SPECIAL FOCUS

Introduction to the Special Issue
Pluralism in Emergenc(i)es in the Middle East and North Africa

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Abstract

The issue "Pluralisms in Emergenc(i)es" is a result of a two-conference series that took place in Amman and Tunis, in December 2017 and October 2018, respectively. Taking these two locations as historical epicenters of human, commodity, and capital mobility, in two connected regions, these conferences set out to interrogate the historical, social, and religious underpinnings of the migrant and refugee crisis in order to position this moment as a state of emergence, rather than a state of emergency. The focus of the essays included here explores pluralism as it has emerged in response to contemporary global crises, and asks a number of questions: What are the variations in how "pluralism" is understood, and how does it function in a time of crisis? What are the material and immaterial modes through which pluralism takes shape? Moreover, how does it change through the circulation of people - as migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers – and capital – whether under the auspices of international development funds, religious aid, or new labor markets? By crossing disciplinary boundaries, this special issue enters into a fundamental

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discussion about how "pluralism" is conceived across sites and offers new vistas for its conceptualization in North Africa and the Middle East.

Keywords: pluralism, emergencies, Middle East and North Africa, Islam, migration, refugees

A decade has passed since massive uprisings sprung up throughout the Middle East and North Africa, leading to a global immigration crisis wherein tens of thousands of Syrians, Iraqis, Iranians, and Libyans, as well as West and Central Africans, sought refuge in neighboring countries, many of whom traveled by foot to reach final destinations in Europe and elsewhere. Though the once-plentiful headlines about the plight of these itinerant people have decreased in recent years, the reverberations of this human catastrophe are still being felt in neighborhoods, schools, camps, and government offices around the globe. There is a continued need to think critically about the challenges facing refugee communities and populations today. Urban spaces continue to be marked by human movement, particularly in conflict zones and adjacent states, where "the refugee crisis" has become the enduring reality that accompanies and outlasts conflict, no longer a "state of emergency" but as, Wendy Brown discusses, a state of perpetual emergence.[2]

In the meantime, the proliferation of the COVID-19 virus has pointed our attention towards the tendency of other matters to follow the trajectories of global capital and, in doing so, mark even more radically the forms of belonging and difference to which capital has already given rise. Critical theorists such as Elizabeth Povinelli pushed us to think through the ways in which that which we want to relegate to the foreign, as "matter out of place,"[3] was actually alongside us all along – not foreign, but entangled in the ecologies of our markets and their infrastructures from the very beginning.[4] How does this push us to reconsider what, in this conference series, we at once called "in emergence" and "in emergency"? The conceit in this polysemic gesture was to push the notion of a sort of pluralism appearing in stark relief as a result of so-called emergencies, while also admitting that perhaps these forms of being and belonging were not so

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[2] Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2010).

[3] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 2000, first published 1966), 36.

[4] Elizabeth A. Povinelli, "The Virus: Figure and Infrastructure." *e-flux architecture: Sick Architecture*, November 27, 2020, https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/sick-architecture/352870/the-virus-figure-and-infrastructure/.

surprising after all and had, in fact, been in emergence long before these moments of eventfulness.

The subject of pluralism has long been the fodder and objective of political scientists, policymakers, religious authorities, and public figures. Traditional (American) understandings of the term have circulated around the notion that a healthy society is a diverse one. This diversity tends to be composed of coexisting and multiple civic faiths, political beliefs, and/or ethnicities.[5] Yet religious pluralism in particular can often be "the most evocative of issues and provocative of conflicts."[6] It is most evident when obedience to a certain God is questioned and/or not shared, and "along with the impulse to certify the validity of one's acts by reference to such transcendent intrusions comes the impulse to respond in communities."[7] Modern historians of the Middle East are quick to point to evidence of centuries-long ties between Muslim and non-Muslim communities who built alliances using religious scriptures. The region itself has been praised as the "global exemplar of pluralism and religious harmony," for half a millennium and in particular under the Ottomans. Ussama Maqdisi has pointed out that the politics of pluralism once permeated the Ottoman Empire and the post-Ottoman Arab world, forging a complex system of coexistence.[8] Though, in Nicolas Pelham's view, the region has now "become the least tolerant and stable place on the planet,"[9] due to communal segregation, forcible population transfer, and territorial exclusivism.[10] The historian of modern Egypt P.J. Vatikiotis wrote at length on the *ahl al-dhimma* (People of the Covenant), underscoring the "historical experience and true condition of non-Muslims in Muslim society," although highlighting the shaky doctrinal basis and "confusion" of religio-political pluralisms and their failure to be accommodated politically.[11]

