

The Politics of Violence, Truth and Reconciliation in the Arab Middle East

Edited by
**Sune Haugbolle and
Anders Hastrup**

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In the last five to ten years, pressure for political liberalisation and the growth of civil society and independent media inside Arab countries have prompted an increasing debate about violent events in the postcolonial period. This book features studies of six Arab countries in which legacies of political violence have been challenged through various initiatives to promote “truth-telling” and transitional justice. The analysis departs from a liberal, teleological understanding of truth and reconciliation as a linear process from trauma through memory to national healing. Rather, the articles highlight how the interplay between state-orchestrated initiatives (such as Truth and Reconciliation committees and ministerial committees), civil society actors (including former political prisoners, investigative journalists and NGOs) and external actors (such as transnational NGOs, state sponsored dialogue initiatives, the UN and the EU) is creating a new political field. The book examines the extent to which this field challenges the Arab nation-state’s monopoly on history and violence, and asks whether public narratives of violence, memory and justice consolidate or challenge political legitimacy of current regimes.

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Introduction: Outlines of a New Politics of Memory in the Middle East

SUNE HAUGBOLLE & ANDERS HASTRUP

In the last decade, pressure for political liberalization resulting from changing conjunctures in international politics, the Barcelona Process and the growth of civil society and independent media inside Arab countries have prompted an increasing number of domestic and international actors to participate in the narration of violent events that have occurred in the Arab Mediterranean in the postcolonial period. The purpose of this special issue of *Mediterranean Politics* is to document and analyse the new politics of violence, truth and reconciliation comparatively. While the historical trajectories of Arab states differ widely, the present articles highlight commonalities that can help us conceptualize the new field across the region. In Morocco, Algeria, Sudan, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq – the countries covered in this volume but far from the only Arab settings where memory politics have become prolific – armed conflicts and periods of oppression have given rise to political contestation over issues of guilt, historical representation and the right to memorialize state violence. These issues remain little researched and badly understood despite their growing importance.

Memories of violence are multifaceted social phenomena with a wide range of implications for individuals and societies. Simply put, memory is the central faculty of human existence in time through which we negotiate past and present experience

and define our individual and collective identities (Huyssen, 1995: 1–31). The emotional and existential significance of memories on the individual level explains their centrality in modern politics. Since the rise and spread of the nation-state in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the notion of collective memory has been widely used as a primary marker of identity and a political idiom to legitimize national sovereignty (Anderson, 1991; Olick, 1998). A preoccupation with the politics of memory in the last 50 years can to a large extent be related to the widespread impact of the Jewish Holocaust and the Nüremberg trials (Olick, 1998: 380). More recently, the demise of authoritarian regimes and accompanying processes of transition from one-party rule to democracy necessitated a reckoning with memory and have therefore brought memory to the forefront of political concerns in many parts of the world. As the relative scarcity of studies about social and political memory in Arab countries shows, the interest in the politics of memory has so far largely eluded Middle East studies.¹

There are signs that this is about to change.² The last decade has seen intense debate inside and outside Arab countries about political change and democratization, which has highlighted the urgency of finding a way to manage legacies of political violence. Arab states have set up judicial institutions (such as the quasi-international courts in Iraq and Lebanon), variants of Truth and Reconciliation committees (in Algeria and Morocco), and other state-orchestrated initiatives to deal with the apparent ‘memory deficit’. From below, domestic non-state actors such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), former political prisoners, ex-purveyors of violence, investigative journalists, artists and academics, participate in the narration of previously tabooed events. Finally, international actors such as the International Criminal Court, transnational NGOs, state-sponsored dialogue initiatives, the United Nations and the European Union take part in the narration of violence and more generally in the contestation over memory.

