The Myth of Middle East Exceptionalism

Unfinished Social Movements

Edited by **Mojtaba Mahdavi**

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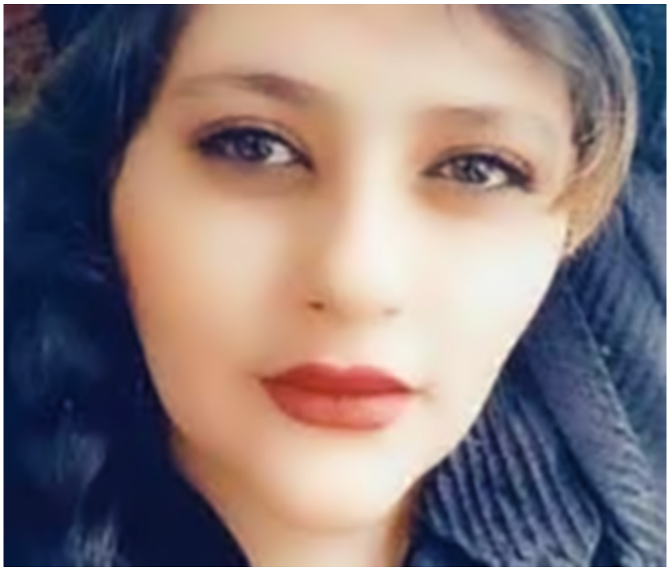
Manufactured in the United States of America

For ordinary and underrepresented people of MENA,
whose struggle for social justice debunks
myth of Middle East exceptionalism
and
In memory of Mahsa (Zhina) Amini (2000–2022),
a woman and a subaltern who was murdered
by Iran’s ruling Islamists



Mahsa (Zhina) Amini (2000–2022)

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The Myth of Middle East Exceptionalism

Introduction

The Myth of MENA Exceptionalism

Mojtaba Mahdavi

More than a decade after the birth of contemporary social movements in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA),[1] we may ask what these movements have achieved and how we can evaluate their lasting legacies. Iran's pro-democracy Green Movement of 2009—the first MENA *post-Islamist* mass social movement—did not achieve its political goals. The Gezi Park movement started in Turkey in 2013 but has lost its momentum largely because of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's iron fist. And the Arab Spring of 2010–11 remains in multiple crises: Yemen is now home to the world's worst humanitarian crisis owing to a regional proxy war; Bahrain's monarchy suppressed the popular pro-democracy movement; and the so-called humanitarian intervention—a neoliberal invasion—ruined Libya. Chief among the predicaments were the failure of Egyptian Islamism in power and the subsequent return of a military junta to power in 2013, the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Iraq and Syria in 2014, and the breakout of a proxy/civil war in Syria—marked as another major world's humanitarian crisis with mass killing of citizens and destruction of the country. In addition, the Arab secular despots such as Bashar al-Assad in Syria, General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in Egypt, and the populist Mohammed bin Salman al Saud in Saudi Arabia are consolidating

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Earlier versions of several sections of this chapter appeared in "Whither Post-Islamism: Revisiting Discourse/Movement after the Arab Spring," in *Arab Spring and the Quest for New Metaphors: Modernity, Identity, and Change*, ed. Eid Mohamed and Dalia Fahmi (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 15–38, and "Introduction: East Meets West? The Unfinished Project of Contemporary Social Movements in the Middle East and Beyond," in "Contemporary Social Movements in the Middle East and Beyond," special issue of *Sociology of Islam* 2, nos. 3–4 (2014): 103–10.

[1] It is known to the scholars of critical Middle East studies that the label "Middle East" is a British colonial invention. A more accurate name for "Middle East and North Africa" (MENA) is "West Asia and North Africa" (WANA).

their power (Mahdavi 2019, 15–17). Even the Tunisian post-Islamist democracy seems in a crisis because President Kais Saied issued an emergency rule by decree on July 25, 2021. And last but certainly not the least, the return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan on August 15, 2021, after two decades demonstrates a profound political crisis in the MENA and Muslim contexts.

On the surface, the confluence of the global power structure and local sociopolitical conditions appear to have repressed the revolutionary spirit in MENA. In other words, the "quiet encroachments" of counterrevolutionary forces seem to have replaced hope with despair and excitement with resentment (Bayat 2013a, 2015). Such catastrophic conditions have largely contributed to the revival of an old Orientalist discourse of "Middle East exceptionalism," implying that the region's *culture* is exceptionally immune to democratic movements, values, and institutions. Even the most recent waves of mass protests in Lebanon, Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Sudan, Iraq, and Iran from 2017 to 2022 seem to have had little impact on the advocates and agents of a discourse of MENA exceptionalism.

In this introduction, however, I argue that, contrary to the conventional wisdom, the MENA region has experienced profound sociostructural transformations and is witnessing a "post-Islamist" social condition. MENA social movements are therefore in crisis but not dead; they are "unfinished" endeavors. The post-Islamist condition in MENA, in other words, nullifies the cultural determinism of the Orientalist myth of "MENA exceptionalism" and signifies the "unfinished" and ongoing processes of democratic social movements in the region.

This book's central argument problematizes and demystifies the many faces of the myth of "cultural exceptionalism" in the context of contemporary MENA social movements, which have been revived in the post–Arab Spring era. More specifically, the volume's central argument is presented in three parts. Inspired by a critical postcolonial/decolonial perspective, the first part places MENA in the larger global context, challenges the alleged cultural exceptionalism of the region, and sheds light on the impact of geopolitics on the current crises and how it may shape the interactions of global, regional, and local actors and factors. This part, in other words, puts culture in the larger historical and political context, critiques cultural exceptionalism, and advances the idea of a global MENA (Bayat and Herrera 2021b).

The second part focuses on the "unfinished projects" of contemporary MENA social movements and their quest for freedom, social justice, and human dignity. It examines different case studies in the Arab world and Iran to showcase the dynamism of MENA civil societies in their enduring resistance to the status quo and persistence in pushing for change. This part, in sum, challenges the myth of

MENA exceptionalism by examining specific cases of post-Islamist movements—the Arab youth, student, and other popular nonviolent movements—arguing against the alleged MENA cultural determinism/essentialism/exceptionalism.

A major pillar of the Orientalist discourse of "MENA exceptionalism" is the idea of gender passivity and women's exclusion/exceptionalism, which reduces the reality of gender injustice to some eternal and essentialized Muslim/MENA mindset. The third part takes up this challenge seriously by placing gender as an independent category of thought and action, demonstrating the presence of MENA women's movements, and providing contexts to the cases of gender injustice to debunk such simplistic, ahistorical, and culturalist assumptions. Although acknowledging the existence of gender injustice in the region, part three complicates and contextualizes the argument and demystifies the myth of MENA exceptionalism.

This edited volume, in sum, shows how a postcolonial/decolonial critique better explains the crisis of democratic social movements, the resilience of authoritarianism, and the violent religious and secular politics in the region. It reveals the simplicity and ahistorical assumptions of the Orientalist discourse of cultural exceptionalism.