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[5] Martin E. Marty, "Pluralisms," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 612.1 (2016): 13–25. For some examples, see: William L. Rowe, "Religious Pluralism," *Religious Studies* 35.2 (1999): 139–50; Mark Chaves and Philip S. Gorski, "Religious Pluralism and Religious Participation," *Annual Review of Sociology* 27 (2001): 261–81; Franck Salameh, "Adonis, the Syrian Crisis, and the Question of Pluralism in the Levant," *Bustan: The Middle East Book Review* 3.1 (2012): 36–61.

[6] Marty, "Pluralisms," 18.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ussama Maqdisi, *The Age of Coexistence* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019).

[9] Nicolas Pelham, *Holy Lands: Reviving Religious Pluralism in the Middle East* (New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2016): 17.

[10] Ibid., 17.

[11] P. J. Vatikiotis, "Non-Muslims in Muslim Society: A Preliminary Consideration of the Problem on the Basis of Recent Published Works by Muslim Authors," in *Ethnicity, Pluralism, and the State in the Middle East*, eds. Milton J. Esman and Itamar Rabinovich (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1988), 54–70.

In recent years, since commentators began to perceive flaws in narratives projecting the successes of the "Arab Spring" – such as the democratic strides observed in Tunisia – given the rise of extremist groups like the Islamic State and the military interventionist undertakings of Egypt's political system, editorials started indicating pluralism's retreat in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The Islamic State in particular was credited for "dealing a severe blow – possibly a fatal one – to the idea of pluralism in the region."[12] One analyst laments:

> Coexistence will be hard to recover, whether between ethnicities, religions, or other identities. . . . What trust existed between communities has been shredded. . . . Long-standing minority fears have been given a concrete and brutal form in the shape of the attempted genocide against the Yazidis and the persecution of minorities. Further, the Islamic State's rise on the heels of the Arab uprisings poses a baffling and uncomfortable question: how could protest movements that started by calling for dignity, freedom, and democracy have given way to the bleak vision of such extremists?[13]

These particularly ominous warnings are oft-repeated by pundits writing for cultural magazines and think tanks. Shadi Hamid, in a July 2014 op-ed for *The Atlantic* entitled "The End of Pluralism," opines "If this second phase of the 'Arab Spring' is really about anything, it is about a collective loss of faith in politics."[14] Similarly, Sarah Repucci, writing for Freedom House, contends that democracy and pluralism "are under assault," identifying 2020 as the year when the traditional political norms of liberal democracy ended, giving way to extreme policies against minorities and pluralism.[15] Regarding the Middle East and North Africa, she declared "Elections are

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[12] Karl Sharro, "The Retreat from Universalism in the Middle East and the World: Intellectual Shifts and the Demise of Inclusive Identities," The Century Foundation online, April 19, 2019, https://tcf.org/content/report/retreat-universalism-middle-east-world/?agreed=1.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Though the word pluralism only features in the article's title, Hamid points to multiple competing interest groups vying for domination over definitions of the state and what it should be. Hamid closes his article by discouraging the diminished role of U.S. diplomacy and intervention in the region, chiefly pointing to ongoing devastation in Syria and Iraq, and urging American policymakers and politicians to seek guidance about taking careful actions (using force by NATO and the international community) to end foreign civil conflicts – underscoring military intervention to encouraging returning to politics in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Rwanda as recent historical examples. Shadi Hamid, "The End of Pluralism," *The Atlantic*, July 23, 2014, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/07/the-end-of-pluralism/374875/.

[15] Sarah Repucci, "A Leaderless Struggle for Democracy," Freedom House, https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2020/leaderless-struggle-democracy.

rare, rigged, or indefinitely postponed," with the noted exception of Tunisian democracy.

