

institutions like parties and leaders persist and engender such allegiance when they are completely bereft of real legitimacy. In the case of Syria, Wedeen explores the use of coercion and a cult of personality, rhetoric, and symbols—or disciplinary symbolic power—to explain how Asad maintains his power. I wonder, in the context of Nahr el-Bared, the degree to which it is not just the parties’ “double nature” but also other factors like coercion or disciplinary symbolic power that might explain the durability of Palestinian factions.


For example, I spent some time perusing Nahr el-Bared’s Facebook page and noticed that, in the winter of 2021, the accountant of a political party was murdered.² The accountant, a woman from a large family in Nahr el-Bared, was found dead after questioning some of the party’s bookkeeping practices. The party absolved itself of any responsibility, and her family was urged not to pursue further inquiry. A criminal investigation yielded few people willing to talk about the specifics of her death, and, at the time of writing this review, the murder remains unsolved by Lebanese authorities. This example indicates the pervasive use of coercive threats levied against members that challenge party dominance, akin to a mafia’s protection racket. In the words of Charles Tilly, “If protection rackets represent organized crime at its smoothest, then war making and state making—quintessential protection rackets with the advantage of legitimacy—qualify as our largest example of organized crime.”³ It may be that factions endure because they are protection rackets that dole out coercive threats on an already marginalized and vulnerable refugee community.

In sum, Issa’s book would make a wonderful addition to a seminar class on Palestine and Israel or an undergraduate class on Middle East studies, as it could provide fruitful and animated debate around notions of legitimacy, dominance, and obedience when paired with complementary works like Lisa Wedeen and Charles Tilly. Her book also suggests future paths of inquiry that test a variety of hypotheses (“double nature,” coercion, and disciplinary symbolic power) for why political parties endure in Palestinian refugee camps when their legitimacy is lacking.

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The Quest for Democracy: Liberalism in the Modern Arab World

Line Khatib (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2022). Pp. 288. \$34.99 paperback. ISBN: 9781108710978

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In *Quest for Democracy*, Line Khatib strives to document liberal ideals in Egypt and Syria both before and after the Arab revolts of 2011. The book’s main argument is that these ideas have continuously existed in the region in complex and varied ways, but have not been adequately studied or even acknowledged by observers and scholars alike. The author cites a number of reasons for this neglect, including the fact that liberal ideals have failed to gain traction on the ground; have not managed to build durable institutions and, as a result, have not proven their existence or viability in the region; and, the fact that resilient autocratic regimes’ defeat of such ideas in the revolts of 2011 evidenced an inability to impose themselves. Some

² <https://www.facebook.com/670940576249549-الان-شبكة-اختيار-محمد-نهر-البارد-ان>.

³ Charles Tilly, “War Making and State Making as Organized Crime,” in *Bringing the State Back In*, ed. Peter D. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Theda Skocpol (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 169–70.

individuals, moreover, have found such ideals to be merely foreign imports that could not strike roots in local societies. Neo-orientalists might interpret these failures as proof of liberalism's incompatibility with native cultures and as evidence of a "natural" inclination towards authoritarianism and lack of genuine interest in political liberties and democracy in the Arab region. But, despite such real defeats and the challenges facing liberals in the region, Khatib maintains that they and their ideals have existed, and this book's purpose is to document this. On this front, Khatib contends that while local liberal ideals may have borrowed some of their formulations from the West, they have largely been rooted in local intellectual traditions and peoples' aspirations for freedom. Arab liberal ideas, accordingly, enjoy a real relevance that mere scholastic importations could not achieve.

The introduction of *Quest for Democracy* justifies the need for documenting Egyptian and Syrian liberal trends, first by showing that these ideals have been part of both countries' intellectual histories and, secondly, by showing their significant impact on their respective political histories. The criteria by which Khatib describes Egyptian and Syrian thinkers and activists as "liberal" include a whole set of values, encompassing individual freedom vis-à-vis societal norms and civil freedoms of opinion, expression, and assembly. These values involve the belief in progress towards social justice, human rights, and welfare capitalism through education. They include resistance to arbitrary and authoritarian power, whether by the state, religious institutions, society, or wealth. They refer to tolerance, equality under the law and of opportunity, constitutionalism, separation of powers, political pluralism, strong civil society, and the peaceful rotation of power. The author notes that individuals or organizations she considers "liberal" might not actively adhere to all these principles, but should, at least, hold positions compatible with them. Khatib astutely observes, for instance, that supporting a dictator in order to defeat illiberal Islamists—as self-declared liberals did in both Egypt and Syria—would not amount to being a liberal. However, the history of liberalism documented in the book shows a liberalism that is more preoccupied with opposing tyranny, authoritarianism, and coercive rule than with individual and social liberties. Such oppositional political stances, indeed, have a long history in the region in the context of Ottoman rule, colonial powers, or local despots. Whether these oppositional positions have been systematically coupled by advocates of liberalism with a belief in pluralism and individual and social liberties, however, is a rather questionable matter, which Khatib also hints at. Rejecting a corrupt autocracy has not always gone hand in hand with social liberalism; in fact, it often coexisted with social conservatism.

