsors doctrinal discourse, generalizes it, and monitors the adherence of its followers to its framework. Parvenu elites may then glorify this discourse and bureaucratically normalize it through proper legal procedures or reinterpret it in ways that serve their interests. In Weber's analysis, the consolidation of political order culminates in the modern concept of the state as the ultimate source of the legitimacy of the use of physical force, a development tied to the monopolization of legitimate violence by the political organisation.[27] Religious (hierocratic) authority, meanwhile, can operate as a powerful

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[23] The term "institutionalized religion" refers to the supreme religious authority in Shia Islam, often led by a *marjiʿ* who holds the title of *Āyat Allāh al-ʿUẓmā* (Grand Ayatollah). The appointment of a *marjiʿ* is not governed by a formalized process, and there can be multiple *marājiʿ* (plural of *marjiʿ*) at the same time. These religious leaders are responsible for overseeing the seminary (*ḥawza*) and managing the financial assets that are entrusted to them through various religious channels, such as khums, donations, and other sources mentioned earlier.

[24] Kareem al-Ghazi, Director General of the Investigations Department at the Integrity Commission, stated that the number of properties encroached upon in Baghdad and the other provinces (excluding the Kurdistan region) reached 31,378, including "buildings, agricultural lands, parking lots, shops, residential houses and apartments, sidewalks and public streets, schools, public squares, and parks". See: Fadhel al-Nashmi, "al-Nazāha al-ʿIrāqiyya Takshif Tajāwuzāt Ṭālat 31 Alf ʿAqār wa-Bināya Ḥukūmiyya," *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 1/12/2021, accessed on 10/12/2025, at: https://acr.ps/1L9BPUB

[25] Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[26] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, Robert Hurley (trans.) (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), p. 93.

[27] Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, Guenther Roth & Claus Wittich (eds.), Ephraim Fischoff et al. (trans.) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), p. 54.

mechanism of legitimacy and social domestication: its structural opposition to political charisma has often recommended it to rulers and conquerors as a means of pacifying and disciplining subject populations.[28]

Within this alternating ideological-economic collaboration, a role-exchange game occurs. The religious institution protects its growing hidden network of economies, in which government support from public funds overlaps with investment returns enhanced by a legal umbrella or, in some cases, silently tolerated. The parvenus, in turn, reap multiplied wealth without real moral oversight from the believing society. This unspoken relationship maintains the fragile status quo and seeks to sustain it. The religious authority has its reservations about direct involvement in politics, which contradicts its educational, moral, and jurisprudential discourse, and the government maintains its cautious distance from the model of a religious state, which the current situation does not allow. Thus, matters proceed on two invisible crutches.

The complex dynamics of power, surveillance, and control offer a more insightful understanding through the use of Michel Foucault's theories in understanding how religious teachings, rituals, and economic institutions interact to shape and manage public behaviour and societal norms in Iraq. Through such a lens, one can dissect these interactions and highlight the complex strategies used by religious and political leaders to maintain and strengthen their authority, providing insight into the broader implications of these dynamics on social structure and individual agency. Particularly through adopting concepts of power/knowledge, surveillance, punishment, and biopolitics,[29] we may clarify the complex interaction between religion, politics, and social control, revealing the profound impact of these mechanisms on both individual lives and the broader socio-political landscape.

Foucault's assertion that "there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations"[30] brings to light the organic connection between civil authority and the epistemological apparatus of spiritual authority.

The *Marjiʿiyya*:[31] Semiotics of the Religious Field

In the context of understanding the role of religious leaders, we see that jurisprudential teachings are not just spiritual guidelines but tools of power that organize social and political life. They are reinforced by monopolizing ambiguous theological interpretations, which are used to legitimize their actions and policies within society. This is accompanied by a highly precise and strict system of signs, which can be described as the *habitus*[32] of the religious field. It pertains to presence and absence, the manner of speaking, the tone of voice, the careful choice of words, gestures, ambiguity that requires or endures interpretation, and the spatial setting in which they are present. The very high-ranking clergy,[33] unlike politicians, avoid rhetorical skills, frequent public confrontations, or excessive media speeches. Their complete immersion

[28] Ibid., p. 1161.

[29] Biopower/Biopolitics: These terms, introduced by Foucault, refer to the ways in which governments regulate populations through the control of biological and bodily aspects of life. Biopower is the practice of modern states to manage the life of the population, focusing on the body as a site of regulation, discipline, and control. Biopolitics extends this concept to encompass the various strategies and mechanisms through which human life processes are managed under regimes of authority over knowledge, power, and the body.

[30] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Alan Sheridan (trans.) (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), p. 27.

[31] The term marjiʿiyya refers to the religious authority and leadership of a marjiʿ, who is a highly respected and qualified Islamic scholar. The marjiʿ serves as a source of emulation (marjiʿ al-taqlīd) for Shi'i Muslims, providing guidance on religious, legal, and ethical matters. The marjiʿiyya holds significant influence within Shia communities, not only in spiritual matters but also in social, political, and economic affairs. The authority of the marjiʿ is rooted in their extensive knowledge of Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh), and they are considered the highest authority on religious law for their followers, who are expected to emulate the marjiʿ's interpretations and rulings in their daily lives.

[32] Habitus is a key concept in Bourdieu's theory, referring to the deeply ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions that individuals acquire through their life experiences and socialization. It represents the way society's structures are internalized by individuals, shaping their perceptions, actions, and reactions, often unconsciously, in a manner consistent with their social and cultural environment.

[33] An example of this is Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who has not given a direct public speech in over 70 years of his presence in the seminary and has appeared in the media only rarely and on infrequent occasions.

in their contemplative world surrounds them with an aura of sanctity and mystery. It is not important for them to publish their thoughts, works, speeches, or comments; they exist in their sacred silence that speaks of something not from our world.

The most revered religious leader among the public is the bearer of sacred secrets, shrouded in mysteries that they cannot decode. The traits they exhibit are not necessarily intentional, as Bourdieu tells us they are a practical sense, automatic and prior to rational thought: "The relation of immediate correspondence between habitus and the field to which it is attuned is the source of the experience of the world as natural and self-evident".[34] As for this class of men proficient in the religious field, "The body believes in what it plays at … by virtue of the dispositions acquired in the course of a prolonged apprenticeship".[35]

The Economics of Discourse: Suppressed Knowledge

The sanctity, reverence, and blind obedience to a religious institution carries symbolic violence toward other forms of knowledge that dare not declare themselves, or whose voices cannot be heard under the loud noise that monopolizes the representation of truth and has the power to protect this monopoly. This is what I call here "suppressed knowledge", referring to dissenting viewpoints that are difficult to express publicly, whether on a contrary jurisprudential level or secular perspectives. Suppressed knowledge is represented by local, intersecting, unqualified, or illegitimate knowledge. It is the information, interpretations, and facts ignored or marginalized by dominant power structures and their discursive tools.

Applying this mechanism to study the formally consistent discourse of the parvenus and its subordination to the discourse of the jurisprudential institution allows us to discover how suppressed knowledge within society is stifled in favour of the dominant power/knowledge narratives promoted by that implicit partnership mentioned earlier. Events and historical narratives, both distant and recent, are interpreted in favour of unilateral implications and ideological distortions. They are incorporated into the official discourse of the state, accompanied by implicit or explicit endorsement from the "infallible" ecclesiastical body.

Since history is the theatre of ideological conflicts, its events are at the forefront of forms of suppressed knowledge, especially when they are selectively and randomly brought into the present to serve as essential material in the discourse of dominance, which a doxic majority revels in, ready to produce all kinds of conflicts. This majority is manufactured and tamed, then controlled according to purely emotional discourses. Foucault's concept of surveillance extends beyond mere observation to include precise controls and standards imposed by subordinate institutions. In the context of the majority discussed here, surveillance manifests itself through monitoring religious adherence, where rituals, public prayers, and external symbols like rings, forehead marks, the wearing of shrouds, function as mechanisms for enforcing and reinforcing both collective and individual conformity and devotion.

The Panopticon:[36] The Economics of Biopolitical Control

Drawing on Foucault's analysis of the Panopticon, where surveillance becomes a mechanism of self-discipline, the public performance of contemporary rituals – especially million-man marches, pilgrimage gatherings, and even voluntary electronic registration – operates as a vast field of visibility in which the faithful become both watchers and watched.[37] Under the constant gaze of religious authorities and communal

[34] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, Richard Nice (trans.) (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 52.

[35] Ibid., p. 67.

[36] The Panopticon is a conceptual prison design introduced by the philosopher Jeremy Bentham, where a single watchman can observe all inmates without them knowing whether they are being watched. Foucault adopted this concept metaphorically in his discussions of modern surveillance and control, suggesting that the Panopticon represents how power operates in society by inducing a state of conscious and permanent visibility that ensures the automatic functioning of power.

[37] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, pp. 195-228.

expectations, individuals internalize the disciplinary norms that govern ritual behaviour, interpreting them as acts of spiritual cleansing, moral purification, and collective solidarity. Within this structure of mutual surveillance, submission is produced not through coercion but through what Bourdieu describes as an "illusory relationship" with the sacred: an embodied disposition through which religious meanings appear self-evident and unquestionable.[38]

This mechanism of internalized submission corresponds to Foucault's concept of biopower, wherein power acts directly upon the body and regulates the fundamental processes of life.[39] Ritual practices such as crying, chest-beating, self-flagellation with chains, head-slashing with blades, crawling in mud, walking long distances, wearing black, and raising flags function as bodily techniques that mould the ritual habitus. Through their repetitive performance within an emotional theatre of mass mourning, these acts constitute a form of corporeal regulation: voluntary, idealistic, and often experienced as spiritually cleansing. The dramatic display of these rituals, filmed and broadcast on a massive scale, reinforces the spectacle. The number of participants is frequently exaggerated for symbolic or political effect, magnifying the appearance of collective devotion and reinforcing the authority of those who orchestrate these performances.

The encouragement and promotion of such ritual behaviour constitute a powerful discourse, extending far beyond personal piety to shape patterns of group control. By aligning religious dictates with government policies, religious institutions govern not only the spiritual life of their followers but also mould the administrative, political, and social directions of society. They create a dense network of boundaries, permissions, and prohibitions regulating the individual's proximity to power, the acceptable expression of dissent, and the degree to which the Parvenus may approach sacred or political authority. This theological authority is not merely an abstract description of clerical power; it represents a deeply embedded system that permeates the daily lives of the community and penetrates their unconscious expectations and emotional reflexes.

Rituals commemorating historical events, especially those centred on grief, sacrifice, and martyrdom, play a crucial role in maintaining group identity and consolidating collective memory. Such rituals, much like the dramatic penitential practices of the medieval Catholic Church, do not merely express religious devotion; they reproduce hierarchical structures and bind the faithful to their clerical leaders through shared experiences of sacred suffering. These rituals delineate who belongs "inside" the discourse and who is cast "outside" as an outsider, sceptic, or threat.

Across different historical contexts, religious institutions have deployed such rituals to exercise multi-layered forms of control: spiritual, political, social, and economic. This transforms the clerical establishment into an indispensable arbiter of moral order and even an implicit channel of political patronage for the Parvenus. Within this open theatre of ritual practice, dissenting knowledge is suppressed: the critical cleric becomes a traitor to the sect, and the secular critic is condemned as an enemy of the community. In both cases, exclusion operates as a disciplinary mechanism enforcing conformity and deepening the biopolitical reach of religious authority.

Al-Kafeel Economy: The Sacred Commodity

> The religious enterprise is an enterprise with an economic dimension which cannot admit to so being, and which functions in a sort of permanent negation of its economic dimension: I undertake an economic act, but I do not want to know it; I do it in such a way that I can tell myself and others that it is not an economic act.[40]

[38] Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Richard Nice (trans.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 164.
[39] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, Robert Hurley (trans.) (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), pp. 135-145.
[40] Pierre Bourdieu, "Genesis and Structure of the Religious Field," Comparative Social Research, no. 13 (1991), p. 12.

In *Practical Reason*, Bourdieu includes a short chapter with the provocative title "The Laughter of Bishops", where he analyses how the religious habitus imposes emotional restraint on clergy: they may smile, but open laughter is considered inappropriate within the symbolic economy of the religious field. This disciplinary control of the body is comparable to other religious traditions. For example, the Islamic hadith warns, "Do not laugh excessively, for excessive laughter deadens the heart".[41] The Bible states: "For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fool. This also is vanity".[42] Judaism, however, does not agree with them, as laughter is praised in Genesis: "And Sarah said, 'God has made me laugh, so that all who hear will laugh with me".[43]

Thus, the bishops' laughter entails a paradox and bears a meaning beyond innocent spontaneous laughter, especially when we know why they laughed: "I have been very struck by the fact that each time the bishops used the language of objectification in relation to the economy of the Church, speaking for example, of a 'phenomenon of supply and demand' to describe the pastoral, they would laugh. (An example: 'We are not societies, uh … quite like the others: we produce nothing, and we sell nothing [laughter], right?".[44]

Bourdieu assumes the existence of two truths for the clerical body, such as the Council of Paris Bishops or any other religious institution: a religious truth and an economic truth.[45] He fills in the gaps in the ambiguous religious language – preaching/marketing, loyalist/customer, imitator/consumer, Friday preacher/spokesperson, shrine servant/executive director, and so on.[46] This makes the economy of practices inseparable from the economy of symbolic wealth. The unacknowledged overlap between the spiritual and the economic leads Bourdieu to label it "the economy of the offering",[47] where the symbolism of commercial and service exchanges is transformed, from self-denial to a kind of heavenly vow. The religious institution, from his point of view, contains an economic dimension that it does not acknowledge. Its function is based on denying this dimension: "I undertake an economic act, but I do not want to know it; I do it in such a way that I can tell myself and others that it is not an economic act".[48]

Why do religious institutions hide their economic goals behind a veil of sacred metaphors? Is it because their objectives deviate from their spiritual function and role in guiding society? Or do they not want to appear wealthy, which religions denounce, especially those advocating asceticism and simplicity in life? Why do they not disclose their financial accounts to the state and society? Perhaps we will find the answer in Bourdieu himself:

We can thus understand how essential it is, from the methodological point of view, to avoid dissociating economic functions from religious functions, that is, the properly economic dimension of practice and the symbolism that makes the fulfilment of economic functions possible. Discourse is not something additional (as some tend to lead one to believe when they speak of "ideology"); it is part of the economy itself. And, if one wants to be precise, it must be taken into consideration, along with the efforts apparently spent in the work of euphemisation: religious work includes a considerable expenditure of energy aimed at converting activity with an economic dimension into a sacred task; one must accept wasting time, making an effort, even suffering, in order to believe (and make others believe) that one is doing something other than what

41 Pierre Bourdieu, Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action, Randal Johnson (trans.) (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), chap. 4, "The Laughter of Bishops," pp. 75-79.
42 Ecclesiastes 7:6 (NIV): "All the toil of man is for his mouth, yet his appetite is never satisfied".
43 Genesis 21:6 (NIV).
44 Bourdieu, Practical Reason, pp. 113-114.
45 Ibid., p. 112.
46 Ibid., p. 113.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid., 112.

one is doing. There is a loss, but the law of conservation of energy remains true because that which is lost is recovered in another position.[49]

The dynamics of power between the clerical class and its economic arm, Al-Kafeel, on the one hand, and the parvenus, on the other, have profound effects on people's daily lives, influencing everything from religious practices to economic opportunities and political patronage.