We position the following collection of essays in response to these trends in scholarship and popular media that frame pluralism as either a political exemplar, which must be pursued again, or as a historical condition in its death throes. Instead, we propose that "pluralism" has long been a part of the ecologies of these places and their sociopolitical spaces, but perhaps in very different ways than has been articulated by state actors, think tanks, and civic and religious authorities. As a result, this issue spans diverse spatial and temporal indices and seeks to position pluralistic practices and collective memories both within their *emergence* as well as in their more sedimented forms. In some cases, this includes the tensions of their origins, such as the "safe but frozen" spaces of emergence in Lebanon in Fogliata's piece, or the boundaries of majority and minority in the construction and performance of the Algerian nation-state in Dobie's and Meziane's pieces. In other cases, Ziai and Dalal provide reflections on how what seems radically new – both in terms of new refugee populations as well as new spaces of "making-do" in situations of "crisis" – in fact draw on pre-existing practices of cooperation and collaboration both between peoples and avatars of national and transnational governance. In different ways, both Diagne and Tafighian invite reflections on the capaciousness of pluralism as a category, in its histories in Islamic thought and as well as its potentiality as a mode of resistance.

Introduction to the Conference Series

Pluralisms in Emergenc(i)es was a conference series exploring pluralism as it has emerged in response to contemporary global crises. "Pluralism" is commonly understood as the recognition and affirmation of diversity within a governing body or set of institutional arrangements. Drawing on the resources of Columbia University's Institute for Religion, Culture, and Public Life (IRCPL) in collaboration with Columbia Global Centers Amman and Tunis, the University of Oslo's Department of Culture Studies and Oriental Languages (IKOS), and the Centre for Religion, Conflict and Globalization at the University of Groningen, this series comprised two workshops, in Amman and Tunis, in December 2017 and October 2018, respectively. Taking these two locations as historical epicenters of human, commodity, and capital mobility, in two connected regions, these conferences set out to interrogate the historical, social, and religious underpinnings of the so-called migrant and refugee crisis in order to position this moment as a state of emergence, rather than a state of emergency.

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The events in this workshop series brought together academics, artists, and activists working around these topics across two regional zones, inviting interventions from the Middle East, the Maghreb and East Africa, and the wider Mediterranean region. Thinking with pluralism as a technology of power that helps to organize people and their relationships, and often articulated with special attention to religious difference, this special issue of *RoMES* has resulted from conversations addressing how pluralism becomes activated in emergency situations, utilized in different ways and towards different ends. The workshop series was also an experiment in how to work across diverse methodologies, locales, and research focuses in order to unpack the various forms of social and cultural life to which emergency pluralisms give rise.

The focus of this series itself, as well as the essays included here, emerged from a number of questions: What are the variations in how "pluralism" is understood and how does it function in a time of crisis? Moreover, what are the material and immaterial modes through which pluralism takes shape? How does it change through the circulation of people – as migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers – and capital – whether under the auspices of international development funds, religious aid, or new labor markets? Lastly, how have ideals of pluralism and multiculturalism so often touted by many of these refugee-receiving countries been awakened, shattered, or reinforced in response to the intense survival situations these refugees, migrants, and residents face?

Addressing these questions and concerns, urban planners, architects, politicians, and everyday people often use pluralism as a tool to address difference. Embedded within this same space but also standing outside of it are the memories that structure communal relations, both past and present, and that come to be drawn upon and challenged as pluralism is operationalized as a restructuring tool. These issues of space, memory, and the historic and contemporary ties that bind and separate communities are challenged and agitated in states of emergency. Arguably, today the whole world exists in this sort of agitated condition. Thinking with and against pluralism, and travelling through places where these questions are immediate and pressing, these conferences sought to create spaces for critical engagement with some of the most pressing issues of our times.

Aims and Structure

This series aimed to think with these questions by conceptualizing and discerning three distinct yet interrelated themes through which pluralism

is articulated and/or affected: urban housing and architecture; collective memory and pluralism; and conceptualizations and comparisons of pluralism. These themes formed the foundation of the conference series, as well as the essays included in this special issue. Throughout the disparate sociopolitical spaces represented here, the essays conceptualized through this theme interrogate the triangulation between movement, new forms of housing, and government policies that create the context within which pluralism emerges and develops. While the workshop series was divided into discrete sections based on these themes, many of the included essays touch on each of these themes in order to posit distinct and emic ways of being together, in common and through shared difference, which we call here *pluralism.*

For the conference series itself, each event followed the same structure, but the content of the panels was specific to each site in as much as it built upon the previous iterations of the workshop. By hosting the same panels in each location, Amman and Tunis, along with a live-stream and video recording of each series, *Pluralism in Emergenc(i)es* committed to a comparative project, wherein participants in each location were in conversation with colleagues at other locations throughout the project. A core group of people participated in each series, subsequently presenting on and publishing material that placed the forms of pluralism investigated across each location in dialogue with each other as the series unfolded. The series mixed panel presentations with roundtable discussions, which were designed to allow for extended conversations about these themes. One roundtable at the end of each day served as a space for returning to points raised throughout the panels and placing the panel topics in harmony with one another.