The literature on social memory in Arab countries has largely been produced by anthropologists on the one hand, and on the other hand political scientists crossing over into cultural studies (Dakhli, 2002; Khalili, 2007; Makdisi and Silverstein, 2006b; Sa’di and Abu-Lughod, 2007; Saunders and Aghaie, 2005; Slyomovics, 2005). This openness to considering memory as a wide social field encompassing legal and political as well as cultural and psychological aspects reflects Middle East studies’ penchant for interdisciplinarity. It is a nascent field, which means that questions of methodology, theory and historiography remain open. Generally, scholars of an anthropological bent have paid attention to the international paradigms in which categories such as truth, reconciliation and victims are embedded. Studies such as Laleh Khalili’s *Heroes and Martyrs of Palestine* (2007) and Susan Slyomovics’ *The Performance of Human Rights in Morocco* (2005) are sympathetic to the plight of victims of state violence and their quest for acknowledgement and retribution, but also interrogate the discursive constructions that underpin their action, as well as the often very savvy responses by the states involved. The present volume is conceived in the same spirit of sympathetic scepticism. Scepticism serves as a healthy antidote to the expectation of universally applicable healing and transformation implied in political processes and their

instrumentalization by Arab regimes, and it is shared by several of the contributors to this volume. We believe it is necessary as a starting point to situate the historical trajectory of narratives that underpin and enable political action. Hence, it is a key ambition of this collection of articles to document the rise of a new politics of violence, truth and reconciliation in the Middle East in the context of modern Arab history. As mentioned, we believe that this politics involves a wide set of actors from civil society and state to the international level, and that its appearance is linked to (real and perceived) political liberalization since the end of the Cold War. Secondly, we want to raise a number of questions about this new field. Why has memory appeared as a central preoccupation of Arab societies in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century? What is the relation between the varying narratives of violence and processes of political change in the contemporary Middle East? Do public narratives of violence consolidate or challenge the political legitimacy of current regimes? And is the new politics of memory living up to its own ambitions of healing and facilitating democratic transition?

From the Politics of ‘As If’ to the Politics of Memory

While we believe that the politics of memory is a new and important field in Middle East studies, that newness can be overstated. What is new is not the use of memory for political purposes, but the form that it is taking, which is characterized by an interaction between the subnational, the national and the international level. The intense focus on memory of violence, rather than cultural and historical memory, also appears to be a strictly contemporary phenomenon. Historically, nationalism was legitimized by various discourses on historical memory. Within the body of literature on the emergence of national consciousness in the Middle East, there is a tendency to focus on the formative period at the expense of the post-independence era (Gershoni and Jankowski, 1997a: xiv). Scholars have examined the origins and development of nationalism in the Arab Middle East through refined readings of social history (Gershoni and Jankowski, 1997b; Khalidi, 1991), but similar approaches to the postcolonial period are rare (with important exceptions such as Dakhli, 2002; Longva, 1997; Shryock, 1997). Arab forms of nationalism were created through constructs of continuity with the pre-colonial past (Armbrust, 1996: 28–29; Salamandra, 2004: 17). These constructs were largely reactions to the rupture of experiencing colonialism and modernity. But the more recent historical ruptures of the postcolonial period – the wars, civil wars and institutionalized violence that have marred the Arab countries since independence – must be made sense of too. Despite the nationalist imagination’s preference for mythical history, nationalist narratives continue to develop in ways that incorporate memories of recent events and give new meaning to old myths. Studying memories of recent events can give us insights into the nationalism of evolving history from a variety of social perspectives including those of masses, elites and state actors. Such an approach inevitably produces a more detailed social picture of the memory landscape than what can be achieved by matter-of-fact descriptions of state-centred representations. This is not least because national memory, as it is adapted, produced

and reproduced in society, is often informed by the catastrophes and traumas that cannot be captured by the triumphant tropes of official, state-sponsored historical imagination and must therefore be disseminated through other channels. Memories of violence have the potential to undercut the discursive foundations of the nation-state, and participating in their narration is often a highly political endeavour.