One cannot find a religious group with a hierarchical system but without an economy, starting from the economy of vows and offerings, the sale of candles and religious symbols, and the imposition of taxes on its followers (tithes, khums,[50] zakat, donations, vows), and not stopping at the establishment of large investment projects, banks, and similar financial institutions. For example, the Catholic Church, the largest spiritual institution with a hierarchical administration, has been working since the twelfth century to establish a financial, administrative, and supervisory system to regulate financial inflows, which come from vast land ownership across Europe (the papacy was the largest landowner on that continent), from tithes that amount to ten percent of individual income or production, and from banking and financial services, where the Knights Templar developed the first international banking system. They adopted financial transactions such as loans, wealth management, and secure deposit. Their network facilitated financial transfers across Europe and the Middle East. They participated in grain trade and supply goods across the Mediterranean. They imposed fees and customs as well. The Church participated in minting coins and managing currencies, in addition to the money it earned from internal practices, such as the sale of ecclesiastical positions known as simony,[51] which formed an important income stream. The Church invested in the sale of spiritual goods, such as religious relics and artefacts, like fragments of the cross of Christ or other objects believed to have sacred history.

A quick look at Catholic churches and others shows that the Vatican tops the list of the richest religious institutions in the world, with a value of 101 billion dollars, followed by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the US with a value of 100 billion dollars, while the Evangelical Church in England has a value of 8 billion dollars.[52] In any case, some estimate that the annual income of the Office of Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the highest religious authority in Iraq, ranges between USD 500 to 700 million, with assets worth three billion dollars.[53]

The Hawza's Shift: From a Votive Economy to a Wealth-Driven Institution

The history of the religious institution in Iraq differs from that of the Church, as it was not, throughout its history, an absolute source of temporal power. Instead, it was an institution managing theological schools for a minority in the Islamic world, maintaining the cohesion and unity of its members, and managing its modest funds from donations, gifts, and the obligatory khums imposed on its followers. Even if these funds were relatively large and sometimes exaggerated in their magnitude, they barely covered the expenses of continuing education and some charitable and scientific projects:

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[49] Ibid., pp. 96-98.

[50] Khums is a religious concept in Twelver Shia Islam, referring to a mandatory religious tax that requires one-fifth (20%) of a person's annual earnings, whether from work, trade, or other sources of income, to be paid. The khums is divided into two portions: the first is given to the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad from the Hashemite lineage, known as the sahm al-sādāt (the Sayyids' share), and the second portion is reserved for the Imam, known as the sahm al-imām (the Imam's share), which is handed over to the religious authorities or institutions representing the Hidden Imam during his occultation. The khums serves as a means to support religious institutions, the clergy, and various social and educational projects. It is considered a religious duty and fulfilling or neglecting it carries spiritual and religious implications.

[51] The term "simony" is used to describe the practice of buying or selling ecclesiastical positions or church privileges, a practice that dates back to the Middle Ages. The term is derived from the story of Simon the Sorcerer in the New Testament, who attempted to purchase the ability to bestow the Holy Spirit upon others through the laying on of hands.

[52] Robert B. Eklund et al., *Sacred Trust: The Medieval Church as an Economic Firm* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

[53] See: Laura Henselmann, "The Shite Clergy in Iraq After Sistani: Growing Iranian Influence?," Research Paper, no. 2, Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Maison Du Futur, December 2017, p. 17.

> The holy shrines had no economic or investment activities since their establishment until the fall of the previous regime in 2003 due to the hostile policies implemented by successive governments in Iraq. However, once freed from these constraints, they turned toward the world of investment and established numerous revenue-generating projects, including large-, medium-, and small-scale ventures.[54]

Among these are the projects of Al-Kafeel Company for Agricultural and Animal Products, the Khairat Abi al-Fadl al-Abbas Farms under the auspices of the Al-Abbas Holy Shrine, and other projects in the tourism, health, and commercial sectors. Additionally, the projects of the Al-Hussein Holy Shrine, such as the Al-Hussein Agricultural City project for agricultural and animal production, and the projects of the Alawi Holy Shrine, such as the Fadak Agricultural Investment Farm and the Faydh al-Qaseem Meat Project. Other proposed projects have been suggested that the holy shrines could establish in the industrial, agricultural, construction, textile, and small to medium-sized enterprises that do not require significant costs or vast resources.[55]

After the fall of the Saddam Hussein's dictatorial regime in 2003, the situation changed, and the seminary took on the role of the regulatory machine controlling the entire political process. Over time, it developed its own economy, which I call here "Al-Kafeel Economy". Gradually, as followers of the *Wilāyat al-Faqīh* gained control over the state in Iraq, the Najaf authority's mechanisms and structures developed to confront the challenge of *Wilāyat al-Faqīh*'s control over the resources of production, government power, and weapons. The authority, in turn, developed the experience of the two shrines in Karbala, which indirectly increased the seminary's resources due to the financial independence of the shrines according to the 2012 Shi'i Endowment Law, and transitioned the authority through the shrines from performing a religious function to taking on the burdens of worldly duties.[56]

The Parvenus: Dual Allegiance

The parvenus, although most of them follow *Wilāyat al-Faqīh* and cooperate with the Iranian regime in a way that squanders public funds and contributes to saving the friendly government in Iran from international economic sanctions, also benefit from this cooperation and gain personal wealth, as Iran, after the US occupation of Iraq, immediately filled the vacuum inside the latter country. They used their proxies and helped them reach the pinnacle of power, but in all this, they maintained a dual loyalty to *Wilāyat al-Faqīh* and the Najaf authority. The former is outside the boundaries of their partisan sphere, and it is not in their interest to replace the Najaf authority with another outside their borders, as the equation of cooperation with the state of the same sect is accompanied by the silence of the local authority, the best possible situation for the Parvenus.

Al-Kafeel network is an investment entity with multiple arms, establishing an expanding economic empire that manages large assets and development programmes, including hospitals, real estate, trading companies, tourism companies, factories, agricultural fields, housing projects, and more, reaching 32 major projects by 2021. Most of these operations have been strategically named after a sacred figure, one of the most revered religious symbols in the popular consciousness, where profit activities intertwine with the aura of the sacred figure and the tragic narrative of their fate, ensuring the support and patronage of the Shi'i community without questioning the strange relationship between bottled water imports and the symbolic charge of the name Al-Kafeel.[57] This economic arm enhances the institution's ability to fund

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[54] Jasim Imran al-Shammari, "al-Niẓām al-Qānūnī li-Istithmār Amwāl al-ʿAtabāt al-Muqaddasa: Dirāsa Muqārina," Master's Thesis, University of Karbala, 2013, p. 179.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Ali Taher Hammoud (ed.), *Al Hawzah of Najaf in Iraq* (Amman: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2023).

[57] Ibid.

religious activities, scholarships for its followers, and social services for its adherents, further entrenching the institution's power and influence within the internal competition field, to reproduce the summit of the pyramid anew and maintain its circulation within a narrow circle.

The institution benefits from various discourses to maintain its power and influence. These include narratives of piety, martyrdom, resistance, and historical grievances, which resonate deeply within the community and have turned, through repetition, into doxa,[58] representing all the unconscious and unconsidered beliefs:

> The financial resources of the holy shrines consist of gifts, donations, vows, bequests, grants, and aid provided by various entities and individuals both within Iraq and abroad, as well as the revenues from their properties and endowments, the profits generated from the investment of their funds, along with the portion allocated to the shrine by the budget of the Shi'i Endowment Office and the compensation for the acquisition and exchange of properties endowed to the shrines, according to legal conditions. Jurists have substantiated the legitimacy of gifts, vows, and endowments to the holy shrines by likening them to the Kaaba, as both involve the veneration of God's symbols. Vows and gifts are voluntary acts, and these, if tangible, can be converted into monetary funds through sale. The legislator has adopted a specific mechanism for this, issuing special provisions that outline the procedure for opening the shrine's treasury and the handling of vows and gifts.[59]

Through this doxa, which Bourdieu often uses in the field of religious struggles, it reinforces its theological legitimacy and frames its political stance, especially in contexts of conflict and allegiance (us/them).

The Economy of Negating the Economy

Using Pierre Bourdieu's sociological theories, we can explore the complex dynamics within the religious field and its relationship with the economy, as symbolic capital[60] represented by recognition, honour, status, and prestige, acquired through the marketing of spiritual products over a long history, and can be converted through the mediation of the moral self into economic benefits. Possessing such symbolic capital, with all its magic and awe, skilfully controls people with lower capital. Symbolic repression becomes possible due to the consolidation of status in society: the multi-directional from one side, and the daily practice of suppressing (suppressed knowledge) on the other.

Focusing particularly on the religious institution and its economic projects, Al-Kafeel, we observe that this institution not only enjoys significant religious-social influence but is also deeply engaged in the country's economic cycle and beyond, which intertwines with the interests of the Parvenus, thus shaping societal norms and structures. The religious field, which it almost absolutely dominates, represents an organized space where symbolic capitals intersect: religious, economic, and political. Its interaction with the political elite illustrates its strategic position in this field, where it benefits from its clerical authority to expand economic work under the banner of Al-Kafeel network. These manoeuvres show how religious institutions can influence and be influenced by other fields, such as politics and economics. They navigate the edges of symbolic capital with agility.

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[58] In Bourdieu's sociological theory, doxa refers to the set of beliefs and practices that are taken for granted within a particular society or social group. These are the unquestioned assumptions that are so deeply ingrained in the collective consciousness that they appear natural or self-evident, shaping the way individuals perceive and interact with the world.

[59] al-Shammari, p. 198.

[60] Symbolic capital, as defined by Bourdieu, refers to the resources available to an individual or group based on honour, prestige, or recognition. Unlike economic capital, which is material, symbolic capital is intangible and operates within social fields, where it can be converted into other forms of capital (such as economic or social capital) and used to maintain or improve one's position within a hierarchy.

a. Economic Capital

The contemporary Shi'i shrine institutions in Iraq – most prominently al-ʿAtaba al-ʿAbbāsiyya and al-ʿAtaba al-ʿAlawiyya have become among the most influential economic actors in the country. Their operations rest on a historically grounded system of financial autonomy, now reinforced through modern legal and administrative arrangements. These institutions enjoy a combination of exemptions, privileges, and discretionary authority that distinguishes them from other public or private entities in Iraq. The legal framework governing the "investment of the funds of the holy shrines" grants them access to state-owned land, exemption from most forms of taxation, and the ability to establish and administer economic enterprises without direct oversight from the Federal Board of Supreme Audit.[61] This structural autonomy continues a historical pattern in which clerical institutions maintain independent economic bases while simultaneously operating within, and benefiting from, the broader authority of the state.[62]

Despite their substantial economic activity, the shrines rarely publish detailed financial disclosures; rather, they emphasize the religious, developmental, or charitable nature of their projects, and publicly avoid providing specific figures regarding investment volumes or generated revenue.[63] Nevertheless, the range and scale of their operations can be reconstructed through official announcements on their institutional websites and through field-specific reports. These reveal a complex and diversified economic profile extending across construction and infrastructure, agriculture, industry, education, health, transportation, food production, and renewable energy.[64]

In the construction and infrastructure sector, al-ʿAtaba al-ʿAbbāsiyya has undertaken major expansion projects such as the ongoing enlargement of its sanctuary complex, presented as one of its largest long-term infrastructural undertakings.[65] Similarly, al-ʿAtaba al-ʿAlawiyya has highlighted the strategic importance of expanding the Great Courtyard of the Imam Ali Shrine, designed to accommodate millions of visitors annually and enhance the shrine's urban capacity.[66]

Agricultural projects form a second pillar of shrine-led economic activity. Al-Saqi Strategic Agricultural Project, administered by al-ʿAtaba al-ʿAbbāsiyya, covers thousands of hectares and produces essential crops such as wheat, barley, maize, and vegetables, serving both local consumption needs and broader food security objectives.[67] Complementing this is al-Joud Company for Modern Agriculture, which specializes in supplying agricultural inputs, seeds, and fertilizers to Iraqi farmers.[68] These initiatives reflect an attempt to link religious institutions to national development goals, particularly in a country highly vulnerable to food insecurity.

Industrial production represents another major domain of shrine activity. Al-Kafeel Dairy Plant has become a significant national producer of dairy goods, supplying broad consumer markets under a unified brand identity.[69] Al-Kafeel Water Plant similarly provides large-scale bottled water production, often described by the institution as "meeting national standards and contributing to public welfare".[70] Both plants demonstrate how shrine-affiliated enterprises operate with efficiency levels that often surpass those of comparable state-run facilities.

