LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR

We have ended the spring semester 2018 on a high note by hosting Professor Yahia Zoubir from KEDGE Business School as a Visiting Professor at the Middle East Studies Center (MESC). Professor Zoubir is an expert on Algerian politics, international relations and management, and gave a talk on the nexus between bad governance and violent extremism.

Ambassador Erfan, Professor of Practice at the center, was busy talking to the Asian Ambassador’s Group Meeting back in January on the topic of the Arab League (from 2011 - 2016, Ambassador Erfan was chef de cabinet of the secretary-general of the Arab League). I am currently working with colleagues in the Observer Research Foundation in New Delhi to set up a workshop in the fall semester on India, Egypt and their regional environments. We welcome Akira Ueno to the center, who is a visiting scholar from the University of Tokyo. MESC also played host to faculty and research fellows from the Institute of West Asian and African Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. We look forward to working with our colleagues in Beijing on research projects and events in the near future.

Both Ambassador Erfan and Karim Haggag, another Professor of Practice at MESC, have also been busy overseeing the Cairo Review of Global Affairs where Ambassador Erfan posted an updated timeline on the struggle over Jerusalem and its holy sites. We congratulate Karim Haggag, a career Egyptian diplomat with over 25 years experience including in the Office of the Presidency in Cairo (responsible for US - Egyptian relations and economic policy), for his appointment as new Director of the Center for American Studies and Research (CASAR) at AUC. CASAR is one of five centers of learning at renowned universities such as Harvard University, University of Cambridge, University of Edinburgh, the American University in Beirut and the American University in Cairo which were established by Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal.

As our final year students are finishing their MA dissertations and comprehensive exams, Diana Abdel Fattah and Heather Hunt have successfully completed their degrees. Mabrook! We wish them every success in their future careers. Over the summer I will be at the Gulf Research Meeting at the University of Cambridge, leading a panel on ‘The Gulf States in East Africa: Security, Economic and Strategic Partnerships?’ Some of our MA students are also attending conferences and I applaud their focus, dedication and engagement in their chosen field. We look forward to welcoming new students in the fall, and continuing to build a vibrant and multidisciplinary teaching and research environment which is attractive to a local and international audiences alike.
Ambassador Aly Erfan Addresses the Asian Ambassadors’ Group

A meeting of the Asian Ambassadors Group discussing the Arab League and its challenges. Amb. Aly Erfan, professor of practice at MESC, addressed the attendees, giving a speech titled “The Arab League as a Regional Arrangement: What Went Wrong.” In his speech, he incorporated his own experiences from his time in the Arab League and the Egyptian Foreign Ministry.

Nathan Birnbaum and the Colonialist-Orientalist Nexus in Zionism

A talk with Professor Michael J. Reimer of the AUC History Department focusing on the colonial nature of Zionism and comparing it to the European colonial movement in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Security Challenges in the Maghreb

A talk with professor Yahia Zoubir from the KED-GE Business School in Marseille on security issues in the Maghreb states. He provided an overview of the drivers of violent extremism in the Maghreb region, highlighting the critical issue of unemployment among youth. The talk was wide-ranging, covering issues of border control, migration, foreign policy and international security cooperation in the Middle East.

Life Trajectories of Islamic Activists: From Egypt to South Asia

A talk with Professor Abdulkader Tayob from the University of Cape Town. An expert in religious movements, Tayob focused on Islamic activist movements in Africa with an emphasis on Egypt. He highlighted the importance of a “biographical approach” in academic research.

What Does the EU Global Strategy Mean for the MENA Region?

A talk with Dr. Eduard Soler, a researcher at the Barcelona Centre for International Affairs, on the EU Global Strategy means for relations and activities in the Middle East as a neighborhood initiative.

