

Letter from the Editor

On July 19, 2018, the Israeli Knesset approved the Nation-State Bill and declared that “the right to exercise national self-determination” is “unique to the Jewish people.” First presented in 2011, [the new Basic Law’s 11 provisions](#) enshrine Hebrew as Israel’s official language, downgrade Arabic to “special status,” declare “Jewish settlement as a national value” and propose mandates for a Hebrew calendrical system, national holidays and days of rest, the state capital, flag, symbol, and anthem, immigration, and cultural heritage. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu characterized this vote as “a defining moment in the history of the state,” although decades of legal and infrastructural projects had already made the provisions of this law a lived reality. In my seminar on “Nations, Nationalisms, and the Global Middle East,” this lived reality emerged as a topic of debate in a climactic denouement to collaborative group projects on twentieth-century state-building techniques and practices. Student poster boards traced the convergence between symbols, institutions, language, law, and demography and collectively assessed the relationship between statehood and statelessness once defined by Hannah Arendt as the foundational praxis of the modern nation-state. During week two, in a moment of shocked realization, one student voiced that “state-building” was not a fixed past event but rather an on-going process (the historian in me wanted to shout a resounding “YES!”). The student’s moment of awakening was not the status of the *bidoon* in Kuwait, nor the escalating global crisis of displaced persons addressed in our last issue, or even the volatile environment of immigration in the U.S., but rather a glancing reference to the Nation-State Bill in his constitutional law class. What once might have passed unnoticed, he reported, now revealed the stakes involved in such a legislative act.

And, indeed, the stakes are high, and not just national. Instead, this moment provides us with yet another opportunity to assess the entangled nature of global events. When the Nation-State Bill passed we had already commissioned the reflective essays for this issue’s Special Focus section “From Tel Aviv to Jerusalem: An Embassy Move as the Crucible for Contested Histories.” Our aim was to evaluate the historical and contemporary dynamics of governance and policy both within Israel-Palestine and between the region and the U.S. from diverse

disciplinary and professional perspectives. The “event” of the embassy move is offered here as a means to reflect on how we as members of the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) might deploy our skills as scholars and practitioners to analyze how history is constantly refashioned within the debates and proclamations of the present. A trans-regional rise in ethno-territorialization demands a global analysis, and MESA members are well poised to provide the methods and strategies for such an intervention.

Our participants offer analysis born from their experience as scholars of religion, history, urban, legal, and material culture, or as practitioners in the fields of journalism and public advocacy. Raja Shehadeh (al-Haq) provides a poignant account of his effort to understand how the organization he founded to document the encroachment of Israeli sovereignty over Palestinian land and territories failed to intervene in the “facts on the ground” strategy. Suleiman A. Mourad (Smith College) turns back from the volatility of the present to outline a historical argument for a model of custodianship rather than ownership. His effort to track variable institutional and legal methods adopted by Christian, Muslim, and Jewish agents emphasizes accommodation and adaptation rather than coercion. Mick Dumper (University of Exeter) complicates further our understanding of Jerusalem as an urban space. He reveals the paradox of a rigidly imposed nationalist ideology on a landscape in which Israeli sovereignty remains uneven and the city’s material and cultural life multifaceted. Ofer Zalzberg (Trinity College, Dublin) and Meron Rapoport (Independent Journalist) both address the fraught nature of diplomatic negotiations and expose how the very structure of these negotiations prohibits meaningful outcomes. In the discourse of so-called “liberal” peacemaking and within the strained vocabularies and conflicting memories deployed by Israeli and Palestinian representatives assumptions and expectations shape the framework of “peace talks” in often binary terms, thus reinforcing oppositions rather than resolving them. Together, these analytical reflections embody a commitment to resist unreflectively adopting the political strategies and narratives that seek to homogenize national identity.

Both the Curator’s Corner and the Pedagogical Perspective align with this issue’s focus on Israel and Palestine. Jeremy Kargon’s (Morgan State University) critical essay for our curator section analyzes the construction of the new National Library of Israel (NLI). As an institution, it serves first as Israel’s official state repository, then as the Hebrew University’s central library, and then, finally, as a “library of the Jewish people.” This institutional trajectory eerily echoes the now unambiguous declaration of

Israel as a Jewish state proclaimed in the 2018 Basic Law. Kargon argues that the NLI serves as a site that both embodies and provokes cultural “discourse” concerning the relationship between statehood and identity among Israel’s diverse constituencies. Kargon traces how architects design public spaces that both emerge from and shape a sense of cultural politics in this architectural essay featuring illustrations that integrate material and political landscapes. Next, in his Pedagogical Perspective essay “Teaching Palestine-Israel: A Pedagogy of Delay and Suspension,” Daniel A. Segal considers his methods for approaching the historical emergence of Palestine-Israel at Pitzer College via careful preliminary class analysis of the meaning of “objectivity.” As many of us work and re-work our classroom plans, we hope that Segal’s piece will inspire our own critical assessments of syllabi and discussion models.

