



# MENA WORKSHOPS

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## CONTACT US

American Political Science Association  
 1527 New Hampshire Ave NW  
 Washington, DC 20036

[menanewsletter@apsanet.org](mailto:menanewsletter@apsanet.org)

<http://web.apsanet.org/mena>

## OUR MISSION

The APSA MENA Workshops program is an initiative, made possible through a grant from Carnegie Corporation of New York, to enhance scholarly networks and support political science research among early-career scholars in the Middle East and North Africa.

## MESSAGE FROM THE EDITORS

Dear Readers,

Greetings! It is our pleasure to inaugurate the *APSA MENA Newsletter* – a project emanating from the APSA MENA workshops. The Newsletter aims to encourage cross-generational dialogue among the different tiers of the academic community (senior scholars, junior scholars, and graduate students). We hope that the Newsletter will serve as a personal, relatable, and humane forum where scholars can share experiences, best practices, and growth areas of political science research in the region.

Our first newsletter theme is “Frontiers of Contemporary Research on the Middle East and North Africa.” The Arab uprisings are now almost six years behind us, and given the security breakdown and instability across the MENA region, conducting research in the MENA region presents researchers with considerable substantive, methodological, and ethical challenges. This first issue seeks to discuss these challenges and explore some remedies.

Mark Tessler, Michael Robbins, and Amaney Jamal show the promise of survey research in studying regional trends and share their findings on popular attitudes towards the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), or as known by their Arabic acronym, Daesh. Annelle Sheline and Serhun Al discuss personal challenges of conducting research in seemingly stable authoritarian regimes and war zones, respectively. They also put together a helpful list of tips researchers can adopt to address these challenges. Ilyas Saliba and Jannis Grimm share their personal experiences and suggest institutional remedies for research challenges. Johannes Gunesch discusses the prospects of researching a country from abroad and Aamer Ibrahim reflects on the limitations of in-depth interviews, a frequently used method in MENA research.

These pieces all address the idiosyncrasies of conducting research in a region that, since 2011, has moved too fast for analysts to keep up. They represent the cutting edge of MENA research approaches. We hope they kickstart a fresh, new, and informed discussion on the study of Middle Eastern and North African politics.

Sincerely,

May Darwich  
 Abdul-Wahab Kayyali

May Darwich  
[may.darwich@durham.ac.uk](mailto:may.darwich@durham.ac.uk)

Abdul-Wahab Kayyali  
[akayyali@gwu.edu](mailto:akayyali@gwu.edu)

## NOTE FROM APSA

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Greetings from APSA!

It is with great excitement that I welcome you to the inaugural issue of the APSA MENA Newsletter. I hope you find this publication to be a useful forum for sharing resources, sparking conversation between different topics and approaches in the study of the MENA region, and generating ideas for collaboration with fellow researchers. The newsletter co-chairs, May Darwich and Abdul-Wahab Kayyali, bring a lot of experience and energy to the project and have worked hard to assemble this first issue. Thanks to you both!

In addition to the Research Symposium included here, I'd like to draw your attention to the announcement on APSA's MENA Workshop Alumni Grants. Alumni from the 2016 Workshops are encouraged to apply for up to \$1,000 in funding to support field work, conference travel, or other activities in the MENA region. Alumni from all workshop years are encouraged to reach out to other alumni and apply for up to \$6,000 in collaborative grant funds to organize a small conference or workshop at your home institution. The deadline for both grant types is December 1, 2016; feel free to e-mail [amorsy@apsanet.org](mailto:amorsy@apsanet.org) with any questions.

Going forward, I urge you to add your voice to this biannual newsletter. We want to hear from you, read your work, and share in your research interests. We welcome scholars both within and outside the MENA Workshops Alumni community to contribute to future newsletters through announcements, research submissions, and feedback on how we can continue to improve this publication.

I look forward to catching up with some of you at the MESA Annual Meeting in Boston this November. Best to all in the coming months and stay well!

Andrew Stinson

Associate Director, APSA International Programs

Andrew Stinson  
[astinson@apsanet.org](mailto:astinson@apsanet.org)

## RESEARCH SYMPOSIUM:

# FRONTIERS OF CONTEMPORARY RESEARCH ON THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

### WHAT DO ORDINARY CITIZENS IN THE ARAB WORLD REALLY THINK ABOUT THE ISLAMIC STATE?

By Mark Tessler (2015), Michael Robbins and Amaney Jamal (2013)

What do ordinary Arabs think about the Islamic State? This spring, we added several questions to the standard battery of Arab Barometer surveys to find out. We asked a scientific sample of respondents in Tunisia, Jordan, Palestine, Algeria and Morocco the following questions:

- To what extent do you agree with the goals of the Islamic State;
- To what extent do you support the Islamic State's use of violence; and
- To what extent do you believe the Islamic State's tactics are compatible with the teachings of Islam?

#### LITTLE SUPPORT FOR THE ISLAMIC STATE

The findings were stark: not many Arabs sympathize with the Islamic State. The percent agreeing with the Islamic State's goals range from 0.4 percent in Jordan to 6.4 percent in Palestine. The percent agreeing with the Islamic State's use of violence range from 0.4 percent in Morocco to 5.4 percent in Palestine. The percent agreeing that the Islamic State's tactics are compatible with Islam range from 1.0 percent in Jordan to 8.9 percent in Palestine.

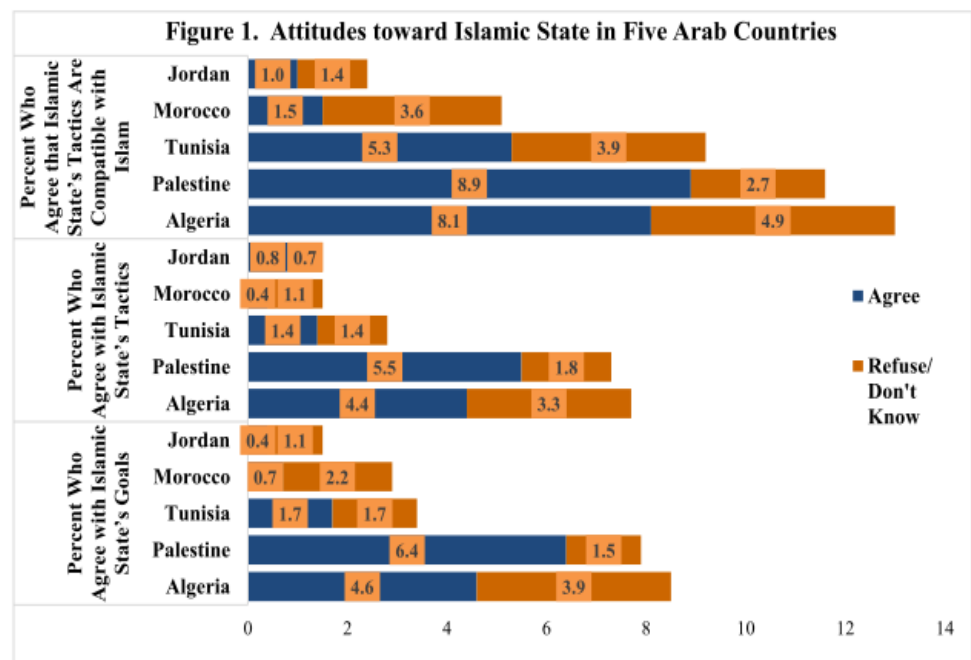
It's important to dig deeper, though. While very few respondents express positive

attitudes toward the Islamic State, it is possible that some who support the Islamic State's goals or tactics or believe the group's actions are compatible with Islam decline to answer the question or say they don't know, rather than explicitly express approval of the Islamic State.