Khatib's presentation and discussion of Egyptian and Syrian liberalism is divided into four chapters that correspond to four chronological periods in modern Arab history: the nineteenth and early twentieth century, with the first formulations of modern liberal ideals; the 1960s to 1990s, characterized by questions of state-led development and modernization; the year 2000, with the exacerbation of multiple crises caused by the failures of post-independence states; and 2011 through 2018, marked by the Arab Spring and its aftermath. Each chapter covers the work of major liberal thinkers and activists, and examines the transformation of priorities and forms of work from one period to the next. While proponents of liberal ideals in the nineteenth and early twentieth century adopted an elitist, paternalistic attitude, they were increasingly inclined after the 1960s to engage with the people and foster a liberal social environment. And while issues of development and modernization dominated liberal agendas in the 1950s and 1960s, it was questions of political participation and state reform that came to the fore in the 1990s. It should be added here that one of the salient features of the 2011 revolts was the connection people made between the absence of accountability and corruption on the one hand, and socio-economic problems on the other. Demands for social justice were perceived by both rebels and local media commentators as closely linked to political participation. Establishing this connection was, for many observers, one of the main characteristics and novelties of the 2011 revolts.

Based on a solid review of the relevant literature, and a close knowledge of the Egyptian and Syrian revolts of 2011 and their aftermath, Khatib's book reminds us of the real struggles


for freedom that took place in both countries. Chapters three and four provide a cogent and compelling summary of the dramatic and eventful struggles for liberation from brutal autocracies. Khatib recalls the multitude of acts that facilitated the changes few dared to imagine before they happened, as well as the numerous actors behind these developments. She underlines the ideal of freedom that motivated them and analyzes the huge challenges they faced. Today, those struggles seem remote and almost unreal. Yet, as Khatib reminds us, they were real, both in the objectives they upheld and the actions they took. The aim was an end to despotism and, with it, the end of human rights violations, corruption, and social injustice. The demand was for freedom, dignity, and democracy. Khatib depicts the weaknesses and failures of liberal individuals and organizations in taking appropriate courses of action to attain these objectives and achieve these demands, due to many reasons, including the lack of political experience, the power of opponents, and the fluidity of ever-moving situations.

The fate of the 2011 revolts and the thwarted processes of democratic transition have had tremendous consequences for people in the Arab region. They are still unfolding today and constitute a central item on scholars' research agendas. The history of liberalism documented by Khatib is part and parcel of a tormented quest for democracy, and, in this sense, is essential to understanding the reasons behind the present failure of that transition. In this regard, the book is a valuable contribution to ongoing efforts at probing the upheavals. Even though the revolts for freedom and dignity did not yield their promises, and instead ended up, painfully, in human and political disasters, they undoubtedly transformed the region in profound ways. These events strongly shook the region's liberal yearnings, as well as all those who carried or struggled for them. *The Quest for democracy* will help readers measure and better understand these transformations.

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Transnational Culture in the Armenian Iranian Diaspora

**Claudia Yaghoobi (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023).
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In *Transnational Culture in the Armenian Iranian Diaspora*, Claudia Yaghoobi makes the case that Armenians in Iran and Iranian Armenians in the US “have occupied a liminal space that has impacted and shifted their consciousness,” and “they have transformed it [this consciousness] from nationalism to transnationalism” (p. 6). Yet, the title does not fully encompass Yaghoobi's purpose, as she describes it, nor how she carries out her project. Simply put, the key phrase in the title—transnational culture—better applies to both the subject matter of art, film, and literature that Yaghoobi analyzes as well as the personal experiences she cites to develop her theoretical framework.

Outwardly, *Transnational Culture* consists of a prologue, introduction, five main chapters, a conclusion, and an epilogue. There is another organizational structure behind Yaghoobi's arguments besides this obvious one, however. Specifically, in *Transnational Culture*, Yaghoobi relies on three modes of writing to put forward and support her arguments. The first utilizes passages of personal reflection aimed at generating a theoretical framework. In the acknowledgements, Yaghoobi distills her intention in incorporating personal