The Myth of Muslim Exceptionalism

Western Orientalism suggests that the absence of democracy and the crisis of modernity in the Muslim world are owed to the "fact" of Muslim exceptionalism, wherein Islamic tradition and modernity are incompatible, and the public role of Islam inevitably results in autocracy. Modernity, rationalism, and democracy are Western in origin and uniquely suited to the Western culture, this Orientalist argument continues. According to Ernest Gellner, Muslim societies are essentially different from others in that "no secularization has taken place in the world of Islam" (1991, 2). In *Postmodernism, Reason, and Religion* (1992), Gellner argues that Islam has been exceptionally immune to the forces of secularization and that modernization has increased this immunization. Likewise, Bernard Lewis (1990) and Samuel Huntington (1996) argue that Western culture is unique and essentially differs from other civilizations in general and from Islam in particular. According to Huntington, whereas "in Islam, God is Caesar," in the West "God and Caesar, church and state, spiritual and temporal authority have been a prevailing dualism" (1996, 70). For Huntington, "the underlying problem for the West is not Islamic fundamentalism. It is Islam, a different civilization whose people are convinced of the superiority of their culture and are obsessed with the inferiority of their power" (217).

As Asef Bayat reminds us, three factors have contributed to the currency of such an “exceptionalist” view in the study of the Muslim countries. “The first is the continuing relevance of Orientalist/essentializing thought in the West”; the second is “the persistent authoritarian rule” in the Middle East supported by the West; and the third is the emergence of “Islamist movements that have often displaced socially conservative and undemocratic dispositions” (2007, 6). Likewise, José Casanova argues that for the Orientalists modernity is a “civilizational achievement of the Christian West and therefore not easily transferable to other civilizations other than through Western hegemonic imposition, or through the conversion to Western norms” (2001, 1050–51).

As such, for the Orientalists, Muslims and Islamic culture are incompatible with modernity not just because of Islamic fundamentalism but also because of what they consider the fundamental essence of Islam. Similarly, for Bernard Lewis (1988) the inevitable fusion of religion and state is something that historically and intellectually attaches to Islam. Implicit to his argument is that the “Islamic mind” and modern democracy are mutually exclusive.

In his critique of cultural essentialism, however, Nasr Hamed Abu Zeid challenges this Orientalist perception: “To speak about an ‘Islamic Mind’ in abstraction from all constrains of geography and history, and in isolation from the social and cultural conditioning of Islamic societies, can only lead us into unrealistic, even meta- physical, speculations.” Instead, we need to “look for the root of this panic reaction,” meaning “the crisis of modernization and [the] complicated relationship between the Islamic world and the West” (2002). Ibrahim Abu-Rabi’ echoes Abu Zeid: “In many Muslim countries, hopes for a healthy process of modernization were dashed in the 1960s and 1970s.” More specifically, “the petrodollars and the U.S. patronage made the post-colonial Muslim states more dependent on the global market and less on its people. It also released the forces of ‘puritanical Islam’ and ‘militant Salafiyyah,’ which endorse violence to eliminate the ‘modern jahiliyyah’ both at the local and global arenas” (2010, xvii–xviii; see also Mahdavi 2019, 17–20).

In *Islam, Authoritarianism, and Underdevelopment* (2019), Ahmet Kuru masterfully challenges the essentialist Orientalist discourse of blaming Islam as the major cause of authoritarianism and underdevelopment in Muslim societies. Grounded in a historical, sociological, and comparative study of Muslim contexts, he successfully demonstrates that the main cause of authoritarianism and underdevelopment in many Muslim-majority countries is the alliance between the religious scholars, or ulama, and state authorities. In other words, he implicitly both argues against the Islamist agenda of the Islamist state/caliphate and challenges the Orientalist discourse of Islamic exceptionalism.

Islamic Exceptionalism Reinvented?

The post–Arab Spring MENA conditions have profoundly contributed to the revival and reinvention of the discourse of Muslim/Islamic exceptionalism. For example, in *Islamic Exceptionalism* (2016), Shadi Hamid asks, "Why exactly does the Middle East suffer from a lack of legitimate order?" The MENA "legitimacy defeat," he argues, "is tied to a continued inability to reckon with Islam's relationship to the state." "Islam is different." And "Islamic exceptionalism is neither good nor bad" (6). The rationale for such a difference, Hamid argues, is that "the relationship between Islam and politics is distinctive, [and therefore] a replay of the Western model—Protestant Reformation followed by an enlightenment in which religion is gradually pushed into the private realm—is unlikely" (5).

Moreover, the dramatic rise of ISIS, Hamid argues, "is only the most striking example of how liberal determinism—the notion that history moves with intent toward a more reasonable, secular future—has failed to explain Middle East realities" (2016, 5). For Hamid, ISIS "draws on, and draws strength from, ideas that have a broad resonance among Muslim-majority populations. They may not agree with the group's interpretation of the caliphate, but the notion of a caliphate is a powerful one, even among more secular-minded Muslims" (11). He then concludes that "this is not to say that most Arabs or Muslims are Islamists. Most are not. However, one can sympathize with or support Islamist politics without being an Islamist—the phenomenon of Islamism without Islamists" (13).

Shadi Hamid's "Islamic exceptionalism" represents the emerging conventional literature in post–Arab Spring MENA, ascribing cultural exceptionalism to Islam/Muslims, underestimating the impact of geopolitics and postcolonial contexts in the current crises, and overgeneralizing the popularity of the Islamist idea of a caliphate to more than a billion Muslims on multiple continents. In his new book, *The Problem of Democracy* (2022), Hamid seems to reiterate the same discourse of "Islamic exceptionalism" under the new idea of "democratic minimalism." The book essentially suggests that Islamists' illiberal ideas may still win the popular votes in the region and that we must prioritize democracy over liberalism, or "democratic minimalism," for the MENA people. Hamid's idea of Islamic exceptionalism, in other words, symbolizes a body of the literature produced after the failure/crisis of the Arab Spring that seems to blame the Muslim public culture for this failure and thus ignores the structural and discursive transformations of the MENA societies, which were and continue to be evident in the popular slogans chanted by ordinary people in contemporary MENA social movements. For this reason, his argument is briefly problematized here to demystify the myth of

MENA/Muslim/Islamic exceptionalism in the broader public discourse and to nullify the puzzling idea of “Islamism without Islamists” in the literature.

An unintended consequence of Hamid’s rationalization and theorization of “Islamic exceptionalism” and “Islamism without Islamists” is to reiterate the old Orientalist cliché of “Muslim exceptionalism.” Such a problematic discourse does not capture the complex reality of the contemporary MENA region for the following reasons. First, the region does not suffer from a cultural exceptionalism; the MENA region has instead been affected by a “geopolitical exceptionalism” forged by “the tribology of geography, oil, and Israel—elements that have historically highlighted imperial dominance and international rivalry” (Bayat and Herrera 2021a, 4). The combination of these three geopolitical factors has profoundly contributed to the resilience of authoritarianism, violent religious politics, and the crisis of democratization. A postcolonial/decolonial critique reveals the simplicity and ahistorical assumptions of the Orientalist discourse of cultural exceptionalism and complicates the argument.

