



ARGUING ISLAM AFTER THE REVIVAL OF ARAB POLITICS

NATHAN J. BROWN

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Brown, Nathan J., author.

Title: Arguing Islam after the revival of Arab politics / Nathan Brown.

Description: New York, NY : Oxford University Press, 2017. | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016014065 | ISBN 9780190619428 (hardcover)

Subjects: LCSH: Islam and politics—Arab countries. | Arab countries—Politics and government—20th century. | Arab countries—Politics and government—21st century.

Classification: LCC BP173.7 .B759 2017 | DDC 322/.109174927—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016014065>

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed by Sheridan Books, Inc., United States of America

To Jacob, Evan, Joseph, and Albert.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book is my attempt to make sense of what I have heard and seen in Arab politics over the course of a scholarly career that began in the 1980s.

I have worked on researching the topic and drafting this book intermittently over some years. The idea first came to me about a decade and a half ago. But had I written it then, it would have been very different. Its subject matter and the way that I understand it have changed. Only in 2010 did I begin sketching out the project and I did not begin drafting until 2014.

But to say that it took me a while because I was sidetracked on to other projects is not quite correct.

The other research I carried out before focusing on writing this book—on Islamist movements, judiciaries, constitutional politics, and authoritarianism—has overlapped with the current project. Some of that overlap is apparent in places in which the current book discusses those subjects directly.

But far more profoundly, I have spent not merely the past ten years but all of my scholarly career attempting to understand arguments I heard from those whose politics I studied—arguments that intrigued me, whether or not they persuaded me (and they most often did not). What coherence there is in my scholarly work over the past thirty years is an attempt to probe how politics is experienced and why people act and speak as they do in a political world that is somewhat different from my own.

In this book, I attempt to explain what I have heard; I aim not to resolve differences but to help make them comprehensible.

In carrying out the research for this book, I had very able assistance from a series of students, research assistants, and guides of various sorts. In alphabetical order, they are Sarah Abdel Gelil, Rawda Ali, Starling Carter, Fatima Fettar, Sarah Kuhail, Dalia Naguib, Julia Romano, Mariam Serag, Scott Wiener, and Laila Abdelkhaliq Zamora.

A number of colleagues and collaborators on related projects also deserve special mention. Marc Lynch has been a party to many conversations connected with this book that have shaped my thinking very deeply. Jonathan

A. C. Brown, Michaelle Browers, and Andrew March attended a daylong workshop that helped me reshape the manuscript into something like its current form. Anonymous reviewers for Oxford University Press were extraordinarily kind, thoughtful, and helpful. Tarek Masoud gave me valuable substantive and organizational advice. At Oxford, Anne Dellinger worked enthusiastically and swiftly as an editor. Harvey L. Gable prepared the index.

My colleagues at the 2014 research group, Balancing Religious Accommodation and Human Rights in Constitutional Frameworks, at Bielefeld University's Center for Interdisciplinary Studies (ZIF) helped me refine the manuscript. I also shared with them meals, evening conversations, and an ideal contemplative setting. Mokhtar Awad, Katie Bentvoglio, Dina Bishara, Lamis El Muhtaseb, Amr Hamzawy, Abdulwahab Kayyali, Clark Lombardi, Mara Revkin, Oren Samet-Mariam, Emad Eldin Shahin, and Scott Williamson have all coauthored shorter works with me that have helped shape my thinking in this book. Several other colleagues have been very generous with their time, thoughts, reactions, and comments. I owe deep thanks to Michele Dunne, Dörthe Engelcke, and Nadia Oweidat.

The ideas for this manuscript were also developed in a series of informed conversations with friends and colleagues, some of whom may be surprised to know that what I learned from them went into this book. In this regard, I should mention Zaid al-Ali, Abdulwahab Alkebsi, Lina Atallah, Yussuf Auf, Dina Bishara, Judith Kohn Brown, Sarah El-Kazaz, Skip Gnehm, Hafsa Halawa, Mahmoud Hamad, Amy Hawthorne, Hisham Hellyer, Satoshi Ikeuchi, Kirsten Lundeborg, Mirette Mabrouk, Marwan Muasher, Khalid Fathi Neguib, Jacob Olidort, Marina Ottaway, Ann Patterson, David Risley, Bassem Sabri, Mark Schwehn, Annelle Sheline, Charlotta Sparre, and Alanna Van Antwerp. There are many residents of the Arab world who trusted me in very frank conversations; I do not mention them by name here both because there are so many and because most would likely prefer not to be named.