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61 al-Shammari, pp. 14-18.
62 Ibid., pp. 27-30.
63 Hammoud (ed.), pp. 22–24.
64 Ibid., pp. 25-28.
65 "Tawsīʿat al-ʿAtaba al-ʿAbbāsiyya al-Muqaddasa," *Al-Kafeel*, accessed on 10/12/2025, at: https://alkafeel.net
66 "Mashrūʿ Tawsīʿat al-Ṣaḥn al-ʿAẓīm li-l-ʿAtaba al-ʿAlawiyya," *al-ʿAtaba al-ʿAlawiyya*, accessed on 10/12/2025, at: https://imamali.net
67 "Mashrūʿ al-Sāqī al-Istirātījī al-Zirāʿī," *Al-Kafeel*, accessed on 10/12/2025, at: https://alkafeel.net
68 "Sharikat al-Jūd li-l-Zirāʿa al-Ḥadītha," *Al-Kafeel*, accessed on 10/12/2025, at: https://alkafeel.net
69 "Maṣnaʿ Albān al-Kafīl," *Al-Kafeel*, accessed on 10/12/2025, at: https://alkafeel.net
70 "Maṣnaʿ Miyāh al-Kafīl," *Al-Kafeel*, accessed on 10/12/2025, at: https://alkafeel.net

Healthcare and education are also central sectors in which shrine institutions have expanded their economic and symbolic influence. Al-Kafeel Super Speciality Hospital, founded and operated by al-ʿAtaba al-ʿAbbāsiyya, positions itself as a high-technology health provider capable of performing advanced surgical procedures and attracting foreign medical expertise.[71] During the Covid-19 pandemic, the shrine also operated an oxygen production plant to supply hospitals in Karbala and neighbouring provinces.[72] In higher education, al-Ameed University and al-Kafeel University (affiliated respectively with al-ʿAtaba al-ʿAbbāsiyya and al-ʿAtaba al-ʿAlawiyya) have become accredited institutions offering programmes across medicine, dentistry, engineering, and the humanities.[73]

Transportation and energy projects further extend the shrines' developmental footprint. Al-Kafeel Company for Public Transport operates a fleet of buses serving pilgrims and urban residents, integrating religious service provision with public mobility needs.[74] Meanwhile, solar energy initiatives such as the 5 MW photovoltaic systems deployed at shrine facilities reflect a move toward sustainable infrastructure and reduced reliance on the national grid.[75]

Taken together, these diverse sectors illustrate how shrine institutions have emerged as alternative providers of essential services, in many cases compensating for the state's chronic underperformance. Their economic activities operate through a hybrid logic: while legally recognized as religious charities, they function in practice as diversified conglomerates with complex administrative, technical, and financial systems. This ambiguity between the sacred and the commercial is not incidental but structurally embedded in the functioning of the religious field.

As Bourdieu argues, religious institutions often engage in economic activity while simultaneously denying its economic character, reframing material operations through symbolic vocabularies of piety, service, or sacrifice.[76] In this context, investments – whether a food factory or a specialized hospital – are often presented not as profit-generating enterprises but as "projects in service of the believer", thus transforming market transactions into moral and spiritual narratives.[77] The use of revered religious names enhances this symbolic reframing, ensuring that economic capital is continually converted into symbolic capital and vice versa, reinforcing the legitimacy and authority of the clerical institution.[78] This dynamic constitutes a core mechanism of the religious field, where spiritual authority and economic interests are mutually reinforcing rather than contradictory.

b. Cultural Capital

As the institution entrusted with "comforting souls", according to Bourdieu, and the economy of its symbolic wealth is based on the idea of faith, the logic of religious practice requires the necessity of giving up immediate interests as a free submission to the demands of the clerical system.

The clerical elite possesses cumulative cultural capital that legitimizes its economic projects and political influence. Since the sacred is a social amalgamation that creates intermediaries between the transcendental and the people, this intermediary maintains its mediation in non-intentional rhythms: of tension and attraction, appearance and celebration, economy in presence in the public sphere, clerical

[71] "Mustashfā al-Kafīl al-Takhaṣṣuṣī," *Al-Kafeel*, accessed on 10/12/2025, at: https://alkafeel.net

[72] "Maʿmal Intāj al-Uksījīn Khilāl Jāʾiḥat COVID-19," Al-Kafeel, accessed on 10/12/2025, at: https://alkafeel.net

[73] "Jāmiʿat al-ʿAmīd," *Al-Kafeel*, accessed on 10/12/2025, at: https://alem.iq; "Jāmiʿat al-Kafīl," *Al-Kafeel, accessed on 10/12/2025, at:* https://alkafeel.edu.iq

[74] "Sharikat al-Kafīl li-l-Naql al-ʿĀmm," *Al-Kafeel*, accessed on 10/12/2025, at: https://alkafeel.net

[75] "Mashrūʿ al-Ṭāqa al-Shamsiyya (5 MW)," *Al-Kafeel*, accessed on 10/12/2025, at: https://alkafeel.net

[76] Bourdieu, "Genesis and Structure of the Religious Field," p. 12.

[77] Ibid., pp. 12-14.

[78] Ibid., p. 15.

official attire, heavenly-sounding titles, and the group of followers and close loyalists who first believe in themselves, then promote this to the public through a trained network that monopolizes interpretation, explanation, correction, and final judgment. This network is accompanied by sanctity and reverence such that its different, carefully chosen vocabulary does not describe a reality but contributes to creating the reality it describes. According to Bourdieu, "Cultural capital can exist in three forms: in the embodied state, i.e., in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body; in the objectified state, in the form of cultural goods, which are the trace or realization of theories or critiques of these theories, problematics, etc.; and in the institutionalized state, a form of objectification which must be set apart because, as will be seen in the case of educational qualifications, it confers entirely original properties on the cultural capital which it is presumed to guarantee".[79]

c. Social Capital

The networks established and maintained by the clerical institution facilitate mobilization and support for religious and political causes, enhancing its position in social and religious fields. It is a rhetorically cautious institution. It says one thing and its opposite in ambiguous language, derived from long-standing traditions that continue through interpretation and conflicting interpretation. Religious authority, like other forms of social authority, depends on the scarcity of the capital it possesses and controls.

d. Symbolic Capital

The revered status of the religious institution grants it symbolic capital, which presupposes a continuous initial accumulation over time and is distributed from the start according to a solid hierarchy in a meticulously organized semiotic space. This symbolic capital is used to monitor political authority and social activities that contradict its visions, thus reinforcing its influence in various fields where doxa, or the world of unquestioned assumptions, forms the real foundation of the relationship; between the clerical class and its followers on one hand, and between them and their opponents on the other.

The social environment, shaped by inherited religious teachings and practices, qualifies individuals to accept the authority of religious leaders voluntarily and emotionally. This acceptance is crucial for maintaining this authority and legitimizing the social order it supports. Thus, it resembles an existential bank that provides salvational credits, under which another bank operates to reap material returns. This is what Bourdieu discusses in his concept of habitus, where individual and collective dispositions are generated within a specific cultural field. Through repetition, they become part of the individual and societal structure and perception because the religious body's monopoly on the sacred often goes unnoticed precisely because it legitimizes through the notion of faith, ascetic appearance, and religious decorum.

Conclusion

Al-Kafeel network exemplifies the complex interplay between religion and economics in Iraq, where religious institutions have increasingly become significant economic players. By leveraging symbolic capital and religious authority, these institutions exert considerable influence over the country's socio-economic landscape. The collaboration between the Parvenus and religious authorities underscores the entanglement of religion and politics, with far-reaching implications for governance, social equity, and economic development. Future research could explore how these dynamics evolve in response to changing political and economic conditions in Iraq and how they compare to similar models in other regions.

[79] Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in: J. G. Richardson (ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1986), p. 241.

The rapid capitalist development of Iraq's Al-Kafeel economy appears to be coinciding with the rise of neoliberalism, where the market may come to dominate to the point of commodifying cultural and spiritual products. This economic transformation is increasingly likely to intertwine with the teachings of the Shi'i faith, potentially leading to the Iraqi economy's indirect and involuntary integration into the global market. Such a shift could move away from the traditional dominance of the rentier state over the means of production. As a result, the religious institution might face a serious ideological crisis, as capital rarely recognizes cultural barriers and often seeks to erase or diminish their impact on society.

This situation could mirror historical precedents observed in other faiths, such as Protestantism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, where religion found itself influenced by and exerting influence over economic forces, reshaping their roles within society. Similarly, the Shi'i authority in Iraq may rapidly embrace investment opportunities in all areas within its reach. This expansion might occur without adequate oversight, facilitated by governmental support that no ideological institution has previously enjoyed in modern history. As the religious institution, which inherently promotes asceticism, potentially transforms into a wealthy financial entity preoccupied with an economic cycle deeply enmeshed with diverse cultural elements, it risks compromising its spiritual core. The strategic cooperation between the Parvenus and religious authorities further complicates this landscape. They may navigate a delicate balance, maintaining dual allegiances that serve both personal wealth accumulation and broader socio-economic goals.

Future research should explore how these dynamics evolve in response to changing political and economic conditions in Iraq and how they compare to similar models in other regions. This exploration could provide further insight into the broader implications of the intersection between religion and economics in a globalized world.

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Farouk Tahri*

Toward a Pharmaceutical Anthropology in Morocco: The Biography of Aureomycin from Physical Production to Cultural Reinterpretation**

نحو أنثروبولوجيا صيدلية بالمغرب: بيوغرافيا دواء الأوريوميسين من الإنتاج المادي إلى إعادة التأويل الثقافي

Abstract: Pharmaceutical anthropology calls for moving beyond the conventional divide between folk remedies and modern pharmaceuticals and applying the same analytical lens to both. The biographical approach to objects helps to understand the various transformations and interactions that govern a medicine within a specific context. This study traces the life story of Aureomycin in Morocco from its initial introduction, through physical production, marketing, and distribution, to consumption. It shows that the medicine had not been used as its producers had anticipate. It has rather been subject to the logic of "pharmaceutical heretics" who treat Aureomycin as a folk remedy and integrate it into a new, intermediary treatment process that is neither fully modern nor wholly traditional.

Keywords: Pharmaceutical Anthropology; Biography of Medicine; Aureomycin; Morocco; Folk Remedies.

ملخص: يتطلب الحديث عن أنثروبولوجيا للصيدلة تجاوز النظرة التقليدية التي تميز بين الأدوية الشعبية والسحرية والأدوية العصرية والاعتيادية، والانتقال إلى دراستها كلها بالنظرة نفسها. إنّ اعتماد المقاربة البيوغرافية للأشياء يندرج في هذا الإطار، ويساعد على فهم التحولات والتفاعلات المختلفة التي تحكم دواءً ما في سياق زمني واجتماعي معين. من هذا المنظور، تعكف الدراسة على تتبع سيرة حياة دواء الأوريوميسين في المغرب بداية من السياقات التي ظهر فيها مرورًا بإنتاجه المادي، ثم عمليات التسويق والتوزيع وصولاً إلى الاستهلاك. أظهر هذا التتبع أنّ الدواء لا يستخدم بالطريقة التي يتوقعها الفاعلون المنتجون، بل يخضع لمنطق الهراطقة الصيدليين الذين يجعلون منه دواءً شعبيًا وجزءًا من عمليات علاج جديدة، ليست عصرية كليًا ولا شعبية تمامًا، بل هي بينية.

كلمات مفتاحية: أنثروبولوجيا صيدلية؛ بيوغرافيا الدواء؛ الأوريوميسين؛ المغرب؛ الدواء الشعبي.

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Introduction: The Biography of Things and the Process of Commoditization

From an anthropological perspective, biography – whether viewed as a metaphor, a process of inquiry, or a negotiated construction between writer and subject – is a cohesive yet hybrid concept. that accounts for subtle and nuanced contexts.[1] This study adopts a relatively modern type of biography: the biography of things. The nature of this type is best illustrated by the process of enslavement, as defined by Igor Kopytoff. Slavery begins with the sale or capture of an individual, stripping them of their social identity and reducing them to a thing or a potential commodity. The process continues as the enslaved person is re-situated within a new social context upon their incorporation into their master's household.[2] Igor Kopytoff writes: "This biographical consideration of enslavement as a process suggests that the commoditization of other things may usefully be seen in a similar light, namely as part of the cultural shaping of biographies".[3]

This study is particularly concerned with medicines, designed for exchange and are subject to a continuous process of commoditization. Their social meanings vary depending on the contexts in which they are used. Unlike the commoditization of a slave, however, a medication is subject to what Kopytoff terms "terminal commoditization" – the same logic that the Catholic Church once adopted in its sale of indulgences. A sinner could purchase forgiveness for himself alone but was not permitted to resell it to others. In modern medicine, terminal commoditization is enforced by law: the resale of prescribed medications, or the sale of any medicine without proper licensing, is prohibited. This is because a medication is viewed as a terminal commodity, intended for a specific patient, under specific conditions, and not transferable beyond that designated use.[4]

This is not to suggest that drugs lack complex histories. Each medication is the product of a tortuous journey shaped by chance discoveries, logical and intuitive analysis, spectacular ingenuity, personal ambition, and fierce corporate competition.[5] As the case of aspirin demonstrates, the history of a drug often reflects the interplay of diverse yet interconnected factors.[6] Accordingly, any model for understanding the history of pharmaceuticals should account not only for individual behaviours but also for institutional structures, socio-historical dynamics, and their interactions over time.[7]

The biography of pharmaceutical drugs refers to the sequence of transformations a medicine undergoes. At different stages, the various actors involved give these substances a history.[8] The process begins with the drug's manufacture within a specific scientific and technological context. It then moves to the stage of distribution, where the product is transferred to specialized retailers such as pharmacists, physicians, or vendors. Marketing follows, during which the drug is sold to consumers, either through prescription or over the counter in pharmacies. Once the drug reaches the consumer, it enters the final stage of its life, where it is used to restore, improve, or maintain health. This stage is crucial; improper use renders the drug worthless, while proper use grants the drug a kind of "life after death", enhancing the consumer's health and achieving the purpose for which it was originally manufactured.[9]

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[1] David Zeitlyn, "Life-History Writing and the Anthropological Silhouette," *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale*, vol. 16, no. 2 (2008), p. 167.

[2] Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process," in: Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 65.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid., p. 75.

[5] Diarmuid Jeffries, *The Remarkable Story of a Wonder Drug* (Philadelphia: Chemical Heritage Foundation, 2008).

[6] Ibid.

[7] David Cohen et al., "Medications as Social Phenomena," *Health*, vol. 5, no. 4 (2001), pp. 448-449.

[8] Sjaak van der Geest, Susan Reynolds Whyte & Anita Hardon, "The Anthropology of Pharmaceuticals: A Biographical Approach," *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 25 (1996), p. 156.

[9] Sjaak van der Geest & Kerry Chamberlain, "Researching the Life Stages of Medicines," *Medische Antropologie: Journal about Culture and Health*, vol. 23, no. 2 (2011), p. 232.