Second, the main slogans used by ordinary Muslims/people in the MENA streets in the Arab Spring of 2010–11, Iran’s Green Movement of 2009 and post–Green Movements of 2017–22, and Turkey’s Gezi Park movement of 2013 were absolutely devoid of a single reference to concepts/ideals such as the caliphate and the Islamic state. The popular quest in the Arab streets was to overthrow the dominant regime (“Ash-sha’b yurid isqat an-nizam” [The people want to bring down the regime])—not only the political regime but also, more importantly, as Hamid Dabashi (2012) argues, the hegemonic regime of knowledge and dominant apologetic postcolonial paradigms of pan-Arabism and other forms of state-sponsored nationalism, the outdated discourse of Third World socialism, and the exhausted *dawah* of Islamism. Equally important was the quest for *hurriyya* (freedom), *‘adala ijtima‘iyya* (social justice), and *karama* (dignity). Millions of ordinary people—men and women, young and old, religious and secular, Muslims and non-Muslims—chanted such popular and post-Islamist slogans in the Arab streets. Furthermore, Juan Cole reminds us that during the Tamarod (Rebellion) movement “in June 2013 some 22 million Egyptians signed a petition asking Morsi to leave office, far more than [the] 13 million who voted for him” (2014, 20). This is also true of the more recent popular demonstrations in Iran from December–January 2017–18 to November 2019, August and November 2021, and September 2022; the Lebanese protest in October 2019; the Algerian movement of 2019; the Iraqi protests of 2019–21; the Sudanese movements of 2019–21; the Tunisian protest in 2021; as well as the women’s demonstration against the Taliban and the Panjshir resistance in Afghanistan in 2021. These movements and public protests have been absolutely devoid of a public quest for any form of Islamist caliphate/state. More specifically, it is important to note that the main motto of Iran's most recent democratic and feminist mass movement of September 2022—"Zan, Zendegi, Azadi" (Women, Life, Freedom)—clearly demonstrates people's quest for women's rights over their own bodies and rejects the Islamist patriarchal and misogynistic values. Iran's anti-Islamist movement largely led by women nullifies the ideas of "Islamic exceptionalism" and "democratic minimalism" for the MENA region.

Third, Hamid's concepts of "Islamic exceptionalism" and "Islamism without Islamists" are vague, simplistic, and essentialist. They fail to explain phenomenon such as how the American-led invasion of Iraq and the failure of postinvasion state building profoundly contributed to the rise of ISIS. Likewise, the rise of ISIS in Syria was a response to the brutality of Baʿathism in postcolonial Syria, the Assads' systemic suppression of popular movements, and the regional and global meddling to hijack the people's authentic demands for justice and dignity. The abstract idea of a caliphate in the Muslim imaginary played little role in the rise of ISIS.

Fourth, although Hamid correctly acknowledges the significance of religion for the Islamist forces, the overwhelming majority of the citizens in Muslim-majority states are not Islamist. We need to remind ourselves that Islamism is not merely a religious phenomenon and that it differs from religious fundamentalism in the Christian/Protestant tradition. If Islamism is defined by the idea of an Islamic state, then the MENA social movements have demonstrated that most ordinary people in the region do not associate themselves with Islamism. It is important to note that ordinary people in the MENA region hold different degrees of religiosity and, like other people around the world, enjoy a multiple/hybrid identity consisting of class, gender, race/ethnicity, nationality, as well as religious and nonreligious cultural traditions. It is not clear why religion—often with a very static and ahistorical notion—is defined as the only or major component of people's identity in MENA and as the most significant driving force for their sociopolitical actions. The concept of "Islamism without Islamists," in sum, suffers from a conceptual confusion.

Fifth, the post-Islamist spirit of the MENA movements categorically rejects the concept of an Islamic state but admires the public and civil role of religion (Mahdavi 2013). The state is a secular entity and cannot be Islamized. The Islamic state in theory is an oxymoron; it is, to use Wael Hallaq's (2013) concept, "the impossible state." The Islamic state, as Abdullahi an-Na'im (2008) argues, is a modern "postcolonial invention" with no divine justification in the Islamic tradition. It is a modern entity ruled by Islamist elites who act and speak on behalf of their interpretation of Islam. Talal Asad reminds us that both Orientalists and Islamists share "the idea that Islam was originally—and therefore essentially—a theocratic state." For the Islamists, "this history constitute[s] the betrayal of a sacred ideal that Muslims are required as believers to restore"; for the Orientalists, "it defines a schizophrenic compromise that has always prevented a progressive reform of Islam." The reality, however, is that the Islamic state is not that much the product of some Islamic essence as "it is the product of modern politics and the modernizing state" (1997, 190–91).

Sixth, Hamid rightly points out that liberalism as we experience it in the West will not be the future of Muslim-majority states and that "there is no particular reason why Islamic 'reform' should lead to liberalism in the way that [the] Protestant Reformation paved the way for the Enlightenment and, eventually modern liberalism" (2016, 25). What is problematic in his argument, however, is the way he explains such a difference. For Hamid, the "difference" boils down to one word: *Islam*. Because of its "fundamentally different relationship to politics," he argues, Islam has been "simply more resistant to secularization" (2016, 26). His argument resembles that of Ernest Gellner and other classical Orientalists in claiming that "no secularization has taken place in the world of Islam" (26). It thus overlooks the predicaments of autocratic secular modernization in postcolonial MENA and how it gave rise to the birth of modern Islamism. The major issue is not that secularization has not taken place in MENA and Muslim-majority contexts or that Islam has not been secularized but that the top-down and undemocratic imposition of *colonial secular modernity* has profoundly contributed to the rise of autocratic modernization, repressive nationalism, dictatorial Third World socialism, and dogmatic and reactionary Islamism.

Seventh, it is true, as Hamid argues, that "for the religious, religion can offer both meaning and legitimacy to ideas that might otherwise seem temporal and temporary. But to exclude Islam or to hope for—or, worse, impose—a top-down secularism requires yet more violence" (2016, 26). However, the characterization of Muslim-majority nations in line with Islamist and Islamic exceptionalism is problematic. Muslim societies are not peculiar or unique in their religiosity; as Bayat points out, "they should not be measured by the 'exceptionalist' yardstick of which religio-centrism is the central core" (2007, 6). Muslim societies hold hybrid identities that include various degrees of religious affiliation as well as diverse national cultures, socioeconomic structures, historical experiences, and political settings. The missing concept in Shadi Hamid's argument seems to be *post-Islamism*: a notion referring to a profound discursive and sociohistorical transformation in MENA and other Muslim-majority societies wherein neither the hegemonic universalism of colonial modernity nor a supposed cultural essentialism/particularism of Islamism captures the complexity of the region (Mahdavi 2013, 2019). Post-Islamism has emerged as a third alternative to the hegemonic voice of a singular and superior colonial/Western-centric modernity and an essentialist, nativist vision of Islamism. Such a dialogical discourse promotes a critical dialogue between tradition and modernity, faith and freedom, religiosity and rights, thus transcending false dichotomies and constructed binaries in postcolonial MENA (Bayat 2013b; Dabashi 2012; Mahdavi 2011, 2019).