I owe thanks to a number of institutions who supported various aspects of this project: a Guggenheim Fellowship provided very generous help; George Washington University granted me a sabbatical leave; Bielefeld University's Center for Interdisciplinary Studies (ZIF) hosted me for a portion of 2014; the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace supported me as a nonresident senior associate; and the Project for Middle East Political Science supported some supplementary research.

At several points noted in the text, I have included updated passages from some of my previous publications: parts of *The Rule of Law in the Arab World: Courts in Egypt and the Gulf* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); "Shari'a and State in the Modern Muslim Middle East," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 29, 3 (1997): 359–376; *Constitutions in a Nonconstitutional World: Arab Basic Laws and the Prospects for Accountable Government* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001); "Egypt and Islamic Sharia: A Guide

for the Perplexed,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2012); and “Islam and Constitutionalism in the Arab World: The Puzzling Course of Islamic Inflation,” in Asli Bali and Hanna Lerner, eds., *Constitution Writing, Religion and Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016). All are reprinted with permission.

Julie Corwin provided very strong support and commented on the manuscript, helping me restrain some of my rhetorical excesses, slim down some repetitive passages, and clarify the argument.

My nephews Jacob Pastor, Evan Brown, Joseph Lea, and Albert Brown all entered adulthood as I was working on this book. They have yet to share with me their thoughts on the role of religion in public life. But I dedicate this book to them in the hope that they will live in a world where ultimate issues can be argued more fruitfully and respectfully than has sometimes happened in the past.

Introduction

Politics is a way of ruling divided societies without undue violence—and most societies are divided, though some think that is the trouble.

Bernard Crick, *In Defence of Politics*, 33

Arab publics have come to argue vociferously about religion. How do they argue? Does it matter?

I hope to show how these arguments over religion take place, how contentious they are, and the varying degree that they affect policy outcomes. And I will also show that they can aggravate conflict and polarization. But these problems stem less from their religious character than their lack of traction in policy making. There are few mechanisms available to induce those arguing to come to an agreement or affect a decision. It is their ineffectual nature, much more than their content, that makes arguments increasingly divisive.

IDEALISM, CONFUSION, SURPRISE, AND CYNICISM

This book has a title that may make its author seem contentious (“arguing”) and optimistic (“revival”). Neither adjective fits. I aim not to take part in any debates but to understand various participants and positions as sympathetically and even as empathetically as I can. And I also seek to understand the effects of those debates. I am not particularly optimistic; indeed, the revival I speak of is real but not particularly cheerful, in part because it is often disagreeable and in part because it is incomplete.

Nor is this book a reaction to events in the Arab world since 2011. I felt some of the hope (heavily tinged with nervousness) shared by so many during

the uprisings of 2011. I felt disappointment (tinged with despair) as the Arab world lapsed into what I refer to in the conclusion as the cruel palindrome of choosing between Isis and Sisi.

But I focus on neither the uprisings nor their aftermath; instead it is longer-term trends that draw my attention. My interest is motivated by a curiosity in what I feel have long been underappreciated aspects of Arab politics: the revival of a public sphere in which political arguments move thick and fast.

That curiosity was born a full decade before the upheavals of 2011; it was formed by a sequence of idealism, confusion, surprise, and, finally, cynicism.

My initial idealism sprouted from some gleanings from political philosophy, especially readings in various streams of liberal and democratic thought premised on how we should speak with each other in an egalitarian and respectful manner and, implicitly (perhaps overly so), how we should listen.

But while those writings could be inspiring, I also found them confusing. Those who were most concerned with combining democratic institutions and behaviors with respect for autonomous individuals often seemed to be writing more for each other than for the individuals and populations whose humanity, dignity, and autonomy they so respected. They wrote in prose I found difficult, even inaccessible. Such writings seemed designed to constrain the very passions that motivate the political activity of many people.¹ Some of the writings seemed tinged by an assumption that there are clear, right answers to policy questions but that actual political discourse is so problematic it obscures those answers. Such a notion suggested an assumption of false consciousness, not a very helpful one for a set of approaches based on mutual respect. The egalitarian ethos seemed more than mildly contaminated by elitism.

My suspicion was not boundless. I soon learned that there were those who could use some of the concepts generated by this line of philosophical inquiry in a very grounded, empirical fashion in a Middle Eastern context (the work of my then yet-to-be colleague Marc Lynch influenced my initial thinking deeply in that regard²). More than a decade ago, I began to think about writing a book about the politics of public debates in the Arab world. I put aside the idea to work on Islamist movements, but that research only deepened my interest.