Although the life cycle of pharmaceuticals can be carefully planned, medicines eventually lead lives of their own, independent of pharmacists and physicians.[10] This is what might be termed the "secret life of pharmaceuticals" – an existence that runs parallel to their formal one, beginning the moment a drug leaves the pharmacy and enters informal circulation.[11] This passage is also a transition in mindset. As a drug moves from a scientific context into local or personal contexts, it becomes subject to forms of local, experiential knowledge. At the intersection of market techniques and everyday cultural habits, a new pharmaceutical mindset emerges.[12]

This study explores the "biography" of one of the widely known and commonly used medications in Morocco: Aureomycin ointment, popularly referred to as "yellow pomade". It traces the antibiotic's origins and circulation in Morocco, addressing how its uses have expanded beyond the purposes envisioned by pharmacists and scientists. The study then undertakes a content analysis of various prescriptions, recipes, and uses shared on YouTube to understand these consumption patterns. Although similar content appears across various online platforms, YouTube provides distinct advantages: its view counts provide a measure of reach and influence, while its capacity for longer, monetizable videos makes it an attractive space for content creators to disseminate their "inventions" and novel uses of Aureomycin.

Pre-Production: The Making of Morocco's Best-Known Ointment

When French colonialists first arrived in Morocco in 1912, the local population was widely afflicted with several serious illnesses, notably eye diseases such as trachoma and conjunctivitis. These conditions affected not only the poor but all social classes. For example, Prince Mawla Abd al-Salam, the son of Sultan Sidi Muhammad b. Abdalla, nearly lost his sight to an eye disease before being treated by a British physician.[13] Upon her arrival in Morocco in 1913, one French physician was astonished to see entire processions of the blind walking through the streets with their hands on each other's shoulders or collectively carrying a stick, chanting prayers in pursuit of alms.[14]

Adding to the tragedies endured by those afflicted, a powerful stigma surrounded eye diseases in Morocco, often pushing individuals to the margins of society. Edward Westermarck notes that Moroccans believed it was a bad omen to encounter a blind or half-blind person in the morning, as it evoked associations with Satan or the Antichrist, figures traditionally imagined as one-eyed. Similarly, if someone happened to meet a blind person, whether in one eye or both, they were advised to return home and take a nap; otherwise, they would fail whatever they intended to do.[15] Eye diseases in Morocco thus carried cultural associations, perhaps linked to deeper anxieties surrounding the power of the evil eye.

For the French, who sought to exploit the region's human resources, infectious eye diseases were merely another obstacle to their goal of controlling the population with minimal cost and effort. French authorized a range of treatments for ophthalmia and trachoma, conditions that, as one doctor noted, afflicted the majority of inhabitants in some regions.[16] These medications included petroleum jelly, cocaine eye drops, and chaulmoogra oil, the latter already used to treat swellings associated with leprosy.[17] The availability

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[10] Sjaak van der Geest, "Anthropology and the Pharmaceutical Nexus," *Anthropology Quarterly*, vol. 79, no. 2 (Spring 2006), p. 307.

[11] Anne M. Lovell, "Addiction Markets: The Case of High-Dose Buprenorphine in France," in: Adriana Petryna, Andrew Lakoff & Arthur Kleinman (eds.), *Global Pharmaceuticals: Ethics, Markets, Practices* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), pp. 155-156.

[12] Geest & Chamberlain, p. 234.

[13] Bujumaa Ruyan, *al-Ṭibb al-Kūlūnyālī al-Faransī bi-l-Maghrib 1912 - 1945* (Rabat: Manshurat al-Ribat.net, 2020), p. 264.

[14] Ibid., p. 374.

[15] Edward Westermarck, *Ritual and Belief in Morocco*, vol. II (New York: University Books Inc, 1968), p. 13.

[16] Ruyan, p. 376.

[17] Ibid., p. 375.

of eye medications increased significantly once French authorities ordered their distribution on a scale similar to that of quinine for malaria.[18] In 1933, the French authorities and the Moroccan health department published a booklet in French and Arabic titled *Help Us Combat Trachoma*. The booklet described the disease, explained how it spread, and provided guidance on prevention and treatment.[19] This represented an early attempt to disseminate knowledge about diseases and their treatment to the wider Moroccan population.

Trachoma persisted among the Moroccan population for many years, with little progress toward its containment. However, between 1952 and 1953 a joint action program was launched through the combined efforts of the Moroccan government, the World Health Organization (WHO), and UNICEF. The main objective of this joint program was to develop an effective, cost-efficient model for the collective treatment of trachoma in Morocco.[20]

Between 1954 and 1958, clinical trials were carried out in various educational institutions in Marrakech and Meknes, as well as in rural areas around Tiznit, to determine the effectiveness of a particular antibiotic known as chlortetracycline in treating trachoma.[21] While most English-language texts refer to the antibiotic as chlortetracycline, this study follows the convention found in French texts and uses its brand name, Aureomycin.[22]

The importance of Aureomycin in treating eye diseases and infections became apparent from the very first clinical trials. Throughout 1953 and 1954, the ointment was dispensed to residents of the Skoura region along with instructions for self-treatment.[23] Between 1954 and 1955, and again between 1964 and 1966, various methods of mass treatment for trachoma were adopted in Kelmima. These included applying 1% Aureomycin ointment to the eyes twice daily for three consecutive days, with the cycle repeated monthly throughout the conjunctivitis season, from June to November.[24]

To bring conjunctivitis under complete control, Aureomycin was distributed more widely across the southeastern areas of Morocco, particularly in villages in the Ouarzazate region with which the residents of Skoura maintained contact. Individuals who had gained experience using the antibiotic were dispatched to these areas to help reduce the severity of seasonal infections by sharing their knowledge of the medicine and its application.[25]

These trials, conducted throughout Morocco, confirmed the importance of Aureomycin in treating both trachoma and seasonal conjunctivitis. In better-equipped, modern schools, administering Aureomycin three times a day for 60 days produced recovery rates of up to 80%. Under the same conditions, the frequency of topical application could be reduced from three to two times daily without diminishing its therapeutic efficacy. This experiment demonstrated that that a lengthy, strict, and costly treatment schedule was unnecessary. These experiments paved the way for expanding Aureomycin-based treatment throughout Morocco.[26] Given the limited material and human resources available, the government considered a self-

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[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid., p. 377.

[20] J. Reinhards et al., "Studies in the Epidemiology and Control of Seasonal Conjunctivitis and Trachoma in Southern Morocco," *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, vol. 39, no. 4 (1968), pp. 499-500.

[21] Ibid., p. 500.

[22] Gian Battista Bietti, "Progrès de la chimiothérapie et de l'antibiothérapie du trachome: Épreuves d'efficacité, nouveaux produits, traitement intermittent," *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, vol. 28, no. 4 (1963), p. 401.

[23] Reinhards et al., p. 525.

[24] Ibid., p. 500.

[25] Ibid., p. 528.

[26] J. Reinhards, A. Weber & F. Maxwell-Lyons, "Collective Antibiotic Treatment of Trachoma: Report on Comparative Trials Leading to More Economic Methods of Treatment," *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, vol. 21, no. 6 (1959), p. 699.

treatment approach not only practical but necessary. Consequently, local residents took responsibility for purchasing and using the antibiotic, bolstering optimism about the program's viability.[27]

Discovery and Production: The First Chapter of Aureomycin's Biography

Many medicines in Morocco, particularly costly prescription drugs for specific illnesses like cancer, have limited social lives beyond their intended medical use, rendering any "biography" of them predictable and unremarkable. Aureomycin, by contrast, has led a far more complex and unpredictable life, in part due to their long history among the Moroccans, and in part due to their relative affordability for all social classes.

One of the challenges in writing the biography of medications lies in the limited access social scientists have to the worlds of pharmaceutical companies.[28] The life story of Aureomycin itself began in the United States shortly after World War II, when Lederle Laboratories hired Professor Benjamin Duggar to find an effective anti-malarial agent. Soon after joining the company in 1945, Duggar discovered a fungus that produced a powerful yellow antibiotic, later marketed as Aureomycin.[29] In 1948, Duggar announced his discovery in an article published in the *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*.[30] In 1951, the French pharmaceutical company Rhône-Poulenc began producing Aureomycin in cooperation with the US-based Lederle Company.[31]

Duggar's discovery was not clearly defined at first, as it showed potential for treating a variety of conditions. Serious interest in Aureomycin as a possible treatment for trachoma emerged around 1950. Although early trials of Aureomycin eye drops involved only a small number of patients,[32] subsequent experiments conducted on larger groups quickly confirmed its effectiveness. Its positive effects appeared quickly than that of previously used medications.[33] As known in Morocco today, Aureomycin is primarily an ointment. In its early phases, however, it appeared in various other forms, such as eye drops, capsules,[34] and a powder, the latter of which was discovered to be more painful.[35] Ultimately, Aureomycin proved effective across every form.[36] In Morocco, the trachoma-control program sought to achieve the best possible outcome at the lowest cost. The ointment proved to be the most practical form for health officials to provide clear instructions for self-treatment.[37]

During this phase of the medication's life story, the actors operated behind the scenes. They were largely economic and political actors seeking to achieve their objectives through technology and biomedicine. As such, they approached the medication as a commodity and discounted its symbolic and material importance, as their central concern was profit. To lend a profit motive to science and medical technology, these actors worked to create a space that enabled exchange between the scientific and industrial sectors.[38]

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[27] Ibid., p. 537.

[28] Geest & Chamberlain, p. 234.

[29] Thomas H. Jukes, "Some Historical Notes on Chlortetracycline," *Reviews of Infectious Diseases*, vol. 7, no. 5 (1985), pp. 702-703.

[30] Benjamin Duggar, "Aureomycin: A Product of the Continuing Search for New Antibiotics," *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, vol. 51, no. 2 (1948), pp. 177-181.

[31] André Frogerais, "Les origines de la fabrication des antibiotiques en France," *Hal Open Science* (2015), p. 20.

[32] Arthur Joseph Boase, "Aureomycin in Trachoma," *The British Journal of Ophthalmology*, vol. 34, no. 10 (1950), p. 627.

[33] Ibid., pp. 631-632.

[34] Stewart Duke-Elder, Derek Ainslie & Arthur James Boase, "Aureomycin in Ophthalmology: A Preliminary Report," *The British Journal of Ophthalmology*, vol. 34, no. 1 (1950), p. 30.

[35] Toulant et al., "Essais de traitement du trachome par l'auréomycine et la chloromycétine," *Bulletin de L'académie Nationale de Médecine*, vol. 135, no. 5-6 (1951), p. 81.

[36] Renald Ching, "Aureomycin in the Treatment of Trachoma," *AMA Archives of Ophthalmology*, vol. 45, no. 6 (1951), p. 659.

[37] Reinhards et al., p. 525.

[38] Paul Rabinow, *Making PCR: A Story of Biotechnology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 10.

The Cultural Construction of Meaning and the Process of Commoditization

The Material, Cultural, and Symbolic Structure of Aureomycin

Sjaak van der Geest and Kerry Chamberlain emphasize the importance of studying pharmaceuticals anthropologically as cultural objects that, beyond their medical function, carry social, spiritual, commercial, and political dimensions.[39] Pharmaceuticals circulate as commodities, but what makes an object a commodity? A commodity is an item that possesses value and can be exchanged for something of equivalent value. During the exchange process, both the item being sold and the item offered in return function as commodities.[40] A pharmaceutical, then, is doubly characterized. On the one hand, it is an object that can be traded and exchanged; on the other hand, it leads a life of its own, one that shifts in critical ways depending on the contexts in which it circulates and the actors controlling it.[41]

During the marketing phase of a pharmaceutical's life story, the primary actors are current consumers, former users, or those who benefit directly from selling the product. However, before addressing the economic dimension, it is important to recognize the cultural construct that renders this object – a pharmaceutical – a desirable commodity. Although the trade in medicines is deeply embedded in society, it was long overlooked as a topic worthy of anthropological analysis. For instance, while there might be a little interest in studying the use of aspirin for headaches in a particular community, the use of elephant dung to treat dizziness might appeal far more intriguing simply because it appears exotic.[42] Thus, any discussion of pharmaceutical anthropology must begin with a deliberate effort to "denaturalize" the accustomed view of pharmaceuticals.[43]

A pharmaceutical is a cultural artifact, an embodiment of shared beliefs, expectations, and experiences, and a point of contact among the various actors who engage with it. According to David Cohen et al., today's pharmaceuticals function in many ways like modern talismans and amulets. This is not to deny their scientific and medical importance; rather, it indicates that, from an anthropological perspective, their material properties are less central than the meanings they convey within the complex network of historical events and social interactions.[44]

In Morocco, Aureomycin was introduced in the form of an ointment rather than as capsules or drops for social and economic reasons. The ointment aligned with a cost-effective collective treatment campaign: once the uninterrupted treatment schedule was adopted, the required dosage per case could be reduced from 18 grams to as little as 3-6 grams.[45] Additionally, applying the ointment did not require the presence of specialists, unlike eye drops, for example, which require precision in preparation and administration.[46] This illustrates how even the material form of a medication can have social and economic justifications, and how understanding these justifications helps us reconstruct the drug's symbolic and cultural dimensions. Pills and capsules, for instance, do not carry the same significance as injections, drops, or ointments. Each form of medication, depending on its temporal and spatial context, acquires its own symbolic and cultural significance.

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[39] Geest & Chamberlain, p. 231.

[40] Kopytoff, p. 68.

[41] Susan Reynolds Whyte & Sjaak van der Geest (eds.), *The Context of Medicines in Developing Countries: Studies in Pharmaceutical Anthropology* (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 1988), p. 4.

[42] Ibid., p. 9.

[43] Ibid., p. 10.

[44] Cohen et al., p. 449.

[45] "The Treatment of Trachoma," *Medical Journal of Australia*, vol. 1, no. 25 (June 1960), p. 984.

[46] Ching, p. 657.

The symbolic dimension of a pharmaceutical is the meaning consumers attribute to it before using it. For an individual to decide to take a medication, they must first possess prior knowledge about it. In most cases, such knowledge is shaped less by medical or pharmacological sources than by social networks and the broader cultural environment. Nonetheless, this knowledge often originates, at least in part, from health-related propaganda disseminated by official bodies. In Morocco, during the mass trachoma-treatment campaign, Aureomycin was introduced as a medical substance together with instructions for proper use.[47] But did people follow these instructions? Did they use the medication in the manner the institutions intended, and for the conditions these institutions sought to treat?