For sensitive issues like support for an extremist group, this is a common way to avoid expressing an opinion that is contrary to societal norms. For each question and each country, therefore, we also note the percent that decline to respond or say they don't know. With these responses treated as expressions of support for the Islamic State, the percent having positive, or at least neutral, attitudes toward the Islamic State increases, particularly in Algeria and Palestine. Nevertheless, as shown in Figure 1, it is clear, overall, that there is very little support for the Islamic State among these five Arab publics.

#### A KEY DEMOGRAPHIC DIFFERS LITTLE

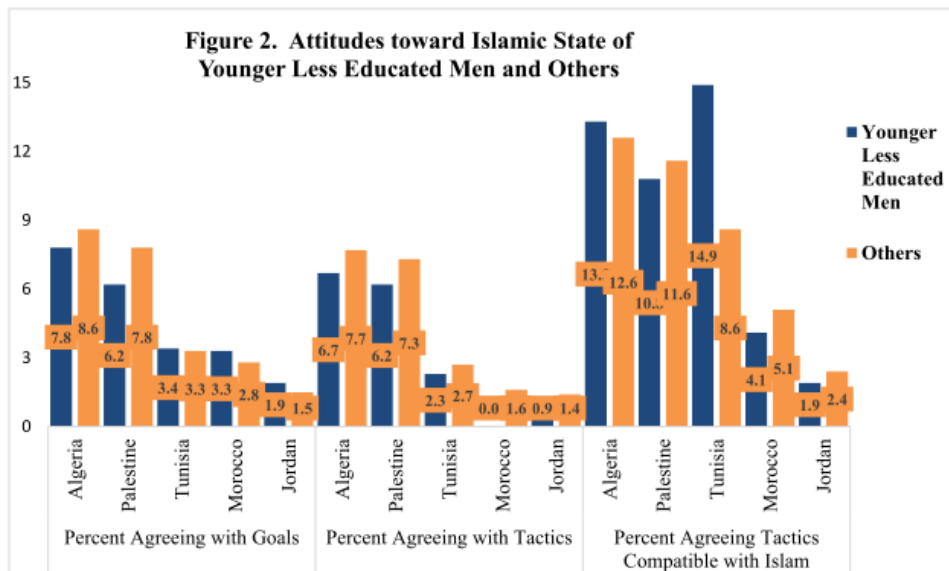
What about younger and poorly educated men, which



seem to be a primary audience for the Islamic State message? Breaking out the responses of male respondents aged 36 or under who have had less than secondary schooling shows that even among this key demographic group there is also little support either for the Islamic State's goals or for its use of violence, and that few consider the Islamic State's tactics to be compatible with the teachings of Islam. Indeed, in some instances positive attitudes toward the Islamic State are held by fewer individuals in the key demographic category. These findings are shown in Figure 2.

responded to the Islamic State's call are poorly educated younger men, the comparatively high percentage that considers the Islamic State's tactics to be compatible with Islam may provide a part of the explanation.

There are only 87 respondents in this key demographic category in the Tunisian survey, and so findings should be accepted with a measure of caution, even though a non-parametric statistical test does show a very low probability of obtaining by chance alone the difference reported in Figure 2.



Only 3.4 percent of poorly educated younger Tunisian men express support for the Islamic State's goals and only 2.3 percent agree with its violent tactics. Nevertheless, it is notable that Tunisians in the demographic category that is the primary target of the Islamic State messaging are significantly more likely than other Tunisians, and also than their counterparts in other Arab countries, to consider the Islamic State's tactics compatible with Islam.

### A TUNISIAN EXCEPTION?

Findings are similar with respect to whether the Islamic State's tactics are compatible with the teachings of Islam, but with one potentially instructive exception. This concerns Tunisia, where 14.9 percent of poorly educated younger male respondents believe that the Islamic State's tactics are compatible with Islamic teachings, compared to only 8.6 percent of other Tunisians.

The finding that younger and less well-educated Tunisian men are more likely than other Tunisians to judge the Islamic State's tactics to be compatible with Islamic teachings may help to explain why a large number of Tunisians have left the country to fight with the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. News reports place the number between 3,000 and 8,000, far more than any other Arab country with the exception of Saudi Arabia. And since most who have

### AN EMBEDDED EXPERIMENT

We wanted to dig even deeper into factors shaping the views of younger less well-educated men, the key demographic targeted by Islamic State messaging. We therefore introduced a survey experiment into the 2016 Arab Barometer instrument. Respondents were randomly assigned to either a control group or one of four treatment groups before being asked the questions about the Islamic State.

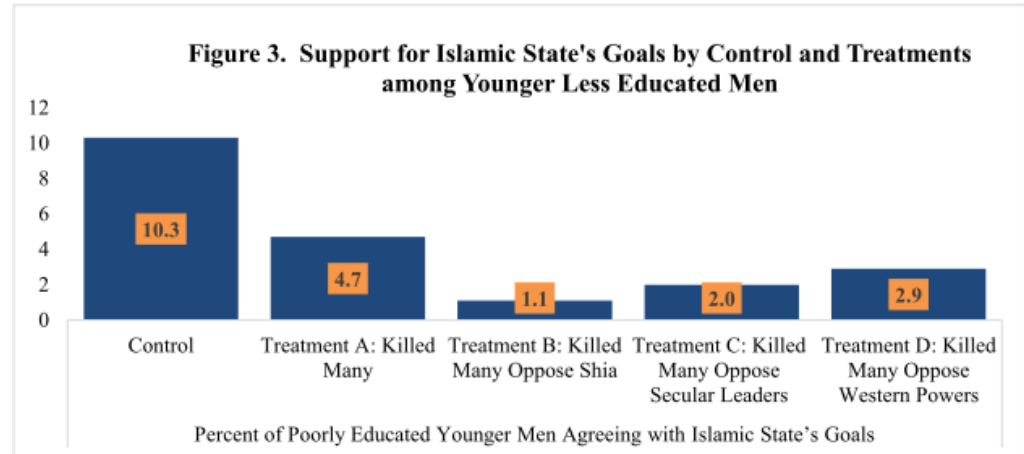
The various treatment scripts provided information about the Islamic State and its stated objectives. The control version included no additional text. The script of the first treatment, Treatment A, told respondents that the Islamic State has emerged as a potent force in the Middle East, that its goal is to extend the caliphate across the Muslim world, and that it has killed many Muslims and non-Muslims in pursuit of of this aim.