Nationalist paradigms of national memory in the twentieth century were not created through exclusively top-down processes. In some countries, like Palestine, the formation of national myths happened in a dialectical relationship between elites and subaltern groups (Lockman, 1997). In other settings, such as Iraq, elite social classes and their control of a rationalized bureaucratic state were the key elements in the formation of nationalism (Zubaida, 2002). In both cases, myths constructed in the first part of the twentieth century were consolidated and managed through education and propaganda by state officials of the Arab regimes in the second half of the century. This development from creation to consolidation has certain parallels in the West, although the history of nationalism and national memory in the Arab Middle East has followed different trajectories than in Western Europe, where the nation-state – so most writers agree – preceded nationalism (Olick and Robbins, 1998: 38). In contrast, Arab forms of nationalism developed prior to statehood, often in conflicting strands that contradicted the shape of the borders imposed by colonial powers. Since their creation, Arab states have therefore had to override or accommodate local tribal, ethnic or sectarian identities and regional notions of nationhood like Pan-Arabism in their quest for territorial consolidation. As a result, the ‘constructed’ Arab states that were carved from the Ottoman Empire in 1918 have been forced to forge strong national identities *while* they were developing state institutions (Wedeen, 1999: 15–16). This might help to explain why, shortly after independence, several Arab states developed authoritarian regimes, strong in coercive force but weak in legitimacy, whose chosen expression of national memory was propaganda disseminated through history books, newspapers, state courts, universities, governments and the production of space more generally (Ayubi, 1995: 3; Saunders and Aghaie, 2005: 22–25).

Today, historical narratives in official variants of Arab nationalism continue to be formed by the time-honoured postcolonial tropes of Arab, Islamic and pre-Islamic history, linguistic and cultural heritage and the struggle against outsiders (Dawisha, 2003; Gershoni and Jankowski, 1997a; Khalidi, 1991; Tibi, 1997). But there is every indication that they do not correspond well to the lived memory of the populations, and therefore the wished-for link between national memory and the state is, for all purposes, missing. Particularly in countries (such as Syria and Iraq) with no pre-colonial territorial tradition of statehood, nationalist propaganda has failed to produce credible imagined communities. In Syria, the Ba’athist state’s claim to absolute power is met with widespread scepticism. At the same time, as Haugbolle shows in his article on Syrian prison memories in this volume, Syrians continue to show support out of fear of the ‘absent spectacle’ of imprisonment and torture – the expectation of state violence that upholds a semblance of compliance in the public sphere. The result is a national public sphere saturated with empty rhetoric in which people enact their obedience ‘as if’ they really believed the bombastic slogans,

as Lisa Wedeen (1999: 67–86) has put it. The politics of ‘as if’ invites subversion, particularly in the cultural and intellectual fields. Prison memories are one such form of cultural resistance that seeks to challenge the postcolonial state’s narrative of legality.

The silence surrounding past and present violence undermines the credibility of the state, also with regard to its take on national history and heritage. As a recent study of national memory in Iraq shows, years of Ba’athist propaganda have not fostered collective memory (Davis, 2005). The Ba’ath Party promoted an insular historical memory that stressed the Sunni legacy of Baghdad, the Semitic (hence Sunni) roots of ancient Mesopotamia, etc., in order to sustain the hegemonic rule of Saddam Hussein. The party used history to atomize groups it considered hostile, such as Shiites, Kurds and Communists, by associating them with ‘unpatriotic’ acts in the past (Davis, 2005: 148–199). Not surprisingly, these groups reacted defensively against such claims. Years of repression only added to their will to refute and, when possible, subvert official representations of history and identity. As a result, Saddam Hussein’s propagandistic use of memories of violence may have been efficient in propping up his regime of fear but not in creating long-lasting effects. When the regime collapsed in 2003, politicized counter-memories of Kurds and Shiites entered the public sphere with a vengeance. As Al-Marashi and Keskin show in their article, this legacy of unresolved social conflict and lingering ethno-violence made a process of truth and reconciliation in Iraq almost impossible.