These questions can barely be addressed with certainty for the past. However, presently, Aureomycin has become one of the best-known medications in Morocco since its introduction decades ago, used across a spectrum of medical specializations. As its use has expanded, it has not simply replaced local folk remedies; rather, it has become incorporated as one of their ingredients.[48]

The Commoditization of Aureomycin and Its Trade Networks

Historically, the commodification of Aureomycin coincided with its popularization, by making it widely available at minimal cost and in numerous locations across Morocco.[49] Certain pharmaceuticals in the country were indigenized that they were sold in stores and markets alongside everyday items. As a result, they began to be used – contrary to medical protocol – in keeping with specific cultural practices: pills were crushed into powders and applied to wounds, certain remedies acquired distinct local names, or pharmaceutical labels were borrowed for locally-made, non-pharmaceutical treatments.[50] In the case of Aureomycin, its "indigenization" resulted from logistical factors, such as the colonial authorities' attempt to control diseases even in remote regions far from major centres. To this end, they relied on informal distribution networks that reached the outermost points of the Moroccan map, such as tobacconists.[51]

As Aureomycin continued to circulate among the population, it became accessible through various channels, most notably through specialists who distributed the ointment free of charge, or through market vendors who sold it at very low prices. For example, a 5-gram tube could be purchased for 30 francs (USD 0.06).[52] Grocery stores and tobacco dispensaries in Morocco continue to sell various medications today, reflecting what might be termed "democratization of the pharmacy". This does not mean that medications are easily obtained or equally available to everyone, but rather that pharmacists do not hold an exclusive monopoly over them and people can obtain certain drugs without passing through formal channels. A prime example is the Fallah Market in the city of Oujda,[53] where a variety of medications is sold at prices far lower than those charged by pharmacies, and without requiring a prescription.[54] Aureomycin can also be obtained through social networks: from a neighbour who only used half a tube, or from a friend who keeps a reserve "just in case". In recent years, social media platforms such as Facebook have hosted groups in which members request medication from each other – either because pharmacy prices are prohibitively high or because certain drugs are unavailable. Within these groups, users exchange medications, send

[47] Reinhards et al., p. 523.

[48] Nina L. Etkin, Paul J. Ross & Ibrahim Muazzamu, "The Indigenization of Pharmaceuticals: Therapeutic Transitions in Rural Hausaland," *Social Science and Medicine*, vol. 30, no. 8 (1990), p. 919.

[49] Hicham Nhaili, "La législation pharmaceutique au Maroc durant le protectorat Français (1912-1956)," PhD. Dissertation, Université Mohammed V, Faculté de Médecine et de Pharmacie, Rabat, 2014, p. 72.

[50] Hilbrand Haak & Anita P. Hardon, "Indigenised Pharmaceuticals in Developing Countries: Widely Used, Widely Neglected," *The Lancet*, vol. 332, no. 8611 (1988), p. 621.

[51] Ruyan, pp. 350-351.

[52] Reinhards et al., p. 538.

[53] Farouk Tahri, "al-Ṭibb al-Ḥayawī bi-Waṣfihi Ṭibban Shaʿbiyyan Ladā l-Marḍā al-Nafsiyyīn wa-ʿĀʾilātihim: Dirāsa fī Iʿādat Intāj al-Waṣfāt al-Ṭibbiyya Khārij al-Mustashfā fī al-Maghrib," *Omran*, vol. 12, no. 48 (Spring 2024), p. 41.

[54] Ibid., pp. 41-42.

and receive them, and even suggest substitutes in comment threads, all without consulting a physician or pharmacist, and without any medical prescription.

Thus, the commodification of Aureomycin unfolded alongside health authorities' efforts to reduce reliance on costly human resources and to implement public health programs at the lowest possible cost. Popularization and commodification advanced in tandem, gradually shifting the medication away from the field of biomedicine.[55]

Only limited and superficial information is available about the company currently responsible for manufacturing and distributing Aureomycin ointment in Morocco. Operating under the name Promopharm Ltd., the company is located in the industrial zone of Sajel in Had Soualem, Casablanca. Incorporated in August 1947, it is described as "a public company listed on the Casablanca Stock Exchange since June 2007". It specializes in pharmaceutical products, biotechnology, and biology, with a focus on skincare and beauty products.[56]

The company appears to make no efforts to market the medication in Morocco. In fact, 1% Aureomycin sold in the country lacks even basic instructions for use inside the package, and it is currently unavailable in various stores and markets. After disappearing from the Moroccan market for several years, the ointment later re-emerged – sold at a high price and only in limited quantities in pharmacies – yet still available over the counter. This stands in contrast to countries such as France, where Aureomycin requires a doctor's prescription and is supplied with detailed instructions for use and a list of potential side effects.[57]

The Final Chapter in a Medication's Biography: Is It Achieving Its Intended Purpose?

Pharmaceutical Heresies: Biomedicine and the General Public

Biomedicine, particularly in its pharmaceutical form, represents a kind of orthodoxy that, given its exactitude, assumes patients' will to adhere to instructions that are sometimes strict. This sort of "dictatorship" has characterized biomedicine since its outset. During the French colonial period in Morocco, for example, when doctors doubted whether patients would take their medications as prescribed, they gathered in central locations and supervised the swallowing of each pill.[58] This might be termed "pharmaceutical orthodoxy": the set of precise instructions deemed necessary to achieve the therapeutic effects envisioned by the medicine or the prescribing doctor. Yet, as history has demonstrated, no orthodoxy exists without corresponding heresies.

The treatment of heretics differs according to the sphere to which they operate. A religious heretic may face execution at the hands of the dominant orthodoxy; a political heretic may be threatened with arrest or even assassination; and a social or economic heretic might end up being ostracized and deprived of the means to earn a livelihood. But what becomes of the scientific heretic? Nothing, as it happens. Even the most formidable and widespread scientific orthodoxies are incapable of confronting and eliminating their heresies.[59]

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[55] Etkin, Ross & Muazzamu, p. 923.

[56] "Pharmaceutical Revival Company in Morocco," *Maʿlūmāt Mubāshir*, accessed on 7/8/2024, at: https://acr.ps/1L9zRqE

[57] This was confirmed to the researcher personally.

[58] Ruyan, p. 353.

[59] Donald Goldsmith (ed.), *Scientists Confront Velikovsky*, Isaac Asimov (fore.) (New York: W. W. Norton Company, 1979), p. 7.

There are two types of scientific heretics. The first emerges from within the scientific community itself, and may be called the "endoheretic". The second comes from outside the scientific community and can be termed the "exoheretic". The exoheretic enjoys greater immunity from the sanctions that scientific orthodoxy might attempt to impose.[60] In general, the endoheretic receives little public attention, and rarely benefits materially from their heresy. The exoheretic, by contrast, tends to attract significant attention and support, and may even derive material benefit from the heresy.[61] This dynamic is especially evident in the profits earned through advertising on YouTube channels, where pharmaceutical heretics post their ideas. Social media platforms have thus enabled pharmaceutical heresies to spread more rapidly and easily than before.

Attributing "inappropriate" uses of medications solely to ignorance or illiteracy is a reductionist conclusion. The problem is fundamentally cultural.[62] Popular therapeutic systems will not simply absorb Western pharmaceuticals as they are; rather, they reinterpret their function within local conceptual frameworks before granting them legitimacy.[63] This is known as indigenization. When biomedicine is indigenized, it is shifted into a category of social relationships which differs radically from those assumed by orthodox Western therapeutic protocol; namely, the relationship between patient and specialized health professional.[64] For instance, outpatients with mental illnesses speak frankly of the indigenization of biomedicine when they turn a doctor's prescription into a folk remedy, retaining the medications that suit them and abandoning those that do not. Instead, they replace these prescribed medications with treatments such as exercise, smoking cannabis, or other substitutes.[65]

Such cases represent explicit forms of pharmaceutical heresies. The anthropologist's task is to understand the non-pharmaceutical mindset in using medications in order to move beyond the one-dimensional perspective that rests exclusively on orthodox therapeutic approaches. Only then does it become possible to view medications and their purposes from the perspective of individuals who maintain a traditional mentality, and to identify the factors that promote, justify, and perhaps even explain these various patterns of use.[66]

Indigenization of Antibiotics: Aureomycin as a Cure for All Ailments

Two types of Aureomycin are available on the Moroccan market: one for the eyes and another, more concentrated, for the skin. The ocular formulation, however, is better known, as evidenced by the terminology Moroccans use to describe it: *būmāḍā dawā al-ʿaynayn* (eye ointment),[67] or "the yellow pomade" in reference to the colour of its packaging.

The need for a medical prescription to obtain Aureomycin in France has helped regulate its use and limit practices that deviate from orthodox medical and pharmaceutical protocols. In Morocco, by contrast, a few dirhams are enough to purchase Aureomycin from the nearest pharmacy, or even from informal sources. However, does Aureomycin still fulfil its intended as a medication – that is, as a treatment for eye and skin conditions?

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[60] Ibid., p. 8.

[61] Ibid., p. 12.

[62] C.H. Bledsoe & M.F. Goubaud, "The Reinterpretation of Western Pharmaceuticals among the Mende of Sierra Leone," *Social Science and Medicine*, vol. 21, no. 3 (1985), pp. 258.

[63] Ibid., p. 262.

[64] Susan R. Whyte, "Pharmaceuticals as Folk Medicine: Transformations in the Social Relations of Health Care in Uganda," *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry*, vol. 16, no. 2 (1992), p. 173.

[65] Tahri, p. 48.

[66] Cohen et al., p. 445.

[67] An Arabization of the French word *pommade*, this word is used in Morocco to refer to any viscous ointment that can be rubbed onto the skin for curative purposes.

To answer this question, the study analyses a selection of YouTube videos in which Aureomycin is presented not only as a treatment of a variety of conditions but also as a solution to a range of cosmetic problems. The internet has played an important role in enabling consumers to share their experience and expertise, contributing to "knowledge-building" around medications. This marks a radical shift. In the past, knowledge concerning the therapeutic uses of pharmaceuticals was available exclusively through health specialists, governments, and companies.[68] However, the new pharmaceutical heretics have transformed the landscape to their advantage, democratizing access to the pharmaceutical field.

Despite being an antibiotic, Aureomycin is often treated much like Vaseline or the many moisturizers sold on the beauty market, applied with the belief that it possesses countless therapeutic powers. Such attributions of expansive healing properties are not unique to Morocco. In Sierra Leone, for example, people have used Mentholatum on their faces and hair to warm themselves when afflicted with what they call "cold fever". Others, including highly educated individuals, have drunk the ointment dissolved in warm water, based on their belief that the fever inhabits the abdomen.[69]

Tetracycline is another antibiotic that many Africans believe can treat virtually any condition. It is noteworthy that Tetracycline and Aureomycin belong to the same class of antibiotics, and the former is referred to locally by a term that literally means "a cure for all". In biomedical terms, however, Tetracycline is only for acne and skin inflammations. In Burkina Faso, residents attribute an expansive therapeutic capacity to Tetracycline, claiming it can cure everything from stomach aches to backaches, toothaches, wounds, headaches, malaria, and diarrhoea. Sold in the form of capsules, Tetracycline's contents are poured onto wounds, placed in cavities of aching teeth, or mixed with all sorts of beverages.[70]

Antibiotics are indigenized most particularly when they are believed to produce rapid results, and when they have been unavailable for long periods.[71] This is true of Aureomycin.

Aureomycin and Medical Heresy: YouTube and the Indigenization of Antibiotics

The research method employed in this study is known as virtual ethnography, an approach based on engagement with virtual communities and the observation of their online interactions and activities.[72] However, relying on the YouTube platform for investigating Moroccans' uses of Aureomycin does not exempt the need for in-depth field research. Studying a digital community alone is insufficient;[73] it must be connected to, and grounded in, social reality.

With the rise of digital communities, the observation process has become twofold: it now involves both the physical observations of social life in its material and digital dimensions, and the online observation of its electronic expressions "netnography".[74] The dual processes of socio-electronic interaction and the automatic digital documentation that accompanies them transform the digital space into a living, dynamic and open archive, where data is preserved at the moment it is produced.[75] YouTube offers particular advantages: it allows access to all publicly posted videos, in addition to comments and likes, unlike platforms such

[68] Ibid., p. 454.

[69] Bledose & Goubard, p. 267.

[70] Sjaak van der Geest & Susan Reynolds Whyte, "The Charm of Medicines: Metaphors and Metonyms," *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, New Series, vol. 3, no. 4 (December 1989), p. 352.

[71] Haak & Hardon, p. 621.

[72] Mahjuba Qawqaw, "al-Mujtamaʿ al-Iftirāḍī wa-Ishkāliyyat Tajdīd Manhaj al-Baḥth al-Sūsyūlūjī: Naḥw Bināʾ Namūdhaj li-Dirāsat al-Tafāʿulāt al-Iliktrūnīyya bi-Wāsiṭat al-Ḥāsūb," *Omran*, vol. 8, no. 29 (Summer 2019), p. 94.

[73] Christine Hine, "Ethnographies of Online Communities and Social Media: Modes, Varieties, Affordances," in: Nigel G. Fieldinget, Raymond M. Lee & Grant Blank (eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Online Research Methods* (California: Sage Publications, 2017), p. 412.

[74] Mahjuba Qawqaw, "al-Nitnūghrāfīyā Manhajan li-l-Baḥth al-Sūsiyūlūjī wa-l-Anthrūbūlūjī: Min al-Mulāḥaẓa al-Iliktrūniyya ilā Iʿādat Kitābat al-Athar al-Raqmī," *African Social Dynamics: The African Journal of the Human and Social Sciences*, no. 5 (2023), p. 24.

[75] Ibid., p. 29.

as Facebook, where access to groups is limited to members, and where stringent admission criteria are sometimes imposed.

Analysing YouTube content and tracking views and comments to assess the extent to which Aureomycin has been indigenized in Morocco is less a methodological innovation than a restoration of methods familiar to earlier sociologists,[76] albeit applied to a new research community: the digital community. Relying on the knowledge of pharmaceutical heretics on YouTube by people seeking to care for their bodies suggests a decline in the power of the medical and pharmaceutical elite and introduces new risks to people's health, most notably, the growing potential for antibiotic resistance. According to the World Health Organization, this presents a real threat to humanity.[77]

We chose videos that addressed Aureomycin and its various uses in Morocco over a relatively short period of time. The earliest video was posted in April 2019, the latest in November 2021.