The three remaining treatments, B, C, and D, included the Treatment A script and then provided

an additional piece of information. Treatment B added that another of the Islamic State's stated objectives is to limit Shia influence across the Muslim world and to confront Iranian-led Shiite forces in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and elsewhere; Treatment C added that another of the Islamic State's declared goals is to defend Islam from attacks by secular leaders and other elites whose goal is to limit the role of Islam in government and public life; and Treatment D added that another of the Islamic State's declared goals is to counter intervention in the region by the United States and other Western powers who have engaged in military attacks against it.

Figure 3 shows responses to the question about the Islamic State's goals of younger less educated men in the control group and in each of the four treatment groups. The figure shows that approval, or at least the absence of disapproval, is more common among respondents in the control group and less common among those in all of the treatment groups, especially those in Treatments B, C, and D, each of which provides information about one of the Islamic State's stated objectives. In each case, the difference between the control and Treatment B, the control and Treatment C, and the control and Treatment D is statistically significant. Figure 3 thus strongly suggests that the provision of information about the Islamic State's declared goals reduces the likelihood that a young poorly educated man will approve of the Islamic State's goals.

Several additional insights are suggested by the findings shown in Figure 3. First, although the degree of support for the Islamic State's goals is lower among those in Treatment A than among those in the control group, the difference is not large enough to be statistically significant, meaning that this result could have just been chance. Accordingly, we cannot say with confidence that telling those in the key demographic targeted by the Islamic State only about the group's violent actions, including the killing of Muslims as well as non-Muslims, will change their views very much.



Although telling these young men both about the Islamic State's violent actions and also about any one of its stated objectives is likely to reduce support for the group, telling them about the Islamic State's goal of combatting Shia influence has the greatest impact on their assessments. This is probably because Sunni-Shia tensions are largely absent in the five Arab countries on which this analysis is based, whereas in many if not all of the countries there is likely to be at least some concern about secular leaders and Western influence. Accordingly, the conclusion to be drawn is that support for the Islamic State will diminish among those in the population category from which the Islamic State seeks to recruit fighters to the extent they see as less relevant to their own societies the goals on behalf of which the Islamic State claims to be fighting.

Only a small minority of young, uneducated men who sympathize with the Islamic State have left to fight on its behalf. Yet, those who sympathize with the movement are more likely than others to one day join its cause. It may be possible to use some of the Islamic State's own messaging against the movement. Juxtaposing information about its use of violence and its specific aims leads to small but statistically significant and meaningful declines in support for the group. Combining this strategy with other messages combating its extremist ideology may offer the best approach to influence the views of the small minority of uneducated young men who sympathize with this terrorist organization.

*Mark Tessler is the Samuel J. Eldersveld Collegiate Professor of Political Science at the University of Michigan (e-mail: [tessler@umich.edu](mailto:tessler@umich.edu)). Michael Robbins is the director of the Arab Barometer (e-mail: [robbinmd@umich.edu](mailto:robbinmd@umich.edu)). Amaney A. Jamal is the Edwards S. Sanford Professor of Politics at Princeton University and director of the Mamdouha S. Bobst Center for Peace and Justice (e-mail: [ajamal@princeton.edu](mailto:ajamal@princeton.edu)).*

## **DON'T POKE THE DICTATOR: FIELD RESEARCH UNDER CONDITIONS OF FRAGILE STABILITY**

**By Annelle Sheline**

You can tell how long someone has been studying the MENA region based on where they have been able to do research. I am of the generation for whom Egypt was the most typical option, but working in Syria or Yemen offered more adventure. Jordan and Tunisia and the GCC were possibilities, but were seen as fairly boring. Moroccan darija was an obstacle for those of us who had labored for years to achieve some command of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). Yet today Jordan, Morocco, and the GCC are some of the only places where fieldwork is still possible in the Arabic speaking world. When asked to justify my dissertation case selection of Jordan, Oman, and Morocco, I was interrupted with the fairly accurate observation that “Those were the only choices you had!”

Yet the increasingly limited range of fieldwork sites is a negligible symptom of the violence spreading across the region. Scholars’ concerns about access to finicky archivists are replaced with fears for friends’ livelihoods and lives. Frustrations at widespread misperceptions that the region is perpetually mired in violence are exacerbated as those misperceptions are reinforced. Doubts about the effectiveness of academic research become more acute in the face of such insurmountable obstacles as persistent authoritarianism and geopolitics.

At the same time that scholars consistently receive bad news from the region, we have had to face greater security challenges ourselves. I conducted dissertation fieldwork in three countries that are considered “stable.” Yet that stability is bought at the price of increased crackdowns on anyone who threatens the regime, including researchers and our contacts. Researchers attempting to gather data in areas suffering from violence are likely aware of the risks they undertake, and hopefully work to mitigate

them. But researchers doing fieldwork in contexts that seem outwardly calm must remember that regimes have fought hard and ruthlessly to project an image of solidity.

My worst moment during fieldwork came in the form of a phone call from an Omani friend who had helped set up interviews with imams in a small town in the interior. She called to let me know that a state security agent had come to her home to ask about me. She and her husband had tried to reassure him that my research would depict the Omani regime in a favourable light. She told me not to worry, but also wanted me to know that I had might have been followed from the capital, and to prepare myself in case an agent appeared at my apartment there. I felt so guilty. Had I put my friends and their children at risk by asking for their help? If they had gotten in actual trouble, what was my plan to help them? If I had gotten in actual trouble, what was my plan to help myself? I had no idea.

Departments and research institutes can help by actively assisting scholars as we prepare for fieldwork. Experienced researchers may need to update their assumptions, and younger researchers must remember that our choices impact our contacts as well as ourselves.

Based on my experience, the following are a few worthwhile precautions:

- Curate your online profile

In my case, a member of my committee sat down with me to revise my internet presence before I left for the field. He advised me, for example, to erase my Twitter posts that had celebrated the fall of the Mubarak regime in 2011. I felt reluctant to reduce my digital footprint at a time when I wanted to expand it. But after the contact from Omani security forces I was grateful to know that if they Googled me, they would find no evidence that I had cheered for the fall of a dictator. Assume everything you write is public.