Just as I was turning back to the subject came the surprise of the 2011 Arab uprisings. My shock did not come from the fact that members of Arab societies were arguing about politics. For my own part, I had noticed the way in which political discussions had gradually become more detailed, open, and critical in the 1990s. When the first Arab Human Development Report was issued in 2002, I was a bit taken aback, but not by the content of the report. Indeed, the document, while critical of existing realities in the Arab world, seemed tame by the standards set by the arguments I had heard. Instead what surprised me was the surprised reaction in Western journalistic and policy circles, lauding what seemed to many external observers to be an unprecedented introduction of self-criticism.

But of course the authors of the report were not criticizing themselves in any personal way—they were lashing out (as much as any United Nations document would allow them) against their rulers, and they were deeply critical of prevailing social and political practices. And this was hardly something new. In fact, by that year, I could not remember the last time I had heard a citizen of an Arab state say something good about his or her political system in casual conversation.³

And not just in casual conversation—older and newer media were awash in political talk, much of it critical. That criticism knew boundaries, but those were unclear and often crossed. In 2005, browsing in an Egyptian bookstore, I was astounded when I saw the title *I Hate Husni Mubarak*.

So, criticism and political talk was something that I had become increasingly aware of. In the 2000s I learned how those arguments were often simply not heard outside the Arab world; as forests of apparently well-rooted truisms were felled in Arab arguments they seemed to make few sounds outside the region. Or, less charitably, arguments among citizens of the Arab world were a surprise to those outside the Arab world only because they had not been listening to them.

But I was also struck by how much the critical talk seemed unconnected to political action. Many argued about the need for fundamental change but fewer tried to do anything about it.

What shocked me profoundly, therefore, was when large numbers of people began to act on their complaints, most dramatically in 2011.⁴ In that year, masses of residents in many societies rose up against their political systems, shouting so all could hear the complaints that had gestated over a decade or even a generation. I visited Egypt and Jordan in December 2010 and found a dour and despairing mood indeed; I returned to both places in March 2011 and found a buoyancy and spirit of activism that seemed to have come from nowhere. Of course I had been witnessing (or hearing) some of the wellsprings for years, but I had generally doubted whether words would be translated into action. (When asked in the fall of 2010 whether a mass uprising in Egypt was likely, I remember answering, “It’s not impossible,” which seemed then to be an unjustifiably daring statement.)

Yet as they began to act, argumentative citizens struck out in some dissonant directions. In the year following the uprising, I was made uneasy by their political choices. Most leading political actors seemed to be very suspicious of each other and in shaky control of the political systems they wished to operate or redesign. I was initially persuaded that a strong consensus on political reform would sustain a more promising process. But that proved a misjudgment; the apparent political consensus broke apart as political systems and processes seemed to either shunt popular pressures aside or set them against each other. I could not resist a bit of cynicism—or at least a grimmer mood—as the mass movements of 2011 metastasized

into coup and civil conflict in Egypt, fizzled in Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, and Palestine, and led to complicated and bloody civil wars in Yemen, Syria, and Libya.

The politics that concerns me in this book is not always pretty; the revival of which I speak has not always been joyful.

OVERCOMING FEAR OF RELIGION

Why do I focus on religion? Not because of my own faith; in my own life, I generally detach questions of justice, morality, and political and social behavior from those of faith and the divine. But in most of the societies I have studied, religion provides an important anchor for such discussions. Indeed, in some ways this book is a story of how thoroughly religious many Arab public discussions have become.

Religion provides one of the main languages of public debate in the Arab world. This book is my contribution to understanding debate over religion in the public sphere in the Arab world and its relationship to public policy.

When I focus on religion in public life, I do not mean to say there are no Arabs who detach (as I do) public behavior from questions involving the divine—I have met many. But they rarely do so explicitly in public—and that is the point. To do so would be to talk in a language that would not make a lot of sense to their audience, perhaps even be self-defeating and alienating. It would be tantamount to claiming that divine guidance and ultimate values have no role in social life. A more commonly voiced attitude is that an individual's beliefs or private behavior is between him and God, but social conduct should be governed by God's merciful and beneficent instructions.

Religion Provides the Language for Such Discussions

But such a close connection between religion and public debate deeply concerns many people, including some of the most influential thinkers about politics.