The post-Islamist discourse, Bayat (2007, 2013b) reminds us, is neither anti-Islamic nor un-Islamic. In a post-Islamist condition, Islam is neither *the* solution nor *the* problem. Yet Islam actively contributes to the sociopolitical life of Muslims. Post-Islamism, contrary to the conventional liberal discourse, discards the privatization of Islam but welcomes civil/public religion at the societal level. The state, however, remains a neutral/civil, or *urfi*, entity. An-Na'im's words best represent the intellectual basis of a post-Islamist discourse: "Instead of sharp dichotomies between religion and secularism that relegate Islam to the purely personal and private domain, I call for balancing the two by separating Islam from the state and regulating the role of religion in politics" (2008, 267). Post-Islamism, in this way, echoes Jürgen Habermas's (2006) concept of "postsecularism," wherein religious and secular citizens have much to offer to one another.

Post-Islamism, in sum, is not post-*Islamic*. It is post-*Islamism*.[2] Not all Muslims, contrary to Hamid's argument, are Islamist. However, for many Muslims, Islam remains active and alive as a part of their individual and collective multiple identity. A post-Islamist polity is not a caliphate; it is a modern civil/*urfi* democracy attentive to local cultures and values, including those of Islam. Post-Islamism is a grassroots discourse—a "universalism from below" (Mahdavi 2009) that synthesizes the global and local paradigms of social justice, freedom, human rights, and Islamic values. It is a *glocal* paradigm (Mahdavi 2011, 2013, 2019, 21–25).

As mentioned earlier, the contemporary MENA social movements symbolize a post-Islamist turn in the region. There was no demand for a "religious

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2. Post-Islamism, Asef Bayat argues, "represents both a *condition* and a *project*." It refers to a *condition* where Islamism "becomes compelled, both by its own internal contradictions and by societal pressure, to reinvent itself." It is also a *project*, "a conscious attempt to conceptualize and strategize the rationale and modalities of transcending Islamism in social, political, and intellectual domains" (2007, 18–19, emphasis in the original). Post-Islamism signifies the impact of secular exigencies on a religious discourse. Moreover, post-Islamism has been used as a historical and analytical category in reference to diverse politico-intellectual and social trends, such as various forms of Muslim reformist trends in postrevolutionary Iran; Ennahda (Hizb al-Nahda, Renaissance Party) of Tunisia; the Justice and Development Party as well as the Gezi Park movement of 2013 in Turkey; the Justice and Development Party in Morocco; Imran Khan's Movement for Justice (Tehreek-e-Insaf) in Pakistan; the many faces of civil Islam in Indonesia; and the Centre Party (Hizb al-Wasat) and the younger generation (not the old guard) of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt (Mahdavi 2011, 2019).

government" during the MENA mass uprisings of the early 2010s. Popular slogans in the Arab streets demanded human dignity, liberty, and social justice, not an Islamic state. The popular mode, however, was not antireligion; the Arab Spring "dearly [upheld] religion" (Bayat 2013b, 260). Furthermore, the post-Islamist mode of the Arab Spring did not reject the public role of religion; it challenged the false dichotomy of religion and secularism. It also transcended the religious–secular divide to become a social movement against authoritarianism and in the service of democratization.

In the post-Islamist climate of the Arab Spring, even the political statements of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and/or its sponsored political arm, the Freedom and Justice Party (Hizb al-Hurriya wal-Adala), did not refer to the establishment of an Islamic state. The Freedom and Justice Party explicitly stated it did not wish to implement a theocracy, which is characterized by a "government of the clergy or by divine right" (Freedom and Justice Party 2011). The party's statements highlighted its attitudes toward freedom of religion, "rejecting sectarian strife" and recognizing the importance of allowing Christians to build churches. As these statements and similar statements reveal, however, shari'a remained the frame of reference. It is beyond the scope of this introduction to examine the *intellectual flaws* and *strategic mistakes* of the Muslim Brotherhood and its political arm, the Freedom and Justice Party, as well as of President Mohamed Morsi's policies in post–Arab Spring Egypt. Suffice it to say that as much as the younger generation of the party demonstrated their commitment to a post-Islamist polity, the old guards were trapped in their exclusivist and patriarchal Islamist discourse. One of the most concerning instances was arguably the Muslim Brotherhood's response to the End Violence to Women campaign. Initiated by the United Nations, the campaign sought the "elimination and prevention of all forms of violence against women and girls." The Muslim Brotherhood's response was to label this initiative as "misleading and deceptive" and as "contradicting the principles of Islam" (IkhwanWeb 2013). Among some of the main issues were "granting equal rights to homosexuals," "full equality in marriage legislation," "cancelling the need for husband's consent with regards to travel and work," and "granting rights to adulterous wives and illegitimate sons" (IkhwanWeb 2013). Those statements from the Muslim Brotherhood raised serious concern among many sectors of the public and did not represent the egalitarian and post-Islamist principles that initially inspired the Arab Spring and represented the dominant, though not the exclusive, viewpoint of the public. A much better example of an Egyptian post-Islamist party was the Center Party (Hizb al-Wasat) (al-Wasat Party 2011), which spoke clearly of equality of religion and equality for women and men. The party has been a clear example of more progressive trends within a post-Islamist turn in Egypt (Mahdavi 2019, 25–27).

But a more sophisticated post-Islamist party of the Arab Spring is Ennahda/al-Nahda, or Renaissance Party, in Tunisia. This party's statements clearly demonstrate a shift from Islamism to post-Islamism as they highlight citizens' rights—including minority rights—as well as issues of gender and religious freedom. They contain numerous "buzz phrases," such as the need for a "thriving democracy with mutual respect," the desire for a "culture of moderation," the guarantee of "equality for all citizens," and the "affirmation of political pluralism" (Ennahdha Movement 2011). Ennahda explicitly "rejected a Khomeini type revolution and viewed a civil and democratic state as compatible with the spirit of Islam" (Bayat 2013b, 261). "Religion should not be imposed," argued Rached al-Ghannouchi, the party's founder, in 2016; "all the teachings and text of religion [Islam], emphasize[] the principle of no compulsion in religion. Freedom of religion is absolutely affirmed in Islam. It is not the task of the state to impose a doctrine on the people. Its mission is to provide services to the people and maintain security" (quoted in *al-Hayat* 2016). Moreover, both Rached al-Ghannouchi and the former prime minister, Hamadi Jebali of the Ennahda, used the concept of *dowla madaniyah*, or civil state, instead of *almaniyah*, or secularism (which carries antireligious baggage) to distance the postrevolutionary Tunisian state from a religious state (Stepan 2012).