The EU and Energy Security

A talk with Marco Guili, a researcher at the European Policy Center in Brussels, on the economic interdependence between the EU and the Middle East. You can read more about this topic, specifically how Eastern Mediterranean gas will impact EU energy security, on page 6.
The Middle East Studies Center has been awarded a €32,000 grant from the European Union to create a new unique platform for young Egyptian scholars to engage with European policymakers and academic experts.

The action will enhance the teaching and research capabilities on this theme at AUC as well as at a number of other public and private universities in Egypt. First, it will enable faculty, students and members of the public to engage with Euro-Med Studies, Euro-Med politics, and thematically related areas such as migration, energy, and multiculturalism during a regular public lecture series. Second, the funding will attract a Visiting Professor to conduct research on a Euro-Med topic at the Middle East Studies Center and enrich the student experience. Third, a roundtable discussion will take place at the Middle East Studies Center on a related topic which is of direct relevance to Egypt, the MENA region, and the EU. An associated publication will provide a tangible legacy for this one year project.

**European Neighborhood Policy**

A talk with two experts, Ambassador James Moran, former Principal Advisor on the Middle East and North Africa to the EU’s External Action Service in 2016-2017 and Head of the EU Delegation to Egypt from 2012-2016, and Dr. Steven Blockmans, Senior Research Fellow at the Center for European Policy Studies, on the future of cooperation between the EU and the Middle East.

**Enhancing Euro-Med Security Cooperation**

A one-day workshop, hosted by MESC, with the EU mission in Cairo and diverse experts from Russia, Europe and the MENA region. The focus was on MENA regional security issues but a wide range of topics were also discussed.

**EU and Libya**

A talk with Dr. Florence Gaub, expert on Libya and current Deputy Director of the European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), on the history of the bilateral relationship between the EU and Libya and the current political and security context in Libya.

**The EU and Palestine**

A talk with Professor Beck from the University of Southern Denmark on the EU’s role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He discussed why the EU has not been able to contribute to the realization of Palestinian self-determination, emphasizing the ways that the EU could foster greater multilateralism in the peace process.
Three Graduate MESC Students in The World Government Summit

MOHAMED GAMEEL
MIDDLE EAST STUDIES MA CANDIDATE

change, good governance, happiness, new technical innovations, etc. The ultimate aim is to establish practical roadmaps for governments to follow and to be more efficient. Additionally, the summit allows governments to see how the world would function within the future extraordinary development in artificial intelligence.

Jessie Steinhauer, Mohamed Gameel, and Yieun Kim from MESC with other three graduate students from the School of Global Affairs and Public Policy (GAPP) have represented the American University in Cairo (AUC) and participated in the Global Universities Challenge that was organized by the WGS.

This event was an excellent opportunity for gaining exposure to such an international events, meeting officials and influencers from all over the world and having a unique unreplaceable experience. “We had the opportunity to attend talks given by world-renowned experts and leaders on issues related to technology, humanitarianism, and good governance. It was a great opportunity to hear new ideas and better understand the dialogue surrounding global challenges” reflected Steinhauer.

Last February, three graduate students from the Middle East Studies Center (MESC) participated in the 6th edition of the World Government Summit (WGS)-Global Universities Challenge, held in Dubai. The WGS is a world-class event that brings together officials, policymakers, academics, and social influencers to discuss and debate issues such as climate
In numerous sessions and panels, the conference covered topics ranging from happiness to governance. “We were able to attend lectures by the speakers from all over the world. It was interesting to see what kind of measures and policies from different countries have been taken to increase the efficiency and satisfaction of the people,” commented Kim.

The Global Universities Challenge is one event among others at the World Government Summit. This was the first time AUC participated and competed alongside 13 global universities including Harvard, London Business School, and other top-ranked universities. AUC and the American University of Sharjah were the only universities from the Middle East.