Table (1): Moroccan Content Creators' Videos Using Aureomycin

No. of likes	No. of views	Date posted	Title
17,000	609,738	22 April 2019	The secret of my clear complexion is a 9-dirham pomade. Get rid of acne and scars, and people will ask you what your secret is. In 3 days …
364	25,558	6 June 2021	Yellow pomade can cure internal and external haemorrhoids from the very first use.
8,800	583,030	25 February 2022	Yellow pomade can treat nail fungus and tooth decay, leaving you as good as new without a doctor. All I ask for in return is your prayers.
1,500	47,453	8 November 2021	Yellow pomade will whiten teeth in seconds, I swear to God. Rub your teeth with it, and yellowing and calcium deposits will disappear.
621	31,037	11 October 2021	Get a flat stomach in 3 days with the miracle of yellow pomade. Melt away belly fat and that "rubber tire" for good without …
6,500	342,403	25 July 2022	I swear to God, with yellow pomade, your hair will grow in thick and never fall out again. No more bald patches, and …

Source: Prepared by the author.

Taken together, these videos garnered more than 1.5 million views and up to 35,000 "likes" over only three years. In their titles, Aureomycin is referred to as "yellow pomade" or simply "pomade". The language used to describe its effects often reflects a kind of magical thinking, with repeated references to the "miracle" ointment's effects. However, the most striking feature is the use of an eye ointment to treat a vast array of unrelated medical conditions.

In one of the videos, Aureomycin is presented as an effective cosmetic treatment for achieving "clearer, more beautiful skin",[78] which is precisely the purpose of Aureomycin 3% ointment. What is noteworthy, however, is that the "influencer" portrays Aureomycin as performing the same function as folk preparations, only in the form of an ointment originating from biomedicine. The irony lies in her harsh criticism of doctors for not adopting Aureomycin as a treatment for complexion problems, an omission she interprets

[76] Qawqaw, "al-Mujtamaʿ al-Iftirāḍī wa-Ishkāliyyat Tajdīd Manhaj al-Baḥth al-Sūsyūlūjī," p. 98.

[77] "Muqāwamat al-Muḍāḍḍāt al-Ḥayawiyya," *World Health Organization*, 31/7/2020, accessed on 10/5/2024, at: https://bit.ly/4b5XfGo

[78] Rajoua Channel, YouTube, 22/4/2019, accessed on 7/8/2024, at: https://bit.ly/4k3Q1Hm

as evidence of a medical monopoly designed to push high-price pharmaceuticals. In this narrative, the influencer positions herself as "fighting" to provide people with the most effective treatment at the lowest cost, which is already available in abundance. She states frankly, "I want to offer you something that is available to everyone, and to help other women take care of themselves with something simple and within easy reach".

In the second video, the influencer proposes Aureomycin 1% as a treatment for haemorrhoids,[79] embedding it within a regimen that makes the antibiotic appear as if it belongs to the realm of folk medicine. The prescription is as follows: "Take a spoonful of Aureomycin 1% and a few drops of olive oil and mix them well. Then add a pinch of turmeric, preferably hand-ground. Place the mixture inside a piece of fabric or cotton and pass it over the affected area". She further advices a rigorous treatment schedule to achieve the desired outcomes: "The prescription should be used regularly even after recovery". In the comments section, a woman asks whether she can use this prescription while eight months pregnant. The YouTuber responds that this is "all right". In doing so, the influencer presents herself as an experienced expert capable of determining what is appropriate for each individual case. This is a vivid example of medical heresy in practice, in which biomedicine overlaps with folk medicine, and the folk healer becomes a physician or pharmacist in their own right.

One researcher notes that to stay in business, folk healers are obliged to adjust to ongoing advances in the healthcare field. One of the most important types of adjustment is the incorporation of pharmaceuticals into their repertoire of folk treatments.[80] In another video, an influencer recommends using Aureomycin 1% as a treatment for nail fungus.[81] As in the previous example, the YouTuber introduces Aureomycin into an otherwise purely folk remedy. The preparation method is described as follows: "First, take two cloves of red garlic and rub them into a paste. Then add a teaspoon of either regular or apple cider vinegar and half a teaspoon of table salt. Then add the Aureomycin 1%". To use the mixture, "place the vinegar and salt in a container of warm water, soak your hands or feet (that is, the affected nails) in the solution for five minutes, then take them out and dry them. After this, trim the nails as short as possible, place the mixture onto the affected nail or nails, and wrap it/them in cellophane. The mixture should preferably be left on overnight. For best results, the process should be repeated daily".

The YouTuber in this video emphasizes the need to adhere to the method she proposes, warning that any deviation will cause the treatment to fail. She repeatedly insists that she is not speaking "out of the blue" but from personal experience. One of the key factors in building a solid relationship between a community and a given medication is the ability to replicate the practices being promoted and obtain the same results.[82]

In the next video, Aureomycin is proffered as a treatment for yellowing teeth.[83] Once again, it is incorporated into a folk remedy, described as follows: "Put about two spoonfuls of apple cider vinegar in a container and add any toothpaste of your choice. Add a pinch of powdered miswak and a bit of ground cloves. In a separate container, mix a little bit of Aureomycin 1% with the miswak power and olive oil and mix them all together". The instructions continue: "Brush your teeth with the first mixture, then place the second mixture on a piece of aluminium foil and wrap it around your teeth". The choice of Aureomycin for this purpose may be influenced by the ointment's yellow colour. Similarly, a yellow pharmaceutical pill is used as a folk remedy for malaria, which turns one's urine bright yellow. The idea, then, is that this yellow

[79] Khadiju Buyuti, YouTube, 7/6/2021, accessed on 7/8/2024, at: https://bit.ly/410Wb24

[80] Ivan Wolffers, "Traditional Practitioners and Western Pharmaceuticals in Sri Lanka," in: Whyte & Geest (eds.), p. 47.

[81] ʿĀlam Ajmal al-Nisāʾ, YouTube, 26/2/2022, accessed on 7/8/2024, at: https://bit.ly/414FPpi

[82] Bledose & Goubaud, p. 263.

[83] Moroccan Women's Beauty Secrets, YouTube, 8/11/2022, accessed on 7/8/2024, at: https://bit.ly/3EIG5Tp

pill knocks out the disease by "fighting fire with fire".[84] In the same vein, red medications are believed to have the capacity to purify or even build up the blood.[85]

In the next video, Aureomycin incorporated into a prescription for weight loss and the reduction of excess body fat:[86] "Put a teaspoon of Aureomycin 1% in a container, add a teaspoon of garlic oil and a teaspoon of lemon oil, then mix well. It is best to avoid Aureomycin 3%, because it is intended for acne; for weight loss, one should use Aureomycin 1%, which is intended for the eyes. Fill a cup with boiling water; add a teaspoon of anise leaf and another teaspoon of anise seed, one cinnamon stick, and two spoonfuls of lemon juice. Then cover the mixture to prevent its benefits from evaporating with the water". Directions for use continue: "Rub the area where the fat loss is desired with the first mixture, then wrap the area in cellophane. After this, drink the second mixture after straining it to make the prescription effective".

This video represents a particularly "extreme" form of medical heresy, as it openly attacks the medical field. It claims to be strict, rejecting the Aureomycin ointment intended for acne, while endorsing the use of the ointment specifically intended for eye conditions. In so doing, it implicitly acknowledges the medication's officially intended purposes (i.e. to treat acne and eye conditions) while simultaneously disregarding them by repurposing the ointment for an entirely different goal: removing body fat. Additionally, it affirms the belief that the benefits of the medication "will evaporate" if the mixture is not covered, offering a popular reformulation of pharmacists' insistence that medications remain covered or in closed containers to remain safe and effective.

Online influencers have given folk medicine an aura of strictness and austerity reminiscent of orthodox biomedicine, while simultaneously making biomedicine a complementary part of folk medicine. In so doing, they have achieved the ultimate indigenization of the modern medicine.

Pharmaceuticals are generally perceived as more powerful and effective than folk medicines and herbs because they act quickly to alleviate symptoms and treat diseases. However, this very "power" carries a negative aspect: the side effects that may result from the shock such substances inflict on the body. By contrast, folk medicines and natural herbs act more slowly and gently, addressing ailments without producing unwanted side effects.[87] Hence, efforts to combine biomedicines with folk remedies may be seen as an attempt to reduce the risks of biomedicine while at the same time augmenting the effectiveness of folk medicine. As such, the activities of the new pharmaceutical heretics offer a meeting point between the two fields which, in their view, offers the "ideal treatment".

This point of convergence is illustrated in a prescription for strengthening hair and treating baldness, presented in a video that received more than 300,000 views.[88] The recipe is as follows: "Place a teaspoon of tea powder in a sealable glass bottle, then add a teaspoon of powdered fenugreek leaves and a teaspoon of zaatar, and stir the mixture well. Next, add a teaspoon of ground cloves and a small amount of olive oil or vegetable oil. To this mixture, add Aureomycin 1%, preferably avoiding Aureomycin 3%, and stir the mixture well again. Close the bottle tightly and place it in boiling water for five minutes. After this, cover the bottle well with aluminium foil and place it far from sunlight for 12 days. Stir the mixture daily until it is thoroughly homogeneous, at which point it will be ready to use". The instructions for use are as follows: "Once a week, apply some of the mixture to the scalp and leave it on all night, then wash your hair well the following morning".

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84 Bledose & Goubaud, p. 264.

85 Ibid., p. 269.

86 Moroccan Women's Beauty Secrets, YouTube, 11/10/2021, accessed on 7/8/2024, at: https://bit.ly/4b7B6rA

87 Linda K. Sussman, "The Use of Herbal and Biomedical Pharmaceuticals on Mauritius," in: Whyte & Geest (eds.), p. 206.

88 Moroccan Women's Beauty Secrets, YouTube, 25/7/2020, accessed on 11/11/2024, at: https://acr.ps/1L9zRPw

This recipe is a striking embodiment of medical heresy. It illustrates how the kitchen becomes a scientific laboratory where new medications are produced using a mixture of plant substances, common folk remedies, and a modern pharmaceutical originally intended as an eye medication. The rigour demonstrated in the choice of time period (stirring the mixture daily for exactly 12 days) and the specification to apply it once a week serves to give the prescription a "pharmaceutical" character. Within this context, it becomes impossible to speak of a "modern medicine" on the one hand, and a "folk" or "traditional" medicine on the other. Rather, one might say that folk medicine has been pharmaceuticalized, or alternatively, that the pharmaceutical or biomedical field has been indigenized, such that the modern can no longer be separated from the traditional. It may be therefore most appropriate to view all available medications as elements within a single cultural system.[89]

All the content creators discussed here agree that Aureomycin is effective in treating a wide variety of conditions. However, they go further, accusing physicians and pharmacists of deliberately concealing the power of Aureomycin to sell more costly medications. This highlights a particular role these heretics claim for themselves: they present their work as a just cause against a ruthless orthodoxy, positioning themselves as the sole defenders of ordinary people and as bearers of revolutionary knowledge.[90] Their message is clear: while elitist biomedicine can be rejected, its discoveries can be appropriated within folk medicine. In this context, Aureomycin is no longer simply a product of biomedical progress; it becomes a component in a broader repertoire of folk remedies. The importance of biomedical pharmaceuticals is acknowledged, but the elite that decides how they are to be used is roundly rejected.

Conclusion

Whatever their form and degree of importance, all objects, including medications, are potentially subject to both commoditization and individualization. In other words, just as an object can be commoditized, it can also be de-commoditized by being imbued with unique qualities that distinguish it from other things. Moreover, an object that is not subject to this logic in one realm may become so in another.

The ideal commodity is one that can be readily exchanged for something else, and the ideally "commoditized" world is one in which everything is tradeable and everything is for sale. By contrast, the most de-commoditized world is one in which all things are individualized and distinct, and therefore not subject to exchange at all.[91] Medications complicate this vision. Even after a medication is individualized – or de-commoditized – by being withdrawn from the sphere of trade or exchange,[92] it could revert at any moment to being exchangeable. It can be given as a gift or loan, or even resold. The dream of every business is for its products to reach a stage of terminal consumption.[93] Yet in the case of medications, this is impossible.

In addition to functioning as "ideal commodities", medications also possess remarkably dynamic lives. The life story of a medication might differ from one consumer to another, and from one geographic context to the next. From the perspective of pharmaceutical anthropology, what matters is not primarily the relationship between patient and physician or healer, but the domain of traditional healing, where people treat themselves using medications they believe to have particular effects.[94]

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89 Bledose & Goubaud, p. 277.

90 Vuk Stambolovic, "Medical Heresy – The View of a Heretic," *Social Science and Medicine*, vol. 43, no. 5 (1996), p. 602.

91 Kopytoff, p. 69.

92 Ibid., p. 74.

93 Ibid., p. 75. Terminal consumption has been defined as the act of acquiring and possessing material goods purely as an end, rather than as a means to achieve true well-being.

94 Whyte & Geest (eds.), p. 5.

The broad availability of medications has had a liberating effect, enabling ever greater number of people to care for themselves. The intensity of this "therapeutic liberation" is particularly notable in societies where medications circulate freely, without oversight or restrictions.[95] Moreover, this growing availability of medications has become directly linked to the gradual loosening of pharmaceutical establishment, which has led gradually to their indigenization and incorporation into local cultures.[96]

Aureomycin, an ideal case study in this regard, began its life in the United States as a powerful yet relatively obscure antibiotic. It then made its way to Morocco through a large-scale program to combat trachoma, and today it serves as a potential treatment for a wide variety of conditions. Consumers began independently redefining its uses, prescribing it for themselves and others to treat a wide range of ailments. consumers began independently redefining its uses, prescribing it for themselves and others to treat a wide range of ailments.

It is within this context that a new type of heresy – medical heresy – emerges. As this study demonstrates, this form of heresy condemns biomedicine and the pharmaceutical industry as fields that exercise a powerful ideological hegemony which is rooted in an elitist perspective, scientifically sanctioned, and globally dominant.[97] Today's heretics are no longer isolated and scattered; instead, they have become producers of discourse that create different meanings that challenge those advanced by prevailing modernist and scientific discourse.[98] This has come about through the internet, which has reversed the direction of the information flow in the medical field,[99] enabling the creators of medically heretical content to earn large profits and gain widespread fame.