Many public discussions in Western settings—and many scholarly and philosophical approaches that inform much academic thinking—betray a strong suspicion about the politics of religion. Religious differences can be politically frightening because they seem so deep and so unfriendly to discussion and compromise—necessary ingredients to any attempt to manage differences politically. Behind this nervousness about religion is a worry that ultimate truths are not open to argument, that religion breeds absolute thinking and even intolerance. These associations between religion and intolerance seem reasonable. And they are particularly potent perhaps in the Arab world,

where the religion involved is Islam, with its heavy legalistic bent. Public arguments in the Arab world can very easily take on a religious guise.

But on this point, my own experience leads me to inject a note of skepticism about the fear of religion in public discourse. The concerns mooted seem to be the mirror image—or the retort—to the equally reasonable-sounding reciprocal suspicions I have heard from some pious individuals. Religiously inspired thinkers often argue that those who seek to avoid ultimate truths can find no secure grounding for any moral code. Many opponents of secularism fear that exclusion of religion breeds not tolerance and pluralism but anomie or hedonism.

While both these views seem reasonable, I find them unhelpful. It is not merely that they contradict each other. They simply do not fit with my experience.

I have not seen religion as inexorably linked to political intolerance nor have I seen secularism as tied to narcissism, egoism, and social dissolution. In both cases, there are many possible intellectual paths to break the supposed links. For instance, the supposed path from religious faith to rigid intolerance can be diverted by a religiously sponsored humility, appreciation of others' humanity and dignity, or willingness to engage in rational speculation on the most difficult religious issues. At the same time, secularism can and frequently does anchor morality in an insistence on shared humanity.

So I do not share the fear of religion in public in its most sweeping form for empirical reasons: the nervousness is simply counter to how readily I have seen many pious friends and acquaintances show real willingness to engage in give-and-take on religious issues and how many of those with a secular bent can refer with derision and even intolerance to the beliefs of their fellows. My point is not that religion makes people virtuous interlocutors, or that tolerance is a ruse, but only that I have seen no clear link between willingness to engage and secularism within my own circles of colleagues and friends.

I do not dismiss the concerns about religion in public life; I wish to proceed only without the assumption that religion is inherently a danger to political life.

And I also wish to explore religion as more than belief or faith. Indeed, in the Arab world religion can come up in many guises that are distinct from faith even if often connected to it: religion is sometimes structure and bureaucracy, sometimes practice, sometimes campaign fodder, sometimes ritual, and sometimes law. The Western European experience often leads us to privilege religion in two guises only: individual belief ("faith") and authoritative structure ("church" in juxtaposition to "state"). Given the other forms in which religion is expressed in the Arab world, we should not be so restrictive in our understanding of where religion will arise and the guises it will take.

And it should therefore be no surprise that while I describe religion as "anchor" and "language," as I have, I also strive to avoid making discussions

seem too fixed and clear—the anchor has a very long chain and language can be a source not only for communication but also for misunderstanding of both the comic and tragic variety.

And it is a sense of tragedy in particular that has characterized many past writings on politics in the sense used here—starting with Jürgen Habermas, who, as we will soon see, lamented the way the public sphere had been corrupted and controlled, and who has been followed by waves of liberal theorists who focus on what politics can be in part by decrying what it has become. Even less explicitly normative scholars often approach such discussions to tie the public arguments immediately to regime type—implicitly claiming that such debates are of interest to the extent they explain the origin or fate of authoritarianism and democracy, less attentive to the ways public discussions might affect more mundane political outcomes.

WHAT POLITICS REALLY IS; WHAT POLITICS REALLY DOES

This book is designed not to provide a sense of drama of any variety but instead to make forays in two directions.

First I seek to describe, providing what might be called an ethnography of current Arab politics as it really is. I am interested, to be sure, in possible trajectories of change but I worry a rush to probe possibilities for democratic opening or authoritarian resurgence may miss the real ways in which Arab political systems are changing.

An emphasis on how politics should be discussed can lead us to overlook how it is actually discussed. In June 2013, as Egypt approached a wave of demonstrations and ultimately a coup against President Muhammad Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood, I was warned by a religious figure to be careful where I walked because I have a short beard—one that might be taken as a nonverbal political statement. Such a symbol of a kind of religiosity, he feared, might expose me to a kind of nonverbal political response.