We also present the text of Judith E. Tucker’s 2018 presidential address for MESA’s annual conference, “Middle East Studies Reckons with Walls and Spoils,” which reflects on the challenges of sustaining a scholarly community as restrictions on personal mobility proliferate and intensify. Further, the phenomenon of walled states and internal and external barriers once again reminds us of the shifting anxieties of national sovereignty as an entangled global history. Tucker’s presidential address shows “Middle East Studies in Action” within the pages of this issue and reinforces our effort to highlight how MESA continues to be an active organization that raises awareness of such vexing global developments.

This issue of the *Review* also acknowledges personal and professional losses to the field by memorializing the following scholars: Butrus Abu-Manneh, Ludwig W. Adamec, Hassanein Mohamed Rabie, and Ali Reza Sheikholeslami. As we build the future legacy of MESA, we must always recognize our indebtedness to those who defined our own institutional past.

The *Review* continues to reach toward capturing the dynamism of Middle East studies in print and media. The outstanding work of two Associate Editors forms the *Review*’s “Spotlight” for this issue. First, our Egypt and North Africa Associate Editor, Kenneth M. Cuno (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign), has gathered an impressive collection of review essays and single book reviews on governance and history in the region. The politics of Islam, historical refashioning of Egyptian pan-Arabism, portrayals of the 2011 revolts in Egypt, and Moroccan legal discourse illuminate the shifting terrain of scholarship on the region. Second, our Art, Architecture, and Archaeology Associate Editor, Ana Botchkareva (New York University), and her reviewers have ensured that RoMES continues to make space for the material arts in Middle East studies. From

the politics of antiquities in the Ottoman Empire to Persian-European dialogue from the seventeenth century to contemporary art, the reviewers explore the splendor of art history in our second “Field Spotlight.” These two spotlights show the range and diversity within Middle East studies and further demonstrate our tradition as a publication of review. We are also grateful for the tireless work of Nadia Yaqub (University of North Carolina) as our Associate Editor for Film and Cinema studies. Joel Gordon’s review essay of Jihan El-Tahri’s documentary history *Egypt’s Modern Pharaohs* dovetails nicely with the two review essays on Egypt in our field spotlight. Sara Saljoughi’s analysis of reform cinema in Iran combined with Nadia Yaqub’s assessment of *Off Frame AKA Revolution Until Victory* enables *RoMES* to emphasize the significance of both media and textual studies.

The *Review* is always on the move, striving to keep up with an expanding field and seeking to avoid prioritizing one form of praxis or regional focus over others. As such, our Fall issue (Nov/Dec 2019) features a roundtable on the politics and practice of digital communication technologies. Sahar Khamis (University of Maryland) introduces the roundtable and frames a series of essays that track how the creation and manipulation of an online public sphere forged a new contested site for both global policy and discourse *about* the Gulf and praxis *within* it. Commissioned by our Associate Editor Jörg Matthias Determann (Virginia Commonwealth University - Qatar) and co-organized by Jocelyn Mitchell (Northwestern University in Qatar) and Sean Foley (Middle Tennessee State University), contributors address social media manipulation, hashtag blockades, re-tweeting vitriolic spirals, and artistic agency via social media. Framed as yet another themed issue, Sumayya Ahmed, an Assistant Professor in the Department of Library and Information Studies at University College London-Qatar will reflect on teaching in the Gulf for our Pedagogical Perspective column. And Maya Allison, the Executive Director at New York University - Abu Dhabi, will discuss how curatorial practices change with location and audience, comparing the U.S. to the UAE and presenting specific curatorial strategies that she observed and developed while working in the Gulf. Allison’s column also foreshadows our Spring (June 2020) issue, which will use *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents* (MoMA Primary Documents) as a textual beginning for a scholarly discussion on the study and practice of modernism as an artistic phenomenon, co-organized by Guy Burak (Associate Editor for Law and Islamic Studies and Executive Board Member) and myself.

It is our hope that these varied components of the *Review* will model an online presence capable of shaping academic and public discourse. A full Editorial board, which includes new and long-standing Associate Editor members, and the continuing advice of the Executive Board will help guide these initiatives to better integrate and diversify the expertise presented in the *Review of Middle East Studies*. We look forward to working with MESA members to ensure that the *RoMES* pages consistently open new modes of engagement with past and present lives and processes. ✦

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