Today's heretics craft new medical prescriptions that are neither modern nor traditional, blending herbs and natural substances commonly used in folk remedies with biomedicines to treat a wide variety of conditions. In doing so, they erase the boundaries that once separated these two fields, transforming the kitchen into a new laboratory for the manufacture of remedies that go beyond classical categories of treatment. Modern medical heretics represent an alternative mentality that reflects not only health concerns, but also social, political and economic concerns.[100] Influencers speak regularly in their videos about the high cost of modern medicine and accuse physicians and pharmacists of colluding to drain Moroccans' pockets even when orthodox medical treatment might be significantly easier, cheaper and faster-acting. Medical heretics cast themselves as saviours who offer the solutions most appropriate for people. Hence, their moral authority rests not on duty, but on an ethos of empathy with others.[101]

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[95] Geest & Whyte, p. 348.

[96] Haak & Hardon, pp. 620-621.

[97] Akile Gürsoy, "Beyond the Orthodox: Heresy in Medicine and the Social Sciences from a Cross-Cultural Perspective," *Social Science and Medicine*, vol. 43, no. 5 (1996), p. 580.

[98] Stambolovic, p. 601.

[99] Cohen et al., p. 455.

[100] Geest, Whyte & Hardon, p. 166.

[101] Stambolovic, p. 602.

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A visual overview of the multilayered points at which Israel blocks Muslims from accessing their holiest site, even during Ramadan

This graphic offers a visual overview of the multilayered points at which Israel blocks Muslims from accessing their holiest site, even during Ramadan. Although Israel proudly boasts of "easing restrictions" for access to the third holiest mosque in Islam during Ramadan, the truth is that millions (in Jerusalem itself, in the rest of the West Bank, in the Gaza Strip, and in other countries) are prevented from even imagining praying there. Gradually, over time, this access has been chipped away such that smaller and smaller numbers of worshippers can actually reach it.

For those holding a Palestinian Authority ID, the criteria for being considered for include being the right age and gender; having an entry permit; having a magnetic card; and having no "security blocks" in the labyrinthine computer system. Even those who meet all the criteria on any given Friday in Ramadan, when the restrictions are "eased", can find themselves turned away if the arbitrarily set quota of worshippers for that day has been reached (for example, only 3,000 will be allowed to pass the checkpoint on any given Friday in Ramadan).

And for those lucky few who are granted access to the city, they must shuttle in provided buses to the mosque area, pray, and then be sure to depart Jerusalem by 4:00 pm (as specified in the permit), return to the checkpoint by the required curfew of 5:00 pm, and prove their physical presence by submitting a fingerprint as they exit the checkpoint.

After such an onerous and humiliating experience, it would not be surprising if worshippers were hesitant to return.[1]

1 For further readings on this, see: Khalil Assali, "Israel Is Banning More and More Palestinian Figures from Entering al-Aqsa Mosque on Arbitrary Grounds," Jerusalem Story, 26/1/2026, accessed on 2/2/2026, at: https://acr.ps/1L9F2zH; Khalil Assali, "How Israel Bans Individual Palestinians from Entering al-Aqsa Mosque and Other Areas," Jerusalem Story, 12/9/2025, accessed on 2/2/2026, at: https://acr.ps/1L9F2Xy; Khalil Assali & Daoud Kuttab, "The Last Days of Ramadan Reflected Worrisome Trends in Jerusalem," Jerusalem Story, 10/4/2025, accessed on 2/2/2026, at: https://acr.ps/1L9F2R0

BOOK REVIEW ESSAYS

Mehdi Mabrouk (ed.), *al-Intikhābāt al-Tashrīʿiyya wa-l-Riʾāsiyya fī Tūnis ʿĀm 2019: al-Ḥaql al-Siyāsī wa-l-Sulūk al-Intikhābī wa-Ḥarāk al-Nukhab* [*The 2019 Legislative and Presidential Elections in Tunisia: Politics, Electoral Behaviors, and Elite Mobilization* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2022), pp. 624.

REVIEWED BY BRAHIM CHLAIH, Researcher Specializing in Public Law and Political Science.

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In the years following the Arab Spring protests in Tunisia, it has become clear that while elections in the MENA region function as political and constitutional mechanisms that enable democratic transitions, they can also exacerbate political and social conflicts.[1] They can also facilitate the rise of actors with undemocratic agendas, as illustrated in Tunisia after the 2019 election of President Kais Saied.

This raises important questions about the function and purpose of elections during democratic transitions. Are free and fair elections merely foundational components of the democratic process, or do they also contribute to the strengthening and consolidation of democratic governance? If so, why and how do some elections, even when democratic in form and substance, offer a starting point for democratic regression or authoritarian backsliding?

These questions are taken up in *The 2019 Legislative and Presidential Elections in Tunisia: Politics, Electoral Behaviors, and Elite Movement*, published in 2022 by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies as part of its series on democratic transition studies. Edited by Mehdi Mabrouk, the volume examines the Tunisian presidential and legislative polls of September and October 2019,[2] their profound impact on the country's political landscape, and the subsequent trajectory of President Saied, which has widely been viewed as authoritarian.

Several chapters in the book analyse the institutional and legal frameworks, as well as the broader political and social context, that shaped the 2019 Tunisian legislative and presidential elections. This lays the groundwork for assessing whether the elections met the objective conditions of a democratic process, and for interpreting their results and implications.[3] Chapters 1-3, along with Chapters 6 and 10, address the electoral system and its impact on the political landscape before and after the vote. The 2014 electoral law, amended in 2017 and again in 2019 to govern that year's elections, was widely viewed as providing a suitable foundation for conducting democratic elections consistent with international standards and best practices.

Despite this, the electoral law exhibited several shortcomings in its drafting. These included imprecise definitions of political advertising and campaign activities, the absence of a legal framework for opinion

[1] Taleb Awad et al., "al-Dīmuqrāṭiyya wa-l-Intikhābāt fī al-ʿĀlam al-ʿArabī," in: Karam Khamis (ed.), *Proceedings of the International Conference on Democracy and Elections in the Arab World*, Alaa Shalabi (intro.) (Cairo: Arab Organization for Human Rights, 2014), p. 7.

[2] Between its independence and 2023, Tunisia has held 16 elections to legislative or constituent assemblies.

[3] To achieve this goal, the researcher employed various methodological tools, including analysis of the legal texts framing the elections, descriptive statistics, qualitative methodological tools, and cartographic analysis as used in electoral geography.

polling, and the limited powers granted to the Independent High Authority for Elections (ISIE) to annul results. While ISIE and its subsidiaries fulfilled their duties in managing the overall electoral process efficiently and effectively, their performance was not without flaws. For example, they failed to inform the public and stakeholders about the details and justifications of their decisions, did not publish minutes of their internal deliberations in a timely manner, and occasionally issued contradictory public statements, all of which diminished public confidence in the integrity of the electoral process.

Several aspects of the legal framework could have been improved. These include establishing clearer timeframes for the various stages of the electoral process, revising legislation governing campaign practices, clarifying the provisions of the electoral law that authorize ISIE to modify preliminary results in response to reported violations, reviewing the division of electoral districts, and adopting a system of voter endorsements in the registration process for presidential candidates.

In the book's second chapter,[4] Mohammed El Imam discusses the political climate surrounding the 2019 Tunisian elections, the dynamics that accompany electoral cycles, and the strategies of various actors amid shifting national and international conditions between 2011 and 2019. He analyses the post-2011 political landscape by focusing on what he calls the "active political elite"[5] and on the role of consensus politics in sustaining the transitional phase despite the fragmentation of Tunisia's political forces. El Imam highlights the rise of a populist current that positions itself as the authentic voice of the people, mobilizing support primarily through criticism of the "traditional" consensus-based political elites that have shaped Tunisian politics since 2011. Based on this analysis, he concludes that Tunisia's experience, although marked by instability, falls within the broader patterns commonly observed in democratic transitions.

By contrast, an examination of voter turnout and election results reflects changes both in the leading political currents and in the factors determining voting behaviour among Tunisians. These changes were driven by several factors. In Chapter 3,[6] Naji al-Arqoubi notes that the 2019 parliamentary elections saw a turnout of only 42.8%, a decline of 26 percentage points compared with the 2014 elections. The subsequent election of Saied in the presidential runoff reflected, broader dissatisfaction with the political elite and its failure to achieve the goals of the revolution or meet citizens' expectations since the 2014 poll.

The 2019 elections resulted in a fragmented parliament. The Assembly of the Representatives of the People (ARP), which convened on 13 November, included representatives from 16 political parties, including seven new parties, 4 coalitions, and 11 independent lists. None secured enough seats to form a government independently. In Chapter 5, Munir al-Kashou[7] describes this complex, intricate parliamentary landscape in which newly formed parties occupied a significant position, while left-wing and Baathist parties experienced a marked decline. He attributes this to several factors: an electoral law based on proportional representation, the adoption of the "highest remainders" method for seat allocation, the absence of an electoral threshold, pervasive party fragmentation, and excessive pluralism. Al-Kashou argues that these factors collectively misled voters and influenced their choices.

According to Mohamed El-Imam in Chapter 2, the factors determining voters' choices in Tunisian elections shifted markedly across the electoral cycles held between 2011 and 2019. This evolution reflects a broader transformation in the public's priorities: whereas many early post-revolution voters sought an elite capable of establishing a democratic system, breaking with authoritarianism, holding the former

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[4] Mehdi Mabrouk (ed.), *al-Intikhābāt al-Tashrīʿiyya wa-l-Riʾāsiyya fī Tūnis ʿĀm 2019: al-Ḥaql al-Siyāsī wa-l-Sulūk al-Intikhābī wa-Ḥarāk al-Nukhab* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2022), pp. 83-130.

[5] Ibid., pp. 87-98.

[6] Ibid., pp. 131-184.

[7] Ibid., pp. 235-288.

regime accountable, and ensuring justice and equality, subsequent elections revealed a preference for actors perceived as credible, honest, serious, and able to govern effectively, improve economic conditions, promote development, and guarantee security and stability.[8] This underlines the role of the media, tribal and regional loyalties, and political money in shaping voter behaviour.

In Chapter 6,[9] Amin Ben Messoud explores the results of the 2019 elections through an analysis of media discourse and its impact on the electoral process. Notably, the 2019 presidential campaign featured, for the first time in Tunisia, live, televised debates, an unprecedented development that shaped both public engagement and candidate visibility.

The election results also reflected the persistent challenges facing Tunisian women in terms of political participation and the realization of gender parity in electoral representation. In Chapter 4, Asma Nouira[10] examines the 2019 results from a gender perspective, advancing two premises: first, that women possess limited substantive political power despite the high levels of representation that democratic systems can, in principle, provide; and second, that women enjoy little representation in the early stages of democratic transitions. Nouira highlights women's political participation as a theoretical indicator of democratic consolidation, concluding that the Tunisian electoral experience has not been fair to women, and that gender has not been a decisive factor in elections since 2011.

Free and fair elections are undoubtedly influenced by several factors. Those include the prevailing political system, social structures, the extent to which voters enjoy their fundamental rights, the consolidation and application of public freedoms, the rule of law, the separation of powers, the public expression of opinions, an independent judiciary, a free press, and a civil society that can monitor the integrity of the electoral process, ensure fair competition among candidates, and promote civic awareness. Abdel Salam Al-Kikli discusses these and other pillars of a democratic system in Chapter 9.[11]

At this level, the 2019 presidential and legislative elections appeared to reaffirm the democratic system in Tunisia, making it a true Arab exception. This resulted in the country's second peaceful, smooth transfer of power from one democratically elected president to another (following the 2014 transition from incumbent Moncef Marzouki to Beji Caid Essebsi), as well as a smooth handover from one elected parliament to the next. Together, these developments marked important milestones in Tunisia's post-2011 democratic transition.

Signs of a political crisis began to emerge with the formation of the new government immediately after the 2019 legislative election results were announced. As Tarek Kahlaoui explains in Chapter 10, this process quickly became mired in political bargaining.[12] He traces the sequence of negotiations among the political parties, its mechanisms, the parties' positioning strategies, and the formation and collapse of alliances throughout the process of government formation. Kahlaoui also demonstrates how, within this context, President Saied became the de facto leader of the political elite, despite coming from outside the established elite and the parties that had dominated Tunisian politics since 2011. During his early months in office, Saied cultivated a populist discourse with authoritarian tendencies, manifested in his monopoly of constitutional interpretation, his rejection of parliamentary initiatives to resolve the crisis surrounding the appointment of judges to the frozen Constitutional Court, and his persistent efforts to usurp the powers of the prime minister.

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[8] Ibid., pp. 83-130.
[9] Ibid., pp. 289-374.
[10] Ibid., pp. 185-234.
[11] Ibid., pp. 519-574.
[12] Ibid., pp. 575-608.

This process produced a government with a vague and ambiguous political identity,[13] particularly regarding economic and social policies, as coalition actors prioritized positional bargaining and the distribution of ministerial portfolios over the articulation of a clear government agenda. This exacerbated public discontent and distrust toward political actors. These circumstances enabled the president, who had been democratically elected with a substantial majority, to consolidate power through a series of measures that amounted to a constitutional coup against Tunisia's democratic trajectory.

In his quest to consolidate power, Saied sought to control the outcomes of the electoral process and determine which political parties could participate by amending the electoral law. The legislative and local elections of 2022 and 2023, marked by the lowest voter turnout since 2011, revealed that public debate and the engagement of political and social actors are essential to overcoming Tunisia's far-reaching crises. The 2022 legislative elections underscored a significant decline in public trust in one of the central mechanisms of democratic governance: electoral representation. Although the new authorities succeeded in administering the elections despite meagre turnout, this only highlighted the severity of the challenges facing Tunisia's democratic experiment amid an accelerating authoritarian turn. Meanwhile, opposition parties failed to attract public support and found themselves confronting the president's decisions alone, without reliable broad popular backing.[14]

In Chapter 7, Hafez Abdel Rahim argues[15] that four main forces opposed to the democratic transition have brought down the Tunisian democratic experiment: the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT); media outlets owned by businessmen hostile to the transition; power centres within the state bureaucracy; and external actors. He identifies four additional factors that exacerbated the setbacks undermining the transition: the failure of transitional justice and reconciliation processes; the inability to establish the Constitutional Court and most other constitutional bodies; the limited effectiveness of civil society in supporting the transition; and the rise of populist rhetoric. He concludes that the setbacks of the democratic experiment cannot be attributed solely to the economic situation but must be understood in relation to the interplay of domestic struggles.