After a short briefing from the organizers, each team worked over the course of three days, to devise a plan to achieve the UAE’s Centennial Vision 2071. Students had to imagine as if they were presenting the plan at its halfway point in the year 2031. Working on this task challenged the participants to think differently and radically. Kim believes that “the team’s expertise in the Middle East gave us an advantage in coming up with the right policies for Dubai and the region. Although we were supposed to come up with the policy for the UAE, we designed an inclusive strategy for the Middle East region with the belief that the UAE cannot achieve its ambitious goals in a relatively fragile region.”

It was not an easy task, none of the AUC team members was Emirati nor had previously lived in the UAE. “We worked under a tight deadline to come up with our proposal for the competition. The members of our team came from different professional and academic backgrounds which proved challenging initially, but in the end, I think it was an advantage because we were able to bounce new ideas off each other and come up with a well-rounded plan” stated Steinhauer.

After the summit ended, the team members had some time to enjoy a different culture within the Middle East. “Dubai is extremely different from Egypt. I almost thought that it was similar to Korea. It was interesting to see the huge gap from other Middle Eastern countries that have deserts. I did not realize that it was in the middle of the desert before I went to the desert after the conference. This trip and the conference made us realize how much the country has developed throughout 60 years” said Kim.

“We worked under a tight deadline to come up with our proposal for the competition. The members of our team came from different professional and academic backgrounds which proved challenging initially, but in the end, I think it was an advantage because we were able to bounce new ideas off each other and come up with a well-rounded plan.”
Can Eastern Mediterranean gas help EU’s energy security?

MARCOS GIULI
POLICY ANALYST, EUROPEAN POLICY CENTRE

Since 2009 on, a number of gas discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean have raised the prospect for a new energy Eldorado. Apart from the clear benefits for the countries in the region, these resources have met the interest of external players such as the EU and the US. The former on the basis of the opportunities that a new gas province in its backyard could improve the bloc’s energy security by contributing to diversification efforts. The latter – under the Obama administration – on the basis of the possibility for gas exploitation to consolidate intra-regional relations by way of knitting together economies.

The EU gas security dynamics

The EU’s reliance on external energy supply has been on the rise over the last decade. Rapidly declining domestic gas supply is accelerating this trend, despite achievement in energy efficiency and renewable energy penetration. Rising gas dependency is taking place in an environment which is commercially more relaxed, but politically more contested. The EU’s energy security has been improving over the last decade thanks to the combination of an abundance in gas supply, growing technological and contractual flexibility, and better infrastructural resilience to supply shocks. Competition discipline in the EU has largely limited incumbent suppliers’—notably Russia—ability to segment markets through discriminatory and abusive monopolistic practices. However, Europe is not out of the woods. Reliance on Russian gas was not curtailed, and the supply of part of Russian gas to Europe is still exposed to Russia-Ukraine relations. At the same time, the Russian proposals for alternative routes bypassing Ukraine would consolidate Gazprom’s position on the EU’s market and offer Russia more policy options in Ukraine – two developments which would contradict the EU’s political priorities. Also, the global gas glut – which largely contributed to the EU’s improved security – may drain fast as a result of rising Asian demand.

The gas discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean: opportunities and challenges

Resources in the Eastern Mediterranean, however, do not look like low hanging fruit. They are distributed across the exclusive economic zone of several jurisdictions: 280 bcm and 620 bcm in Israel’s Tamar and Leviathan fields, 140 bcm in Cyprus’ Aphrodite field, and 850 bcm in Egypt’s Zohr field. Other resources are located off the coasts of Lebanon and the Gaza strip. Such a distribution implies that some resources are located in contested waters – notably those in Cyprus and Lebanon – whilst having a size larger than the size of their domestic markets, their development only makes sense with an outlook for exporting them. This raises a transport challenge, as gas would not only have to be extracted in, but also transported across contested waters.