Not all political speech is ideal. In fact, not even all rarefied academic discussions are ideal. Shortly after that warning about my beard, I attended a presentation at an academic conference in the United States by a very accomplished and respected colleague who argued that opposition to a specific policy initiative—an opposition apparently grounded in public reason—could in fact be refuted in terms of public reason. I noticed that the most effective way in which he undermined the positions he was attempting to refute in front of an audience predisposed to sympathize with him was by reading sections of his opponents' writings slowly with an arched eyebrow, inserting an occasional sarcastic remark.

Neither harassing people with beards nor repeating an opponent's words with a derisive tone and subtly contemptuous gestures is ideal political speech.

But such forms still deserve our attention because this is how much politics is practiced.

That leads me to my second purpose: to explain the effects of political arguments over religion in the Arab world. I am interested in whether people experience the political world differently as politics revives or whether the vitality of political arguments over religion changes policy. I find that the arguments do indeed deeply affect the way that various groups understand the political order but that the effects on policy outcomes are far more limited. The problem is not that religious disagreements are unmanageable but that political systems and institutions are generally not configured to reflect political arguments of any sort. Arguments about religion are generally not resolved (or managed) politically in the Arab world today, it is true, but the problem, as I will show, has less to do with their religious nature and more to do with the inability of weak structures to translate political talk into political practice.

NOTES

1. I first explored this idea in “Reason, Interest, Rationality, and Passion in Constitution Drafting,” *Perspectives on Politics* 6, 4 2 (008): 675–689.
2. My introduction came through his book *State Interests and Public Spheres: The International Politics of Jordan's Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999) and his article “Taking Arabs Seriously,” *Foreign Affairs* 82, 5 (2003): 81–94.
3. My puzzlement at the reaction was unusual but not unique: the *Economist* account of the report noted, “Across dinner tables from Morocco to the Gulf, but above all in Egypt, the Arab world’s natural leader, Arab intellectuals endlessly ask one another how and why things came to turn out in this unnecessarily bad way.” “Self-Doomed to Failure,” *Economist*, July 4, 2002.
4. I explore this distinction between clear political preferences and unclear willingness to act in “Constitutional Revolutions and the Public Sphere,” in *The Arab Uprisings Explained: New Contentious Politics in the Middle East*, ed. Marc Lynch (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

PART 1

Publicity, Religion, and the Revival of Politics

Of course, I too look at American television. When I see debates between presidential candidates, I get sick.

Jürgen Habermas, "Further Reflections on the Public Sphere,"
in, Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, 467

[That]even this prepolitical authority which ruled the relations between adults and children, teachers and pupils, is no longer secure signifies that all the old time-honored metaphors and models for authoritarian relations have lost their plausibility. Practically as well as theoretically, we are no longer in a position to know what authority really is.

Hannah Arendt, "What is Authority?" in *Between Past and Future*:
Six Exercises in Political Thought, 92

The most striking change about Arab politics in the last few years is that it has now become so alive. Violence and oppression are very real, but so are political arguments. Their liveliness affects how religion and religious authority are understood and practiced. In this book I study how politics operates and what effects it has on how Islam is understood, shapes, and is shaped by public life.

Both my initial claim (about the vivacity of Arab politics) and my project (to study how Arab politics interacts with religion) seem to go beyond brash to preposterous. In chapter 1, I work to return them to the realm of the merely brash. I do so in two steps. First, I explain what I mean by the "revival" of politics. Second, I provide a detailed overview of the questions and the findings.

In chapter 2, I disentangle some useful concepts involving publicity, politics, and religion from some of their normative foundations to make them more amenable for critical analysis. But I also show that a complete divorce from normative concerns will miss why they are so powerful and what they mean to those who deploy them in making public arguments about politics.

CHAPTER 1

Understanding the Revival of Politics

News will come from Rome—but it will be rumor confounded with fact, fact confounded with self-interest, until self-interest and faction become the source of all we shall know.

John Williams, *Augustus*, 24

When I first journeyed to Arab societies in the early 1980s as a doctoral student of political science, one thing struck me in Egypt (where I spent the most time) as well as Jordan and Syria (where I briefly visited): nobody spoke much about politics. What few discussions I heard were guarded and private. There was politics aplenty in the sense that governments acted in ways that deeply affected people's lives. But there was a vacuum of politics in terms of public discussion. A combination of deep nervousness and profound lack of interest (seemingly very different but sometimes difficult for me to disentangle) inhibited or even prevented political conversations, especially as one moved into the public realm. Public spaces were strangely devoid of political discussions: the largest public squares in major cities showed no signs of political assemblies (except for those occasionally arranged by the regime); and all coffeehouses and restaurants seemed to have televisions that showed only sports. If one picked up a newspaper (and not many people did), one read about the comings and goings of officials, the arrival of basic commodities (such as meat), and the departure of prominent citizens from this world. A few journals or newspapers carried highbrow pieces from a few public intellectuals, but the resulting debates were fairly circumscribed in content and limited to a small number of participants. Overall, there was precious little about the politics of this world in many media; if one watched the television news, official comings-and-goings seemed to dominate much of the broadcast.