As a whole, the conference and its composite workshops brought scholars and civic actors into sustained conversation in order to ask how theories and practices of pluralism work from the ground up. In doing so, *Pluralism in Emergenc(i)es* brought to the fore new ways of critiquing the category of pluralism, as well as the ways in which it is navigated across difference in space and identity, and the collective and national forms in which it is enmeshed. By bringing together work from across regions often situated together, "the Middle East" *and* "North Africa," it examined multiple cases both in their specificities and the lines of dis/juncture between them.

Theories of Pluralism from the Ground Up

The concept of pluralism in the MENA region is often analyzed either through a religious prism of inclusivity or as a political end within

democratic regimes of power.[16] While these contributions at times make reference to various political and religious indicators, they consider, first and foremost, the notion of pluralism through the study of the politics of difference, the building and maintenance of legitimate territorial states, and the construction of new forms of belonging and, simply put, making-do in refugee camps as forms of solidarity. Instead of looking into the official political representatives' opinions of what is political pluralism, or how it is promoted by states and think tanks, these papers analyze both historical-theoretical approaches and on-the-ground social actors that have been in the past either silenced or studied as separate entities. The study of pluralism as it is negotiated in various socio-cultural, political, and/or urban spaces, opens up new vistas to move beyond understanding the region as a contested arena of geopolitical polarization. Instead, it provides occasion to examine informal encounters of civic engagement and the fundamental questions surrounding emergent identities and categories of belonging.

In doing so, these essays traverse the thematics above, of urban housing and architecture, collective memory and pluralism, and conceptualizations and comparisons of pluralism, while also proposing new and extant ways of navigating belonging that exceed the emergencies of this movement.

New forms of migration and movement in the recent past due to violence and economic insecurity have led to the construction of semi-temporary housing that, as has been the trend in the region, has become quite permanent. Government policies that discipline the ways that these new populations can integrate into the local economy lead to new economic spaces and economies. In the essay "The Refugee Camp as Site of Encounters," Ayham Dalal critically assesses the notion of "encounters" in refugee camps, highlighting three types: the "refugee-refugee," the "refugee-humanitarian," and the "refugee-more-than-human." Using empirical examples from his fieldwork in the Zaatari camp in Jordan, Dalal shows how the dynamics of each encounter generate unique knowledge about shelter, space, and materiality that draw on refugees' diverse

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[16] As a recent example of the latter, Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy, in collaboration with the Carnegie Corporation of New York, organized panel discussions in January 2017 to "identify effective and sustainable policy options the new U.S. administration may consider to foster more inclusive and pluralistic systems in the region." See the program video, "Building Inclusive and Pluralistic Systems post-Arab Spring," January 26, 2018, BakerInstitute.org, https://www.bakerinstitute.org/videos/building-inclusive-and-pluralistic-systems-post-arab-spring/. See also Marwan Muasher, "A Movement for Pluralism in the Arab World," *CarnegieEndowment.org*, January 23, 2014, https://carnegieendowment.org/2014/01/23/movement-for-pluralism-in-arab-world-pub-54359.

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practices and cultural memories, including differences in urban and rural backgrounds, among others.

New forms of movement, and impetuses for this movement, create new spaces of encounter among peoples with and without collective histories. Reflecting upon these emerging spaces of collectivity, beyond their material dimensions, Stefano Fogliata's essay "Safe but Frozen Camps: Syrian and Palestinian Refugees around a Football Field in Beirut" looks at a Palestinian football pitch as a field of possibility for interconnectivities between the Palestinian Bourj el Barajneh camp and a Hezbollah-controlled Beirut suburb. A plurality of subjectivities emerges within the camps and highlights the connection between spatial marginalization and precarious legal statuses. In doing so, Fogliata shows how playing football in the camp involves a wide range of practices extending beyond its boundaries, with different scales of mobility and involving both refugees and residents of Beirut.

Looking beyond the territorial borders separating Europe, Africa, and the Middle East, Hengameh Ziai's paper "Migrants as Entrepreneurs? Reconfiguring 'Development' as Migration Management in Neoliberal Sudan" offers a critical examination of how neoliberal "development" schemes are reconfigured to manage migratory flows in and through Sudan. It studies the European Union's attempts to prevent migrants from arriving at its shores not only by "externalizing" its border across Africa, but also through the propagation of development projects that both systemically and discursively construct "internalized" borders grounded in exclusion.