Iraq may be the most conspicuous example of the collapse of a regime and its memory narrative. But in various Arab countries, pressure on state-centred formulations of memory is giving way to contest over the nationalism of evolving (as opposed to immutable) history. In particular, the succession of rulers, peace settlements and regime change produce the ruptures necessary for such contestation. In Morocco, the death of King Hassan II in 1998 gave way to long-suppressed debates about political violence during his reign (Slyomovics, 2005). In Algeria, the end of the civil war between Islamists and the state in the early 2000s resulted in a remarkable if tightly state-controlled ‘truth and reconciliation process’, described in the article by George Joffé. And in Lebanon, the quasi-collapse of the pro-Syrian regime in Lebanon in 2005 spawned counter-memories, challenged accepted visions of the past and opened the field of political contestation over memory (Haugbolle, 2006). Crucially, it did so in a way that reflected opinions and debates formed in society over a number of years. Political transition does not create debates *ex nihilo*, but often simply brings out various interpretations of narratives of violence which existed in less public places. In practically all Arab countries, increased access to information, means of expression and political participation are introducing previously ‘intimate’ views of the past into public deliberation, thereby challenging state-centred narratives of national memory. This makes it necessary to study truth and reconciliation as both top-down and bottom-up phenomena.

It is instructive to compare these developments with other parts of the world. The Arab state’s declining monopoly over the formulation of historical memory shows certain similarities with Western European history. According to Pierre Nora, a similar change happened in the West as the state gradually ceded power to society

in the nineteenth century (Nora, 1989). Today, the waning of nationalism has left most European states – formerly shored up by memory – as what he calls ‘memory traces’: explicit signs, rather than implicitly taken-for-granted meanings [Olick, 1998: 379]. The popular obsession with history in many Western societies today, Nora claims, is in fact a symptom that we have lost the sense of historical memory and replaced it with representations of the past designed for consumption rather than unitary legitimacy. In his famous formulation, ‘we speak so much of memory because there is so little left of it’ [Nora 1989: 7].

Arabs, too, speak of memory because it is under threat – not from postmodern social dispersion and multiculturalism as in Europe, but from the outside forces of economic and cultural globalization and the internal legacy of indiscriminate violence and hollow propaganda. Behind the facades of state propaganda and enacted participation, social memory in Arab countries may in fact be quite similar to what Andreas Huyssen (1995: 7) has called the ‘chaotic, fragmentary and free-floating’ diffusion of memory in Western states. Indeed, the politics of ‘as if’, too, is a sign of meanings not spontaneously taken for granted. If the politics of ‘as if’ is truly being replaced by a new politics of memory, nationalism may in the future be reformulated in ways that perhaps correspond better to lived experience. Arab artists, activists and politicians today use memory, and particularly memories of state violence, to challenge official versions of historical memory and regime legitimacy, and often do so in an optimistic vein. As a result of this move from the politics of ‘as if’ to the politics of memory, historical memory is re-emerging as competition in the public sphere. This competition takes different shapes depending on the political and social conjectures in question. In countries like Algeria and Morocco, the state seeks to co-opt public narration of political violence in the past. In states with a history of more extreme coercion and propaganda, tattered discourses and worn-out slogans of the regimes, delegitimized by their own violence, interact with personal memories and historical interpretations of groups and parties. In post-Saddam Iraq, for example, the politics of memory has been increasingly shaped by competition between sectarian identities, which years of Sunni-dominated one-party rule fervently suppressed (Shadid, 2005). When the state relinquishes its monopoly on memory, neglected and suppressed memories of recent events enter the public sphere and become politicized. Arguably, the politics of denial and amnesia is equally politicizing, albeit in covert ways. But an open politics of memory takes hold of public life and charges it with pent-up conflicts. While this may be conducive to reconciliation and democratization in some places, the opposite remains equally likely: animosity, revenge and renewed violence.

The Inadequacy of Truth and Reconciliation

What happens when society begins to partake more freely in the negotiation of national memory? By showing how various social forces propagate their narratives of violence and use memory as a political idiom, the articles in this volume suggest several answers, none of which can be summed up as ‘breaking the cycle of hatred’, ‘democratic opening’, ‘participation’ or anything else prescribed by normative

political theories (Minow, 2002). Rather, the entry of contested memories of the past into the public sphere ushers in a political contestation between various social and political groups with each their interpretations, strategies and narratives to promote. Put differently, the politics of memory is not primarily about reading the past historically but about using it for political means. Equally, truth and reconciliation itself, despite signifying a universally desirable process, invariably becomes an idiom used for specific political agendas in the cases presented here.