Everything is different today. Politics has edged out even sports in personal and coffeehouse conversations. It forges some personal ties and ruptures others. Public squares have filled with demonstrators in some places and witnessed violent clashes over political issues. Newspapers are crowded with (and occasionally even invent) news and an enormous amount of analysis and argument. Engaged members of the public swap rumors and views in personal conversations or by text messages. Boisterous political talk fills the airwaves, often sparking far more discussions than do sitcoms, soap operas, and even sports. That politics is often ugly, and it can be used to dehumanize those who have different views and justify violence against them. Official attempts to control what is said are still very much robust and occasionally quite fierce.

Arab politics—in the sense of discussion and argument about public affairs—has been reborn. It is pursued, sustained, and developed in many overlapping institutions and practices. The structures of political argument do not merely overlap. They interact in novel ways that, while they hardly replace older hierarchies and structures of authority, still modify, steer, and even occasionally undermine or limit them. An authority figure who would brook no public dissent a generation ago now finds his words moved into media where they are easily mocked.

In their rich cacophony, the circles in which arguments take place often clash with each other. That rich cacophony will be the object of our attention in the first half of this book.

The sense of politics that I am employing here—as old as the word itself—is used today primarily by normative political theorists concerned with how we should speak to each other. Phrases like “deliberative democracy,” “public sphere,” and “ideal speech” pepper their writings, many of which presume that politics takes place in a liberal and democratic society. As we will see, these concepts can enlighten and ennoble us but can also obstruct our understanding of empirical realities.

Indeed, this inquiry into arguments among residents of the Arab world would be of less interest if it were not connected to a second, perhaps grittier, meaning of politics—the struggle over public policy outcomes. For a long time, politics in the first sense of public argument seemed to be in hibernation in most Arab societies. In the second sense of the word, of course, politics was of course always fully alive. There was public policy and political power to be sure. But politics in that second sense was brutally and ruthlessly predicated on the suppression of politics in the first sense. Sometimes open and even violent contests for political authority occurred (though these seemed to decline in much of the Arab world in the last third of the twentieth century as regimes seemed to settle in). And there were, of course, private conversations and samizdat forums for arguments that rulers could not suppress. So, as regimes entrenched themselves and effectively presented themselves as inevitable, there was little point and sometimes considerable risk to politics in the sense

of publicly arguing and discussing (and also organizing peacefully) to affect matters of public interest.

Remarkably, the revival of Arab politics began just as politics seemed most futile—and indeed, the despair caused by futility served as the midwife of the revival.

So of course, struggles over allocation, policy, power, and authority had never disappeared. Powerful actors lined up on different sides of critical economic debates, for instance. Politics according to those meanings never died. In the latter chapters of this book, I will consider how the revival of politics as public argument has affected politics in the second sense, focusing on policy outcomes related to the public role of religion. In the remainder of part 1, I will focus on the revival of politics in the sense of public argumentation.

But politics in the primary sense I am using here requires the existence of a public sphere. Hannah Arendt wrote, “Whenever people come together, the world thrusts itself between them, and it is in this in-between space that all human affairs are conducted.”¹ No Arab society ever had that in-between space completely controlled by the state (such domination was the basis for Arendt’s image of totalitarianism²); Arab authoritarianism, especially as it ground on and on, was based more on the futility than the domination of activity and talk within that space. Arab politics never fully died, but it was nearly lifeless and seemed pointless under prevailing authoritarian conditions. It is that revival of public argument that leads me to use the term “revival” with only a touch of exaggeration.

When Arab authoritarianism gradually gave way to semiauthoritarianism from the 1970s onward, and when semiauthoritarianism in turn faltered in 2011, the space between residents of the Arab world could be pried open even further than it had before. Thus, Arendt’s in-between space has come alive in the Arab world in recent decades, increasingly escaping from the harsh constraints imposed by authoritarian political systems. The years since 2011 have been cruel ones in many Arab societies, especially in the political realm. Journalists are imprisoned; commentary on social media is polarized and policed; and few political orders could be described as liberal or permissive. But the arguments continue.