- Have resources ready if a contact is detained

I had no idea what I would have done if my friend or her husband had been taken away by security forces. I should have had numbers for contacts in Oman who might have been able to help. Departments could assist by pooling the contacts of influential individuals in that country, and making them available to researchers.

- Have a plan if you are detained or kidnapped

Technologies and apps can serve as a tracking and alert system on a personal cell phone that transmit your location, and if you are in a situation that feels threatening, you can initiate a sequence that will alert your family and the authorities. I used a beta version of an app called Waynik, for example, which was developed by a friend for journalists and contractors to use in situations of elevated risk.

Based on my earlier experiences in Egypt, Syria, and Yemen, I would have once found such advice to be overly alarmist. I might have ignored it in order to avoid playing into fears about the Middle East as a frightening, mysterious place. But then my friend Steven Sotloff, whom I got to know during language training in Yemen, was killed by the so-called Islamic State. And Italian researcher Giulio Regeni was killed by the Egyptian authorities. And countless civilians have suffered harassment, detention, and death as their rulers struggle to retain control. Those that hold the reins of power in the region have demonstrated their willingness to do anything to retain it.

As someone who studies the region, acting in a manner that caused harm to a contact or interviewee would be devastating. And if something should happen to me that would serve the agenda of those who portray the Middle East as a source of violence, my years of working to overcome such negative stereotypes would evaporate as I became a symbol of that violence. Even in the seemingly stable kingdoms, I had to learn that the insouciance of earlier years was no longer appropriate. I once swore to worried friends that the places I travelled were much safer than they appeared in the media. But this is no longer as true for scholars, nor anyone who might threaten regime stability.

*Annelle Sheline is a PhD candidate at the Department of Political Science, George Washington University (e-mail: [asheline@email.gwu.edu](mailto:asheline@email.gwu.edu)). Her dissertation focuses on how Arab regimes promote their official religious narrative.*

## RESEARCH INSIDE THE KURDISH CONFLICT ZONE IN IRAQ AND TURKEY: FIELDWORK AND INTERVIEW STRATEGIES

**By Serhun Al**

During the heavy urban clashes between the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) militants and the Turkish military,<sup>1</sup> I conducted fieldwork in southeastern Turkey and northern Iraq between February and May 2016. While I was able to go to the provinces of Diyarbakir, Mardin and Sanliurfa, I couldn't get access to the provinces of Hakkari and Sirnak due to curfews and travel bans by the Turkish military. However, I was still able to conduct 55 semi-structured interviews with local NGOs, journalists, academics, politicians, and government officials—along with non-structured, unplanned interviews and ethnographic observations in the daily lives of ordinary citizens. My research goal was to understand how local people—who are the direct victims of the conflict—make sense of the conflict between the PKK and the Turkish state, especially in light of the almost two-year long peace process and ceasefire, which had given them high hopes for peace and stability. My aim was also to understand the dynamics of this conflict within the larger Kurdish world. Hence, I made a trip to Erbil, the capital of the Iraqi Kurdistan, to research how ethnic brethren on the other side of the Turkish border approach the conflict. The Iraqi Kurdistan government under the leadership of Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) has tense relations with the PKK as well as significant security threats from the Islamic State—which was able to approach within almost 30 miles of this Kurdish capital in the summer of 2014. Visiting Erbil helped me to place the PKK-Turkey conflict in the regional context.

Based on my experiences, I believe that one of the most critical issues in doing research in such a highly insecure environment is establishing trust among yourself, your interviewees and the local population. As a researcher, you can easily be labelled as a spy (from either side of the conflict) since law and order is mostly suspended and interpersonal trust is at its weakest. To overcome this problem, first, I used personal contacts in the region who facilitated my access to my interviewees. If I didn't have these personal contacts, convincing people to agree to an interview would have been much harder. Second, I carried an official letter from my university that clearly stated its endorsement of

the research, and invited interviewees to contact the university if they had any concerns or questions with regards to me as a researcher or the research itself. As soon as I met with the interviewees, I presented the official letter, so the interviewees would believe in the non-political aspect of my research along with its scientific intentions.

Carrying an official letter from your university is also helpful in your possible encounters with military and law enforcement personnel. For instance, I was stopped by the military border guards in the town of Suruc (Turkey) which borders Kobani (Syria). At that time, the border was closed for security reasons. Kobani (Syria) can be seen very clearly from Suruc (Turkey), so I attempted to take few pictures. But the Turkish border guards stopped me and told me that I wasn't allowed to take pictures. They told me to delete the pictures (which I did). I told them I was doing research and showed them the official letter. If I didn't have that letter, it was most likely that I would be detained.

Personal physical security of the researcher is very important as well. During the research, I was often told not to go out on the streets after the sunset since security measures were minimum until sunrise. However, there were heavy clashes during the day too. For instance, I conducted one of my interviews in daylight Diyarbakir (near the Sur neighbourhood where urban warfare was the highest) with the sounds of gun fires, bombs, shells and tanks in the distance. My interviewee and I looked out from the window and watched all the smoke rising from Sur. This particular interviewee was so familiar with the clashes; he could identify the sounds of different weaponry used by the warring parties. Moreover, I was also told not to stay near law enforcement vehicles which are the open targets for PKK attacks. Personal contacts are again very helpful in this context since they would tell you where and when your security would be at high risk.

In terms of arranging appointments with the interviewees, email rarely works since the main type of communication is phones and people rarely check email. For this reason, speaking the local language is vital in order to make phone calls. Moreover, time and place of meeting with interviewees may change frequently since interviewing with the researcher is not their priority; under these conditions, it is understandable that they may need to cancel their appointments in the last minute. Therefore,

researchers must be patient, yet persistent in pursuing their research agenda. In fact, conducting one successful interview usually has a snowballing effect which opens more doors in finding new potential interviewees. So be prepared for unplanned and spontaneous interviews.

In cases where you do not have personal contacts, reaching out to academics in your field at local universities is also very helpful since they can empathize with what you are doing and may be willing to assist you. For instance, I had a language barrier in Erbil, Iraq; several like-minded academics in local universities (mostly English speaking, educated in Western higher education institutions) helped me arrange appointments and were even willing to translate during the interviews. Academics often tend to check their emails as well, so it is easier to arrange appointments with them at their university offices.

Today, the intensity of heavy urban clashes between PKK and Turkish military has decreased, yet clashes intermittently break out. Under these conditions, I would advise the potential junior researchers to postpone their fieldwork 1) if they do not know the area very well 2) if they do not speak the local language 3) if they do not have any reliable local sources/contacts/guides.