Most studies of the wide range of attempts to promote national renewal and inclusive national societies after state repression and violence in South America, Asia, Africa and Europe come to the same conclusion (Ashplant *et al.*, 2000; Barahona de Brito, 2001; Humphrey, 2002; Phelps, 2004). Transitional justice showcases two different ways of dealing with the past. The first involves an effort to address the legacy of violence as the basis for promoting reconciliation, rather than prosecuting perpetrators in order to pursue justice, whereas the other model puts the onus on justice through trials. The first truth and reconciliation committees were set up in Argentina and Chile in the 1980s. In the 1990s, the South African experience made truth and reconciliation a championed model for post-conflict resolution. In essence, truth telling allows past violence to be recounted, either through declassification of official documents, or through public hearings. A truth report is part of the writing of a new master narrative for a reconstituting nation. It elevates the voice of the victim to the truth, and thus proclaims that this is a country where these voices can be heard and valued. Truth reports are polyphonic, giving society a human, pluralistic perhaps democratic face. By placing emphasis on multivocality and personal narratives, truth telling announces that 'we hold these truths to be self-evident'; it proclaims that the country in question will not accept such harms in the future (Phelps, 2004: 81).

This spectacle seeks to integrate 'losers' into the moral community by laying their crimes bare in return for absolution and pardon. Some truth committees, like South Africa's, did not provide automatic amnesty; rather, perpetrators were invited to confess to crimes committed and apply for amnesty. However, in effect the punitive aspect of truth committees is limited. Very few people have been sentenced in any of the transitional committees and trials. As such, despite the apparent dichotomy between justice and amnesty, truth and reconciliation can be seen as a variation of the approach to conflict resolution that puts emphasis on blanket amnesty, initially in order to draw combatants to the negotiation table, and then to pacify simmering conflict. Many scholars now find this an inadequate and short-sighted approach which rarely leads to long-term democratic transition or pacification (Lanegran, 2005: 116). Moreover, the application of absolute categories such as truth and justice is troubling because memory, at a closer look, serves as a potent tool for particular powerful agendas. In Lanegran's words, 'the official memory of past atrocities that the truth-seeking institutions sanction should be regarded cautiously as a product of a process shaped by the power balance among political actors' (Lanegran, 2005: 112). Turning the gaze to power relations also implies questioning ethnic, racial and class divisions in the reconstituting nation. In the case of South Africa, for example, Mahmoud Mamdani has argued that the Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC), by ignoring certain atrocities such as forced removals of blacks, gave white South

Africans who benefited from exploitation of the black population a chance to renounce apartheid as evil while continuing to benefit from its structural economic legacies [Mamdani 2000].

Such moral dilemmas appear to be inevitable by-products of truth commissions, acceptable even to those who believe that the positive effects of truth commissions by far outweigh the negative ones. More worrying is the criticism that truth and reconciliation essentially puts justice on the back burner. In the 1990s, despite universal praise for South Africa's TRC, the idea that genocide, ethnic cleansing, torture and other horrors should go unpunished also became increasingly troubling to many people. This brought to the fore another approach, namely international tribunals. In 1993, the UN's International Criminal Tribunal for ex-Yugoslavia became the first international war crimes tribunal to be set up since the aftermath of the Second World War. It has since been followed by a series of courts for Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Cambodia, East Timor, Iraq and Afghanistan, some operating exclusively under international law and others with a mixture of international and national law and judges. The ambition of these judicial mechanisms is to establish clean breaks through punishment. Practically speaking, however, it is often impossible to purge whole political classes and their supporters as it would crowd prisons and bring countries to an economic standstill. Trials therefore at best attain a symbolic value. By focusing on particularly cruel human rights violations, they approach the same effect as a truth commission, namely to signify that a country has passed from a politics of terror to a politics of memory and acknowledgement. It is unquestionably positive that leaders responsible for gross human rights violations in places like Liberia, Iraq, Chile, Chad and Serbia are now facing trials. But it is equally unquestionable that this emergent regime of international justice is imperfect and entwined with Western interests. The settings singled out for international tribunals are all countries whose regimes have fallen out with Western powers, some arguably as a result of their human rights record, but rarely exclusively so. Secondly, some international tribunals such as those for Rwanda and Cambodia have failed spectacularly to address periods before and after the main massacres which would have highlighted the implication of Western powers in propping up the aggressors. And even in counties where persecution has taken place, it has been slow, costly and almost farcically ineffective, such as in Rwanda, where tens of thousands committed massacres but only a dozen people have been convicted so far, at an estimated annual cost of \$200 million.