To many external observers, the change suddenly became visible in 2011. But for those living in or closely following the region, it was far from sudden. At a regime level, many authoritarian Arab political systems had, as I say, given way in the last quarter of the twentieth century to semiauthoritarian regimes, where opposition movements could operate, organize, and occasionally agitate but were denied the opportunity to win elections. At the broader social level, newer media (satellite television and internet-based), and—just as important—older ones (such as the daily newspaper) gradually made it easier in many countries to participate in public debates from a variety of ideological perspectives. At a very local level, the state retreat from social welfare

commitments opened opportunities for a host of formal and informal groups and organizations to operate in areas once dominated by officially controlled bodies.

UNDERSTANDING POLITICS

These various trends have been noticed by political scientists, sociologists, anthropologists, and scholars in the humanities. But various disciplinary contributions have not covered for each other's blind spots. First, those who focus on the large-scale political changes and their normative implications can edge into a celebratory (or sometimes cynical) tone: the changes are seen as potentially democratizing or as simply entrenching authoritarianism more deeply—as if the only political change that draws interest is democratization. Second, those who take more grass-roots or empirical approaches often overlook the effects of discussions. Third, both groups often (though not always) miss the ways that various spheres of argument interact.

MACRO AND NORMATIVE VIEWS

Some normatively informed political scientists whose focus usually falls outside the Arab world have shown great interest in exploring public discussions about politics. Led by generations of intellectuals from Aristotle to Arendt, much of this interest is motivated by important and sometimes quite lofty normative concerns: how can we reason together; talk and deliberate across our differences in experiences, outlooks, and values; inform and be informed by each other; and come to common decisions about public matters? How can we structure public discussions to encourage such deliberation and realize the public interest rather than engage in mere horse-trading, bargaining, sloganeering, threats, coercion, and appeals to passion and private interests rather than public reason? How can we make sure that all citizens have access to—and the ability to participate in—such discussions?

I do not dismiss such goals, but I fear that when we keep our eye on the horizon of virtuous politics, we may trip on some very hard political realities—ones that we would be better advised to treat as building blocks rather than obstacles. Politics, even in the sense that I use the term here as centering on public discussion, is rarely so lofty as we might hope; it is grounded very much in earthly concerns. Even in the heady year of 2011, Arab political argumentation was hardly ideal; in the years since, official oppression and violence have proven very much alive. But those troubling trends have been woven into political arguments and have not silenced them.

Public discussions take place to be sure, but real ones are emotional, argumentative, manipulative, passionate, and edge into disrespect, prejudice, and even threats. Students of public spheres will immediately notice that we will speak far more about “arguments” and far less about “deliberation” than is the norm for scholarly writings on the subject. Much of what is politically significant hardly seems like deliberation but it certainly can be argumentative.

If we focus only on the critical-rational and the egalitarian and fair deliberations, we will therefore miss most politics. If we instead turn our attention to all forms of actual political discussions, not only will we see that there are certain forms of argumentation privileged over others in the actually existing public spheres, but we will also incorporate the obvious but often underappreciated phenomenon that some participants have privileged entry to public spheres. In a television talk show or on a dais at a public rally, only a few voices speak. Even those who enter small face-to-face gatherings hardly leave hierarchies of wealth and power at the doorstep.

Of course, the normative theorists who have inspired much of our interest have long been forced, however reluctantly, to acknowledge these realities when they confront genuine politics. It is instructive here to turn to Jürgen Habermas, one of the most sophisticated normative theorists of the politics of the public sphere. He presents much of his thought in prose so difficult to penetrate it is never quite clear if it has been translated from the original German: “I think an empirically meaningful approach to our selective and even colonized forms of public communication is to see how they work within certain procedural dimensions of formal inclusion, of the degree of political participation, of the quality of discussion, of the range of issues, and, finally and most important, of how the presuppositions of those public debates are really institutionalized.” Immediately after making this comment, Habermas explained himself in the uncharacteristically earthy terms quoted in the epigraph to part 1: “Of course, I too look at American television. When I see debates between presidential candidates, I get sick.” Real politics in real public spheres can be nauseating. But, as Habermas hastens to add, “we at least have to explain why we get sick. . . .”³ And I seek to do more: not merely to live with the sense of unease and explain it but also to embrace and explore its sources.