President Saied, despite his promises, has remained unable to resolve the economic and social crises plaguing Tunisia. This presents the country with two possible scenarios. The first is that mounting economic, political, and potentially even security crises will push Tunisian society, in its civil and political components, toward forms of rebellion and civil disobedience, as citizens demand improvements in living conditions and the political landscape. Such pressures could compel the president either to accept a political compromise with his opponents or to relinquish power. The second scenario is that the president manages to consolidate his rule as a hybrid regime, absorbing the weakened opposition and compelling it to accept participation within the narrow limits permitted by the regime, even while recognizing that the electoral process remains deeply flawed.

[13] The administration of Ennahda's Habib Jemli.

[14] The UGTT has taken weak and ambiguous positions compared to its role in previous periods, and the Coordination of Social Democratic Parties and the National Salvation Front rejected the results of the constitutional referendum and boycotted two rounds of legislative elections in December 2022 and January 2023.

[15] Mabrouk (ed.), pp. 375-440.

Anas Khaled Nassar, al-Istrātījiyya al-Ṣīniyya Tijāh al-Duwal al-ʿArabiyya: al-Ahdāf wa-l-Āthār al-Mustaqbaliyya, Dirāsa Istishrāfiyya [Chinese Strategy Toward Arab States: Goals and Implications for the Future, an Exploration] (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2020), pp. 275.

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The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked a shift from a bipolar to a multipolar system. Although the US briefly emerged as the sole superpower this unipolar moment soon gave way to the rise of new Asian powers such as China and India. China's ascent has been driven by rapid economic growth, sustained military modernization, and the expansion of its diplomatic influence through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative. It has also strengthened its presence in international institutions and established new multilateral forums, raising questions about future global leadership and the trajectory of Sino-American competition.

With these shifts in the global system, there has been for studies on China's strategies toward Arab states. One such contribution is *Chinese Strategy Toward Arab States: Goals and Implications for the Future, an Exploration,* authored by Anas Khaled Nassar.

Nassar presents a comprehensive, in-depth analysis, focusing on the core elements shaping Sino-Arab relations within their geopolitical and strategic context. He employs diverse research techniques, including interviews and content analysis. While his adoption of a qualitative methodology allows for greater analytical depth, a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative techniques, would have strengthened the robustness of the findings and reduced the risk of analytical bias, thus enhancing the overall rigour and methodological soundness.

The author interviewed 20 experts, carefully selected based on nationality, academic qualifications, field of specialization, professional position, years of experience, and age.[1] Having established these methodological foundations, he then develops a theoretical framework based on four analytical approaches outlined in the second chapter.

The first approach is game theory, specifically the concept of non-zero-sum games, which suggests the possibility of mutual benefit between China and Arab states rather than a purely competitive relationship.[2] The second draws on structural realism, particularly the work of Kenneth Waltz, which holds that the anarchic structure of the international system drives states to accumulate power. Nassar acknowledges that this theory explains the behaviour of the US more effectively than that of China, yet he employs it to illuminate China's ambition for great power status.[3]

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1 Anas Khaled Nassar, *al-Istrātījiyya al-Ṣīniyya Tijāh al-Duwal al-ʿArabiyya: al-Ahdāf wa-l-Āthār al-Mustaqbaliyya, Dirāsa Istishrāfiyya* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2020), p. 36.

2 Ibid., pp. 64-65.

3 Ibid., pp. 65-67.

The third approach is power transition theory, developed by A.F.K. Organski, which posits a hierarchical international order. From this perspective China occupies a complex position, exhibiting characteristics of both satisfied and dissatisfied strong states. This framework allows Nassar to interpret Sino-Arab alliance as a strategy to counterbalance US influence.[4] Finally, he explores Friedrich Ratzel's notion of Lebensraum. Arguing that its direct application to China is problematic given the absence of overt expansionist tendencies, the author instead proposes interpreting China's conduct from the perspective of positive geopolitical engagement.[5] Nassar also surveys the views of Chinese thinkers who believe that Western theories of international relations are incompatible with their reality and therefore inadequate for analysing China's behaviour toward other countries.

The author traces the evolution of China's foreign policy in relation to domestic developments, beginning with its historical experience as an isolated empire guided by Confucian principles, moving through the revolutions of the 19th century and then the Japanese occupation, then to the post-1949 reconstruction under Mao Zedong, and culminating in the gradual opening and the articulation of the "Chinese Dream".[6] Nassar analyses China's internal advantages as a cornerstone of its foreign policy. Geographically, China occupies a strategic location and possesses abundant resources; economically, it ranks second globally while striving to reach first place and to secure stable energy supplies; socially, it prioritizes investment in human capital and education; culturally, it mobilizes Confucianism as a form of soft power; and militarily, it strengthens its capabilities while emphasizing a doctrine of non-expansion.[7]

The author then turns to the external dimension, examining China's sensitive relationship with the US, marked by both cooperation and competition; its strategic and energy-based cooperation with Russia and the dynamics of global polarization, including China's role within international organizations such as the UN Security Council and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.[8]

The book discusses China's reliance on a dual strategy combining soft power, embodied in the strategies of "peaceful rise" and "peaceful coexistence", with hard power, manifested in the development of military capabilities accompanied by guarantees against offensive use, alongside a sustained effort to project a moral, peaceful image and to avoid imposing its ideological model on other states.[9]

The author deepens his analysis by examining the concrete manifestations of China's strategy toward Arab states, which reflect a multidimensional approach encompassing economic, political, cultural, and security dimensions. Economically, this strategy is exemplified by the Belt and Road Initiative; politically, it is reflected in the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, mutual respect, and non-interference; culturally, it entails the promotion of people-to-people exchanges and the expansion of academic and media cooperation; and in security-terms, it prioritizes stability and counterterrorism. This approach is geared to the challenges facing Arab states (political instability, development needs, and security concerns), while simultaneously strengthening China's influence and advancing its strategic interests.

The third chapter highlights the marked advancement in Sino-Arab relations through key events, including the launch of the China-Arab Cooperation Forum (2004), the Belt and Road Initiative (2013), President Xi Jinping's "1+2+3" strategy (2014), and Xi's visit to Cairo University (2016), where he announced the first official document outlining China's policy toward Arab states.[10]

4 Ibid., pp. 67-69.
5 Ibid., pp. 69-70.
6 Ibid., pp. 72-76.
7 Ibid., pp. 76-90.
8 Ibid., pp. 90-96.
9 Ibid., pp. 105-111.
10 Ibid., pp. 115-116.

Nassar further analyses the contemporary realities of Arab states across several dimensions. On the agricultural front, he observes a decline in sustainability and reliance on imports. In industry, he highlights heavy reliance on imported goods and the limited scope of research and development. Socially, he draws attention to persistent poverty, unemployment, conflicts, and terrorism, in addition to intra-Arab rivalries and a cautious stance toward projects advanced by Iran, Turkey, and Israel. Internationally, he notes the continued Western support for Israel coupled with an inability to resolve pivotal issues such as in Palestine and Syria.[11]

The author dedicates part of his analysis to the Belt and Road Initiative, a major strategy launched in 2013 to connect Asia, Europe, and Africa through mutually beneficial cooperation rather than domination. The strategy is supported by institutions established in 2014, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Silk Road Fund. Nassar underscores the strategic importance of Arab states within this framework, given their control over vital trade corridors like the Arabian Gulf, the Red Sea, and the Suez Canal.[12]

The fourth chapter addresses China's strategic objectives toward the Arab world, its tools, and its implications. First, China seeks to expand its international influence, a goal consistent with structural realism and power transition theory. Second, it aims to rectify and reform the international system. Third, it pursues mutual support on strategic issues such as Palestine and Taiwan. Finally, the chapter argues that China also seeks to promote elements of its communist system abroad.[13]

With respect to the economic dimension, the principal objective is to secure access to energy resources, followed by promotion of free trade and investment and the pursuit of shared sustainability through the development of Arab industrial capacities. The Belt and Road Initiative is thus presented as an instrument for improving relations rather than an end in itself.[14]

In the cultural sphere, three objectives were identified: fostering cultural interaction, disseminating Chinese culture, and promoting communist values, although the Chinese experts deny any intention to export communism.[15] In the social sphere, the objectives include developing human resources, expanding joint research centres, achieving shared social development, and advancing science and technology in accordance with the principle of mutual benefit.[16]

In the security and military realm, China's earlier policy of distancing itself from Arab security issues has shifted. Its objectives now encompass strengthening security cooperation, exporting weapons, achieving strategic military parity with regional powers, and pursuing geopolitical expansion, including the establishment of military bases. The chapter further explores the tools through which China seeks to implement its strategy, particularly economic diplomacy (investments, loans, and sustainable projects), cultural tools, political tools such as intervention to resolve regional issues, and, finally, media tools.

The author concludes by offering strategic recommendations to three main groups. To the Arab League, he recommends establishing a centre for Chinese strategic studies and integrating an analysis of Sino-Arab relations into the unified Arab economic report. To Arab governments, he suggests creating specialized research centres to analyse relations with China across all sectors, with particular emphasis on the economic and cultural ones. To universities and researchers, he encourages them to pursue in-depth

11 Ibid., pp. 116-122.
12 Ibid., pp. 143-154.
13 Ibid., pp. 158-160.
14 Ibid., pp. 163-168.
15 Ibid., pp. 168-172.
16 Ibid., pp. 172-176.

studies on relations with China, with a focus on the Belt and Road Initiative. Nassar emphasizes the need for Arab governmental strategic planning to leverage the relationship with China and support it on issues such as Taiwan to ensure its support for Arab causes, while maintaining balanced relations with all major international powers.[17]

This book represents a valuable addition to the Arabic-language literature on the rise of China and the repercussions for the Arab region. Nassar successfully presents a comprehensive vision of intersecting political, economic, cultural, and security dimensions of Sino-Arab relations, drawing on interviews with both Arab and Chinese experts. This comparative perspective illuminates important divergences in perceptions and interpretations. Nevertheless, the exclusive reliance on qualitative methods, without complementary quantitative tools, may limit the generalizability of the findings. Further, the book occasionally reproduces official Chinese discourse without subjecting it to sufficient critical scrutiny, which underscores the need for more balanced readings incorporating alternative perspectives. Despite these limitations, the study remains of considerable value to researchers and policymakers seeking a deeper understanding of the dynamics of Sino-Arab relations and their prospects.

17 Ibid., pp. 209-216.

المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies (ACRPS) is an independent social sciences and humanities institute that conducts applied and theoretical research seeking to foster communication between Arab intellectuals and specialists and global and regional intellectual hubs. The ACRPS achieves this objective through consistent research, developing criticism and tools to advance knowledge, while establishing fruitful links with both Arab and international research centers.

The ACRPS encourages a resurgence of intellectualism in Arab societies, committed to strengthening the Arab nation. It works towards the advancement of the latter based on the understanding that development cannot contradict a people's culture and identity, and that the development of any society remains impossible if pursued without an awareness of its historical and cultural context, reflecting its language(s) and its interactions with other cultures.

The ACRPS works therefore to promote systematic and rational, scientific research-based approaches to understanding issues of society and state, through the analysis of social, economic, and cultural policies. In line with this vision, the ACRPS conducts various academic activities to achieve fundamental goals. In addition to producing research papers, studies and reports, the ACRPS conducts specialized programs and convenes conferences, workshops, training sessions, and seminars oriented to specialists as well as to Arab public opinion. It publishes peer-reviewed books and journals and many publications are available in both Arabic and English to reach a wider audience.

The ACRPS, established in Doha in autumn 2010 with a publishing office in Beirut, has since opened three additional branches in Tunis, Washington and Paris, and founded both the Doha Historical Dictionary of Arabic and the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies. The ACRPS employs resident researchers and administrative staff in addition to hosting visiting researchers, and offering sabbaticals to pursue full time academic research. Additionally, it appoints external researchers to conduct research projects.

Through these endeavours the ACRPS contributes to directing the regional research agenda towards the main concerns and challenges facing the Arab nation and citizen today.

The Doha Institute for Graduate Studies (DI) is an independent institute for learning and research in the fields of Social Sciences, Humanities, Public Administration and Development Economics in Doha.

Through its academic programs and the research activities of its professors, the DI aims to achieve its mission of contributing to the formation of a new generation of academics and intellectually independent researchers who are proficient in international scholarship standards and modern interdisciplinary research methodologies and tools, and leading professionals who can advance human knowledge and respond to the needs of the Arab region, resulting in social, cultural and intellectual development.

The DI seeks to establish an intellectual hub that will benefit the Arab region in particular. The DI supports academic research that deals with Arab issues, in an atmosphere of institutional and intellectual freedom.

The DI works in cooperation with the ACRPS and the Doha Historical Dictionary of Arabic Language to facilitate its students and faculty members in their research of the most important current issues related to the Arab world and the wider international community. The involvement of students in the most important research projects is at the heart of the DI's interests.

The DI adopts Arabic as its official and primary language for education and research. English serves as an accompaniment to Arabic, with both languages used in presenting and research.

PAST CONFERENCES

Annual Palestine Forum

The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies and the Institute for Palestine Studies are holding the fourth Annual Palestine Forum. This fourth installment of the Forum focuses on the genocidal war on the Gaza Strip, which has been accompanied by a wide-scale escalation in the West Bank and attacks on Lebanon and the occupation of additional parts of Syrian territory. The Forum also includes evening symposia focusing on political approaches to the post-genocide phase and international roles, particularly that of the United States and global solidarity movements, as well as a special symposium discussing the future of the Palestinian national project considering the current regional and international challenges.

24-26 January 2026

COVER ARTWORK

"Bulbul Baghdad" (2024)

Acrylic on canvas, 60*85 cm, by **Mohammed Abdulwasi**

Iraqi artist born in Babylon in 1986. He earned a Bachelor's degree in Fine Arts in 2008 and a Master's degree in Visual Arts in 2011 from the University of Babylon. His paintings were exhibited in a number of exhibitions in Baghdad and Paris.