Several options are under consideration. Cyprus could expand its liquefaction terminal in Vasilikos with a view to export
gas from Aphrodite and Levia-
than. However, this option suf-
fers from high costs, the inade-
quate size of sites, and Israel’s
skepticism regarding Cyprus’
ability to guarantee security. Li-
quefaction plans in Israel also
show weak prospects due to the
opposition of local communities.
The EU supports a subsea pipe-
line from the fields to Cyprus and
then Greece/Italy – the 10 bcm
EastMed pipeline – which howe-
ver suffers complex subsea geo-
logy and would tie the resources
to uncertain European demand.
A 16 bcm subsea pipeline to
ship Israeli gas to Turkey was
dismissed as a result of volatile
Israel-Turkey relations, Cyprus’
and Turkey’s conditioning of the
plan to a settlement of Cyprus’
division, and of Turkey’s enga-
gement with the Turkish Stream
project with Russia – through
which Gazprom could deter al-
ternative supply by playing vo-
lumes. As a result – and mostly
thanks to the discovery of the
giant Zohr field in Egypt – the
option currently gaining traction
is to ship Cyprus’ and Israeli gas
to Egypt, to be re-exported from
Egypt’s liquefaction terminals
currently sitting idle in Idku and
Damietta.

Such a development would be
beneficial for Egypt. The country
was a net exporter until 2014,
when expanding domestic de-
mand – risen by 40.5% between
2006 and 2016 - turned Egypt
into a net importer, accumula-
ting 3.6 bn USD debt to foreign
corporations. Developing Zohr to
quench domestic gas thirst and
act as an exporting hub for Is-
rael and Cyprus gas would also
enhance Egypt’s strategic cen-
trality for other coastal countries
and powers outside the region.

Developments started moving in
the right direction for Cairo with
the signature of a 10-years supply
contract of Israeli gas to Egypt.

Will the Levant gas help the
EU?

Despite optimism, several ob-
tacles still stand in the way of
Eastern Mediterranean resources
becoming a game changer for the
EU’s supply structure.

First, amounts remain interest-
ing for the Eastern Mediterranean
region, but limited in terms of ove-
rall European demand. At capaci-
ty, Egypt terminals could export
up to 19 bcm. This supply would
also be intended for a currently
saturated European market, whe-
re competition between Russian
and US gas might limit the room
for alternative supply. The overall
problem with diversification is that
although it holds strategic value,
it is not always rewarded by
markets. This is a longstanding
dilemma for the EU, whose diver-
sification ambitions’ rely on com-
mmercial factors which incumbents
have to power to deter. Howe-
ver, it would be nevertheless
advantageous for the EU to see
expanded supply at its doorstep,
coming onstream at a time when
the global LNG glut is expected to
contract.

Second, security in the region
should not be taken for granted.
Far from proving the catalyst for
economic peace, Eastern Me-
diterranean resources continue
to prove divisive. Egypt’s emer-
gence as a viable export option
carries the consequence of mar-
ginalizing Turkey. In other words,
by facilitating regional dialogue in
the southern part of the Eastern
Mediterranean, gas resources are
complicating dialogue in the nor-
th. Turkey has enough leverage
to meddle with developments in
offshore Cyprus, and has already
engaged in gunboat diplomacy by
deterring exploratory activities in
Cyprus’ waters. At the same time,
non-state actors can also trigger
security threats: whilst Israel can
deter gas developments in Leba-
on or Gaza in order not to em-
power Hezbollah or Hamas, the
former is developing naval capa-
bilities which could threaten criti-
cal infrastructure. Also, pipelines
in the Sinai – which are expec-
ted to carry Israeli gas to Egypt
– have repeatedly being targeted
by attacks of radical islamic mil-
itia.

Not all these challenges are wi-
thin the EU’s reach. The EU can
neither guarantee the security
demand, especially in line with
its decarbonisation commitment,
nor the security of critical local
infrastructure. Still, the EU can
contribute towards improving the
overall commercial and political
environment by stepping up its
energy diplomacy, and incentivi-
zing reforms in Egypt that push
the case for energy efficiency,
renewable deployment and slash
local subsidies to fossil fuels con-
sumptions. A stable regulatory
environment and an outlook for
local demand reduction would
enhance the region’ prospects to
become a player in global LNG
markets.
Akira Ueno is a visiting scholar at MESC from the University of Tokyo. His research focuses on protest movements and authoritarian regimes in comparative politics. MESC Newsletter editors sat down with him to learn more about his research and experience as a scholar in Egypt.