Micro and Empirical Approaches

Those from a range of other disciplines in the social sciences and humanities (anthropology, communication studies, and sociology, for instance) with a more finely grained focus are very aware of the ways in which new forms of politics and discourse carry within them gradations, affirmations, and subversions of hierarchy, status, and power. But the focus often remains highly localized, often centering on the participants themselves; the broader political

implications of the emerging public spheres have attracted less interest. And there is still a strongly hopeful tilt to many such efforts—a sense in which these public spheres empower those who enter them. Overall, there is far more interest in their effect on the participants than on their impact on the society.

And there is a common blind (or at least hazy) spot that can be of enormous significance. Both micro- and macro-level approaches have often led us to miss the interaction among apparently discrete spheres, one that will emerge as critical to our inquiry: the way that a newspaper article is circulated quickly through newer social media technology; that a discussion group relies on a website; that parliamentary debates are fodder for television talk shows; that demonstrators in a public square circulate their slogans among those not attending. Exploring such linkages is critical to understanding who speaks, how they speak, and what effect political debate and discussion has. Indeed, the ways in which various spheres interact drives much of Arab politics today, and the way in which the linkages detach argument from speaker can have significant effects on authority and power (as we will see in parts 2 and 3).

THE QUESTIONS AND THE FINDINGS

This, then, brings us to my project in this book: to understand and map the reborn forms of Arab politics as they really are and the effects they really have. I do so while moving beyond a concern for only good or ill. In particular, I present various sites of Arab public life to understand when various spheres arose, who participates in them, and how. I pay particular attention to how the various forums interact with each other. I develop a more comprehensive sense of the Arab public sphere but also present its effect on policy outcomes: the revival of Arab politics does matter for policy, but only under specific conditions. It has great impact on how people assess their governance structures, however.

And I focus on religion.

The public sphere seems to be terrain friendly to religion in the Arab world. The re-emergence of Arab politics took place at a time when religion in general seemed to be resurging as a public force in Arab societies, so that Arab politics often has taken on a strong religious coloration.

Focusing on religion will raise a set of concerns which I address more fully in chapter 2. Religion in general (and Islam specifically) excites some suspicions and fears, even among those who celebrate public deliberation. Indeed, if Habermas's early writings on the public sphere mourned its corruption by the state and by capitalism and consumerism, his followers often showed more concern about religion. When they turn to the world today—especially given the existence of substantial Muslim communities in Europe, faith-based

politics and movements in the United States, and the political force of Islam in the Middle East—it is religion in politics that causes special concern.

I am focusing particular attention on religion and especially on arguments about the Islamic shari‘a precisely because there is a strong religious coloration to much public life in the Arab world. Many previous writers have explored the “democratization” of the Islamic shari‘a in recent decades: matters that had largely been within the domain of discourse among scholars and specialists have burst out in many different public settings. If the Islamic shari‘a is the set of divine instructions that Muslims believe has been given to them, then the number of people exploring what those instructions are and how to interpret and apply them has multiplied greatly as education, a participatory spirit, and a dedication to increasing the role of religious values in public life have spread. Most significantly, as new public spheres have opened and overlapped, discussions and debates have become more inclusive but also more confusing.

While the demos is now forcing its way into religious discourse, it does not speak in a single voice, a single manner, or a single place. Indeed, actual democratic politics should teach us three things critical to any exploration of the intersection of religion and politics: (1) that democratic politics engenders cacophony as much as consensus; (2) that it does not eliminate but reflects and even reproduces gradations of wealth and power (though of course it also can undermine, tame, or redirect their effects); and (3) that it allows expertise and authority to continue to speak powerfully even as participatory institutions operate.

I have much assistance in this exploration of the newly lively nature of the in-between spaces where politics now operates, because most of the initial charting has been done by others. We have learned a lot about actual and emerging public spheres in the Arab world—some have studied the new and constantly shifting technologies; some have focused more on hoarier ones (such as the printing press); and others have probed forms of face-to-face and oral communication. And that extensive work allows me to move forward not simply through my own research but through synthesizing and bringing together much work that others have done. I hope that I am moving our understanding forward, probing not simply what public spheres actually exist and how they operate, but how they interact.

My general questions are thus clear: Who participates in discussions of how the Islamic shari‘a should inform these areas of policy and governance? How do they make arguments, and how do arguments evolve? How do the various forums interact? And how do the debates within the public sphere(s) affect policy outcomes?

I focus on debates and discussions about specific issues where I have garnered expertise in conducting various research projects over the years—constitution writing, personal status law, and education curricula. And I explore them in places within the Arab world where I have been led by those