The failures and hypocrisies of these sorts of policies, and the way they stratify and enact the governance of borders, lead to the conditions of incarceration and theories of resistance discussed by Tofighian and Boochani. Omid Tofighian is the translator for Kurdish-Iranian journalist Behrouz Boochani's award-winning memoir *No Friend but the Mountains: Writing from Manus Prison*, typed on WhatsApp while incarcerated in an Australian prison on Manus Island, Papua New Guinea. Tofighian's essay, "Narrative, Resistance and Manus Prison Theory," reflects on their long-standing collaboration in order to outline a theory of resistance to the Australian settler-state that speaks to the political formations that underlie and emerge from global practices and policies of detention and immigration.

In the Maghreb, languages of literature and philosophy have a long history as vehicles for discussion and debates on pluralism across conventions of genre. Madeleine Dobie's "From Plurality to Pluralism in the Maghreb:

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Literary and Philosophical Perspectives" argues that in the modern history of the Maghreb, identities have often been defined as either co-efficients of nation, language, or religion, or as an inflexible fusion of all three displaying a sense of unity and uniformity. Conversely, literary and philosophical works from Algerian thinker Mohamed Arkoun and Moroccan essayists Abdelkébir Khatibi and Abdelfattah Kilito have repeatedly made the case for a form of pluralism immanent to the multiplicity of languages practiced across the Maghreb.

The plurality debated in literary and philosophical debates in the Maghreb, and embedded in the linguistic politics of the region, extends into the politics of difference as articulated by the modern nation-state, its colonial antecedents, and actors in resistance to both. Mohamed Amer Meziane's "Race and the Effects of the Ethnographic State in North Africa: A Conceptual Critique of the Arab–Amazigh Divide in Light of the Algerian Hirak" argues for a conceptualization of the contemporary Algerian nation-state as produced through the transformation of the Imazighen peoples into a cultural minority of "Berbers," in the grammars of an Arab–Berber and majority–minority divide. In doing so, Meziane theorizes how the political usages of this divide, between Berbers and Arabs, by the Algerian government as well as by Berber activists, must be understood much more broadly than in reductive terms inherited from the legacies of French colonial representations, such as "the Kabyle Myth."

Moving from a different philosophical tone, Souleymane Bachir Diagne offers insight into how pluralism might be discursively read in a history of Sufist thought. Reflecting on the very notion of pluralism as examined in philosophical and theological works by some prominent Muslim scholars from different eras and regions, Diagne's short essay "Theology and Philosophy of Pluralism" contemplates the imperative of pluralism in our times. Emphasizing the notion of pluralism as a form of unity, he briefly traces the discussion of pluralism among classical scholars such as al-Farabi (d. 950), al-Ghazali (d. 1111), and the modern Tijanni master Tierno Bokar Salif Tall (d. 1939), through what he describes as Quranic anthropology of the term.

Conclusion

By crossing disciplinary boundaries and perspectives, this special issue enters into a fundamental discussion about the various ways "pluralism" is conceived across these sites, and hence offers new vistas for its conceptualization in North Africa and the Middle East. The essays provide

a space for reflection on the workshop and conference series as it moved from Amman to Tunis and put each site into conversation with one another. Entailing a discussion of cross-site affinities, differences, and convergences, this issue provides the opportunity for explicitly comparative work on how pluralism becomes a politically exigent discourse on the ground.

This discourse is different from the top-down lens provided by the rubrics of think tanks, political pundits, and state actors. The fact that pluralism has become conceptually important across these different times and spaces makes clear that we must better understand where and when the lens of pluralism presents itself as useful to those in power, and to those in states of precarity. This collection of essays is thus a reflection on pluralism as a multifaceted term that is brought into existence in times of emergencies, by accentuating fluid identities, spaces of belonging and difference, expressions of solidarity, and forms of resistance. Even as it comes into existence, however, these essays make clear how it draws on pre-existing paradigms and indices of relatedness, refracting them into new constellations of belonging and being together. This pluralism stands in opposition to what is usually regarded as the normative form of political and/or religious pluralism in the MENA region, and is in fact a mode of survival. Such a comparison allows for rumination on difference to better understand the various types of pluralism that emerge and the multiplicity of its expressions.

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