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Panel Title: The Narratives of the Arab Uprisings: Towards a Cultural Analysis of Social Movements in the Middle East

Panel Organizer: Dalia Abdelhady, Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Lund University, Sweden

Discussant: Mark Levine, Department of History, University of California, Irvine, USA

Panel Description:

The popular uprisings that swept many countries in the Middle East during the last three years have been subject to much academic analysis that attempted to interpret the events and their significance for future political developments in the region. Discursive tropes such as revolution, counter-revolution, sectarian strife, and terrorism have been used in such analyses as they have been utilized by many actors to define desirable and undesirable actions. Little attention has been paid to the cultural significance of such tropes and their role in motivating the different forms of action in the first place. This panel looks at how different narratives are constructed, and sometimes inflated, that motivates specific forms of action and legitimizes certain actors. Through presenting case studies from Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen and the Gulf countries, the papers in this panel address the discursive patterns of different actors during the uprisings and in post-revolutionary contexts. Looking at traditional media outlets, group/party controlled digital outlets, and public performances of the different actors, the papers present analyses of the uprisings that challenge dominant understandings of the events that took place during the last three years, and consequently, highlight the importance of cultural analysis to understanding mass movements in the region.

Paper 1:

Joegen Aske, Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Lund University, Sweden

Title: Narrating Raba'a: The Meaning of High Risk Activities during Political Turmoil

Abstract:

This study attempts to answer why actors engaged in contentious politics and sometimes choose to take part in high-risk activities, such as the participation in the sit-in in support of the former Egyptian president Muhammed Morsi at Raba'a square in Cairo under threat of military intervention. By drawing on the insights from the framing perspective of social movement theory and Philip Smith's theory of narrative inflation the study argues that participation in such activities can constitute meaningful action for their participants if the activities are recognized to resonate with the participants' narration of the conflict. The study investigates the narrative inflation that took place between supporters and antagonists of the former Egyptian President Muhammed Morsi prior to his ousting on the 3rd of July 2013. The methodology of the research consists of a textual analysis that looks for language that indicates the inflation of the narrative in media and civil society that shaped the experience of the members of the Muslim Brotherhood and arguably influenced their decision to participate in high risk activities.

Paper 2:

Steffen Schimko, Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Lund University, Sweden

Title: War of the Narratives – The Cultural Performances of the Government and the Protest Movement in the 2011 Bahraini Uprising

Abstract:

Three years after mass protests hit the island nation of Bahrain, the jury is still out on how the tactics and strategies deployed by both the protest movement and the Bahraini government shaped the course and outcome of the first weeks of the uprising. While marches have been staged, street battles fought, and waves of arrests conducted, a battle has also been waged in a very peculiar theatre of war: the respective sides' attempts to frame the civil unrest in their particular ways. Deciding on how to read unfolding events holds a great amount of political significance, since it means deciding which side's actions are more legitimate, which side retains the moral high ground. How and in what ways the Bahraini government and the protest movement tried to frame their actions in the first half of 2011 will be the subject of this study. Drawing on the cultural sociology of Stuart Hall, Jeffrey Alexander and Philip Smith, the codes and narratives deployed will be conceptualized as cultural performances that attempt to give meaning to the different actions and actors, in order to rally crucial support both domestically and internationally. Not only official statements and media coverage, but also social media performances of key players shall come under scrutiny. Such an approach will offer a much more nuanced analysis than accounts that simply stress the protesters' longing for freedom and democracy, or the government's repeated claims of the demonstrations being overwhelmingly sectarian in nature.

Paper 3:

Nicole Roy, Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Lund University, Sweden

Title: Did the Yemeni National Dialogue Conference Empower or Oppress Women's Voices? Multiplicity of the Public Sphere and Narratives of Inclusion/Exclusion

Abstract: The current situation in Yemen is fragile. After the uprisings in 2011 and the collapse of the old regime, the National Dialogue Conference, which started on the March 18, 2013, was seen as one of the last chances to save the state from descending into chaos. Therefore, it was unlikely that women's issues would be addressed. However, this does not mean that those should be put on hold until Yemen is stable again. Women in Yemen played an important role in the revolution, although it might not have been an outcry for gender equality. Women constituted 30 percent of the National Dialogue Conference, which is relatively high given Yemen's standings on gender equality. The hypothesis is that women-specific concerns are more likely to be weakened by this inclusive approach of the conference. The theoretical framework supporting this claim is mainly based on Nancy Fraser's theory of the multiplicity of public spheres. The National Dialogue was, in this framework, the official public sphere which is dominated by the prevailing discourse of society. An inclusive approach for women in the official public sphere could lead to a subliminal exclusion of women's issues and therefore weaken their achievements. A segmented public sphere for women in Yemen, as introduced by Stacey Philbrick Yadav, could be more empowering than a space where women seem to be included,

but in reality are not heard and stigmatized. Utilizing narratives constructions of inclusion/exclusion, the paper highlights ways women may be motivated to participate in the National Dialogue, a process that ultimately undermines their position in society and politics instead of strengthen it.

Paper 4:

Milos Davidovic, Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Lund University, Sweden

Title: Democratization in the Gulf: Media, Narratives and Democracy

Abstract: The paper focuses on analyzing the representation of a term “democracy” in Gulf media. Through analysis of key media outlets in the region, the paper highlights patterns in reporting about the popular uprisings in Bahrain, Egypt and Syria. Utilizing narrative analysis, the paper shows ways the uprising in other Arab countries, and especially Bahrain, are being framed in ways that legitimizes the current political actors and institutions in the GCC while delegitimizing popular uprisings and demands for democratization in other Arab countries. The paper concludes by arguing for ways the uprisings could be a catalyst for strengthening forms of governance already existing in the Gulf instead of weakening them as some authors have argued.