On his Research

While watching throngs of people mass in Tahrir Square in 2011, Ueno’s interest in protest movements, and Egypt specifically, piqued. Subsequently, his master’s thesis explored why people mobilized in Egypt in 2011, proposing that economic stagnation and inequality, political freedom and the coherence of the opposition are all critical factors propelling mass mobilization.

Having graduated from the University of Tokyo in 2015, Ueno began doctoral studies at the same university. Currently, he is looking at why and how political opposition groups emerged in Egypt since 2000. While in Egypt, he has been utilizing local resources such as annual reports from the Ahram Center for Political Studies. He also plans to visit some humanitarian organizations based in Cairo.

Ueno cited gaps in political theory, particularly social movement theory, and its application to the Middle East region to argue that theory is often insufficient when applied to the Middle East. “I would like to build theory in the case of the Middle East, simply by bridging theory with cast studies,” he said. “For example, social movement theory that might be relevant to my research tends to propose ad-hoc factors without providing insight into broader cross-case correlation of each social movement. It does not explain the common factors nor the unique characteristics of one movement.” He further explained that there is a gap between broad authoritarian studies and the study of authoritarianism in the Middle East.

Although he believes that conducting field work and taking course work simultaneously is difficult, he intends to take some courses at AUC and meet with professors to discuss his research interests. Although he has been primarily using secondary resources for his research, he said “I have been learning Arabic in order to have up-to-date sources.”

Life in Egypt and Future Plans

Despite his opinion that his fellow Japanese citizens are uninterested in international affairs, he managed to find a small community of Japanese researchers living in Cairo. He met the handful of other Japanese researchers while studying at the Japanese Research Institute in Zamalek. “I think Middle East Studies in Japan is very unique,” he said. “While most modern Japanese Middle East scholars focus on local materials written in Arabic and are very proficient in Arabic, few Japanese scholars are known internationally due to issues with English.”

Living in Cairo motivates Ueno to continue his Arabic studies because it is “filled with Arabic.” Through his interactions with people in Cairo allows him to learn more about the culture and politics. However, he believes his life as a researcher in Cairo does not differ so much from his life as a researcher in Japan.

While he enjoys many things about living in Cairo, Ueno said that it is a challenge to find ready-made food, which is readily available in Japanese convenience stores. He was most surprised by the festive atmosphere during Ramadan saying, “my previous image of Ramadan was of tough fasting and people being cheerless, but I never imagined such a festival-like atmosphere.”

He advises future Ph.d students to take the time to decide on a research topic and have a clear understanding of what they want to study before they begin their program.
In August 2018, I traveled to Beirut, the capital of Lebanon, to conduct the fieldwork for my thesis. I am currently writing my thesis about the Mountain War or Harb Al Jabal (1983-1984) between two of Lebanon’s most important confessional sects, which are: The Maronites and the Druzes. In my thesis, I am endeavoring to understand Harb Al Jabal from a historical perspective. This is because this war was not the first violent encounter and confrontation between those two communities. Both the Maronites and the Druzes had fought fiercely before in the mid-nineteenth century (1840 and 1860 civil wars). It is important to note that although the Druzes won the 1840 and 1860 civil wars militarily, they were defeated in the political sense; following the French intervention in Mount Lebanon in 1860 to protect the Maronites from the massacres that were committed against them by the Druzes. The latter had more of their lands confiscated and they had to share their homes and food with the Maronites. Ever since that time, the Maronites became the most powerful confessional group in Lebanon. When the Mountain War occurred, the Druze political and religious leadership started to use the rhetoric of collective victimization, with references to the 1860 civil war, to fuel the Druze masses to fight the Maronite encroachment towards the Druze heartland; following the withdrawal of the Israeli army from Al Chouf region (the southern part of Mount Lebanon which had always been inhabited by a majority of Druzes). So, in my thesis, I am trying to understand why the 1860 civil war was brought into perspective in Harb Al Jabal. I am also trying to understand how the memory of 1860 remained that strong in the collective consciousness of the Druze community.