These inadequacies resonate in several of the articles in this volume. In his article, Lebanese human rights lawyer Muhamad Mughrabi questions whether the push to establish an international tribunal for the murder of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri in 2005 indeed embodies the imputed universal justice. How, he asks, can a country with a long history of political killings, human rights violations and endemic corruption, afford to focus on one single crime? How can it justify spending an annual amount of \$40 million when the annual budget of the entire Lebanese justice is hardly \$30 million? More critically, Mughrabi suggests that the Hariri Tribunal is in contradiction with international as well as Lebanese law. While justice for the heinous crime of killing a great Arab leader is ultimately desirable, the

existent terms of the Hariri Tribunal are turning it into a political weapon for one side in the current national, regional and international stand-off in Lebanon which, moreover, ignores a much deeper need for juridical reform and a history of human rights violations that make the Hariri killing pale in comparison.

Sceptical Responses

Lebanon is only one example of how the transformative potential in trials and truth and reconciliation processes becomes operationalized by various state, non-state and international actors with varying agendas of power politics. The intense politicization of the terms used to describe the various practices of narrating violence routinely distorts the actual processes taking place in society. The basic conclusion that truth and reconciliation is an ideal more often than a reflection of the actual complexities of memory politics runs through this volume. It is no surprise that Middle Eastern populations react sceptically to proclamations of truth and reconciliation. After all, the realization that memory discourse is a powerful tool for constructing subjectivities and manipulating politics is not news to citizens in authoritarian regimes. Add to that a general mistrust of Western grand narratives about universally applicable trajectories for the non-Western world. The often flagrant conflation of power and universalistic discourse can lead to cries of 'victor's justice' from different groups who do not sense that their own unique historical experience is formally incorporated in an official reconciliation initiative. On the ground, in the political reality of Middle Eastern countries, and on the airwaves of increasingly critical and sophisticated Arab media, that scepticism plays itself out in different ways. In Iraq, the Shia and Kurdish communities responded doubtfully to the Arab League's Reconciliation Initiative launched in 2004, wary of the Sunni character of that body and its failure to condemn Saddam Hussein in the past. Al-Marashi and Keskin's article illuminates this problem over who owns the right to formally construct a body of authoritative accounts about past atrocities. In the aftermath of the American invasion of Iraq, where the state and occupation forces have failed to provide a clear-cut narrative on winners and losers, Al-Marashi and Keskin show that each bruised sectarian and political group has promoted its own narrative, inevitably hindering the emergence of a national process of reconciliation despite state-sponsored, regional and civil society initiatives. At the same time there has been a clear awareness from political parties, civil society as well as the broader population of the perceived need to 'deal with the past'. The resulting initiatives, however, have all been undermined by the continued violence in Iraq. The continuation of low-intensity conflict does not impede the emergence of truth and reconciliation initiatives, the authors suggest, but it changes the focus from prevention of future conflict to more conventional conflict resolution.

Another source of scepticism is the fact that official renderings of historical events frequently sit uneasily with lived experience of the communities and individuals who have suffered through oppression and violence. The venues, participants, frameworks and historical gaze of the institutions of truth telling all define which aspects of the past to include, and which to exclude, from public consideration.