Although Ghannouchi and his party did not use the concept of secularism, his understanding of the concept is revealing: secularism in the West, he argues, is not an atheistic ideology, as some think. Secularism is the separation of functions: separation of the religious function from the political function. This does not mean that the state will be at war with religion. Rather, the state must protect all religions and stand in a highly neutral manner toward religions. Ghannouchi argues there is no necessary relationship between democracy and secularism. You can be both secular and a terrorist or a dictator; you can be both secular and democratic; you can be an Islamic and a terrorist; and you can be democratic and Muslim. The necessary and inevitable link among secularism, modernity, and democracy is an arbitrary link. Therefore, Islam and democracy, asserts Ghannouchi, are compatible, and democracy is the modern practice of the *shura*/consultation (al-Ghannouchi 2015). In fact, many Muslim democrats often point to the key Qur'anic concepts of *shura*/consultation, *ijma'*/consensus and *adala*/justice to support democracy (Mahdavi 2019, 27–28).

In an interview in 2014, Ghannouchi criticized Islamists who "chose the path of violence." They formulate their own "excessively strict interpretation of religious texts . . . aimed at monopolizing the right of explaining it, which means for those organizations that the text has one meaning only, and anybody who disagrees with their exegesis and understanding of it is a disbeliever and godless" (Noureddine 2014). Furthermore, Ghannouchi explicitly argues that "no political party can or should claim to represent religion and that the religious sphere should be managed by independent and neutral institutions, [as] religion should be nonpartisan" (al-Ghannouchi 2016). Ennahda's statements have made it clear that citizens' rights are universal regardless of their faith. Ghannouchi has explicitly argued that "his party should embrace the historic specificity that Tunisia for more than sixty years has had the Arab World's most progressive and women-friendly family code" (Stepan 2012, 94–97). This was demonstrated by the Ennahda's inclusion of women in the National Constituent Assembly of 2011–14 (Mahdavi 2019, 28–29).

As Sayida Qunissi, an Ennahda member of Parliament in Tunisia, shows, Ennahda has always considered itself "different from the Muslim Brotherhood at both the ideological and political levels." For her, the maturity of Ennahda in the public debate is evident: "It is no longer a matter of the relationship between Islam and state anymore, or traditionally 'Islamic' issues, but rather a commitment to finding solutions to corruption, economic development, social justice, and human rights" (2017, 234). Since even before the uprisings, Ennahda's philosophy was based on "unity and inclusion." More specifically, Ennahda worked with two Tunisian secular parties, the secular-liberal El Mottamar, or Congress for the Republic, and the socialist Ettakatol, or Democratic Forum for Labor and Liberties, after the Arab Spring (Qunissi 2017, 235–36). Ghannouchi and Moncef Marzouki, a secular human rights activist, have been able to work together in the postrevolutionary Tunisia. Furthermore, following the elections in 2014, Ennahda conceded its loss to the Nidaa Tounes (Call of Tunisia), a center-right secular party, and formed a coalition government with it (Mahdavi 2019, 29).

Sayida Qunissi's argument (2017, 238) clearly represents the main conclusions reached at Ennahda's Tenth Congress, held May 20–23, 2016, in which the party explicitly distanced itself from Islamism and the idea of an Islamic state, defining itself as a party of Muslim democrats. "'Muslim democrat' is the most accurate term to describe what Ennahda has been trying to accomplish since the beginning: reconciling Islam and democracy in the Arab world," states Qunissi. She continues: "When Rached Ghannouchi first used the term 'Muslim democratic,' it was an effort to help the media under[stand] the pitfalls of instantly and unanimously labeling diverse political actors as 'Islamists,' despite their differences. Highlighting the parallel with Christian Democratic parties in Europe, like Germany's Christian Democratic Union, seemed to be the easiest way to signify Ennahda as a political party bringing together both democratic principles and religious values" (2017, 237; see also Mahdavi 2019, 30).

Post-Islamist movements in post–Arab Spring MENA are certainly experiencing a setback, and Tunisia is not an exception: President Kais Saied announced the dissolution of the Parliament and government in July 2021. Nonetheless, Ennahda breaking away from Islamism and branding itself a “Muslim democratic” party was a step forward toward post-Islamism. Ghannouchi and other party leaders distanced themselves from Islamism and its central concept of an Islamic state. The call not for a religious state but for a civil state that would promote human rights and citizenship is an achievement. The party seems, however, to be falling into the trap of neoliberal elitist and ivory tower discourse, ignoring the urgent question of *social justice*. As I have argued elsewhere, democracy, particularly in the Global South, desperately needs an egalitarian pro–social justice discourse. Abstract liberal notions of rights need to be translated into tangible social justice policies. Otherwise, either secular despots or populist demagogues will use the rhetoric of social justice to mobilize the masses. The political crisis both in Ennahda and in the Tunisian government in 2021 speak to this problem (see *Middle East Monitor* 2021). Moreover, uneven development is a common problem in the MENA region, and only a grassroots egalitarian democracy can protect the social and political rights of masses, in particular the rights of the “subaltern groups,” including the marginalized and ordinary people, the women and youth, and the “middle-class poor,” all of whom served as the main force of the Arab Spring (Mahdavi 2017, 2019, 30; see also Bayat 2021).

In Egypt, the post-Islamist Wasat Party is small in number but could have been a source of greater inspiration for younger generations of the Muslim Brotherhood. Mohamed Morsi’s strategic mistakes, the miscalculations of secular forces, and al-Sisi’s coup were a setback to post-Islamism in Egypt. Nonetheless, as Juan Cole reminds us, the Egyptian Spring was a post-Islamist movement. The poem “Ana ‘almani” (I Am Secular), which was posted at a young Egyptian website in April 2012, represents such a post-Islamist climate in the Egyptian civil society: “I am secular: . . . for me, religion is for God and the nation is for all” (quoted in Cole 2014, 17).