*Serhun Al is Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science and International Relations at the Izmir University of Economics, Turkey (e-mail: [serhun.al@ieu.edu.tr](mailto:serhun.al@ieu.edu.tr)).*

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> For more information on the conflict, please see International Crisis Group's report at <http://www.crisisgroup.be/interactives/turkey/>



## EGYPT BEYOND EGYPT?

By Johannes Gunesch (2016)

“Egypt exists today”, writes Jack Shenker, “in a prolonged moment of flux”. As such, the 2011 popular uprising is also not over. It continues to this very day – because, and not despite, the counter-revolutionary onslaught. As a result, the emergent memories, meanings and effects of the uprising are deeply contested amongst a variety of different actors. The ensuing “social drama” (in Victor Turner’s sense) is very real. This also poses a number of daunting challenges for our engagement with what is happening in Egypt – from near as well as from afar – on which I would like to reflect based on my own PhD research.

At present, the military regime, together with its unruly allies and apologists, is hammering out its own form of redress, thereby working to eliminate any form of criticism and dissent. This has led to radicalization and an escalation of organized, state-sanctioned violence. Such violence comes in many different forms. By and large, it is exempt from reproach. This is not only because it is ostensibly justified in the name of an elusive “stability” and the *haybat el-dawla* (ie. the prestige and inviolability of the state). The excess of violence is also perpetuated through complicity, including of international actors, in “the war against terror” and (big) business interests. This has culminated in the mass killings of Rabea, the murder of Giulio Regeni, the disappearance of hundreds of Egyptians, and vicious “anti-protest” and restrictive NGO legislations.

For qualitative research in and on Egypt, this has caused a fundamental predicament. On the one hand, it is paramount to document, inform and voice concerns about what is happening, especially because many cannot (anymore). It is crucial to expose violence and identify its perpetrators, thereby confronting the authoritative closure that is imposed on Egypt. This, to be sure, requires to be in touch with the people in Egypt, those who actually encounter the drama, speak with and be close with them. Yet, on the other hand, the dangers that are inherent to this endeavor are severe, for both researchers and their interlocutors.

In the case of my own PhD research on the politics and pedagogy of “development” in the course of the

Egyptian uprising, many discussions with friends and colleagues have led me to cancel the fieldwork that I had planned. As troubling as this decision is, I believe it is indicative of a general development in the larger field of knowledge production and discourse about Egypt, the underpinnings and effects of which need to be carefully worked out.

Towards this end, and against the backdrop of the standard requirements of ethical research practice (i.e. informed consent, safety and security, and dissemination), there are a number of concerns that I would like to highlight:

1) With decreasing availability of safe channels for communication, it gets more difficult to gain access to information as well as people. There is evidence, for example, that emails and also Skype conversations have been tracked. As a result, encrypted messaging is left as an option (Telegram, Threema), which however requires previous contacts. While this might encourage vetting, the means of communication are nonetheless restricted.

2) In preparing for field-work in Egypt, official accreditation is also circumscribed. In light of the debilitating application process as well as the numerous incidents of maltreatment of researchers, few (if any) still consider a formal research visa an option. Instead, foreign researchers have to rely on tourist visa that come without any authorization and tend to invite suspicion. While it is possible to enter Egypt from another place but Cairo, arrival in touristic areas such as Hurghada for example is also coupled to particular and, therefore, restrictive visa requirements.

3) What is more, an official affiliation with local entities is becoming increasingly difficult. This pertains both to universities and research centers as well as non-governmental and civil society organizations. As those entities and their staff are oftentimes already heavily scrutinized, they have to exert extra caution in cooperating with (foreign) researchers.

4) As a consequence, available information is currently significantly skewed. For instance, numerous local and foreign political foundations and organizations are increasingly hard pressed to either terminate their work on/in Egypt altogether, or change their thematic foci. This is because certain

strands of work are effectively disallowed while others are permitted and, at times, even supported by the regime. In a nutshell, this means that “official” information from governmental and UN agencies is accessible while local, non-governmental and potentially critical information is circumscribed. Likewise, quantitative and policy research that relies on statistics and/or surveys that can be administered from afar is currently a safer option. Yet, this comes with crucial trade-offs, not least with regard to the ability (or even willingness) to scrutinize statist prerogatives.

5) While those technical, formal and substantial restrictions might be circumvented by careful planning, close rapport, and (local) support networks, other problems are more engrained and difficult to evade. This concerns primarily the identity politics that the escalation of violence engenders. The pressure to forge and demarcate belongings, oftentimes around racialized lines, also impacts on the conditions of possibility to discuss about what is currently happening in Egypt. As such, both from within as well as outside the country, language is politicized and certain terms — such as “revolution” or “coup” — serve as identity marker. Therefore, how researchers as well as interlocutors describe particular events and trajectories indicates allegiances. Upon the inevitable probing questions, this might open as well as close doors and connections, testament to how closely the ensuing political contestation is entangled with ways to document and make sense of it.

As those difficulties and tensions can probably not be resolved any time soon, I believe it is important to address their impact on the personal and political engagement with the ongoing drama. Since I have decided to cancel my fieldwork in Egypt, I am therefore thinking where to find Egypt beyond Egypt. In order to explore how widely the contestation over the cause for socio-political change resonates, it is paramount to address the emotive appeal, lasting aspirations and deep-seated awe that are associated with the ongoing uprising. This pertains not only to Egyptian diaspora but also to different communities — academic and otherwise — that partake in the knowledge production about Egypt. After all, against the authoritative closure of Egypt, the uprising is not a mere container, but subject to many different experiences and voices from different places, both “here” and “there.”

*Johannes Gunesch is a PhD candidate at the Central European University in Budapest, Hungary (e-mail: [Gunesch\\_johannes@phd.ceu.edu](mailto:Gunesch_johannes@phd.ceu.edu)).*

## DETERIORATING CONDITIONS FOR ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN MENA

**By Ilyas Saliba and Jannis Grimm**

The frontiers of contemporary political science on the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) are shifting. Deteriorating political conditions across the region not only have implications for disciplinary paradigms (Pace and Cavatorta 2012; Bank 2015),<sup>1</sup> but bear practical consequences for how we can conduct research in the region too. The research environment for political scientists has markedly changed: access to the field has become increasingly difficult — in some states as a result of war and militant conflict, in others as a byproduct of authoritarian restoration. Above all, the spaces for critical inquiry and fieldwork have been shrinking. How we, as students of political science, deal with this situation is crucial, as it has profound consequences for both, our research topics and methods of inquiry as well as on knowledge production on a more general level.

With this short intervention, we aim to start a debate about how we, as students of political science, should deal with the current situation. Our account is informed by our personal experiences with fieldwork in Egypt, Tunisia, Turkey and Morocco over the course of the past five years and by countless talks with colleagues and partners in the region. Not the least, it draws from an inspiring workshop “Academic and Media Freedom under Threat in Egypt,” held in Berlin in last June in the framework of our capacity building conference “Egypt’s Civil Society on the Brink? Politics from Below Five Years after the Revolution.”