It is important to highlight that this topic is extremely sensitive in a country like Lebanon that did not reconcile with its past. Following the end of the Lebanese civil war in 1991, after 15 years of fierce and relentless fighting, massacres and displacement, the Lebanese state issued the 1991 General Amnesty Law that enabled all the war criminals to escape being punished for what they did in the war. Until now, there is no official or state sponsored documentation of the civil war, no memorials to commemorate the war and no museums to inform the Lebanese about their past. The Lebanese state dealt, and continues to deal, with the Lebanese civil war as if it never happened. Given this background, my topic is of extreme sensitivity, especially that the situation in Mount Lebanon never returned back to normal after the war ended. Harb Al Jabal did not only result in horrendous massacres, but it also culminated in burning and destroying several Christian villages and which resulted in the massive expulsion of the Christians from Al Chouf region. By 1984, the Christians constituted only 1% of the Chouf population. In the post-civil war period, there had been several attempts to return the Christians to the Chouf. However, these attempts mostly failed. Thus, opening this issue had been and continues to be of extreme sensitivity for both communities since it reminds them of the horrendous historical moments when they violently clashed and massacred each other (especially, the Druzes who were fiercer on the military level), and of the subsequent failure of the political leadership of both communities to return the Christians back to the Mountain.

I conducted my fieldwork in four regions in Lebanon: Beirut, Aley, Baisour and Dayr Al Qamar. I have to
say that my research positionality as an Egyptian, Christian and female researcher who had been researching, studying and reading about Lebanon for three years provided me with privileges during conducting my fieldwork. In most of the cases, the interviewees felt comfortable to talk and discuss my questions to them. But still, I encountered several difficulties and reluctance from some of my interviewees to answer some of my questions. I started my fieldwork in the Maronite village of Dayr Al Qamar, which was extremely challenging since this town is surrounded by Druze villages in Al Chouf; and it was besieged for three months during Harb Al Jabal. I conducted there four interviews. Unfortunately, those whom I interviewed were increasingly cautious and they asked me why I was opening the wounds of the past. I wanted to conduct other interviews in Dayr Al Qamar, but the town’s inhabitants were not open to this idea of discussing the Mountain War; believing that it was over and there is no need to bring the past memories back again.

In regards to the other areas where I conducted my interviews, it is crucial to note that they were in the core of the fight during the Mountain War (except for Beirut). The other six interviews that I conducted were facilitated by one of the most amazing and active NGOs in Lebanon, which is: Fighters for Peace. This NGO is run by a number of activists who were former militia fighters in the Lebanese civil war, and who reconciled with their past in the post-war period; and decided to use their past experiences to prevent other clashes from occurring in Lebanon. I was fortunate enough to meet Mr. Ziad Saab (former Druze fighter) and Mr. Asaad Chaftari (former Christian/ Maronite fighter), who were both fighting against each other in Harb Al Jabal. Both of them put me in contact with a number of Druze ex-fighters who fought in the Mountain War. I conducted six interviews that were extremely fruitful and enriching for my thesis. The interviewees were very open to all my questions, and I believe that they were very honest in their answers.