Post-Islamism in Iran is strong at the societal level but remains in a deep crisis at the political/state level. The Green Movement of 2009, the first MENA post-Islamist mass movement, did not succeed politically, but the quest for democracy remains strong socially in Iran. From 2017 to 2022, post–Green Movement Iran has witnessed multiple civil protests and social movements, demonstrating a popular post-Islamist spirit and the public’s deep disenchantment with the dominant Islamist politics. As mentioned earlier, this is also evident in the latest waves of democratic movements that have mobilized women and men, young and old, the religious and the secular, lower and middle classes, and many ethnicities across the country in small and big cities against the ruling Islamists. The movement began after Mahsa (Zhina) Amini, a twenty-two-year-old Iranian Kurdish woman from the city of Saqez, was detained by the so-called morality police in Tehran on September 13, 2022, under the pretext of the state's forced hijab law. She lost consciousness in police custody and was pronounced dead at a Tehran hospital on September 16.[3] Her murder by police has sparked nationwide and international protests not only in Kurdistan province but also in more than one hundred cities, including Tehran, Isfahan, Mashhad, Tabriz, Rasht, Gorgan, Hamadan, Shiraz, Kerman, as well as demonstrations at a number of universities in Tehran. Mahsa's death touched a nerve of anger in the country, causing people to chant, "Death to the dictator," "Women, Life, Freedom," and "Justice, Freedom, Hijab by Choice." Some women took their headscarves off in public demonstrations; others cut their hair and burned their headscarves on social media or in public to express their anger and frustration toward the state's misogynistic policies, gender apartheid, subjugation of women's bodies, and compulsory hijab. The September 2022 protests were led largely by women and demonstrated the persistence of Iran's civil society in its quest for freedom, justice, and dignity. They showed the dynamics of women's and students' unfinished social movements as well as the predicament of Islamism in Iran.

Moreover, the depth and diversity of intellectual debates on the question of religion, democracy, gender, and human rights in postrevolutionary Iran are exemplary. However, as in the Tunisian case, the (neo)liberal post-Islamist discourse in Iran undermines the middle-class poor and the issue of social justice. One of the notable progressive post-Islamist discourses in postrevolutionary Iran is that of the neo-Shariʿatis—a generation of Muslim scholars and activists on the left who are inspired by a new reading of ʿAli Shariʿati (1933–77), a celebrated critical postcolonial Muslim thinker. The neo-Shariʿatis have attempted to produce a synthetic emancipatory discourse of "freedom, social justice and civil spirituality," proposing an alternative discourse to the hegemonic and West-centric secular modernity, Islamist essentialism, and elitist neoliberal post-Islamism (Mahdavi 2013, 2019, 30–31).

Turkey is another complex case where the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) demonstrated features of post-Islamist politics in its platform in 2002. The AKP platform has always been socially conservative and economically neoliberal. However, there has been a great setback and regression in the party's post-Islamist policies over the past decade. President Erdoğan's iron fist and authoritarianism, his "new Ottomanist" foreign policy in the region, and the suppression of the popular Gezi Park movement in 2013 were conducive to the deterioration of Turkish post-Islamism. The Gezi Park movement, in my view, is now a better representative of Turkish post-Islamism because it encompasses many diverse religious and secular dissidents in Turkey, ranging from post-Kemalists to post-Islamists, environmental activists, LGBTQ activists, and anticapitalist Muslims (Tugal 2016; see also Mahdavi 2019, 31).

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[3] According to eyewitnesses, she was beaten while inside a police van and slipped into a coma later (BBC 2022).

Post-Islamism, in sum, can be applied as a label to a vast number of different sociopolitical positions, some arguably more democratic than others. Post-Islamists are a diverse combination of conservative, (neo)liberal, and progressive forces. They all believe in an active role for public religion in civil society but denounce the religious/divine state. Most post-Islamist parties are socially conservative and have adopted neoliberal economic policies. Post-Islamism is a significant paradigm shift from Islamism in the MENA region because it rejects the concept of a divine state. However, post-Islamism is not monolithic and has its own limitations and deficiencies (Mahdavi 2019, 21–32). Many contemporary post-Islamist forces, for example, have constantly undermined social elements of democracy and comprehensive social justice. Egalitarian policies prompt democratic support and mediate the impact of religiosity on democratic aspirations and orientations (Ciftci 2019, 2021). The crisis of some post-Islamist parties in post–Arab Spring MENA, in particular the predicaments in Morocco and Tunisia in 2021, speak in part to this problem.

"The Old Is Dying"! The Unfinished MENA Social Movements

The MENA social movements are experiencing a deep and profound crisis. However, such crisis is not unique to this region: "Almost all post-revolution moments are marked by an ecstatic exhilaration followed by a deep disappointment and demoralization. . . . The great revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg goes so far as to suggest that revolution is the only form of 'war' in which the ultimate victory can be prepared only by a series of defeats" (Bayat 2015). Likewise, Antonio Gramsci reminds us that such "crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear" (1971, 276).

MENA democratic forces are largely repressed, but the repressed will most likely return and recapture their social position. This is evident in the most recent waves of mass protests in Lebanon, Algeria, Tunisia, Sudan, Iraq, and Iran in 2017, 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2022 (Saab 2020). These protests demonstrate that the

MENA social movements of the 2010s are unfinished projects and never really ended. It is true that the first wave (2009–13) of the contemporary MENA movements was not quite successful. However, the region is currently experiencing the second wave (2017–22), and most likely will witness a third and more democratic waves in the future.

Although each of these uprisings is a distinctive case and represents a particular sociopolitical context, they all speak to the larger issue of an enduring quest for social justice, freedom, and human dignity. This quest will continue to generate new democratic social movements in the region. The genie is out of the bottle because the contemporary MENA social movements signify a deep-seated sociocultural and structural transformation in the region. The current crisis, argues Bayat, "is hardly a measure of popular consent or compliance. Rather, it is driven by the inner force of life itself, expressed through an urge for self-regulation; it is a technique of survival in rough times" (2015). Hence, these movements are rich with endless and open-ended possibilities; they are unfinished projects (Mahdavi 2014, 103–4).

The MENA social movements have created a historical momentum and "memories" of "extraordinary episodes"; they have generated "moral resources" that "have become part of the popular consciousness" of the young and restless generation in the region (Bayat 2015). For this generation, revolutions and social movements are unfinished projects. Many MENA societies and cultures, argues Dabashi, "are in the midst of systematic and epistemic changes, by virtue of the material forces that underlie their daily lives. False and falsifying binaries still afflict these cultures (East–West, Persian–Arab, Sunni–Shia) but the body of their seismic transmutation moves towards liberating horizons apace" (2015). Change, however, is not easy. Freedom is not free; it is costly. There are at least two major challenges ahead: regressive forces from within and meddling by external forces—that is, regional powers and the global hegemon. Despite such structural constraints, one should not underestimate the force of hope and will—the power of people's agency. Gramsci (1971) has reminded us that we need to overcome the "pessimism of the intellect" by the "optimism of the will." Such will and hope will be materialized, Bayat argues, "with [the] building [of] an 'active citizenry' endowed with the 'art of presence'; a citizenry that possesses the courage and creativity to assert collective will in spite of all odds by circumventing constraints, utilizing what is possible, and discovering new spaces within which to make themselves heard, seen, felt, and realized" (2015).

"The old order is largely back in business" in a number of MENA societies in the post–Arab Spring era. Nonetheless, "these are the old ways in new times, when the old order faces new political subjects and novel subjectivities; when the memories of sacrifice, the taste of triumph, and betrayal of aspirations are likely to turn quiet but lingering mass discontent into periodic social upheavals. These are uncharted political moments loaded with indefinite possibilities, in which meaningful social engagement would demand a creative fusion of the old and new ways of doing politics" (Bayat 2015).