## GROWING RISKS TO PERSONAL SECURITY

Since the enigmatic and tragic murder of Giulio Regeni,<sup>2</sup> an Italian colleague and PhD candidate at Cambridge University who was conducting research on independent labor unions in Egypt, academic institutions have become more reluctant to let researchers depart on fieldwork missions to the

entire MENA region. This reluctance is not unfounded: Regeni's tortured body was found on the roadside of a highway in February 2016 bearing the hallmarks of the Egyptian security state. His case was not an isolated incident of academic work coming under threat.

According to the modest count by the New York-based non-profit Scholars at Risk (SAR), his death was the 19th attack on academic freedom in Egypt in the past 3 years. Many more cases of scholars being threatened or detained by authorities go unreported, because the inflicted remain silent to not endanger their future research access. The Council for At-Risk Academics (CARA), a British non-profit that provides aid to scholars, currently already supports over 213 academics facing discrimination, persecution, suffering and violence, and has identified 100 more people at immediate risk. In addition, the number of applications for urgent help from the Middle East and the surrounding region has been rising – from 3-4 per week to 15-20 per week in mid-2016 – indicating the highest levels of need since CARA was founded.

Among those impacted by the extending security state are also scholars abroad: critical writers can expect to be contacted by Egyptian officials who aim at “clarifying” their arguments; conference organizers face obstruction attempts by Egyptian diplomatic missions; and Egyptian researchers attending workshops abroad go to great lengths to conceal their travel itineraries.

#### **INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES AND THE PITFALLS OF FORMALIZATION**

The institutional reaction to the continuing infringement on academics' rights has overwhelmingly been one of retreat: in the past months alone, we have personally witnessed how several colleagues who were preparing to go into the field were barred from traveling – not by authorities in the MENA-region, but by either their own hosting institutions or their funders. Other partners had to go to great lengths to convince traditional funding organizations to continue supporting their events or publications, if they touched upon issues sensitive to regimes in the region (e.g. civil society or human rights violations). Moreover, it seems as if many supervisors and institutes, including a range of renown graduate schools and faculties, have become

hesitant to accept projects involving field trips to Egypt and other countries deemed as dangerous. Their reluctance follows, on the one hand, from the recognition of an institutional responsibility and the realization that supervisors may be unable to fulfill their duty of care towards students investigating contentious topics abroad. On the other hand, it is exacerbated by the added costs of insuring researchers in hostile environments properly.

Institutions' growing reluctance to engage in critical academic research in the MENA region has manifested itself in a trend towards greater formalization of visa procedures for outgoing researchers and more institutionalized controls over fieldwork. This policy shift is understandable from an institutional logic. Its consequences for knowledge production, however, are fatal. After all, a practical lock down on states where scholars are at risk entails elements of censorship, as scholars are left to choose between either self-imposed exile or moving their focus to less contentious topics. Ultimately, it also plays into the hands of authoritarian regimes across the region, if critical scholars are silenced.

#### **WHAT CAN WE DO?**

On an individual level, scholars (junior and senior) have to assess the risks they are willing to take on their own. Many may choose to abide by the restrictions set by regimes in the region and institutions at home, in exchange for continued field access. We are hopeful, however, that the community that has started to speak out against violations of academic freedom will refuse to back down. A debate amongst scholars is necessary to ensure that institutional security concerns do not lead to a scientific withdrawal from certain topics in parts of the world.

Petitions condemning erosions of academic freedom is not the only tool available to academics. As a research community, we should attempt to pool resources into enabling outgoing researchers to be better informed and better prepared. For a long time, social scientists have taken immense risks to conduct interviews or ethnographic studies in conflict zones, i.e. with combatants and guerrillas (e.g., Gyle and Hyndman 2004; Wood 2006). Identifying potential risks, building a local network, seeking peer advice and requesting professional

expertise when preparing for fieldwork missions in hostile environments are standard procedures for researchers in (post-)conflict environments. We can learn from these experiences.

We should also attempt to systematize these experiences, catalogue best practice examples and seek to develop a curriculum for fieldwork training. Following the model of other professions faced with similar threats (such as journalists or development workers), trainings on secure communication and ethical concerns, and a thorough briefing before fieldwork missions should become standard procedures offered to outgoing researchers. In addition, we must create safe spaces at graduate schools, research institutes, workshops and conferences where we can discuss dangers and fears but also share practical advice on how to deal adequately with the shifting conditions in the field.

It is precisely these needs that we want to address in a follow-up project to our workshop in Berlin, which aims at establishing a network for secure academic research by providing an interactive platform for debates on academic freedom, personal security issues, and the duty of care of hosting institutions.

Such an exchange is pivotal to the future of political science research conducted in and on the MENA region.

*Ilyas Saliba is a research fellow at the WZB (Berlin Social Science Center) and a PhD candidate at the Berlin Graduate School for Social Sciences at Humboldt University Berlin (e-mail: [ilyas.saliba@wzb.eu](mailto:ilyas.saliba@wzb.eu)). Jannis Grimm is a visiting research fellow at the Orient-Institute Istanbul (OII) & a doctoral fellow at the Berlin Graduate School Muslim Cultures and Societies (BGSMS), Freie Universität Berlin (e-mail: [jj.grimm@fu-berlin.de](mailto:jj.grimm@fu-berlin.de)).*

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Between 1980 and the mid 1990s, much of the political science debates on the MENA-Region had circulated around questions of democratization. Against the evidence of seemingly stable authoritarianism across the region, the scholarly discourse shifted, during the following decade, to explanations of this supposed 'Arab exceptionalism' from a worldwide democratization trend. The volatile and ambiguous political transformations since 2011 have contributed to a basic questioning of both of these theoretical paradigms. Given that the uprisings took the vast majority of scholars by surprise, it was asked whether scholarship about Arab politics had been undermined. In response, comparativists and, above

all, transitologists and social movement scholars engaged in a heated debate on the mainstay of political science studies of the region and on the promises of various alternative research paradigms.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed account on the disappearance and murder of Giulio Regeni, see Alexander Stille (2016) 'Who murdered Giulio Regeni', *the Guardian*, at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/04/egypt-murder-giulio-regeni>

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## "YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN": RESEARCHING MASCULINITIES AND BORDERS UNDER SETTLER-COLONIAL CONTEXT

By Aamer Ibraheem

"Two years ago, I was more active than now and I used to discuss my opinions in general, but specifically on that [political] issue, because I wanted to make youth here aware of what the [Israeli] authorities are trying to do ... but now, and after I have been warned, I rarely say something ... not that I'm not interested anymore, but ... you know what I mean"

This paper shares a few notes on the way in-depth interviews become a challenging, limiting, problematic and suspect method when conducting qualitative socio-political research that deals with society on borderlands and under settler colonial condition. A form of colonial formation whereby foreign people move into a region, and where the new colonial regime (the colonial power) influences the production of space, the forms of population management, the structures of violence that are imposed and the different bio-political techniques that are used. It is a structure, as Patrick Wolfe (2006) writes, which destroys to replace (388).