I would say that doing fieldwork for my thesis has been among the most amazing experiences in this journey of doing the Masters’ degree and in writing the thesis. My fieldwork definitely added new layers of analysis that I was not aware of and to which I did not pay attention during the reading phase. I am extremely grateful for this experience and for everyone who accepted to be part of it.
During May 17-18th, I attended an international academic conference called “Orientalism, Neo-Orientalism, and Post-Orientalism in African, Middle East, Latin American, Asian/Chinese Studies & 15th Anniversary of Memory of Edward Said (1935-2003) and 40th Anniversary of His Book (1978),” which was held at Shanghai University. I was honored to be one of two graduate students to be invited to join 50 scholars from the United States, China, Canada, Turkey, Britain, Pakistan, Palestine and other countries at this conference.

My presentation was in the Fourth Panel. Bassam Haddad, Director of the Middle East Studies at George Mason University and editor of the journal Jadaliyya, chaired my panel. In my article, “Funding ‘Women’s Empowerment’: Neoliberal Capital and Gender Politics in Post-invasion Afghanistan and Iraq,” I examine how Muslim women become subjects of neoliberal projects promoted by the U.S. and Western organizations. I argue that the core of women empowerment programs is to produce modern women with economic independence adaptive to world capitalism.

I argue that life is at stake when gendered bodies become a site for capital accumulation and value exchange. Claims of “universal” and “modernity” norms are Western social imaginaries that need to be continuously producing “underdeveloped” subjects. Thus, I probe the neoliberal notion of “Empowerment” as biopolitics and a form of life. The violence derived from “Empowerment” pushes Muslim women to fit into the Western political and economic framework.

My panel was inspiring and challenging, the comments were very constructive. I met a number of great people, with refreshing new angles, insights, and feedback during this conference. I plan to bring it all together and feed it into my academic writing.

There were excellent reflections at this conference from attendees but more issues related to these topics deserve to be explored. We are witnessing major global shifts amid the resurgence of China, Russia, the new political sway of Europe, which certainly, will generate new questions and insight related to the discourse surrounding Orientalism.
Korea Meets Arab Culture through Film

Yieun Kim - Middle East Studies MA Candidate

The 11th Arab Cultural Festival including the 7th Arab Film Festival was held in Seoul, Korea. This year nine movies from the Arab world including those by filmmakers of Kurdish, Palestinian, Algerian, Tunisian, Egyptian, Lebanese, Jordanian, Moroccan, Iraqi, and Syrian descent were shown at the event. The catchphrase of this year’s event was “Blooming Arab.” It had a section called “Arabian Wave” that put special emphasis on contemporary Arab cinema trends in the aftermath of the revolution when underlying problems still exist. It showed how contemporary movies focus on the conflict between changing society and tradition within the framework of religion and national identities. Moreover, this year the festival had a special section called “Focus 2018: Rise Up, Speak Out.” This section featured contemporary Arab women’s voices speaking out against sexual violence, social oppression, and the structural barriers they face. Not only did it include several movies featuring women protagonists that followed the rise of women, but the festival also held open talks and panels on the issue. As the #MeToo Movement has reached Korea and is beginning to create phenomenal change in Korean society as well as the international community, this focus was significant. The event also invited the director of the movie Beauty and the Dogs and Challat of Tunis, one of the most controversial films at the festival because of its portrayal of the reality of life for many Tunisian women.