"Epistemic Disobedience"?

One should not overlook the profound impact of the movements of 2010–12 on postcolonial MENA societies. For some time, they brought together secular and religious individuals, Muslims and non-Muslims, men and women, the poor and the middle class. They transcended ethnic, religious, gender, class, and ideological divides in these societies. They symbolized a potential paradigm shift toward a "postideological," "postnationalist," and "post-Islamist" discourse in the region (Bayat 2013a, 2013b; Dabashi 2012; Mahdavi 2011, 2013, 2014). These movements were neither religious nor antireligious. The Islamic state/caliphate was not at the center of any popular slogan in the MENA streets. The MENA social movements symbolized a popular quest for human dignity, freedom, and social justice as well as a backlash against the neoliberal order—the Washington Consensus and the Structural Adjustment Program in the region. They also challenged the Orientalist "clash of civilizations" discourse and nullified the notion of "Middle East exceptionalism" (Mahdavi and Knight 2012b).

The MENA movements, in sum, represent a new paradigm shift from two hegemonic discourses of the post–Cold War era: Samuel Huntington's (1996) "clash of civilizations" and Francis Fukuyama's (1989) "end of history." Human dignity, freedom, and social justice are not exclusively Western civilizational achievements; they are widespread values across the West and the East—"a common theme in the streets of Tunis, Cairo, Aden, Tehran, Madrid, New York, Athens, and London" (Mahdavi 2014, 104–5; see also Mahdavi and Knight 2012a, xxi). Moreover, these social movements have revealed a systematic crisis in the neoliberal order that Fukuyama liked us to see as "the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government" (1989, 271).

MENA social movements were—and continue to be—nothing less than a warm welcome "to the End of the End of History" (Mishra 2013). They paved the path toward, to use Walter Mingolo's (2011) concept, an "epistemic disobedience." They resisted hegemonic universalism, celebrated our differences, and proposed a third alternative way to both Fukuyama's hegemonic universalism and Huntington's essentialist particularism. The third way is a radical call for "universalism from below" (Mahdavi 2013). It suggests that each culture/nation should engage in a critical dialogue with its own tradition and formulate the universal values of freedom and social justice in a local language that can be implemented through local/homegrown institutions. In other words, the third way "aspires to a different kind of universalism, one based on deliberation and contestation among diverse political entities, with the aim of reaching functional agreement on questions of global concern. This kind of universalism differs from one resulting from universal injunctions by self-assured subjects" (Grovogui 2013, 263). It is an unfinished project but signifies a new historical era toward post-Islamism in the Muslim contexts (Mahdavi 2014, 105).

The Book's Structure

A balanced collection of the work of both well-established and emerging scholars, this edited volume offers theory-oriented and case-study chapters. Inspired by critical postcolonial/decolonial studies and the interdisciplinary perspectives of social movement theories, gender studies, Islamic studies, and critical race theory, it challenges and demystifies the myth of MENA exceptionalism.

This edited volume consists of this introduction, sixteen chapters divided into three parts, as well as a foreword and an afterword by two distinguished scholars of Middle East and Islamic studies, John Esposito and Khaled Abou El Fadl, respectively. Part one, "Beyond the 'Middle East Exceptionalism,'" includes six chapters. In chapter 1, "Exceptions to Exceptionalisms! Or What MENA Offers to World History," Peyman Vahabzadeh provides an inversion of Giorgio Agamben's theory of exceptionalism and, by virtue of that, showcases the contributions of the grassroots social movements in MENA. The cases of Iran, Tunisia, and the Kurdish region Rojava, Vahabzadeh argues, allow us to appreciate the MENA region's contribution to a world history guided from the bottom up. In chapter 2, "Israel, Palestine, and the Politics of Race: Moving from Exceptionalism to Global Context," Abigail B. Bakan and Yasmeen Abu-Laban argue that an enduring view of Israel in the Western academy and popular imaginary is that it is a unique state in the context of the Middle East because it is the only "democracy" in the region. The chapter traces how this idea was constructed as part of US ideological hegemony in the aftermath of World War II and how it has been challenged in the face of the democratic impulses and movements associated with the Arab Spring as well as the growing global attention to the human rights abuses of Palestinians by the Israeli government. The authors utilize a racial contract framework to disrupt the mythologized exceptionalism that has attended studies of Israel. By placing Israel in international as well as comparative context, and by attending to the Palestinian voice, they highlight how power, politics, and race have been and remain critical to the study of Israel in a global context. Navid Pourmokhtari argues in chapter 3, "How Applicable Are Leading Mainstream Social Movement Theories to the MENA Region?," that the leading mainstream social movement theories fall short of explicating the phenomenon of mass mobilization in contemporary MENA societies. The chapter begins by problematizing the historical contexts from which such ethnocentric theories emerged and providing a critique of their core assumptions. It then showcases how the Western-centric theories are incapable of accounting for the specificities and complexities of the contemporary MENA social movements by highlighting the Egyptian Feminist Union movement in 1923, the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the Uprising of Dignity in Bahrain in 1994, the Iranian Green Movement of 2009, and the Arab Spring of 2010–11, among others. The chapter makes a case for a fresh approach to thinking about how in the context of the authoritarian state broad social movements can effectively contest power. In chapter 4, "China and Syria as an Ideological Exception?," Juan Cole discusses whether China's Syria policy might be explained in the context of an "ideological exception": that is, Syria's state socialism, anti-imperialism, and secularism provide a particular case in a region rife with religious pro-American regimes such as Saudi Arabia. China's Syria policy, he then argues, may be explained in light of China's need for energy in the region, though radical Salafi groups in Syria are also seen as a threat to China because of their potential impact on China's 40 million Muslims. In chapter 5, "The Rise of ISIS in Postinvasion Iraq: A Manifestation of (Neo)Colonial Violence," Mariam Georgis problematizes the conventional cultural exceptionalist argument about the rise of ISIS. She demonstrates the political and strategic factors that gave rise to ISIS: the invasion of Iraq, sectarian policies, the Syrian proxy war, and regional factors, including the ideologies of Wahhabism and Salafism. The chapter suggests that ISIS and sectarian violence do not reflect the desires of ordinary people and that the initial appeal of al-Qaeda or ISIS can be truly eradicated only when the conditions of social, economic, and political marginalization and oppression that act as breeding grounds for such movements are eliminated. In "Recolonizing the Arab World?," chapter 6, Tariq Ali argues that to understand the Arab Spring and its mixed outcome, we need to situate it within the region's broader geopolitical politics and its historical and modern struggles against Western colonialism and American imperialism. In carrying out this analysis, the chapter adopts a fourfold approach. First, Ali unpacks the meaning and destructive effect of European colonialism and American imperialism on the possibilities of democratic changes in the region. Then he focuses on the spread of the counterrevolutionary jihadist forces in the Arab region and highlights the role of the United States and its allies in the development of those forces. The chapter also elucidates the spread of Islamophobia in the West and maps its influence on the politics of dissent and resistance in the MENA region.