Under these settler-colonial condition, I would argue that academic researchers face difficult and serious dilemmas about who to represent and how (or whether to represent them at all), and what types of findings and insights to include or omit.

#### EXAMINING IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW:

Feminist research has adopted in-depth interviews as one of the most important ways to critically examine the dominant field of scientific knowledge, and to create alternative knowledge fields (Herzog 2014). In-depth interviews, as a feminist qualitative research tool, have gained wide interest over the years (Gubrium & Holstein 2002). However, one of the main arguments which is intertwined in many methodological discussions, is that interviews are not only a data collection technique, but must be examined as part of the construction of an “Interview Society”, using Silverman’s term (1997, p. 248). A society where an ‘industry of interviews’ is growing in almost every aspect of our daily life, and is immersed in what Foucault (1997) defines as modern governmentality and self-construction technologies (67).

The concept of “Interview Society”, Herzog argues, assumes the democratization and research attitude that gives space for unheard voices in society (Herzog 2014). However, alongside such assumptions, Herzog continues, we as researchers should examine with a critical view what really lies behind an “interview society”, akin to an approach that has been developed by Briggs (2002).

On this issue, Briggs has scrutinized the asymmetries of power that emerge in interview situations, investing interviewers with control over what is said and how it is said, and the subsequent circulation of the interview knowledge. He argues, following Foucault (1973 [1963]; 1977 [1975]) and Bourdieu (1977), that the various types of research interviews are part of political technology and symbolic capital that aim to maintain the asymmetric relations of power. In practice, interviews provide personal data that can be used by employers, institutions, marketing companies and, most importantly, by the state, to their own needs and according to their world’s view. Hence, interviews in many ways, can be considered as an intervention into people’s private lives, Briggs concludes (2002, p. 914). This conclusion is crucial

for understanding the interview as a methodology in the current research context, which I refer to as a settler-colonial research context.

#### FEW ESSENTIAL NOTES:

The quoted paragraph at the beginning of this paper is taken from my research that focuses on the formation of masculinity concepts among Syrian men living in the occupied Golan. A large percentage of the membership of this research group, or their friends or relatives, have been detained in Israeli prisons in their past, or have been interrogated by the Israeli intelligence. In this research context, demolition of houses by Israeli forces and ongoing processes of land judaization are considered daily struggles. Hence, using a recorder during the interview, asking about specific political issues, or publishing concrete findings is always problematic. It should also be noted that in this research, both the interviewer and the interviewee were Syrian men and residents of the Golan. I will examine the quote shared at the beginning of the paper to share few notes on the use of in-depth interviews in the context I presented.

I have realized during the research that silence or information withheld by the interviewees do matter in the given context, and in fact matter in ways that challenge the value of silence and secrets, or at least the idea that they have a given value, as argued by Ahmed (2010). As the interviewee ends his statement, after a short silence, he says “you know what I mean.” I argue that he actually intends to keep things less clear and hints about a sensitive political topic, which is the core of the research and that he is not interested in revealing. Reflecting on his ‘decision’ raises questions about the way knowledge and experiences in that specific society’s context are being shared and transferred. Conversely, these silences or secrets or even the refusal to share knowledge may show how people who are mostly be silenced, are able to ‘use’ that oppression as a means of exclusion and mode of resistance.

Sometimes silence can be a tool of oppression; when you are silenced, whether by explicit force or by persuasion, it is not simply that you do not speak but that you are barred from participation in a conversation that nevertheless involves you (Ahmed 2010). Sometimes silence is a strategic response to

oppression; one that allows subjects to persist in their own way; one that acknowledges that, under certain circumstances, speech might not be empowering, let alone sensible (ibid; introduction).

These conditions on the ground, somehow, stand in contrast to feminist research tradition of demanding that the unseen and the unacknowledged be made visible and heard. However, these dilemmas are not the interviewee's purview alone. Sometimes we, as researchers, might stay silent about some of the findings of our research because we do not have trust in how those findings might be used by other actors, such as universities or research institutions. At other times, it might become important to reveal something, but not to reveal too much. We have to learn how much to reveal or not – it is not just a binary choice of whether to withhold or reveal a secret, or to choose silence or speech, but is also a question of degree.

What we do with what we are entrusted, whether we speak or keep silent, remains an important question. Moreover, to conclude with Ahmed's argument: difficulties are, as ever, pedagogic (2010).

*Aamer Ibraheem is a licensed graduate in Social Work and a Master's student in Women and Gender Studies (e-mail: [Aamer.ibraheem@gmail.com](mailto:Aamer.ibraheem@gmail.com)).*

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## ANNOUNCEMENTS

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### ALUMNI RESEARCH AND NETWORKING GRANTS

The deadline for the next round of Alumni Grants will be **December 1, 2016**. Made possible by Carnegie Corporation of New York, the program supports alumni activities such as presenting at an academic conference, organizing a mini-workshop, conducting fieldwork, or advancing research towards publication. Since October 2014, APSA has awarded 25 grants to MENA Workshops alumni totaling over \$60,000. Additional information can be found online at <http://web.apsanet.org/mena/award-recipient>. For questions, contact [amorsy@apsanet.org](mailto:amorsy@apsanet.org).

### 2016 MENA WORKSHOPS: “CIVIL SOCIETY REVISITED” IN BEIRUT AND AMMAN

APSA’s MENA Workshops program continued this year with a two-part program entitled, “Civil Society Revisited: Researching Associational Life in Comparative Perspective.” The first workshop was held at the Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship at the American University of Beirut (AUB), from May 16-20. Together with a follow-up workshop in Amman, Jordan from September 18-22, the 2016 program sought to revisit the concept of civil society in the wake of the Arab Uprisings.

While there is broad agreement that civil society matters, the precise causal mechanisms by which it is believed to exert an influence remain understudied. As the region experiences upheavals and regime-change, a wide range of actors with sometimes competing ideologies struggle to define and operationalize the mechanisms for securing durable political reform, social stability, and lasting peace. These changing state-society dynamics offer scholars a unique opportunity to reexamine, and potentially re-conceptualize, traditional understandings of civil-society. More broadly, the workshops also focused on issues of research design, best practices and approaches for conducting field research, and questions associated with manuscript preparation and publication. Participants discussed an extensive set of readings and received detailed feedback on their own research related to civil society in the MENA region.