Although I have been to this event several years in a row, I have never seen this many people attending the event. When I attended a screening the first year I went to this festival, the only other people who were watching were my colleagues who study Arabic and its culture, but no one else. This time, there were people from all over and of all ages. Although I wanted to watch other movies especially Cactus Flower that was partially filmed in Cairo, I had time to watch just one movie: Only Men Go to the Grave. This movie, directed by Emirati Abdulla Al Kaabi, follows an Iraqi family after the war in 1988. Although the plot and the story might have been a bit cliché, it was interesting because many topics that might be considered taboo were featured such as homosexuality and transgender issues. This movie also covered the oppression of women with scenes where women could not participate in burying and making condolence calls following a death. Additionally, one of the daughters had to run away from the family to marry a man from another sect. Personally, I was extremely happy to find the movie addressing women’s issues and gender inequality. Although many Koreans believe that the oppression of women is contingent upon many of the Arab states, watching the film and understanding the culture it presents led me to see many similarities between Korean and Arab cultures regarding issues of gender discrimination and inequality. I was pleased to see that many scenes, in fact show what is general problem in Korea and the world and is not necessarily specific to the Arab world. It was easy to see that the structural issues and inequality of women are in fact an international problem. I was also happy to hear Arabic in the movie having returned to Korea from Egypt a few days beforehand. I was delighted to see so many people interested in Arab culture and I hope the festival’s audience continues to grow each year.
The issue of women's involvement with organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood was (and continues to be) an enticing topic for scholars and journalists alike. Hafez's personal accounts of women working with the al-Hilal Islamic PVO (private voluntary organization) gives further credibility to Hafez's already impressive research. Dalia and Doctora Zeinab, her main contacts in al-Hilal, serve as her guide throughout the book, introducing her to other women in the organization and assisting Hafez with networking. Hafez's book is a refreshing look at women navigating the political minefield of secularism and the role of religion in politics. It builds on ethnographic research conducted over six years in Egypt between 2000-2003 and 2005-2008.

The book begins with a hearty introduction of women's involvement in politics, Islam and the discussion of feminism, feminist goals (and often, disappointments) in political change, the public and private roles of Islam, and women's unique relationship to God. It begs the question of whether feminism and Islam, Islam and political growth, and religion and modernity are mutually exclusive. Hafez questions the use of women's rights and interests by religious groups for political purposes, and interviews a wide range of women working to promote Islam in the Egyptian political sphere.

The bulk of Hafez's book focuses on personal narratives of the members of al-Hilal and their experiences as women, Muslims, and activists. It argues that the women who choose to volunteer in Islamic movements are creating “an Islam of their own”, as the book's title suggests, and that their personal, private relationship with God motivates them to display public support for these movements.

Hafez, in the true nature of an anthropologist, successfully incorporates the history of state building, changing political climates, the “myth” of modernization, and women's changing places in society into the narrative of women in Islamic movements. However, one weakness of the book is that Hafez spends very little of the book considering the negative effects of Islamic movements on women's social and political rights. In focusing so closely on female activists currently working towards Islamic incorporation in politics, she fails to shed light on former activists or women working against Islamic movements, which would make for an interesting comparison for the reader. Another shortcoming of the book is the last portion of the “Development and Social Change” chapter, which deviates from Hafez's original intentions for the book and reads more like an anthropological recording of poor women's living conditions and distracts the reader from the other sections of the book.

Overall, the author's writing style is both informative and pleasing to the reader. Her firsthand encounters put faces and names to the otherwise unidentifiable female members of Islamic movements and provide an insightful look into their motivations and actions. There is a charm and anthropological value to An Islam of Her Own that invited readers to reconsider their preconceived notions of women in Islamic movements and the creation of interreligious and political dialogue.
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The Middle East Studies Center Working Paper Series is a platform for individual scholars and contributes to international social science and humanities scholarship on the Middle East and the wider Islamic world, from the seventh century to the present. It allows for publication, dissemination, and discussion of new research on a relatively fast track. It is quicker than the usual timelines for publication of articles in journals or books.

Visiting scholars are generally expected to submit a working paper during, or shortly after, their Middle East Studies Center residency. Other scholars are welcome to submit papers at any time. The general editor of the Working Paper series is Middle East Studies Center Director Robert Mason, associate professor at The American University in Cairo.

For more information on submission guidelines, Click here.

Editors’ Note

Thank you for reading the third issue of the MESC Newsletter. We hope this newsletter serves as a valuable means to connect current students, alumni, and the broader AUC community with MESC events, projects and programs.

Special thanks to Claire Begbie.

Jessie Steinhauer and Yieun Kim

If you have any inquires about the newsletter, please send us an email at mescnews@aucegypt.edu

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