Part two, “The Unfinished Project of the Resilient Citizenship,” comprises five chapters. In chapter 7, “Arab Youth Nonmovements: Resilient Citizenship in the Middle East,” Bessma Momani and Melissa Finn bring to our attention the significance of Arab youths’ constant quest for democracy and progressive change. They argue that Arab youths are the agents of continuing social and cultural revolution within an important demographic of Arab societies. Michael Frishkopf and his coauthors argue in chapter 8, “What Happened to ‘Songs of the New Arab Revolutions’?,” that throughout the tumult of the Arab Spring music demonstrated its power to galvanize sentiment and mobilize civil society. The chapter highlights many examples of such revolutionary songs—music of and for grief and anger as well as of and for hope and empowerment. It then examines what happened to those revolutionary songs, composers, lyricists, and performers in the post–Arab Spring era. It also reflects on the limits of music’s ability to be imbued with durable social meaning, revolutionary or otherwise, and the limits on its social power. In chapter 9, “The Future of Nonviolence in the Middle East: Iran and Beyond,” Ramin Jahanbegloo argues that nonviolence, or the “Gandhian moment,” is an emerging paradigm shift in political mentalities and practices in the MENA region, contrary to the mainstream argument about the region. Drawing from Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., the chapter highlights the urgency and significance of nonviolence as a method of resistance in the current MENA social movements. In chapter 10, “The Rise and Fall of the Student Movements in Postrevolutionary Iran,” Roozbeh Safshekan captures the cyclical rise and fall of the Iranian student movement as one of the most significant social agents of change in postrevolutionary Iran. The chapter offers a brief history of student activism before the Revolution of 1979, highlighting the role of university students in overthrowing the Pahlavi monarchy. It then examines the impact of subsequent political junctures on the student movement in postrevolutionary Iran: the Cultural Revolution and the Iran–Iraq War (1980–88), the Reconstruction era (1989–97), social and political liberalization during the Reform era (1997–2005), and authoritarianism during Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s presidency (2005–13) and Hassan Rouhani’s presidency (2013–21). Chapter 11 by Paul S. Rowe, “Finished or Unfinished? The Uncertain Future of Christians in the Middle East,” examines how despite ambivalence exhibited by established church hierarchies and elites, many Christians participated in the Egyptian and Syrian Arab Spring protests. The Arab Spring highlighted the possibility of a new pluralist form of representation, a possibility that was subsequently dashed by destabilization and crises in the post–Arab Spring era. Most Arab regimes continue to seek neomillet elite bargains with Christian leaders, bargains that gain support among Christians fearful of a return to a chaotic situation. The unfinished project of the Arab Spring, the chapter argues, is the expansion of the opportunity to organize and celebrate differences through civil activism and community engagement. The chapter surveys Christian responses to the past few years of crises to map the future representation of Christians' interests in MENA.

Part three, "Gendering the MENA Movements," includes five chapters. Chapter 12, "Toward a Democratization of Authority in Islamic Thought: Gender as a Category of Thought in Light of the Arab Spring" by amina wadud, provides a broad conceptual framework for examining the question of gender as a category of thought in the MENA and Muslim contexts. The author argues that the Arab Spring became symbolic of democratic aspirations for both Muslim-minority and Muslim-majority communities. Ironically, ISIS and the like also became symbolic of ways to resist the impact of the unfolding of those aspirations. Among the foundational ideas distinguishing these two movements are diametrically opposed notions of authority and, more specifically, of gender justice in Islam. The chapter then explores the construction of a democratic authority and gender justice in Islamic thought by focusing on the contributions of Islamic feminism to the democratization of authority and to gender equality and reciprocity in MENA and Muslim contexts. The following chapters examine the MENA movements' gender relations in Turkey, Iran, Tunisia, and Egypt. In chapter 13, "Remembering Gezi's True Ideology in Turkey: Women and Anarchistic-Queer Openings in a Belated Modernity," Poyraz Kolluoglu locates the Gezi events in 2013 as an example of the anticapitalist and antiglobalization struggles in a postnational solidarity era. As a nonaligned eco-protester witnessing how the first environment-centered resistance movement in Gezi Park evolved into civil disobedience, Kolluoglu approaches this phenomenon through the prism of autoethnography and offers a radical examination of the role of women and the anarchistic queer in "the Istanbul Commune of 2013 and the grassroots politics it set in motion in the following years." Victoria Tahmasebi-Birgani argues in chapter 14, "Women Continue the Unfinished Project of Liberation in the MENA Region through Online Activism," that people's physical presence in the form of street protests have subsided in the post–Arab Spring era. However, human rights advocates and women's groups have shifted their activism to the virtual space and social networking sites, or virtual "civil societies." Using a case study of Iranian women's online activism and drawing on other notable examples from women's cybernetworking in other MENA counties, Tahmasebi-Birgani argues that women are at the forefront of reconceptualizing and rewriting the unfinished project of the MENA movements in the 2010s. Women's online activism not only continually builds on the achievements of earlier popular uprisings in the region but also creatively expands on the meaning of democracy, equality, and justice for women in MENA countries. In chapter 15, "Women's Engagement in the Tunisian Revolution," building on framing theory and contentious politics literature, Nermin Allam interrogates women's collective action at the time of the Tunisian revolution to elucidate how gender featured in the framing of their participation. Allam's quantitative and qualitative analysis contributes to complicating and expanding debates on women's participation in national struggles beyond reductionist accounts that view their engagement as misguided or passive. The chapter shows that Tunisian women framed their participation around their citizenship; hence, the absence of gender issues in women's framing of their participation needs to be situated within the context of Tunisia's conventional and contentious politics. Mark Muhannad Ayyash examines the case of the Egyptian uprising in chapter 16, "The Egyptian Uprising and Sexual Violence," focusing in particular on materials from two groups, the April 6 Youth Movement and Nazra for Feminist Studies. In a way much different from superficial Orientalist analyses, he argues that these two groups presented a scathing critique of the sexual contract that underpins the authoritarian postcolonial regime. The challenge to the sexual contract is the uprising's achievements, its unfinished promise, and its major difficulty, which manifested itself in greater scope in the postrevolutionary moments—that the movement never managed to make central the question of the sexual contract during the revolutionary moment. The Egyptian military regime's ability to (re)assert itself through sexual violence and the "virginity tests" highlights the persistence of postcoloniality in the difficulty of deconstructing the sexual contract.

Last but not least, Khaled Abou El Fadl's afterword, "A Personal Retrospection on the Aborted Spring and Islamic Exceptionalism," historicizes and contextualizes the rise of the Arab Spring through a powerful and distinctive personal retrospection. It also masterfully critiques the MENA autocrats sponsored by petrodollars and Western (re)colonial policies, the opportunistic and undemocratic Saudi-backed ideology of Jami-Salafism, Islamophobia, and the very foundations of the discourse of "Islamic exceptionalism."

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