Co-leading the program were Fateh Azzam (AUB-Asfari Institute, Lebanon), Sandrine Gamblin (AUC, Egypt), Noora Lori (Boston University, USA), Richard Norton (Boston University, USA), and Denis Sullivan (Northeastern University, USA).



*MENA Workshop fellows and leaders on the steps of the AUB front gate in May 2016*



*MENA Workshop fellows and leaders at Ajloun Castle in Jordan in September 2016.*

Participants included 25 PhD students and early-career faculty from across the MENA region, Europe, and the United States. Following their participation in the five-month fellowship, alumni receive 3 year's membership to APSA and are eligible to apply for small grant funding to advance their research.

Since 2013, APSA has organized eight workshops throughout the MENA region as part of a multi-year initiative to support political science research and networking in the Arab Middle East and North Africa. Funded by Carnegie Corporation of New York, the MENA Workshops program is a major component of APSA's efforts to engage with political science communities outside the United States and support research networks linking US scholars with their colleagues overseas. For more information, visit APSA's MENA Workshops website at <http://web.apsanet.org/mena>.

## ALUMNI NEWS AND PUBLICATIONS

Over the past year, many of our alumni (both fellows and co-leaders) were invited to present their research and participate in conferences across the United States, including 16 alumni at APSA's Annual Meeting in Philadelphia, PA, and 18 alumni at the Middle East Studies Association's Annual Meeting in Boston, MA. For more information, see the [Alumni Network](#) section of our website.

If you would like to submit an announcement to be included in future Alumni News, send your updates directly to [menanewsletter@apsanet.org](mailto:menanewsletter@apsanet.org). Please join us in congratulating the following alumni for their continued professional accomplishments!

### 2013 ALUMNI - CAIRO AND TUNIS

- Guy Burton (University of Nottingham-Malaysia) published his research "[How do Palestinians perceive China's Rise?](#)" in the *China Policy Institute's Working Paper Series*, no.22.
- May Darwich (Durham University, UK) published her article "[The Ontological \(In\)security of Similarity: Wahhabism Versus Islamism in Saudi Foreign Policy](#)" in *Foreign Policy Analysis* 12, no 3.

### 2014 ALUMNI - AMMAN AND BEIRUT

- Bassel F. Salloukh (Lebanese American University) published his research "[How to break the Middle East's sectarian spiral](#)" on *The Washington Post's Monkey Cage blog* on August 8.

### 2015 ALUMNI - DOHA AND KUWAIT

- Hamad Albloshi (Kuwait University) published his book [The Eternal Revolution: Hardliners and Conservatives in Iran](#) with I. B. Tauris Publishers.
- Justin Gengler (Social and Economic Survey Research Institute, Qatar University) published his research "[The Political Economy of Sectarianism in the Gulf](#)" with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
- Kristen Kao (University of Gothenburg, Sweden) published her research "[How Jordan's election revealed enduring weaknesses in its political system](#)" on *The Washington Post's Monkey Cage blog* on October 3.
- Mark Tessler (University of Michigan, USA) has co-authored several pieces in *The Washington Post's Monkey Cage blog*: "[Talk of rigged elections undermines democracy](#)" on October 21, and "[What do ordinary citizens in the Arab world really think about the Islamic State?](#)" on July 27.



*Sarina Theys (2015) and Kristin Eggeling (2015) in Poland for the 2016 IPSA World Congress*



## CALL FOR PAPERS

**APSA Annual Meeting 2017:** The 2017 APSA Annual Meeting will take place from August 31 – September 3 in San Francisco, CA. The theme of the 2017 meeting is “The Quest for Legitimacy: Actors, Audiences and Aspirations.” There are a number of different options available for submitting research proposals, including via divisions and related groups. The deadline for submission is **January 9, 2017**. For more information, visit <http://web.apsanet.org/apsa2017>.

**POMEPS Annual Conference 2017:** The Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) invites proposals for papers on the politics of the contemporary Middle East for its eighth annual conference at The George Washington University on **May 18-19, 2017**. The conference will include workshop discussions of article-length papers with an eye toward preparing them for publication, with each paper read by by multiple senior scholars in the field. It will also feature plenary discussions of topics relevant to the Middle East political science community. The deadline to submit paper proposals is **December 9, 2016**. For more information, visit: <http://pomeps.org/2016/09/06/call-for-proposals-8th-annual-pomeps-conference/>

**Workshop on Islamists and Local Politics 2017:** POMEPS and the Program on Governance and Local Development (GLD) at the University of Gothenburg invite proposals for short papers exploring questions related to Islamist politics at the local level, particularly in areas outside of urban core areas. The conference will be hosted by the University of Gothenburg in Sweden on June 13-14, 2017. The deadline to submit proposals is **January 8, 2017**. For more information, visit: <http://pomeps.org/2016/09/14/call-for-proposals-islamists-and-local-politics/>

**BRISMES Annual Conference 2017:** The British Society for Middle Eastern Studies announced that the 2017 Annual Conference will be held in collaboration with the Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies Department in Edinburgh, on July 5 – 7, 2017, with the theme of “Movement and Migration in the Middle East: People and Ideas in Flux.” The Call for Papers will be issued shortly. For more information, please visit: <http://www.brismes.ac.uk/>



*Magdalena Karolak (2014), Huda Alsahi (2015), and Nermin Allam (2013) in Philadelphia for the 2016 APSA Annual Meeting*

## CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

**Looking for a high-ranking outlet to publish your original research? *Politics* is the place.**

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*Politics* publishes timely, research-led analyses on the state of the art, the state of the world, and the state of disciplinary pedagogy. As a generalist journal we welcome excellent research that makes a clearly identifiable, original contribution to new or existing debates in politics and international relations. We welcome both quantitative and qualitative analyses and encourage authors to draw on a wide range of methodological approaches, theoretical frameworks, or empirical focuses. Our aims and strategies are outlined in our Editorial 36(2), which can be accessed online: <http://pol.sagepub.com/content/36/2/115.full.pdf+html>

Articles need be 4000-8000 words in length. We also welcome articles that are interdisciplinary in nature and use methods and/or theoretical frameworks from cognate disciplines such as Geography, Sociology, Law, Anthropology and Cultural Studies. At *Politics*, we provide an initial decision normally within 8-10 weeks, which is considerably faster than other journals in the discipline. In addition to the fast turnaround time, we provide detailed feedback on all decisions which helps the author to further develop and strengthen his/her article. Once an article is accepted, we promote the article via online media such as our blog, Twitter, LinkedIn and scholarly networks, so that your article reaches a wide audience as possible. For more information and contact, visit <http://pol.sagepub.com>

We are looking forward to receiving your article.

Sarina THEYS, Editorial Assistant, *Politics*